



Jamaica – No Problem

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A prostitute. Fine figure. Minimal clothes. Tons of makeup. Standing on the side of the road. Her diseases and emotions are of no consequence. \$300 is the price of satisfaction. \$300 is the price of her soul. She returns to her street corner. She is struggling to walk, shattered. But today her children will eat.

Jamaica – a prostitute. Exotic beaches. Dancehalls. Bob Marley. Ganga. “Jamaica – No Problem.” The cruise ship docks at her port and the country opens her lush mountains and blue waters to the flood of tourists. She opens to an overflow of pollution, to exploitation of her resources, to the detrimental effects of crowds of tourists hungry for satisfaction. Struggling to move forward and sustain herself, she is shattered. But today, her citizens will eat.

Jamaica is one of the most popular tourist destinations in the Caribbean. As such, the Jamaican Tourist Board sees itself as the most important industry in the country, offering what it sees as the best chance for lasting economic development.¹ Their messages of an exotic, problem-free Jamaica lure tourists in vast numbers. Indeed these tourists bring much of Jamaica’s economic prosperity. At the same time, consciously or not, while staying in their all-inclusive hotels, these tourists cause great environmental damage, and divert the government’s attention from the non-tourist regions. Their presence draws the attention away from infrastructure and facilities for Jamaicans like education and health. Montego Bay is more important than Portmore. A tourist in Montego Bay, his safety and happiness, is more important than that of fifteen-year-old Damien who lives in Portmore.

I have come to Jamaica in search of answers. I want to know what happens in non-tourist regions: Where is the money from the tourism industry going? How is Damien from Portmore benefitting from the tourist industry? Have tourists even heard of his story? Would they care? Perhaps most importantly, what are lives really like in Jamaica? That is what I have come to the “tropical paradise” to explore.

Of all places to explore, it is not accidental that I chose Jamaica. I believe in the complexity and universality of human experience and suffering. I, too, like other tourists in the Caribbean, was deceived into believing that Jamaica, unlike anywhere else in the world, was a *problem-free* zone. As a Palestinian and as a human-rights activist who advocates more than anything for the re-humanization of the Palestinian experience and identity, I couldn’t afford to have such preconceptions about Jamaica.

My academic journey at Brandeis University led me to taking a class that analyzed Jamaican culture through the lens of reggae music. My learning still didn’t do Jamaica the justice it deserved. In this class I selectively learned about the *other* Jamaica. The images of coconuts on a heavenly beach quickly transformed into images of conflicts, crime, homophobia and struggle. Jamaica was now a heart-breaking dichotomy. Either this or that. Nothing in between.

Of all people, I should know that dichotomies don’t portray reality. I am neither a “radical” nor a “moderate” as a Palestinian, like the mainstream media might depict my struggle. I am an individual thinker, with individual experiences, that prevent me from being placed into a box that represents me as an either/or. So is the case with Jamaica. Jamaica is not just the exploited problem-free tourist areas, or the crime-ridden neighborhoods. Jamaica is both, and neither.

Jamaica is the story of each and every Jamaican I met while living there this summer. It is the story of the Students Expressing Truth (S.E.T.) Foundation that I worked for. It is

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the story of fifteen students I worked with and their everyday struggles, which I got to intensively know.

But the Jamaican story I know and experienced is not just of the individuals I met there. Their story is intertwined with mine. With my non-violent struggle for justice in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. With my search of new methods for community and personal empowerment. With my eagerness to learn about different cultures and how they deal with their conflicts. With my longing for a home, a physical space. With my desire for a metaphoric home, a Palestinian nation. All have shaped my understanding of Jamaica.

This is my story of a Jamaican story. A story one does not find in a tourist

resort, or in a travel warning about “high threat areas.”²

Four Homes

I consider many places home. The most important one would be my home in Jaffa, Israel, where my family lives. My second home is in Boston, where I study. Even though I live in a dorm it is still a home. My third home is in Tanzania, where I spent my previous summer working for the United Nations Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda. Jamaica will soon become my fourth home so far, and probably not my last. For everyone I worked with, this Jamaica is their only home.

I am observing my new house in Jamaica. At first glance I am not pleased. Upstairs lives Kevin Wallen, the C.E.O. of S.E.T., and on the weekends Kijani – his four-year-old son – lives there too. I live downstairs. The exterior walls of the house are painted in banana-yellow paint. The tiles, maroon. Random different walls and ceilings are painted in light green. The colors don't work together for me. They just don't.

I don't like the house because it so far away from the city, from the market, from Kingstonian life. I am a car ride away from everything. Taxi drivers worry about their engines when driving up to Queen Hill. The roads are steep and the infrastructure is bad. After much complaining they sigh happily when finally reaching the house. Here a bird's-eye view of the whole of Kingston is revealed. This view discloses the co-existing contrasts of this beautiful city: the good and the bad; noise and peace; beauty and pollution. Everything and everyone is part of the scenery. In town, the same taxi

drivers point out my yellow house from afar. This house is an integral part of the Kingstonian scenery, and I am beginning to be proud to call it home.

This house will become my refuge. Here if I choose to I can meditate and absorb everything I will learn from my interaction with the neglected inner-city life. And if I choose otherwise, here there are no fifteen stories of conflict. Here there are no fifteen stories of sadness. Here there are no fifteen students. Here there is just one home. Here it's just me, the amazing view and a good book to read.

When looking down I can see silent movement of cars. Planes landing and flying again. Ships docking at the port and unloading their goods. Further to the left I can see trash being burnt, covering the air with a thick black smoke of pollution.

Out of every part of this epic view, I am dazzled the most by the bird movement. Located high on the hill, I see Jamaica as they see it. While in paintings, they appear as two black strokes; here, their wingspan is more real than ever. In the early morning all the little birds from pigeons to hummingbirds come out, but later on the hawks would overwhelm the sky with their presence, and scare away all other birds. They need not fly and flap their wings; instead they glide easily and smoothly, as if they are floating in the air. It keeps me in awe and complete jealousy every time I see them flowing like this on top of Kingston and the neighboring towns.

If I were a hawk, Jamaica, or more specifically Kingston or Portmore, would be problem-free. It can't possibly be flawed. Like the tourists, I can't see what lies beneath the Jamaican surface. From afar I am addicted to this beauty, just like they are addicted to the beauty they see in the resort towns.

Down in the city, the thick cloud of pollution, the only aspect tainting my view from the hill, can't be seen. Just like from afar the problems aren't revealed. Down here any tourist would vigorously guard their belongings. Kingston, where my new home resides, is not problem-free like most tourists experience the rest of Jamaica to be.

From my new home I can criticize, observe and judge all of these interactions. In this home I am humbled by Jamaican hospitality. In this home I find my peace like in no other home. A peace that will soon be disrupted by the harsh realities of my fifteen students' lives.

One Organization, Reforming Jamaica

The Students Expressing Truth (S.E.T.) Foundation is a non-governmental grassroots organization. It had its origins

as an inmate-driven literacy program in the penal facilities of Jamaica in 1999. S.E.T. is the brainchild of former inmates Richard “Muslim” Buckner, and Robert “Chemist” James. Their main objective was to improve educational opportunities within Jamaican prisons. Their efforts were later joined by many prominent figures: Kevin Wallen, life skills coach and Harvard fellow; Professor Charles Nesson, senior Harvard Law Professor; Charles Ogletree, mentor to Barack Obama; and Ruben “Hurricane” Carter, Ph.D., who spent 20 years in prison for a wrongful conviction. They and others formed an alliance of minds and experiences. This was an alliance that would eventually help S.E.T. evolve into the powerful phenomenon it is today, unlocking and uplifting Jamaican society, by bringing technology to prisons and underprivileged schools.

By extension of its core mission, S.E.T. seeks to help reform Jamaican society through those who are often viewed as the bottom of its hierarchy—inmates and underprivileged communities, like the fifteen students I am to work with. Those whom the government neglects while investing its time and resources to luring more tourists. Every S.E.T. member or participant learns how he or she can contribute to personal and collective restorative transformation and economic growth.

Over the 2008-2009 school year, the S.E.T. team was handed fifteen students, some of whom teachers labeled “most likely to kill another person one day.”³ S.E.T. ran a yearlong discipline program for these students, helping them re-emerge into the school system before being expelled for good and falling into a cycle of crime and addiction. Kevin once said, “To make our schools better and safer we exclude students that need the most help and, in effect, by taking them out of the educational system we make our communities unsafe, for their hands are idle.”⁴ After graduating from this program, these students are turned over to me for the summer. Now is the time to make them leaders.

Two Gazas

On my first day in Kingston, I am an observer in a meeting with representatives of the American Agency for International Development (USAID) and S.E.T. I am invited to this meeting to get a better insight into both organizations and the roles they will be playing in my summer.

Every couple of minutes, my attention span fades. I’ve never been diagnosed as hyperactive, but I’ve learned to cope with this personal flaw. On some days I can’t sit through meetings at all, on others I am somewhat attentive. Everyone I’ve ever worked with knows this about me. Here in Jamaica on my first day I am a clean white page, I have no excuse for not listening properly, and I can’t follow this meeting. Surely,

some interesting things are coming up but I am jetlagged, homesick already, and somewhat dehydrated. But it is important for me to make a good impression. My internal mental battle is futile, and I step out of the room for some water.

As I return I hear Caleen, my supervisor, talk about Gaza. Quickly, all my distractions disappear. I sit in the chair tightly and force myself to take in every word. Caleen is talking about Darrel. He is a graduate of the discipline program, soon to be one of my students. She is telling the USAID representative how he has transformed, from being someone who illicitly sprayed the whole school with the word “GAZA” to a caring, disciplined student. But what does Gaza have to do with all of this? I ask myself, forcing my attention span not to waver.

As we step out of the meeting and outside the building, I’m more confused than ever. I see the word “GAZA” spray painted everywhere. Not only was Gaza portrayed badly in the meeting; the graffiti outside is bland and feels very violent. It is screaming for attention, crying for help.

I seem to carry the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, like a rat carries diseases, across borders and countries. I have not been in one country where I have not used both the Arabic and Hebrew languages to discuss the conflict. Neither have I been to a place where people didn’t know something about the conflict. This conflict that the media never fails to cover, whether accurately or not, has forced most of the people I have ever met to have some kind of an opinion about it. Some identify with me, some may not know enough to have an independent opinion, but for the most part, people are surprised I don’t look like a terrorist.

I want this summer to not be about the conflict for the first time in my life. I want it to be about Jamaica. I want to ignore the graffiti, but I can’t. The graffiti symbolizes a conflict that is the essence of my being.

“Gaza, Palestine?” I ask Caleen bluntly and without any precursors, as we drive to our next meeting. Amused by my question and forwardness, she explains that the Dancehall artist Vybz Kartel decided to rename his hometown—Waterfront, Portmore, a poor stricken neighborhood right outside of Kingston, “Gaza.” He did so as part of musical/gang rivalry between himself and Movado, another artist, who comes from the “Gullyside.” Kartel created a whole CD called “Gaza,” and every song features a different artist from the Kartel Artists Alliance talking about “Gaza.” While these artists enjoy making money off their musical rivalries, children in both “Gaza” and the “Gullyside” take the antagonism to the next level and join gangs to fight each other. Darrel comes from “Gaza.” To prove loyalty to his

hometown he was willing to risk expulsion from school for covering its walls with “GAZA.” That was before the S.E.T. team intervened.

Once I meet Darrel and the rest of these kids, I learn they do not know anything about the real Gaza in Palestine. They only associate it with the recent news stories about the massacre in which thousands of Palestinians were brutally killed during the months of December 2008 and January 2009. They relate themselves with the toughness of these people, and identify with an all-out war against the other neighborhood. Even though I wanted to treat the Palestinian case and the Jamaican one separately, I can't. Even here they are indirectly intertwined. Both Gazas are overwhelmingly poor ghettos situated next to the sea. One is under an occupation, a siege. The government and the Board of Tourism neglect the other for it attracts no tourists to its gang-ridden streets.

I can't help but ponder if this should bring me pride as a Palestinian. Has Kartel associated toughness and resilience with the Palestinian people? Or has he in fact made a mockery of the destruction and death that was inflicted upon these Gazans?

When my fifteen students found out that I am a Palestinian they came up to me daily asking “What is it like pon [in] de real Gaza?” They were eager to learn about the realities of Gaza—not the false images created by the musical artists or the media. It brought me comfort to see them eager to learn, thirsty for knowledge. I taught them about my Gaza; they taught me about theirs. I couldn't wait to share their stories with the world. This isn't the Gaza that is bombarded with missiles. This is the Gaza that is rife with domestic violence, gang rivalry and poverty. This is the Jamaican Gaza.

Fifteen Students, Fifteen Stories, A Different Method

Fifteen students fill the computer room of “Lab 3” in Ascot High School located in the city of Portmore. Their ages range from thirteen to eighteen. They have fifteen different harsh experiences. Isis cuts her arms in response to her father's

beatings. Tanera swallows the exact amount of pills that will not kill her but send her to the hospital for weeks. Christian is in a gang. James has nothing to eat. And Antoine is bleaching his black skin.

I facilitate a program providing them with an alternative form of education. Instead of being seated behind desks and taught from textbooks while the teacher presents a monologue—the

traditional pedagogic approach (in which I, as a hyperactive student never fit into)—we sit in a circle, and learn from each other. I am not the teacher. I am a mediator. Guiding our learning experience, this education is mutual. We are all students and we all are teachers.

Here I learn about the Jamaican story I was never exposed to before. Each student, myself included, comes in with his or her experiences of identity, culture, race and color. Together, the students, other S.E.T. members and I create the base for new leaders in Portmore. We use journalism as our means. We strive to create a teen newspaper for Portmore. We aim to teach these kids how to transcend their limiting surroundings and the false labels their society and the education system have imposed on them.

On the first day of this summer camp we meet in the room that is usually used by the principal for formal meetings. The room boasts huge chairs and a big long table. Each student finds refuge in one of the chairs. I see them smirk, as they feel cozy in the seats, knowing that they are sitting in the same spot where important decisions for their school are usually made. I sit outside the table on the side of the room, taking notes and observing the new atmosphere.

Kevin, the C.E.O. of S.E.T., takes the stage. He introduces the summer camp, presenting our objectives and missions for each and every student. Finally, he proudly presents me to the students. “This is Lisa, and she will be helping you create your own newspaper,”⁵ he says. I take my time, breathe, and close my eyes for a second. In my head a million thoughts are rushing through; I am imagining horrible scenarios. The S.E.T. team prepared me for the worst, expecting me, a foreigner, to not be able to deal with these extremely troubled youth. Their intentions are good; they want to reassure me that if I don't succeed, it probably won't be my fault. Seconds later, I open my eyes again and I am greeted by smiles and the warm hearts of fifteen lonely students who have lost all trust in adults.

At first, I do not introduce myself. Instead I take a seat in the middle of the table and ask them all to place their palms on the wooden surface, crossing each hand with the person sitting next to them. I then start thumping my palm on the table and ask the girl sitting next to me to continue the beat. I add more rules. Two thumps change the direction of the flow. Now, if one's hand thumps in the wrong time, it is taken off the table.

The girl sitting next to me is reluctant to participate. She makes an odd face, confusing me. Every other student seems eager to play and participate, but not this girl. She seems

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disgusted. Her face twitches when I ask her to start the flow. She shows no sign of excitement. She keeps contorting her face when the beat reaches her. Soon enough she is among the final three. Despite her disturbing facial expressions, she plays along, and the beat of our palms flows all the way around the table. Eventually she wins, but doesn't seem to care.

When the game ends, we go around the table and introduce ourselves; I start by saying my name and my favorite dessert. The boy to my left continues the pattern. We now reach the other end of the circle and the girl next to me introduces herself. She speaks softly, yet very firmly. Again I interpret her facial expression as disapproving. "Isis," she announces in a deep Jamaican accent. I insist on learning her favorite dessert but she refuses to share, telling us she doesn't have one. I let it go.

She is a beautiful young lady, when she is not twitching her face. Only thirteen years old, she always has her hair braided distinctly from the others, bringing out her wide eyes and clear black skin. Unlike me, the boys do not notice her facial expression; they all dedicate much attention to her, especially Jamel. Isis dresses in bright colors that oppose her shy and timid personality; perhaps they represent how she would like to be perceived.

Everything goes smoothly with the other students. Despite earlier assumptions, I encounter almost no problems, other than a language barrier. They ask me to speak slowly; I try. I ask them to talk in more standardized English. This means less Patwa—the Jamaica Creole – which is mostly only a spoken language. I am torn to be forcing this language upon them, but I know that, for now, without standardized English, it will be almost impossible for them to advance in the professional Jamaican society.⁶

Some teachers believe these kids have no need of standardized English, assuming they will not make it to professional jobs. Other teachers believe that Patwa should be recognized as a formal language of communication, even though for now it isn't. Falling between chairs of those assuming they are unworthy of the effort, and those who call for a linguistic revolution in post-colonial Jamaican society, the students are not given the basic tools they need to advance *today*. The Jamaican economy due to tourism, unlike these students, is blossoming today. But in the long run, the success is not sustainable. The fabric of society is crumbling and eventually the tourism appeal will fade. Jamaica is not progressing today, nor tomorrow. These kids are not progressing today, nor tomorrow.

One Student, One Story, Fifteen Metaphors

The following week we are seated in the same room, on the same chairs. I ask them to introduce themselves again, and to share an interesting experience they had this week. Isis contorts her face, says her name again and doesn't object to share this time.

"Over the weekend I went to a psychologist with my parents,"⁷ she announces.

Her answer catches me completely off guard. I didn't expect such openness at the beginning of camp. Her tone is cold and emotionless. I am reluctant to respond. I don't feel ready to deal with this. All of my former experience with education and teenagers is being put to the test, and I am failing. A combination of her disgusted facial expression and her bluntness puts me off. I let her physical appearance affect my professionalism.

Still, I ask why they went and she responds: "We have issues."

I do not ask any more questions. I am not even sure the first question I asked was appropriate since it was in front of the whole class. And still, I don't ask her in private either. I can't deal with the thought of facing her directly. I do not find a connection to Isis—her facial expressions appall me. I let them get in the way of our relationship. From my perspective it is her fault. With her expressions she is uninviting.

Isis seems like she comes from a higher social standing than the rest of the students. She takes cabs to school and can almost always afford lunch. This made her troubles the least of my problems. If her family has some money then she must be mostly okay, I think to myself. I fail as an educator to see the underlying issues.

"I want to get over my shyness; I want to be a leader,"⁸ she told the team when she petitioned to join the camp. I see no hope for her in becoming a leader with these facial expressions. Isis emails me the most out of all the students. As part of introducing technology as means for social change, they must email me their daily newspaper assignments to me. Isis always adds a personal message. "Now that I'm done with this assignment will you please work with me on my pose?"⁹ she asks. Later she writes asking me to help her practice her radio skills. Isis wants to participate in a radio talk show about S.E.T. and figures she needs practice for it.

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There are fourteen other students. Isis's pose and voice are the least of my troubles. After all, she can afford her lunch.

As part of the leadership aspect of the camp, I gather the students in circle. My purpose is to get them to understand the importance of their role in their school and communities. Just like Isis did, almost each and every student came requesting to become a leader, requesting to change. Around the circle I start pointing out problems our newspaper team is facing, the challenges each individual brings that force the group to collectively suffer.

Despite my previous experience in preparing for such cases, I choose to "shake" the classroom with an "open forum" method I devise on the spot. Principally, it is like group therapy, only my restructuring of this method allows me more leeway in my criticism of the individuals. Isis is on my mind now. We can address her issues best with this method.

I point out individual problems each student faces, and we all engage in constructive criticism. When Isis shares her personal family issues with the group, she indirectly tells me that this group is safe and strong enough to divulge such hardships. This tells me that this method I chose for the room, which can be intimidating, especially for young people, is incredibly constructive and plays an integral role in our team building. But again, I don't listen or react to Isis's wisdom.

As we are going around the circle Isis's turn comes up. Her not-so-secret admirer Jamel starts to laugh awkwardly. She immediately puts on her usual "disgusted" face.

"Aha!" I point out. "That is a problem we have with Isis."¹⁰

She doesn't seem to understand what I am talking about: "Your facial expressions," I continue, "they send out a wrong message to me and the group."

She continues to distort her face. "What is the matter, Isis? Are you sad or mad today?"

"No," she mumbles.

"Well why does your face tell me you are mad? Why am I getting a bad impression from you?"

She has no idea what I am talking about. I reach out to my computer and open the webcam, reflecting Isis's image upon the screen, like a mirror.

"Do you know your face looks like this right now, Isis?" I take photo shots of her face. "Would you want to talk to someone with an expression like this?" I ask the class rhetorically.

There is a silence in the room. I think I pushed too hard this time, so I retreat.

"Isis must work on her facial expression. She leaves a bad impression on people with these faces and this holds us back," I summarize.

The silence breaks quickly when Jamel makes a joke about another student, perhaps to draw the tension away from Isis. This time, I don't drop the issue. I call Isis to my desk to further discuss what I had opened in front of the group before.

"Didn't you want to get over your shyness?" I ask her when she comes to sit next to me. "What is the matter? Why are you putting on these faces?" I plead with her. Isis doesn't respond; her eyes aren't talking either, and she continues to twitch. "Isis, you are a beautiful girl," I tell her, and she finally reacts.

"I don't think so," she answers timidly and contorts her face.

She doesn't cry.

Then, Isis opens up to me. She tells me that all of her community is aware of the constant physical abuse she faces at home. Her mother does nothing to stop this. Isis's father is the sole provider. Pressing charges against him would mean no food on the table. Her next-door neighbor, a police officer, neglects to react either. Isis twitches her face because she believes she is ugly; inside and out. She must be; otherwise, why would the world betray her in such a way? Despite my familiarity with such hardships, my education and my experience, I failed to pay attention to her desperate cry.

Zero Answers

There is nothing much I can do for Isis even after I learn about her situation. Not for her or for the rest of the students. There is no proper system in Jamaica that I can refer her to. Especially in the poor neighborhoods, there is nothing that deters adults from assaulting children. How is economic prosperity helping Isis today? Where are the tourists and their money now? Isis is the future of Jamaica. As a human, a teenager, she needs to be given legal and adequate psychological help. As a citizen, she in no way benefits from the tourism that is causing her country's beauty to erode. For her Jamaica is a zero-sum game.

Isis is lucky in a way; her family members have not raped her, unlike Shanika, another student. Isis's situation is somewhat bearable. For Isis and all the other students, I am mostly a resource for personal and social mobility. I am not here to extract them from the mess they were born into. Instead, I am here to provide them with tools that will help them to pull themselves, and hopefully other community members, out of their hard lives. Here I learn once again about the universality of human suffering. The stories of Palestinian children fighting for their voices, fighting for human rights, fighting for freedom of movement, are the stories of Jamaican kids who are fighting for a proper education, fighting to be included in the "economic prosperity," fighting for their voices.

Fifteen students fill the room. Sixteen stories, mine included. Some can't pay for lunch or for the camp itself. Most of them are and have been abused physically, mentally and sexually by the adults in their lives. I hoped in my heart that Isis—the fifteenth student—had a somewhat normal life. I was wrong.

Jamaica: her delicate ecosystem is valuable. Her beaches are breathtaking. Her music is a pleasure. Her stories are real. Her stories are important. Tourists cannot continue abusing it like they have all these years. What will happen when all of its resources are exploited? Who will feed Jamaicans? Who will feed James? Who will take care of Isis? Who will be the next victims in the Caribbean or the world?

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NOTES

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