

Title: Encounters with Global Marginalization: Connecting African American Students to Mediated “Othering.”

Abstract

African American mass communication students travelled to Latin American and Caribbean countries where they examined first hand the role that U.S. media plays in “othering” marginalized countries and their peoples. However, these research experiences and exchanges were very much a lesson on a collective sense of marginalization, as African American students also saw how their own media narratives travelled abroad, perpetuating stereotypes. The field trips were to Haiti, the Dominican Republic and Cuba and they took place during the summer. The project’s teaching objective was to educate students about the power of Western media in shaping outcomes for global communities both through its gatekeeping and framing of other countries. Students directly interacted with national journalists and media workers who, through ongoing projects, allowed students to see the impact of U.S. news and other mediated discourse on their own countries. Alternatively, these African American students were able to see how media narratives about African Americans travel to countries in the region and shape perspectives of the black experience in America.

Description

Explanation of the Activity:

For each field trip, students were assigned a current topic in the news headlines for the assigned country. The learning outcomes below were applied to these assignments. For the field trip to Haiti and the Dominican Republic, the major headline was the deportation of Dominicans of Haitian decent. In Cuba, the major news story was the reversal of Obama administration normalization of relations with Cuba under the Trump administration. Students met with news workers in the respective countries and other stakeholders and sources knowledgeable of the news event. The students produced video reports of these exchanges to reflect on what they had learned and the role that U.S. media played in portraying these countries in light of these news stories. Additionally, the students were then also asked to position their own experiences as African Americans, within a global understanding of how media “others” marginalized peoples or nations.

The field visits carried the following two primary learning outcomes for students.

Learning Outcome A: To educate students on how U.S. media frames news about the Americas.

Learning Outcome B: To train students to critically examine the impact of Western media narratives on people of color.

The first learning objective allowed students to consider the hegemony of the United States in the Western Hemisphere and to consider the position of U.S. media within that sphere of power. The students had taken a Latin America and Caribbean course with a focus on media and the black diaspora. The students learned in the

course the historic impact of the Monroe Doctrine in the region and subsequent U.S. policy to countries in the Hemisphere. Through these field visits, they learned directly from journalists in these respective countries, how U.S. mainstream media also plays a hegemonic role in shaping global perspectives that influence U.S. public opinion and political actions.

While the first learning outcome was primarily a critical learning exercise on media and political power, the second learning outcome was a critical exercise on race. Here students were able to fully grasp a second layer of this “othering” by considering questions of race and racial stereotyping within global narratives. The students heard from black and brown communities, similar, yet different from their own, about the stereotypes perpetuated about the spaces such peoples come from.

Rationale.

African American students rarely are provided with opportunities to travel abroad, or interact with foreign media workers. Professionally, even fewer become foreign correspondents, one of the most elite positions in news. The majority of the students who participated in these field visits had never left the U.S. and all the students in the project had never visited these countries. Their only knowledge of the peoples of these countries was through the lens of the U.S. media. These field trips and projects brought these students in direct contact with media professionals in foreign countries and allowed them this perspective early on in their media careers.

More importantly, while African American students do not consider themselves privileged in their own countries, they were able to, for the first time, examine their advantage relative to the people of the countries they visited. They saw their projects as a way to use their relative privileged positioning as Americans, to add to the dominant discourse about these countries, by providing an alternative perspective to mainstream presentations of these countries. In other words, they were able to consider the power they did hold in fact hold, as American citizens, but as marginalized ones, to use that media power to challenge existing narratives about people of color elsewhere.

Learning Outcomes

Learning Outcome A sought to educate the students on how U.S. news frames these countries. In the following link one of the students described how his experience in Haiti affected him and challenged the view her had about the country:

“This is a beautiful country. When we see Haiti, all we see is the poverty, or the trash, we don’t see this, we don’t see the elegance, we don’t see the beachfronts and stuff, we don’t see the markets. What changed for me is my whole perception of what Haiti looks like. To be honest, I thought it was a slum, but it’s a magnificent country.”

Link (from: 1:07): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TnyhSqZWmCo>



Another student interviewed a mother and her child who had been recently deported in the image above. The students learned lessons in dignity from Haitians during their visit. Haitian journalists shared with the students that Haitians use a well-known critique of foreign journalists “you are making money off my face.” Before students filmed, they put down their cameras and got to know their subjects, as human beings. They determined not to film visuals of naked children that perpetuated stereotypes, but sought to capture them doing ordinary things. They tried to get visuals that dignified their subjects despite the difficult task of examining their deportations.

Learning Outcome B sought to engage students on critically examining how people of color are “othered” in global mediated discourse. One student compared coverage of Haiti and the Dominican Republic and noted “We are on the same land, but [Haitians] are treated differently” (see from 1:37 in the above link).

The issue of race was also captured in this report by two students examining shared perspectives of stereotyping blackness while in Cuba. The students captured this exchange in a video project titled “My Ship Kept Going” (Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jWAIjrUqLSU&t=222s>). Here the students recognized that as African Americans, their ancestor’s journey in the Diaspora brought them to North America. They acknowledged their vantage point as American citizens, and they considered what Black people in the Diaspora think and feel about African Americans through a mediated lens. They start their video project out with the following narration (see link above):

“It wasn’t what we expected at all. Here we are in this foreign place but life seems so familiar. We see people who look just like us and act just like us. The only difference is, we don’t speak the same language. It made us realize that we could have easily ended up right here.”

This opening statement to their video project demonstrates that the students identify with their shared blackness or “othering” with the Cubans they met. They realized that the stereotypes and the confusion they had about Cubans were also mirrored in the stereotypes Cubans were fed about African Americans through the media. However, the students noted that their marginalization was in many ways similar to that of Cubans. What they knew of Cuba was largely limited to media discourse. They determined to produce reports that showed and shared experiences of Afro-Cubans with African Americans (see reports below).



A student interviewed a young Afro-Cuban artist. The student created a multimedia report of the artist on the shared experience of black identity here: <http://ladatanews.com/2017/07/31/new-orleans-inspires-cuban-art/> and <https://youtu.be/ryyvoCptmQQ>