

## The Center of the World is Everywhere

Allyn Gaestel

Haverford College

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“Confusion is a word we have invented for an order which is not understood,” American novelist Henry Miller wrote.

I first decided to become a journalist after having the jarring experience of traveling to Mali at 19 while a student at Haverford, and finding nothing like what I had read about. I was a fairly voracious consumer of the New York Times, Harpers, the New Yorker as a teenager, my dad subscribed to all the publications I dreamed of writing for, and I would pick them up from our glass coffee table and read them in the bath.

But in Mali, I found nothing like what I had read about. It was disconcerting to me. And I’ve come to learn much more so to people who live in and come from the countries that are being poorly narrated.

So today I want to talk today about some of the ways that narratives that feel false function — things like the imposition of “comforting myths” onto reality; the violent flattening of the world into something accepted, expected and certain; poor translations of reality; missing the essential, ephemeral components of spaces; the invisible hidden in plain sight; the presumption of chaos in spaces that are at first incomprehensible to outsiders; the unwillingness of outsiders to shift their center.

I want to do this because I believe there are serious implications to the widespread diffusion of untrue narratives. I would argue that stripping a place of its specificity, missing its internal coherence, narrating in a way that is otherizing is itself a violent act. I think it also has broad implications for how imperialistic engagement with spaces continues in various fields, from architecture to business to aid. I believe that the narratives we are exposed to have a huge impact on how we engage with the world, and that

westerners who are formed and informed by the western narratives they read in the press perpetuate a huge amount of violence in the world. I also think it's damaging to Americans dealing with themselves. The presumed superiority and rightness of our broken society leads to a failure of imagination and openness to the beautiful multiplicities of reality that exist. We are limited by our belief that ours is the only way of thinking, framing, and narrating the world.

What I'm talking about are not just structures and systems—like the prison system, or, the health care system, or philanthropy—but the ideas behind them, the very frameworks for reality that are permitted in a journalistic space, and the ways that other frameworks for reality are brushed over, ignored, or otherized. I am talking about things like time—time is experienced, allowed and narrated differently by different people. But western journalists impose the rigid chronological framework for time on places that may express or allow for more fluid concepts of temporality. This is an imposed construct. At the most basic level, the Gregorian calendar was created by a pope in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and there are hundreds of other calendars in the world. More broadly, there are endless permutations of simultaneity, elasticity, layers, etc in the lived experience of time. Such truths are more than brushed over, they are never even considered in these narratives, which take as a given Western concepts of time and modernity. That's just one example.

I often ask journalists who they are writing for, who their imagined audience is, and they say, people like me—they mean, generally, white, woke brooklynites.

But it's 2018, so though the stories are written for a very specific audience that is an outsider in the place the stories narrate, the stories are also seen by people in the places the stories are told on top of. Haitians read all the news on Haiti; Nigerians read everything written on Nigeria. I've had countless conversations with people frustrated, and embittered who read about their homes but don't recognize themselves. Local viewers look at a collection of photographs, videos and facts that are comprised of the physicality of a space they know intimately, and yet the stories do not resonate. They are not true. This is because the stories maintain their centers in the West.

I've wandered into villages with western journalists, who described them as “ancient”—(Westerners associate newness with Western taste and technology; every-

where else is construed as behind. Embedded in the concept of “development” is the idea of a trajectory with an agreed upon destination, one that looks like us. Westerners see modernity as western, but everywhere exists at once, and it is right now, everywhere. Each place has a history as deep as any other, a series of happenings over centuries that led, or lead, to the present moment. Calling a village ancient perpetuates all this misunderstanding.) I’ve had editors rewrite my prose to describe slums they’ve never seen as “otherworldly” — this is a place, in the world, I say, it’s real, I say.

Places are narrated in relation to the West, which is an imagined center, a presumed “normal” which also has implied superiority inside of it. I was speaking to students yesterday and a couple told me, proudly, it seemed, that over the summer they confronted their privilege while working in poor environments — what did you learn about your limitations, I asked? What is it that these societies and people have that you don’t? It’s essential to develop a keen understanding of global inequality and what that means in terms of health, survival, medicine, wealth, access, technology. But we also must stay humble to all the things that we are missing in the way that our Western society is organized.

But it’s difficult for Westerners to be aware of this, because our stories don’t let through those other truths and realities. They are relegated to the realms of fiction and art, called magical realism and written out of non-fiction. Who chose and chooses what counts as “true”?

“As members of society, most of us see only what we expect to see, and what we expect to see is what we are conditioned to see when we have learned the definitions and classifications of our culture,” British anthropologist Victor Turner wrote. The invisible is often hidden in plain sight. Many visitors never even consider that the spaces they engage with may hold whole layers and realms; complexities and norms beyond what they can conceive of. “These cities are often invisible to the outside world,” Belgian anthropologist Filip de Boeck wrote, because “they function in ways that we are not used to seeing and therefore go unnoticed.” Because journalists don’t do the inner work of dismantling their preconceived concepts for reality, because they are not changed by the spaces they enter, they miss most of what is going on, and report back only the limited aspects that they saw. Then Americans continue to consume the rest of the world from the limited perspective of people who are missing most of the rest of

the world. This is paired with judgement and superiority that diminishes the richness and completeness of every place. It's a terrible cycle.

I think it's not that hard to shift this. We just all have to have the humility and curiosity—and belief in that which is beyond us for now, the Haitian concept of *connais-sance*, that which we do not yet understand. If we can accept that this is a fundamental aspect of reality, we can continually grow into it. It's a beautiful thing.

So this is all very conceptual, and I want to show you a few ways I try to engage with these ideas in my work.

One of the ways that I combat this in my work, is by telling stories that are centered where they take place. I have the fundamental belief that people are not crazy, that there is internal logic and internal coherence to people and places. So I report until I understand the internal logic of the people I am speaking to, the ways their lives function, the contexts they exist in. While a place or person seems incomprehensible, chaotic or overwhelming to me, I know I don't know enough to speak on it. It has to make sense to me on its own terms before I'm willing to narrate it. So when I got to Kinshasa a few weeks ago and was overwhelmed by the energy of the place, I stayed until I was comfortable and I figured out how to move through the space. I shift my center for every story.

1—I had funding last year from the Carter Center to report on trauma in Northern Nigeria in the aftermath of the Boko Haram conflict. When I wrote the proposal I framed it like The Time magazine story that came out later did—I said—there is a huge amount of trauma in this post-conflict space, and Nigeria has a lack of psychologists. There are only a few hundred in the country, and even fewer in the North. Thankfully, as I was doing my pre-reporting, and continuing to exist in Nigeria, I realized how arbitrary, imperialistic and ridiculous it is to narrate a place as not yet having all the healing structures that exist in the west, particularly when talking about something as intimate as emotional or psychological injury. By the time I reported in the field my questioning had changed—I asked how do people narrate their experience, what to people call what would otherwise be known as trauma, and what systems and modalities exist here that people are using to heal? So I met with psychologists, and I also met with imams who were getting their doctorate in Islamic medicine and exorcism of djinns, I met with traditional herbalists who had generations of knowledge.

And I did the internal work of releasing my idea of what the right answer is — that isn't really the journalist's role, and as attached as journalists are to objectivity, they still narrate the rest of the world as if it hasn't caught up to the West yet. It is a constant, common mistake to narrate places from a perspective of lack. But, these places are as complete and coherent as we are and so I'm writing my piece in that way. Grounded in the place itself, instead of framed in comparison to an external imagined center.

2. I wrote on infanticide in Senegal, which is an issue tied up around impossible pregnancies and taboo. Women who find themselves pregnant in a way that will be scorned by society to the extent that some may be disowned from their families, devolve into isolation and paranoia and trauma and kill their infant children. I reported this from the ground up with my colleague Ricci who has lived in Senegal for a decade and had read a lot of the local stories about these women — stories which framed them as monsters. We wanted to write about the broad social context that made something that seemed initially incomprehensible understandable. But when I sent in my piece, my editor rewrote the lede to literally say “in some countries it is clear that infanticide still takes place on a regular basis. This is the case in the west african nation of senegal.” So I wrote a small essay in response to his edits and said — this is a story that I reported up from the ground in Senegal, not down from the statistics. I said I don't the frame of my story to be “infanticide happens in “other countries” like senegal,” and besides, rarely, infanticide happens in the us too.” He's a thoughtful guy and I know he wasn't trying to make a broad statement about those dark other countries where people do crazy things, but racism and otherization is so deeply embedded in ourselves, that the work of narrating otherwise is a constant inner practice of confronting the edges of our thoughts and assumptions and conceptions and crumbling them, opening past them. I only just, 10 years later, noticed my internal judgement on African big men, which is such a cliché, but is how we frame leaders when they don't follow western democratic concepts of term limits. It was only in spending a lot of time in Congo studying leadership that I once again clicked into the understanding that this is a coherent system that functions, it's just different.

3. Another small way that I work on broadening stories we tell is I've been interested in trajectories over the past few years, inspired perhaps by my own quite peripatetic and perhaps random, though totally coherent to me, trajectories. So I've done a few projects that follow pathways that people and taste, fashion and aesthetics follow as they move through the world. I had one recently in the New York Times about a man

who has a fashion trade with used clothing sent from Europe to Togo that he buys in Togo and resells in Europe. It was important to me that I told a story that never touched the US but was still complete. Often US editors will ask why something is relevant to a US audience. It's like we're talking down to US readers, assuming that they only want to think of themselves, or think of the rest of the world in relation to themselves. But when I publish work that is focused elsewhere, people love it. I had an installation at a German art museum of another story on taste and trajectories between China and Africa—looking at the Nigerian designers and traders of knock off designer ware. It's called Versage and it's a concept and project that has gone very far. People like hearing things they've never heard before, so I don't know why there is such a strong attachment to expected stories.

4. In my photography I do not identify as a photojournalist. I make photographs compulsively, all the time. It's a kind of emotional and spiritual practice for me. A way of expressing my feelings, a way of entering a space, the way that I'm shooting reflects how I feel. And for a long time I did not identify as a photographer and I didn't my publish work because I didn't know what it was. I knew that it wasn't documentary work, because it was a place where I refused to be explanatory, I refused to impose linear narratives on spaces. One of the first photo essays I published, earlier this year, is from Goma, Democratic Republic of Congo. It is a place that has been extremely narrated, rendered symbolic, it is gordian knot of conflict, the epicenter of the most deadly war since world war 2, the rape capital of the world. I wanted to release all of that, just do something else, because the place also feels so specific, I love it there, I have energetic pull to the place. So I shot photos that are just not narrative. They're just momentary, quotidian, daily life in this place that is as specific and unique as every place.

It's about instead of bringing the rest of the world closer by saying, we're all the same at heart, it's engaging lovingly with everyone's specificity and distinctiveness and depth.