

Haitians' Response to U.S. Media Coverage of Haiti

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Abstract

Drawing on past scholarly literature and ethnographic data collection in Miami's Haitian community in the summer of 2019, this article examines how Haitians respond to American media bias concerning Haiti, and the differences between how Haitians perceive themselves and how they believe Americans perceive them. Research participants expressed a multitude of beliefs concerning Haitian identity, many of which were rooted in a deep historical self-consciousness as well as an awareness of new struggles that Haitians and Haitian-Americans face today. The findings suggest that the persistence of colonial attitudes and paternalism towards Haitians — as well as the continued circulation of century-old stereotypes — are contributing to a chasm between Haitians and non-Haitians in the United States today vis-à-vis cultural identity.

I. Introduction

Journalism and news reporting rely on the accuracy and objectivity of reporters and media outlets. Parachute journalism, a concept referring to the dropping of reporters into unfamiliar territory to briefly cover an event before returning home, can be problematic in foreign media coverage — journalists who do not know a lot about the place or the people they are covering are more susceptible to perpetuating stereotypes or providing less than the whole picture (Martin, 2011). Media bias creates negative relationships between nations and can keep alive hackneyed ideas. This is the case with the United States and Haiti. Bias in American media coverage of Haiti and the Haitian people is contributing to misunderstanding between the two nations and the perpetuation of negative stereotypes and biases rooted in falsehood.

This paper draws upon scholarly literature and original ethnographic research during the summer of 2019 in Little Haiti, Miami, to discuss how Haitians believe Americans perceive them. With the invaluable help of a research partner who is a Haitian native, interviews were conducted with Haitians and Haitian-Americans concerning media bias, cultural stereotypes, and life as immigrants in the United States.

II. Literature Review

Since winning its independence from France in the early nineteenth century, Haiti often has been misrepresented and treated with condescension in American media (Dubois, 2013). Haiti has been portrayed

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in many different negative lights — from evil to savage to helpless — yet these portrayals have little to no basis in truth. Poor U.S. media representation of Haiti continues today and can be easily recognized in America's coverage of the disastrous 2010 earthquake in Haiti. American journalism, for example, often perpetuates the century-old narrative that Haiti is weak, inferior, and pitiable. In order to improve media relations between Haiti and the United States, scholars suggest that American journalists increase their own awareness of Haiti's history and present struggles and spread such awareness to the American public through accurate and even empathetic reporting.

In order to understand the recent United States media portrayal of Haiti, it is essential to understand the deep history between the two countries. Haiti successfully unchained itself from slavery and earned its independence in 1804. After much internal political turmoil, Haiti was occupied by the United States for 19 years beginning in 1914. During this time, the media described Haiti as a country plagued by political instability, violence, disarray, and immorality, among other problems (Potter, 2009). One newspaper in particular, *The New York Times*, “displayed condescension, paternalism, and racism in its editorials toward the inhabitants of the ‘black republic’” throughout the period of occupation (Bergman, 2011, p. 38). This type of media portrayal was common during the U.S. occupation, and, more broadly, the United States has regarded Haiti with an air of superiority and pity since the country gained independence. In the decades after the occupation, American journalists continued to “blame the problems of Haiti on the ‘races,’ languages, religions, and cultures of Haitians” instead of reporting objectively (Daut, 2015, p. 610). Simply put, American journalists have historically viewed Haiti as a “failed state unable to properly govern itself,” which has become a “common frame that can be found on the pages of U.S. newspapers” (Potter, 2009, p. 209).

Additionally, Hollywood is largely responsible for creating stereotypes surrounding the people of Haiti and circulating these misconceptions among the American people. Hollywood films like “White Zombie” portray Haiti as an uncivilized society consumed by evil and black magic, especially with regard to the spiritual tradition of Vodou (Halperin, 1933). Popularization of Vodou dolls and the association of Vodou with sorcery can be largely attributed to Hollywood and American popular culture, as “books, films, and travelogues have helped perpetuate [Vodou] stereotypes” (Potter, 2009, p. 211).

Despite the close relationship between Haiti and the United States over the past 300 years — one characterized as “intricately connected through geography, the Haitian diaspora, and the global economy” — the United States media, “whether consciously or not, have a tendency to portray Haiti as completely isolated from the rest of the world” (Potter, 2009, p. 211). American coverage of Haiti denigrates the country and continuously paints the Haitian people as inferior, with continuing media stereotypes reflecting and stemming from colonial discourse (Bellegarde-Smith, 2011). The combination of negative stereotypes, self-proclaimed altruism, and misinformation continues to drive biased American media coverage of Haiti.

Coverage of Haiti: The 2010 Earthquake

American coverage of the catastrophic earthquake that struck Haiti in January of 2010 proved to be no exception to the media bias described previously and serves as a case study for recent U.S. media coverage of Haiti. The 7.0 magnitude earthquake devastated Haiti in 2010, killing hundreds of thousands of people and displacing over a million (“Haiti Earthquake Fast Facts,” 2018). The disaster was perceived by people across the globe as “an unfortunate, even ‘unfair’ natural calamity on a people already suffering the million affronts of acute poverty and underdevelopment,” (“Haiti’s Lesson,” 2010, p. 5). Haitians were traumatized by the immense loss of life and the degree of environmental destruction. Yet the American media largely did not tell this story — they continued to stereotype and denigrate the country of Haiti and its people.

Once the United States got word of the earthquake in Haiti and its severity, the reporting began. Without wasting any time, cable news networks, newspapers, bloggers, and other Internet media sources began delivering speculation and misinformation instead of facts — with most of the information “ahistorical” and bordering on “gross racial caricature” (Lundy, 2011, p. 128). American media weaved undertones of Haitian inferiority in their reports, perpetuating old stereotypes during a time of disaster and grief. The journalists reporting on the disaster were largely uneducated on Haiti's history and offered little sympathy to the people dealing first-hand with such a tragedy (Ulysse, 2010). Overall, Haiti's troubled and dysfunctional past made the country an object of pity to the world, and the earthquake only fueled that narrative (Balaji, 2011). Despite the broad circulation of stereotypes and a narrative about Haiti based in pity and superiority, scholars suggest that media relations can be repaired if effort is made to better understand the country, its history, and its current challenges.

Relational Issues Between the United States and Haiti

Many observers believe the United States should be focusing on developing a way to help Haitians without patronizing them, advocating that foreign aid should be used to halt cycles of tyranny and poverty — especially after natural disasters — not to further colonial ideas or serve paternalistic agendas (“Haiti’s Lesson,” 2010). American media, critics charge, exacerbate the difficulties, failing “to adequately acknowledge the full extent of its present problems or place them in their properly complex geohistorical context, thus inhibiting an understanding that will offer real solutions to its problems” (Potter, 2009, pp. 226-227). While the fact that Haiti has had a “tangled and, at times, traumatic relationship” with the United States is irrefutable, “the potential exists for a more enlightened relationship between Haitians and the United States based on reciprocity and intercultural dialogue” (Dash, 2014, p. x).

Ignorance clearly exists in America concerning Haiti’s past and present, which manifests itself in news coverage. The simplest solution to patronizing, stereotyping, and often inaccurate American media coverage of Haiti is to better educate society on who Haitians are, what they have endured, and what they are still challenged by today. Instead of marginalizing Haiti — a common framework for coverage of disaster in developing countries — the American media should seek to spread awareness and organize relief solutions (Brown, 2012). The answer to Haiti’s problems is not American pity — feeling sorry for Haitians only serves to distance Americans from them further — nor is it reliance on clichés and stereotypes. “The day when Haitians as a people and Haiti as a symbol are no longer representatives of or synonymous with poverty, backwardness, and evil is still yet to come” (Ulysse, 2010, p. 37). It seems as though the answer may be a blend of knowledge, empathy, and aid that aims to uplift.

The present study examines the following research questions:

RQ1: Do Haitians/Haitian-Americans today feel as though the American media is biased against Haiti?

RQ2: How do Haitians/Haitian-Americans today feel they are perceived by Americans?

III. Methods

This study employed participant-observation at religious and community sites in a section of Miami called Little Haiti, and additionally conducted thirteen long-form interviews with Haitians and Haitian-Americans with the assistance of a research partner who is a Haitian native. Participants ranged in age from the early 20s to late 60s, with five identifying as male and eight identifying as female. Snowball sampling was used to make connections with possible participants and schedule interviews in Little Haiti. With permission from participants, each interview was audio-recorded and then transcribed.

While a greater number of interviews was intended, the political climate was frightening during the timeframe of the study. Haitians were cautious about disclosing personal information to strangers. Additionally, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officers were patrolling interstate roads, leading to clergy telling congregation members how they should act if ICE agents knocked on their doors. At times, the researchers were suspected of being ICE agents. Several interviews were scheduled where participants never appeared, and community leaders expressed concern about the privacy and wellbeing of participants during the study. Despite these challenges, valuable information emerged from long conversations centering on Haitian religion and identity.

IV. Findings

The thirteen interviews revealed a series of themes: Haitians were united by a sense of cultural pride, a deep understanding of their country’s history, and a drive to work hard. Haitians expressed that they believe their perceptions of themselves, however, are not in line with how Americans perceive Haitians. These findings led to the conclusion that there is a gap in mutual understanding between Haitians and Americans, in part perpetuated by American media’s biased coverage of Haiti.

The first trend was that Haitian emigres were united by their deep sense of pride in their cultural heritage. Each participant expressed affection and respect for the Haitian people — their people — with

one participant emphasizing, “I have never been one day ashamed or embarrassed of who I am” (Personal Interview, 6/26/19). The qualities and values Haitians used to describe and characterize themselves and the examples they gave to illustrate what Haitian identity means to them can effectively be grouped into two categories: discussions of perseverance through a tumultuous and painful history and references to hard work in today’s American society.

Participants displayed an astounding degree of historical consciousness. Several Haitians referenced Haiti’s history as a slave colony, the oppressive rule of François Duvalier (the violent totalitarian president of Haiti in from 1957-1971), and their lasting reputation as “botpipel,” a derogatory term used to refer to Haitians who came to America by ship beginning in the late 1970s. These periods of hardship and perceptions of their own cultural uniqueness instilled a sense of dignity in Haitians and contributed to the formation of a Haitian identity predicated on honor. One participant, a second-generation, female Haitian-American, captured these ideas in this way: “Being Haitian has always been about being uniquely different and having a lot of pride in terms of — not necessarily your blackness, but the liberation process — conversations about liberation, about freedom, about being bold, and unapologetic, is definitely what it means to me to be Haitian. And to speak Creole gives me a sense, a tie, to those that came before me. Actually, it’s something that I’m very proud of” (Personal Interview, 6/19/19). Haitians feel dignified because of what their ancestors have overcome and the trying historical events their people have endured. The Haitian people carry on a legacy of devotion to freedom, fellowship, and resilience that is apparent in their perception of their cultural identity today.

Secondly, participants also identified hard work as a cornerstone of Haitian identity. Participants often referred to the challenges of immigration and living as foreigners in American society, even as they juxtaposed these difficulties with their perceived ability to overcome them. One participant put it succinctly: “Haitians are courageous people. We know what we want and we work hard to make it happen” (Personal Interview, 6/27/19). Another participant discussed a conversation she had with another Haitian in Miami concerning his job and his relationship with his American boss. He explained, “I would tell [my boss] that just because he sees me work very hard and very well in spite of the fact that I’m not paid well and I’m treated badly, I’m not stupid. It’s not because I’m stupid that I’m working so hard for you. It’s because as a Haitian man, the quality of my work still speaks for me. Because I don’t have an education, I don’t have degrees, the quality of my work continues to define who I am” (Personal Interview, 7/4/19). In addition to the history they have overcome and the survival of their culture, Haitians pride themselves on their willingness to work hard to improve their situations. Haitians see themselves as uniquely resilient and strong in a positive way and possessing an unwavering sense of dignity.

Despite their favorable perception of themselves, Haitians are aware that others — outsiders to their communities and to their nationality — see them differently. Participants expressed that Americans generally lack credible information concerning Haiti’s history and instead base their judgments in stereotypes. One participant disclosed, “I do express [my Haitian identity], but I am very cautious about whom I might offend because of the bad connotations on Haitians, the way they see Haitians, the way they see my culture. ‘Cause once somebody say ‘Haitians’, the first word comes in their mind is ‘Vodou’” (Personal Interview, 6/14/19). This theme directly aligns with academic literature, which analyzed American media and popular culture portrayals of Vodou practitioners as evil and uncivilized. Despite the fact that not all Haitians practice Vodou, they feel judged and looked down upon for being associated with a tradition that is so stigmatized within American culture. Further, participants expressed an awareness of persistent colonial and paternalistic attitudes in American media, as if Haiti is a place that needs saving. These comments support Potter’s claim that the framing of Haiti as a failed state can certainly be found in U.S. newspapers (Potter, 2009).

Additionally, one participant noted that she feels as though non-Haitian Americans view them as “less than human,” perhaps because of societal and racial differences (Personal Interview, 6/14/19). Another participant offered the idea that “we look at Haiti through the lens of American exceptionalism and we expect for Haiti to have the same development standards as first-world countries,” a comment which lends further support to the contention that Americans are generally ignorant of Haitian affairs and society (Personal Interview, 6/19/19). This ignorance can surface in reporting, especially in parachute journalism, and lead to the circulation of misinformation, stereotypes, and framed or biased stories. The same participant also claimed that, “The only reason why Vodou is perceived as something negative is because it’s practiced by brown and black people,” pointing to the idea that perhaps the American bias against Haitians may also be racial (Personal Interview, 6/19/19).

Broadly, there is a significant disconnect between how Haitians view themselves and how they believe Americans view them. It is clear that many Haitians feel as though the American media is misrepresenting them, drawing out old stereotypes and focusing on negative aspects of their culture. Participants were looking for non-Haitian Americans to gain a greater understanding of Haitian culture and history, advocating for more education about Haiti in U.S. schools, better media representation, and for Americans to actually visit the country itself. One participant, a middle-aged man who works multiple jobs to support his wife and three children, expressed disappointment, saying, “the American people, they have a lot to know about Haitian people. When they see Haitian people here, they think we are ‘botpipel,’ poor people, black people. It’s not true. It’s not true. We have a heart. They have to know more about Haitian people” (Personal Interview, 6/29/19).

V. Conclusion

Poor media representation of Haiti — including but not limited to the country’s government, people, and religious practices — is contributing significantly to the stereotypes about Haitians that Americans have internalized and the gap in understanding between the two countries. This research suggests that ignorance is the root of the Haiti-United States disconnect. Haitians seek understanding, open-mindedness, and less arrogance in American attitudes towards Haitians. In order to halt the spread of misinformation about Haiti and the Haitian people in American media, it is essential that journalists prioritize fact and objectivity in their reporting and that the American people avoid judgement, generalizations, and ignorance.

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