

“The Tremors Felt Round the World”

Haiti’s Earthquake as Global Imagined Community

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Benedict Anderson (1987) argued that capitalist print media created for the first time a national identity, first, by standardizing language and encouraging standard time zones, but most importantly by shaping the consciousness of citizens around so-called national events. His historical analysis was focused on the same time period as Jürgen Habermas’s (1989) analysis of the rise of the bourgeois public sphere in the Enlightenment, the so-called age of revolution. Haiti’s earthquake became a global event that hailed global citizens to act. The multinational response broke new ground; it truly became the model for a global disaster. To use the phrase of Ralph Waldo Emerson, writing about the battles of Lexington and Concord that triggered the Age of Revolution, the January 12, 2010 tremors were felt “round the world.”

The times are very different, but Anderson’s insights help us understand the contemporary era. CNN—which cut its teeth on the 1991 U.S. invasion of Iraq—also successfully hailed citizens from around the world in its dramatic coverage of an event in a country that has often served as a foil to imperialist, white supremacist, capital interests. In total, according to the United Nations Office of the Special Envoy for Haiti (2012), private individuals gave \$3.06 billion. At a March 2010 UN conference, official donors pledged \$10 billion for reconstruction, \$5.6 for the following year and a half. The Special Envoy’s office reported that official donors allocated \$13.34 billion to Haiti, having disbursed just under a half of that amount—\$6.43 billion—as of December 2012.

The response to Haiti’s earthquake was thus one of the most generous in recent memory. This is in no small part because of the event’s high media profile. As several analysts have noted (e.g., Benthall 1993; Brauman 1993), disaster aid feeds off media coverage. Olsen, Carstensen, and Høyen (2003) demonstrated a correlation in the amount of seconds allo-

cated on prime time news to a particular disaster and the generosity of the response (see, e.g., Brown and Minty 2008). The Olsen et. article was published in 2003, before the mega-disasters of the past decade, including the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and Hurricane Katrina, in 2005, not to mention the massive earthquake in Haiti. While the article did not lay out a formula for a precise prediction of private and public donations to a humanitarian effort, the hypothesis seems validated by the differences in donations to the Haiti earthquake, the 2010 floods in Pakistan, and the results of the earthquake and tsunami (aka 3/11) in Fukushima, Japan. The Pakistan flood that displaced 20 million was almost entirely ignored in U.S. media, and worldwide donations were only \$687 million, with pledges totaling just over a billion. Even though Japan is one of the world’s wealthiest countries, the earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear threat attracted almost \$5 billion (530 billion yen) during the first year.

However, the Haiti earthquake’s high media profile—and the generosity it inspired—came at a price. With stories of devastation, appearing to many foreign observers as hell on earth with phrases like “state failure” often repeated, foreign media coverage also naturalized foreign control of the response. The Haitian Creole word *istwa* means story in the way that people share with one another as well as official histories (see also Bell 2001). In fact, they are often the same, since political actors are also often the ones writing history (Trouillot 1995, 22). This chapter explores this phenomenon, how what might be called disaster narratives shape responses. The transnational nation building, the global imagined community, thus triggered a chain of events that empowered foreign agencies and actors. Foreign agencies assumed de facto control over Haiti’s governance apparatus, through the Interim Haiti Reconstruction Commission (CIRH, in the French acronym, or IHRC in the English) and a system of UN clusters. Framed by the continued media coverage, this foreign control was naturalized through a series of discourses about Haiti being a “failed state,” requiring a “republic of NGOs” to step in and take over. This chapter begins with contrasting foreign media coverage and Haitian understandings. Following that discussion is an exploration of the connection between foreign media coverage and aid delivery, particularly four tropes: a weak state, dehumanization, the photo op, and the blame game. The chapter ends with a series of reflections on the disaster narrative.

Haiti’s Earthquake as Media Event

At 4:53 P.M. on January 12, 2010, an earthquake of 7.0 magnitude struck outside the capital of Port-au-Prince, Haiti. The damage was unimaginable:

an estimated 230,000 people dead and an equal number injured. An evaluation (Schwartz, Pierre, and Calpas 2011) declared over half of the housing in the capital was seriously damaged; 105,000 houses were completely destroyed and 188,383 houses badly damaged, requiring repair (United Nations Office of the Special Envoy for Haiti 2012). At its peak, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) counted 1.5 million people in makeshift internally displaced persons (IDP) camps. Certainly the facts alone should merit worldwide attention. However, Haiti's earthquake became an international event because of foreign media coverage. As a transnational event, global citizens were hailed to act, and international agencies responded.

News from within Haiti first trickled out of the country through Twitter, because the earthquake damaged other satellite-based Internet and cell phone towers. Soon thereafter, CNN reported the earthquake nonstop for over a week, capturing the most horrific scenes and broadcasting them throughout the world. Anchor Anderson Cooper—who had made a name for himself after his coverage of Hurricane Katrina sharing some emotional moments with millions of viewers—immediately went to Haiti and stayed for over two weeks. He returned at the six-month point, July 12, 2010, to receive an award from President René Préval of Haiti; Bill Clinton and Sean Penn accompanied him. Progressive news site Common Dreams had for the first time a special banner on the top left related to Haiti's earthquake, which it has since repeated for the BP oil spill, the antigovernment mobilization in Egypt, the Japan earthquake, and the bombing of Libya (neither the floods in Pakistan nor the earthquakes in Chile or New Zealand received a special banner). The banner on Haiti outlasted all the others, and finally was taken down in mid-March 2010.

World citizens responded to the collective hailing. In the first week, private U.S. citizens contributed \$275 million, mostly to large NGOs like the Red Cross. By contrast, the donations the first week following Japan's earthquake that triggered a nuclear crisis and killed around 20,000 totaled \$87 million. In their generosity to the Haiti effort, U.S. citizens reacted more like they did following Hurricane Katrina, with \$522 million. This contribution was sustained, reaching \$1 billion as of March 1, the deadline for claiming donations on citizens' 2009 taxes following a special incentive from the Obama administration, peaking at \$1.4 billion for the year. Sixty percent of U.S. households and over 80 percent of African American families contributed to the Haiti earthquake response, despite feeling the pinch from the global financial crisis. Another technological innovation that was to later serve as a blueprint for global citizens' action was the use of text messages to donate. Made popular by international hip-hop star and disqualified presidential candidate Wyclef Jean for his *Yéle Haiti* char-

ity, texting to the relief effort was particularly aimed at younger people. The Red Cross adopted this technology, which it continued in the Japan earthquake effort.

Individual citizens poured into Haiti after it was deemed safe by the U.S. military, which had shut down the airport to rebuild the airstrip. The number of flights and destinations to and from Haiti increased. Before 2009, when Delta added a nonstop to Haiti several times a week, the only U.S. air carriers to Haiti were American Airlines and Spirit. There were five American flights from Miami, Fort Lauderdale, and New York, and one with Spirit, from Miami. Following the earthquake, to keep up with and capitalize on the increased demand, American added a flight from its worldwide hub Dallas and one from San Juan, Puerto Rico. Delta added one from its worldwide hub of Atlanta. Continental, which merged with United soon thereafter, added a flight from Newark. Before the quake it was not uncommon to see packs of missionaries with matching t-shirts on the flights. Throughout 2010 foreigners were a majority of people on flights. The average age also decreased: following the earthquake, missionary groups included large numbers of high school and even some junior high students, and the professional development or nongovernmental organization (NGO) staff increased their numbers, with a plurality if not a majority of twenty-somethings to staff these agencies. When asked, a group of two dozen junior high school students wearing "map ede Ayiti" (I am helping Haiti) t-shirts reported that they were volunteering at an orphanage. Media stories abound of reports back from first-time mission trips, almost invariably to celebrate the hometown heroes. Narratives about Haiti include what Hefferan (2007) called the reverse mission, that Haitian people were more spiritual and resilient (Panchang 2012; Ulysse 2011). Captured and mirrored by news coverage, these newly minted experts (Renda 2001) also opined about the virtues of Christianity, of capitalist development, public health and hygiene, and limited representative democracy, all markers of assumed cultural and racial superiority. As Haitian American anthropologist Gina Ulysse (2010:421) has hammered home, these racist depictions are a contemporary reflection of Haiti's "image problem" that stretches far into its past because of its role in ending slavery with the Haitian Revolution. The collective residue of these stories justify, and naturalize, foreign control of the country, an element of what Inderpal Grewal (2014) termed "humanitarian citizenship" being the "soft" power of empire.

In the wake of the temblor, televangelist Pat Robertson claimed it was God's punishment for Haiti's "pact to [sic] the devil." While this was not his first such statement following a disaster—he made similar comments following Hurricane Katrina—this discourse gained wide currency. The "pact" Robertson referred to was the ceremony at Bois Caiman, on Au-

gust 14, 1791, which ignited the Haitian Revolution. This discourse gained momentum following the earthquake, including among Haitian evangelicals, many of whom traced their conversion from Catholicism to a missionary group in the United States (McAlister 2013). Mainstream coverage eschewed this brazen attempt to invoke the almighty, but the terms of the discussion placed the onus on Haiti for the evident lack of progress. *New York Times* columnist David Brooks argued that Haitian culture was resistant to progress. Ulysse (2010) deconstructed the representations of Haiti coming out of the mainstream press at the time. She demonstrated racialized continuities in discourses stemming from the Haitian Revolution—from a slave revolt—based on the fear of black self-determination and as a warning to other slaves against rising up, which Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) called unthinkable, given Enlightenment ideas of who counted as a person. Familiar language of Haiti being a fragile or failed state, and being the poorest country in the hemisphere, served to justify the need for foreign intervention and offered a convenient explanation for the limited progress of this intervention. By focusing on “deficient” local cultural practices, social systems, or institutions, the foreign media gaze deflected attention away from the impact of foreign policies toward Haiti in amplifying the earthquake’s destructiveness.

Haitian Understandings

As a country with an estimated 10 million inhabitants, and one deeply divided along a variety of social cleavages, including socioeconomic status, religion, and urban/rural, it should not come as a surprise that there are many often competing narratives from within Haiti: there is far more than one Haitian perspective, just as there is more than one Filipino or American perspective. That said, clusters of Haitian understandings offer important counterpoints to those promoted in foreign media and policy-making agencies. Many commentators in Haiti do not use the word *katastwòf* (catastrophe) or *dezas* (disaster) to discuss the earthquake. For a long while, many did not use the Creole word *tranblemanntè* (earthquake) to discuss the seismic event, out of respect for the dead and also to not relive the memories: it was known as various names, including *Douz* (12), *bagay la* (the thing), *evenman nan* (the event), or *goudougoudou* (an onomatopoeia mimicking the rumbling sound of the earth moving). Haitian scholar Myrtha Gilbert is succinct: the title of her 2010 book is “*La catastrophe n’était pas naturelle*” (the catastrophe wasn’t natural; Gilbert 2010). Many commentators, activists, scholars, or people living in the camps (with many identifying with more than one category) pointedly drew the distinc-

tion between “the catastrophe” and “the event.” This language mirrors social science scholarship, which discusses triggering “events” as only one part of the disaster. Haitian intellectuals, including what Antonio Gramsci (1971) termed organic intellectuals, as well as activists, community leaders, and aid recipients who lived in the camps, whose experience and reflection represent marginalized people’s interests, distinguish the *kriz estriktirèl* (structural crisis) from the *kriz konjonktirèl* (conjunctural crisis, of the intersection of contemporary issues with the structural).

This *kriz estriktirèl* is local language reflecting the concept of vulnerability. To many in Haiti, the disaster was not the event itself but the factors that increased Haiti’s vulnerability. As scholars have argued elsewhere (e.g., Beauvoir-Dominique 2005; Gilbert 2010; Oliver-Smith 2012), this vulnerability was produced by a collusion of foreign and local elite populations. Having lost their “pearl of the Antilles” in 1804, France nonetheless demanded a 150 million francs indemnity in 1825, plunging the country into a 125-year debt. In 2003, President Jean-Bertrand Aristide estimated the contemporary value of this debt to be \$22 billion. The United States, which did not recognize Haiti until its Civil War, invaded the country twenty-six times until 1915, when Marines landed and occupied the island for nineteen years. This U.S. occupation centralized political and economic power in Port-au-Prince (Elie 2006; Jean-Baptiste 2012; Lucien 2013), and neoliberal policies imposed on the country since the mid-1980s triggered a massive urbanization and slumification (Deshommes 2005; DeWind and Kinley 1988). Alex Dupuy (2010) pointed out that the population quadrupled in the two decades since the implantation of neoliberalism. With nowhere to go, individually bearing costs of austerity, paying for education, health care, water, and sanitation, and with a weakened government with limited oversight capacity, people built housing as cheaply as possible in shantytowns. These neoliberal policies had a direct impact on the disaster: 86 percent of the homes destroyed in the earthquake had been built since 1990 (Etienne 2012).

Haitian people have told other sets of narratives about the earthquake, their own shared survival, and everyday heroism. Throughout the earthquake-affected region—not only Port-au-Prince but also the area to the south, including Léogâne, Jacmel, Petit-Goâve, and Grand-Goâve—the first emergency response came from people themselves: Complete strangers pulling out children or the elderly, half-buried, from under slabs of concrete. Neighbors pooling together what scraps of food, utensils, charcoal, and water they could find, sleeping next to one another on the ground, in the street. Community brigades pulling out material goods along with the living and dead bodies from the remains of houses. Makeshift clinics being set up under borrowed tarps or bedsheets. Store owners giving out

stocks of candles, water, batteries, and medicines to passers-by. Huddled meetings assessing the damage, the loss of life, needs, and community assets. Homeowners opening their *lakou*—the family compound—to family members, fellow churchgoers, neighbors, coworkers, and friends. Teams of able-bodied young men and women clearing debris from roads and corridors. Stories like these were not the exception: this was the story of how the Haitian people put away their economic and political differences and worked together, in dignity and solidarity, to collectively survive.

As Rebecca Solnit (2009) reminds us, following a tradition within disaster sociology, disasters can also be stages for extraordinary human growth and solidarity. Haiti's earthquake was not by any means an exception, even though stories of solidarity and Haitian people's everyday acts of survival went largely unnoticed by international press and humanitarian agencies. A range of Haitian writers detailed acts of solidarity following the earthquake (e.g., Jean-Baptiste 2012; Lahens 2010; Montas-Dominique 2011; Trouillot 2012; Victor 2010). Unfortunately, there is a serious gap in research on local communities acting as first responders to disasters. The political divisions that six years prior ripped the country apart were at least temporarily suspended. Glimpses of another Haiti that fulfilled its revolutionary slogan emblazoned on its flag, *l'union fait la force* (unity creates strength) were visible, as the spirit of *youn ede lòt* (one helping the other) was so poignantly expressed.

Connection between Media Coverage and Aid

It may seem too obvious to mention, but most media outlets are for-profit, generating revenue based on advertising. Even so-called new or social media rely on the amount of hits a particular story generates: increased traffic means greater ad revenue. Reporters are disciplined into covering stories that have maximum impact, written in such a way to highlight drama (Pedelty 1995). Editors—often far away from the “beat”—are responsible for writing headlines, and even more important for online media searches, which often obscure nuance and at times can even argue against the main ideas. If the story has particularly dramatic photos, so much the better. Haiti's earthquake provided all these elements, inspiring a maelstrom of literally tens of thousands of stories. Once put on a Web site, images went viral. Haitian photojournalist Daniel Morel successfully sued transnational media conglomerates Agence France-Presse and Getty Images for \$1.2 million in royalties denied from using his images, an indicator of just how profitable covering the earthquake was. Outlets like CNN

had direct financial interests in seeking out the most macabre, desperate, and devastating.

Haiti was also the first mega-disaster in an era dominated by new or social media. From 2005 (the year of Hurricane Katrina) to 2010, new platforms like Twitter came on the scene, Facebook grew from 1 million regular users at the beginning of 2005 to 350 million five years later, and entirely online *Huffington Post* outpaced even the *New York Times*. True, so-called traditional media still had the resources and infrastructure to maintain dominance within online platforms. But the proliferation of media forms as well as outlets led to a blurring of distinctions between journalists and aid workers. For example, the vast majority of people covering Haiti for *Huffington Post* worked for aid agencies. Reflecting the low mean age of foreign aid workers (Seitenfus 2015) and armies of volunteers, tens of thousands of stories were written by amateurs, coming to Haiti for the first time as part of an aid mission. These individuals became instant experts. These voices also had a direct interest in dramatizing the devastation of the earthquake. In addition, they had interests in highlighting their heroic efforts. Even if unintended, a direct outcome of both tendencies was to frame Haitian people out of the story, or relegate them to silent victims, props for foreigners’ heroism. The following section of the chapter explores the material impacts of these media framings.

Impacts of the Foreign Coverage

Given the many circuits connecting media coverage and disaster response, there are many potential outcomes of what might be called the media-disasters-industrial complex, or the disaster narrative. The following discussion focuses on four: First, the discourse of a “weak state” served to justify foreign control of the process and almost total exclusion of Haitian people in the process. Second, this exclusion, also having roots in framing Haitian people out of the story and tropes of dehumanization, led to practices and relationships wherein aid recipients felt they were treated like animals. Third, the disaster response was greatly influenced by the photo op. Finally, a blame game led to increasingly severe responses.

Weak State

The destruction of government buildings was often cited as justification for foreign agencies—donors, intergovernmental organizations like the Red Cross and IOM, and NGOs—taking charge of the effort. This did not

sit well with Haitian government employees. A member of the Haitian government retorted, “So we didn’t have a space to meet. That doesn’t mean you exclude us from the conversation.” By and large, government agencies made do with what they had. According to a foreign NGO worker, he was given the choice to either meet “in the small conference room” or “in the large conference room,” indicating two different tables under trees on the ministry grounds. While not universally true, and notwithstanding the populations’ belief in government capacity, the government itself continued to function even with buildings collapsed. Many donors, including the U.N. (United Nations Office of the Special Envoy for Haiti 2012), had outlined the need for improved coordination in Haiti. In order to support this, only the Spanish government gave direct support to two government agencies playing central roles in coordination. Venezuela, a country that out-pledged even the United States, gave direct cash support—much in the form of loans—to the Haitian government, through the Petro Caribé program. However, Spain and Venezuela were exceptions; nearly all other donors continued to support NGOs headquartered in their country, or gave to a new international body.

Solidifying this tendency, following the March 2010 UN donor conference, donors asked the Haitian parliament to vote to dissolve itself and endorse the creation of the IHRC. The IHRC comprised twenty-six members, half of them non-Haitian, and was cochaired by Bill Clinton and Jean-Max Bellerive, who was then prime minister. In theory, this was a symbol of shared governance. The IHRC’s mandate was to review and approve projects for reconstruction. Upon IHRC approval, the Haiti Reconstruction Fund, managed by the World Bank, had the authority to release the funds. In the words of a World Bank official, “It was the way we could convince donors to let go of the money. In effect we were holding onto it.” The IHRC was structured in such a way that the major donors—the United States, Canada, France, and the European Union—had individual seats while the entirety of Caribbean Community and Common Market (CARICOM), Haiti’s Caribbean neighbors, shared a seat. Commentators across the political spectrum in Haiti saw the IHRC as a symbol of Haiti’s sovereignty being violated (Bélizaire 2010; Willems 2012). One international aid worker reported that a senior government official characterized it as *comment est-ce qu’on va foutre la gueule du peuple haïtien*, which can be translated as “How can we fuck the snout of the Haitian people?” Prime Minister Bellerive, who was to be IHRC cochair, responded to senators, “I hope you sense the dependency in this document. If you don’t sense it, you should tear it up” (Dupuy 2010, 15). Several Haitian members of the IHRC denounced the fact that they were shut out of the process of meaningful participation, publishing a scathing open letter on December 14, 2010, before a meeting

in the Dominican Republic, when borders were closed to Haitian people because of the cholera epidemic caused by the UN (Hendriksen, Price, and Shupp 2011; Piarroux et al. 2011).¹ At least it was more open, to some, reflecting the reality of an occupation: UN troops on the ground since 2004 and an even longer foreign control of finances and aid.

Parallel to the IHRC that assumed control of reconstruction, international agencies created a foreign-led system of coordinating the humanitarian response. Taking a cue from one of what agencies referred to as “lessons learned” from the Aceh experience, the UN organized what they call “clusters” bringing together different agencies that they term “actors”—the UN system, other donors, international NGOs, and at least in theory the Haitian government—from the various sectors of the humanitarian response: water and sanitation, health, protection, agriculture, food aid, and so on. Agriculture was a separate cluster from emergency food aid. At least for the first two years, housing was split between three clusters, for emergency shelter (Camp Coordination and Management); temporary shelters, or T-shelters (Shelter), and longer-term housing outside the camps (Housing Reconstruction). Gender-Based Violence was a subcluster of Protection. There were twelve clusters overall. All but the Water and Sanitation and Gender-Based Violence clusters met inside the UN Logistics Base, a military base tucked inside the international airport, called LogBase for short. LogBase contained large tents and later shipping containers wherein various UN agencies set up temporary offices, a grocery store, and a couple of restaurants, serving international fare and using the U.S. dollar as the official currency (Klarreich and Polman 2012). The area was patrolled and secured by UN troops, with a solid wall painted with the UN colors (white and baby blue) towering over six meters high, topped with barbed wire, keeping Haitian people out. Armed guards granted access, checking passports. Once cleared, visitors would be sent through X-ray, metal detection, and closed-circuit television. Exiting this, a person would find one another guard tower trained down on them. Several Haitian nationals reported that they felt excluded from the space. For example, a high-ranking government official was denied access by the UN guards. Suspecting a racial and national origin bias, I twice attempted to enter without my U.S. passport. Both times I was granted access.

The Haitian government already had coordination structures in place, called *tables sectorielles* (sector tables). Some people expressed the concern that the cluster meetings were on top of their jobs, and so some NGO staff, with experience before the earthquake, chose to opt out. Almost every foreign agency staff member I talked to used the word “clusterfuck” to describe the chaotic, overwhelming, and ineffectual nature of the meetings. Several participants noted that cluster meetings were about mes-

saging or sharing information about a particular service contracted by an NGO. They were, in other words, ritual or performative spaces rather than deliberative spaces. In all but the two clusters noted above, the language was English, not even French, one of the two national languages accessible to Haiti's NGO class (Miles 2012). Haitian NGO employee Geralda noted, "For a long time, the dominant language of the country was English. In a context where English was the dominant language in the decision-making process, in a context where all planning was done in English, and considering cultural aspects were ignored, it was crystal clear that Haitians were outside of everything." Like *kach-fò-wòk* (cash for work) and *chèltè* (shelter), the word "*klòstè*," a Kreyòl pronunciation of "cluster," was used among the NGO class, but fewer than 1 percent of IDP camp residents knew what that meant or had even heard of it. International agency staff Antonio said candidly, "We don't include IDPs in our discussions" (see also Panchang 2012).

"Like Animals"

Given the dehumanizing tendencies within media coverage, it is unfortunately not surprising that many aid recipients reported feeling dehumanized. A discourse that agencies were treating them like animals was quite common; at the State University of Haiti students and faculty invoked Giorgio Agamben's (1998) concept of "bare life" to describe how human beings were reduced to bare, biological, survival. Living conditions were often inhuman: the heat, lack of sanitation, mud, complete lack of privacy, the smell, and limited opportunities. Skin rashes were a common occurrence, as people's bodies attempted to fend off pathogens in the environment. Yves, who lived in an IDP camp, explained that "We're here, in tents, because of what happened on January 12. Some people look at us like we're dogs. Actually, dogs in foreign countries are valued more than us. The amount of money that's spent on them in one week would be our income for four or five months." Allande, who lived in another camp, decried the situation: "Just because we're living in a camp, the way people see us, people liken us to delinquents." Frisline, who lived in the same camp, revealed, "Sometimes you get on a bus and you hear people speaking badly about people living in the camps. You can't speak because you are one of them." These statements and many more like them outline a powerful stigma attached to being a *deplase* (person removed to a camp), the identity of being an IDP (Brun 2003; Duncan 2005).

Why is this? In no small part, camps remain visual reminders of failures within the international aid response, eyesores that get in the way of selling Haiti as being "now open for business," as President Michel Martelly

boasted in May 2011. This slogan just happened to coincide with Bill Clinton's.² More fundamentally, the people struggling to survive under the heat of the tarps or T-shelters were committing the ultimate indignity: they existed. IDPs' mere existence brought visibility to profound social problems, such as extreme poverty and deep class hostility that has always beset Haiti but had been swept under the rug; they were what Hardt and Negri (2000, 294) called disposable people, or Michel Agier (2011) called undesirables. The hypocrisy, misery, and inequality could no longer be ignored, now that it was in plain view, especially in the Champs de Mars, the national plaza surrounding the crumbled remains of the Palais National (National Palace): a visible demand to be seen.

The Photo Op

This demand to be seen is a central trait to humanitarian aid. Humanitarian staff, particularly those engaged in public relations or fundraising, are acutely aware that their organizations live from media coverage. Therefore, decisions about particular courses of action on the ground are guided at least in part for the opportunity to stage a photo op. Some staff grumbled about their roles as "PR tools," even when they knew better. "Remember how your salaries are being paid," one person sardonically retold when I asked why she did things she knew to be ineffective, inefficient, or inappropriate. She left that agency a month after our interview.

This mantra, directive, or logic of visibility was evident in many sectors of the humanitarian response. One such example was the T-shelters. Cluster staff demonstrated that they were inappropriate, creating pressures that swelled the shantytowns in dangerous mountainsides. In addition, the Haitian government and the Shelter cluster issued a moratorium in 2011. However, in the parlance of humanitarian agencies, they were still the "solution" of choice for several NGOs. Explaining why, international aid worker Siobhan argued, "It's also the most visible, providing the photo opportunity, to show off what our structures are." This logic of visibility was also behind the choice of which camps were to be closed during the controversial 16/6 relocation program, announced by newly elected president Martelly in June 2011, closing six highly visible camps and supposedly reconstructing sixteen neighborhoods where the residents of the six camps had lived before the earthquake. Andrea, who came to Haiti working for an NGO and later joined the IOM, said, "They might not be the most vulnerable sites, but they are sites with the most visibility." Aside from the Champs de Mars, the epicenter of the photo op across from the crumbled Palais National, which was not part of the program, these locations were the most highly visible to journalists, including the area around

the airport and the main two plazas in the suburb of Pétiion-Ville. For his part, Andrea's colleague William, who worked more directly on relocation, was unmoved by this critique: "There are humanitarian actors and donors who are very upset that the six camps have been chosen quite clearly on political grounds. My view on that is you were never going to get them to start on any other grounds other than political."

The need for visibility also encouraged private water trucks instead of reinforcing public taps that existed before the earthquake. Geralda, a Haitian director of an international NGO, denounced this practice: "Water distribution began with the international community bringing their own water. Then, they started buying local water trucks, making a few people rich, instead of building water systems that could still be useful to us today. When you distribute water with trucks only, you are spending millions, but you have to provide water on a daily basis. When the millions are gone, the people don't have drinking water and are exposed once again to water-related diseases."

One reason why humanitarian agencies chose this decidedly unsustainable practice was that people could be seen—and photographed—standing in long lines in the camps. Beneficiaries' performances become cred for the humanitarian agency filming it; it becomes capital they can leverage, in effect to sell to donors for more aid, or to justify its receipt. Associated Press (AP) journalist Jonathan Katz (2013) came close to suggesting that this tendency to play to the international media led many NGOs to force people into the camps in order to receive aid.

International aid worker Siobhan noted the tendency for humanitarian agencies to look for visible signs of distress and send aid there, so it would be expected that NGOs would not even look for the strategic points, local providers, or local leaders. This is one reason why the international response missed a golden opportunity to decrease the vulnerability that neoliberalism engendered when 630,000 people fled the city (Bengtsson et al. 2011).³ Agencies have to be seen actually giving aid. This need for visibility also explained why camps in peripheral municipalities had fewer services than those near the urban core (Schuller and Levey 2014). Those of us in the solidarity movement might have contributed to these tendencies by the lack of clarity of our rhetoric. If the only question (that was heard, at least) was, "Where did the money go?" then, understandably, NGOs needing to justify their receipt of \$3.06 billion in private donations and \$6.43 billion in official sources went for the "quick wins" in the words of one: the photo op. Said another, "If I can see it, I can sell it." This simple statement says a lot: in the first several months of the recovery it was enough to show pictures of usually young, usually white, aid workers carrying boxes of aid to demonstrate effort.⁴ But when the image of the

country did not change as a result of foreigners’ good intentions, journalists began questioning the overall effort and its effectiveness; in fact, some had questioned it all along, a strange mix of Fox News and leftist non-mainstream sites. This questioning reached a high point in June 2015, when NPR published a scathing exposé of the Red Cross (Elliot and Sullivan 2015).

A Blame Game

In response, some humanitarian actors went on the offensive, playing a blame game. On top of Haiti’s deep-seated social divisions temporarily suspended after the earthquake, foreign aid agencies added to this denigration of IDPs. In most of my interviews and in informal conversations, foreign aid workers were quick to point to a case of an individual trying to take advantage of the situation. Usually this was a single individual, and always this was the prelude to a general assessment of IDPs. This assessment either justified the agency’s disciplinary, even punitive, approach to management of IDPs or explained the failures in the aid system overall. These were not just conversations with me: humanitarian agencies attempted to shape the conversation, shifting the blame for the obvious lack of progress onto the IDPs themselves. Echoing former first lady Barbara Bush’s comments about Katrina-displaced persons living better in the Astrodome than they had before the storm, on May 10, 2010, Assistant Secretary of State Cheryl Mills said, “People seek to remain in the temporary communities because, as surprising as that might seem outside of Haiti, life is better for many of them now.”

Mills’ comment highlights a persistent discourse that people were only living under tents in order to get free services: How else would living “worse than dogs” be possibly considered better? Foreign aid workers expended quite a bit of energy to expose this. For example, anthropologist Tim Schwartz declared there only to be 42,608 “legitimate” IDPs in a report commissioned (and later rejected) by United States Agency for International Development (USAID), but leaked to the press and finally published on May 27, 2011, by Agence France-Presse (Troutman 2011). Dozens of news stories, including in large-circulation *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, *Newsweek*, and *Time*, repeated this finger-wagging, more editorializing than news reporting. Schwartz’s critique of the Haitian government was based primarily on its lack of transparency in its research methods, however the leaked report was similarly opaque. For its part, USAID distanced itself from the most controversial claims, citing inconsistencies and irregularities within Schwartz’s research methods (Daniel 2011). Only two stories that made it to Google’s daily news alerts reported this critique,

despite the dozens that used the leaked report to lodge a critique against the Haitian government, many drawing on familiar narratives of Haitian incompetence, adding to Haiti's unending bad press (Lawless 1992; Ulysse 2010; Trouillot 1990). The debate was primarily focused on the death toll, leaving the other unsubstantiated claims about the "legitimate" IDPs and incendiary statements such as people living in the camps only for the free access to services unaddressed. The total silence, the attention deflected away from this discussion of the "illegitimate" IDPs, was an insidious outcome. The inflammatory and controversial allegations about living IDPs, whose rights were actively being challenged by a range of actors, became tacitly accepted by the lack of scrutiny. This debate about the numbers of dead, mapping onto a discussion of who is a "real" victim, dramatizes the material consequences of contests over the disaster narrative.

Theorizing the Disaster Narrative

Haiti's earthquake broke the charts in terms of media coverage. Consequently, the scale of the foreign response has few parallels. Disaster scholars have long pointed out the interrelation between media coverage and generosity (e.g., Brauman 1993; Olsen, Carstensen, and Høyen 2003). However, this chapter has also demonstrated that the disaster narrative shapes the imagination, articulation, and implementation of responses, a point powerfully argued by Ulysse (2015). Having framed Haitian people outside of a person who is deemed an actor, reducing them to objects of aid, most stories justified a top-down, militarized, foreign-led response. Disaster response institutions such as the IHRC and the clusters excluded Haitian authorities and communities from decision-making. In addition, short-term, costly, unsustainable interventions that neither matched local communities' priorities nor reinforced public institutions or services were consistently chosen by foreign humanitarian agencies. Explaining why, several agency representatives pointed to the need to stage a photo op to justify their receipt of one of the largest humanitarian responses ever given, and to prove that funds had been spent. In addition to begging the question, "Where did the money go?" increasingly raised by journalists (and solidarity activists), the need for visibility is a general operating logic within contemporary disaster responses. While funding for international development has declined, certainly after the global recession since 2008, funding for humanitarian aid has held steady and even grown. In 2013 the industry was worth \$22 billion, up from \$17.3 the previous year (Development Initiatives 2014). Noted above, media coverage is widely credited for maintaining these levels of generosity.

Focusing disproportionate attention on the event and not on vulnerability, most media accounts of the earthquake took for granted that Haiti was a “failed state” without exploring the foreign policy roots of this condition. Some commentators like *New York Times*’ David Brooks and others argued that Haiti’s fatalistic, present-oriented culture (in the singular) was to blame. Many other accounts had the language of corruption or failed state framed within the story, while slavery, colonialism, the U.S. occupation, and neoliberalism were usually framed outside, and not discussed. Aid agencies’ good intentions, Bill Clinton’s cheerful “Build Back Better” and “Haiti is open for business” slogans were reported, erasing the role played by Clinton and USAID in creating the conditions for Port-au-Prince’s hyperurbanization and slumification in the first place. With a historical analysis thus cut off, a new industrial park outside of the capital area wherein the USAID and the Inter-American Development Bank spent \$482.9 million could even make sense as a solution in the first place. The industrial park in the capital, with its low wages and limited public investment, played a heavy role in producing the country’s largest shantytown, Cité Soleil, and associated negative consequences that include violence and extreme vulnerability to disasters.

Given the singularity of the media attention and therefore generosity, it is tempting to once again exceptionalize Haiti. The post-earthquake case is more visible and therefore the contradictions within the humanitarian system are easier to notice. But the need for visibility, photo op, project mentality, market logic, and turning people’s suffering into capital are unfortunately realities of a humanitarian system that relies on generosity of individual donors and states, particularly in a lingering financial crisis (e.g., Agier 2006; Barnett 2011; Duffield, Macrae, and Curtis 2001; Fassin 2012; Feldman 2010; Scherz 2013). Especially people employed in public relations or fundraising intimately understand this reality. The Haiti case, perhaps, because of its visibility, makes these contradictions—and their consequences—difficult to ignore. As many people in Haiti exclaimed, “They are making money off us!”

Related to this point, the post-quake aid response highlights the disaster narrative. While the nonstop barrage of media coverage engendered generosity, most stories also normalized foreign control. They did so first by portraying the most abject misery, framed in a narrative of a nation brought “to its knees,” a quadruple entendre referring to being physically jostled, extreme devastation, and a reflex to pray, not to mention being forced to beg. Second, by systematically ignoring the everyday heroism and solidarity of tens of thousands of ordinary people, framing them outside the story, media accounts painted a picture of *terra nullius*, if not *Lord of the Flies*. This served to justify a fear-based, militarized response.

Explaining what he called an “expatriate colonization,” Haitian NGO professional Sonson theorized, “It seems that they thought that the rubble fell on our intelligence too.” If we foreigners were responsible for everything, from security to nation building, because everything was destroyed and there was nothing left of the state and no local capacity, then why not continue to forge ahead with the war surgeries and cigar cuts, continuing to build T-shelters when the government actually did say no? Structuring this expatronizing, Haitian commentators discussed the tendency to turn recipients into objects, animals, or children (Louis 2015). Jackson, a director of a Haitian NGO, challenged one of these narratives: “NGOs are currently spending money any which way because they say Haitians can’t manage. Constructing autonomy begins here as well. We reject in advance all attempts to say that Haitians can’t manage.”

Media coverage focused almost entirely on what Paul Farmer (2011) called the proximate cause of the suffering: the hazardous conditions (Wisner et al. 2004). Lost in the majority of discussions in the media are the distal, more structural, causes: hyperurbanization triggered by one of the most successful implantations of free-market capitalism the world has ever seen, following a nineteen-year U.S. military occupation. Consequently, the opportunity to reinforce what Haitian people were actually doing was lost (Jean-Baptiste 2012). Rather than seize this opportunity to undo this urbanization and rebuild Haiti’s rural peasant economy, agencies contributed to the centralization, overcrowding, and individualism. As foreign aid worker Siobhan noted, supporting rural recipient communities wouldn’t have even occurred to humanitarian agencies. Using the same language, two Haitian directors argued that this is because of their need to “plant the flag,” to be seen where the journalists were. It was, in effect, a vicious cycle. Aid attracted journalists to the epicenter and the national plaza, and to the camps. Meanwhile, quietly, 630,000 Haitian people sought refuge with their rural family members, and even more individuals in Port-au-Prince were piecing together their homes, families, and neighborhoods outside the camps.

Beyond Haiti

Insights from understanding these disaster narratives are certainly not limited to Haiti. Discussing multiple cases of industrial accidents, from Exxon Valdez to the BP Deepwater Horizon spill, Gregory Button (2010) demonstrated how hotly contested the disaster narrative can be. Importantly, accounts that portray spills as “accidents” and without precedent actively discourage public recognition of these as systemic, and portray

these excesses of corporate greed and lack of accountability as normal. And thus the response is usually woefully inadequate, and certainly we are no better prepared against future catastrophes. Mahmood Mamdani (2009) analyzes the disaster narrative coming from Darfur that mapped onto global anti-Islamic discourses, turning the “responsibility to protect” into a “right to punish” (see also Clarke 2010).

Why do media anoint some disasters such as the 2010 earthquake in Haiti and disregard others such as the coal ash spill covered by Button and Eldridge, this volume? Haiti’s earthquake, like the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami or Hurricane Katrina, became mega-disasters, whose media coverage obscures our understanding of disasters overall. Scholars of disasters have long pointed out that for an event to become known as a disaster requires vulnerability. Scholars and practitioners have correctly focused our energies on the factors that contribute to vulnerability, as the factors within our control and actually the factors that shape the deadliness of a hazard. We often lament the misrecognition of the disaster-as-event, often imbedded in media portrayals, as acts of God or their inherent singularity. However, it behooves us to pay attention to these narratives themselves. In effect, to be anointed as a disaster requires a disaster narrative. The difference between mega-disasters, slow-moving disasters, or hidden or forgotten disasters is the photo op, the ability to move people to an emotional response: in short, the story.

The extreme visibility and impact of foreign news coverage on Haiti’s earthquake is a powerful example of what Arjun Appadurai (1990, 9) referred to as “mediascape,” pervasive and insidious, shaping how people perceive the world. Michel Foucault (1978) has drawn scholars’ attention to the relationships of power surrounding the messages, media, and individuals regarding discourse. Building from these insights of mediascapes shaping people’s worldview, and how discourses reflect and reproduce inequality, the disaster narrative is the *istwa*, the story as well as the history, exposing the ways in which powerful interests define and frame the disaster, calling to question what issues are to be discussed—and what excluded—how, and by whom, and who is declared to be an actor, and who is framed out of the story. In this way the disaster narrative frames the responses. Deconstructing the disaster narrative thus exposes the political economy of knowledge production, dissemination, and action. One wonders whether mega-disasters themselves, notably Haiti’s earthquake, through the disaster narrative, constitute a global imagined community? The circuits of a community of concern overlaid on Haiti suggest that mega-disasters might represent the epicenter of a new transnational humanitarian order: a trans-nation.

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Notes

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1. The full text of the letter is posted online, unnamed. It was published originally in *Le Matin*, with unofficial translation by Isabeau Doucet (“Letter from the Haitian Members” 2010).
2. In *Fatal Assistance* (Peck 2013), there was a strong implication that Bill Clinton backed Martelly in the elections. The documentary also showed Secretary of State Hillary Clinton strong-arming President Préval about the election results.
3. There were some individual efforts, notably a settlement built in the Belladères-Las Cahobas border region, and in Papaye.
4. For an example see the cover photo of Frédéric Thomas’s (2013) *Haiti: l’Echec Humanitaire*.

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