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Critical Reflection: Humanitarian Palimpsest

Creating a palimpsest for my chosen project, the visual representation of humanitarian life narrative, was an exploration of feelings and loss that I had experienced throughout our class. For the humanitarian, a whole narrative has been constructed to support, build up, and glorify the ideology and the falsity that the West is the world's saviour. Conversely, the aid 'recipient' is little more than a prop intended to validate the role of the humanitarian. Each and every visual production that I found throughout my research centered the west, overtly, or just beneath the surface. Black and brown bodies are very clearly props used to hold up this narrative. The flooding of imperialism and white supremacy raging under human rights atrocities can never be released while the humanitarian narrative exists to function as floodgates. This point is powerfully sent home through Teju Cole: "[the] white saviour industrial complex is a valve for releasing the unbearable pressures that build in a system built on pillage". Humanitarian life narrative is constructed over top of colonial history, functioning to placate responsibility, guilt, and admonishment by the Global North and covering an authentic and place-based solution to

chaos and suffering in war torn areas; it serves as a nicely laid out blanket that covers up the theft, exploitation, and pillage underneath.

The images I chose to use for my project span across a century, from the early 20th century to a few years ago. What struck me was how the vernacular shifted over time from a blatant dismissal of recipient voice, to more empowering language, that nonetheless still does not allow the recipient agency. The imagery also shifted from atrocious and invasive depictions of suffering to smiling and probably grateful recipients. I have always understood the interconnections and layers of illusory and staged realities and have usually utilized poetry to express my thoughts, but the palimpsest added significant texture to my process. Throughout the process of researching and completing this project, I felt a physicality with the topic – by choosing the imagery, the text, and the pieces that would remain seen, it felt as if I was better able to express the entanglement and complexities experienced in this class.

Didier Fassin's ideas of witnessing were particularly resonant throughout my research of produced humanitarian imagery and text; the idea of distance was persistent – the humanitarian, although physically appearing to be present 'in the field' with recipients, was ideologically and distinctively fixed in the West. I'm not implying that the humanitarian should appropriate perspectives or ideologies of the recipient, but rather that there should be an established reciprocity, equity, and backgrounding – the humanitarian (in authentic denotation) is never martyred at the front, but rather is positioned only in an invited supportive role to the local community. Throughout my research, the aid recipient was never provided a political life or position, but was perpetually repressed as single dimension characters configured as an example or even hashtag.

The intent of my project is to challenge how the West sees humanitarianism – a complex and long standing construct functioning to placate the atrocities the Global South are subjected to in the name of the imperialist project. I do not like to suppose the solution for others, but I do feel justified in suggesting the solution to imperialism through my own hands and work as well as those of other Black and brown leaders, scholars and thinkers – for certain, the way out is not the same way we got in. Edward Said so perfectly asserts,

[to] achieve recognition is to rechart and then occupy the place in imperial cultural forms reserved for subordination, to occupy it self-consciously, fighting for it on the very same territory once ruled by a consciousness that assumed the subordination of a designated inferior Other (Said 210).

I have deepened my understanding of freedom from destruction as also freedom from saviourism. Prior to this project, I did not fully comprehend the sensitive but incredibly strong hold that the West has not only on the exploitation of the earth but through the very network that many of us believed was a way to help! In my past, I was a monthly donor to World Vision, received the picture for my fridge and handwritten notes from my ‘child sponsor’. I fell for it, all of it.

The purpose of my project was to dig deeper into the way that large humanitarian organizations depict those that they claim to be saving (from what is another discussion). I am left with one large question, if not this than what? I understand that there are many layers to this question and it highly reduces the complexities to a likely unanswerable question. It is not possible to simply give one a voice, or give one agency – it is not even about new age empowerment. The entire construct of colonialism only allows the subaltern to be subjugated –

beyond that there is nothing (Spivak). There is nothing for the subjected in this construct, underneath the layers is nothing but air and humiliation.

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