Bearing Witness to Trauma as a Journalist

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There I was, in Tijuana, Mexico, listening and taking in the stories I will carry forever. I will remember feeling the weight of these stories sinking in, our interviewees' vulnerability, resilience and power.

I had the privilege to travel with my peers, student journalists from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, to Tijuana, Mexico, to practice reporting on immigration at the U.S.-Mexico border.

I say "privilege" because, as a daughter of immigrant parents, I have U.S. citizenship. I was born in a country where I received a K-12 North Carolina public education and a Constitution that protects anybody who steps into this country.

My identity and intersectionality have shaped and influenced my purpose.

I always knew that at one point in my life, if I were doing journalism, I would have a conflict of interest because of my identity, Mexican American.

Being bicultural gives me leverage to connect with two communities and understand their lived experiences. I can bridge gaps.

I knew this trip would be personal, and I knew my emotions might get in the way of reporting, and they did.

We stopped at a Haitian Creole restaurant where the group interviewed the owner, Vivianne Petit Frere, and her friend Even Luis, both of whom are Haitian immigrants.

Before we interviewed them, my first impression was that they were full of life.

When we interviewed Luis, his story struck me the most.

He said, “Extraño todo, porque el Haití de mi niñez, creíamos que era una dictadura, que era un país malo y ahorita, cuando yo veo ese Haití, extraño el Haití que yo dejé de mi niñez porque ahorita Haití no es Haití.”

"I miss everything because the Haiti of my childhood, we thought it was a dictatorship, that it was a bad country, and now, when I see that Haiti, I miss the Haiti that I left from my childhood because now Haiti is not Haiti."

I felt my throat tightening, and then I teared up. I was holding in a pain of guilt.

The way he expressed his feelings and his emotional vulnerability with us struck me.

I thought to myself, “How do I stop from making this about my feelings?”

All I could do was feel. I kept crying.

In that moment, I thought of my immigrant parents. I wonder what they miss about their home, Oaxaca, Mexico.

I also thought about what would have happened if I were born in Mexico and immigrated with my parents. But I wasn't. I was born into this life.

A life that gave me a home, a family, public education, the opportunity to attend a public university and more.

A life that many don’t have access to.

The privilege I carry every day strikes me now more than ever as a young adult experiencing and seeing this administration dehumanize immigrants.

With the new administration, Donald Trump had an agenda. One priority was to secure the border and carry out his agenda, mass deportation. Part of that was ending the CBP One program.

Many immigrants had appointments on Jan. 20 and were in line when they were notified that their appointment was canceled.

We went to a shelter called the Border Line Crisis Center, where we met two Colombian women who had their appointment on Jan. 20 canceled.

One of the immigrants said, “Para nosotros fue muy triste ese día… mucha gente lloró.”

"For us, it was very sad that day… a lot of people cried."

The woman felt very sad, frustrated and heartbroken when she heard about the appointments being canceled. She described it as feeling like her dreams were being crushed and that all her efforts had been in vain.

“Pienso que es ilegal lo que él hizo con nosotros, es una injusticia,” she said.

"I think it's illegal what he did to us; it's an injustice."

Although it was an injustice, the president does have the power to make an executive order to end the CBP One program, a border app to schedule an appointment at a legal port of entry.

As my peers and I interviewed the immigrant, we took our time. We wanted to respect her space and her feelings. We knew that whenever she was ready to talk, she would share her story and the reason why she immigrated.

She shared with us that she is a victim of violence and armed conflict. Her family was displaced from their land and forced to move to the capital in 1998. Later, she started a foundation to help reclaim land, and that's when the threats began.

As a human first, I can't fathom having to go through that.

As she spoke, I noticed her tone; it was a traumatic voice.

She told us she left Colombia to get to Mexico for her CBP One appointment.

On her journey, she was kidnapped in Guatemala. When passing through Mexico, she was a victim of extortion and threats against her rights.

These are things no one should have to go through.

She arrived in Mexico City to get her appointment and set it for Jan. 20.

She arrived in Tijuana, Mexico, on Jan. 18, later to find out her appointment was rescheduled to Feb. 9. She decided to show up on Jan. 20 regardless.

She said, "Y ahí nos enteramos en la fila de que ya no había más entradas y se acababa el programa de CBP One."

"And there we found out in the line that there were no more people entering and the CBP One program was ending."

Experiences like hers stayed with me throughout the trip; I realized they still are.

We all became trauma reporters.

In class, we watched a recorded video from three years ago, Bruce Shapiro, executive director of the Dart Center, said, "Sooner or later we all become trauma reporters."

"Trauma is a psychological injury," he said.

Shapiro breaks down how he has been able to understand trauma as a biopsychosocial experience.

Trauma alters the brain, body and social trust.

Biologically, when humans face danger, the brain launches a "neurobiological cascade" to help them survive. But if the threat is intense or ongoing, the brain's survival responses can stay active long after the danger has passed, Shapiro explains.

Psychologically, trauma can rewire how people see the world, often leaving them hyperaware of threats or detached from places, people and memories that trigger pain.

Socially, it can break the basic expectation of safety, damaging trust. Survivors often live between extremes — remembering versus forgetting, arousal versus avoidance, ratification versus isolation, anger versus shame, trust versus betrayal, and power versus powerlessness — as they navigate life after trauma, Shapiro notes.

He shared tips on restoring power back to the interviewees by being transparent and listening.

"This is how they don't feel very victimized by simply being hounded, being in a story," he said.

From his experience, "many people want the world to know what happened to them. If we don't bear witness for the trauma survivor, who will know their story?" he said.

Mitigating emotions as a journalist, and even for the interviewee, is challenging.

To navigate, it is just asking with a simple question: "What happened to you?"

"This came from the outside. You did not seek it. You did not ask for it. You are not to blame for it. You are not judged by it," he said.

It takes a step from the journalist to show and invite authentic narration. This leads to an open conversation and a comfortable space for them to build trust with the interviewer to cover the emotion authentically.

And specifically when covering immigration, there are so many ethical steps within trauma reporting: consent, trust, betrayal verification, safety and more.

While there's a story being reported on the other end, there's a journalist who heard and took time to represent the story as best as they can. I'm an overthinker, and I think about, "Did I do everything right?"

As journalists, we need self-care and to know ourselves better than anyone else.

It's easy to burn out, especially in trauma reporting. According to experts, talk it out with colleagues, a mentor, a support group, friends or family that you feel comfortable with.

I spoke to a former correspondent and now professor, Layla Santiago, about her experience covering Hurricane Maria and how she has processed trauma reporting.

It was tough and personal because her family was located in Corozal, Puerto Rico.

She said, “I have regrets, I sometimes kind of tear up about it because at times I put my journalist hat ahead of my personal hat with my own family.”

When she was able to get on a helicopter to get aerial views, the pilot asked, “Is there anywhere else you want to go?”

They flew over Corozal. She couldn't find landmarks. They couldn't land because they didn't have enough fuel.

She said that she came back with a lot of guilt because she knew her family was there, and she should have gone there first.

She made a decision with good intent, but she understands that it was a tough decision to make.

She eventually shared her experience with the viewer because she felt that it was important to be transparent.

“I kind of hope with my approach to things, when I understand that it has had an impact, and sometimes that doesn't come till later,” she said.

She hadn't realized until months later that the White House saw a piece she did, which led to action being taken.

Santiago coped with emotional reporting by pushing through, sacrificing her rest and personal process time because she believed telling the story led to a real impact, and it did.

She acknowledges this approach isn't the healthiest way, and it's a reason why she took a step back and is teaching journalism.

“I am where I am because I didn't cope with a lot of those things. I was dealing with a lot of burnout after time and time again doing that,” she said

The emotional weight of the trip wasn't just mine to carry. Many of my classmates felt it too.

Viyada Soukthavone, a sophomore student, shared the impact that the trip had on her.

Coming back from the trip, she felt guilty for returning to her privileged life while the people she met continued to face hardship.

She said, “I think this is like one of those trips where I would just think about it every day. And it still hits me. I think that's what's really hard about looking at the photographs that I took.”

She is still processing to this day. I think we all are.

I have to admit, during that week, I wasn't processing, I was just doing.

It’s these pieces that make you reflect and say you are only here in a moment of time.

We all carry an emotional burden of bearing witness to these stories.

This trip taught me that journalism is not easy.

It’s more than writing. It requires a high level of emotional intelligence.

It's about the impact we make, ethically represent and respect our subjects with integrity.