[1]**UNPUBLISHED PAPER**

Passive Empathy in Public Discourse on the Suffering of the Racial "Other"

Abstract

This article examines how empathy for the black victims of the 2015 Charleston shooting was articulated in media discourse and political rhetoric after the event. Critical analysis shows that both public figures and elite news media drew on discursive and rhetoric strategies that suggested "passive empathy". Conceptualized as an incomplete identification with the racial other's distress and operationalized using modern racism literature, "passive empathy" was seen in how news media made salient certain aspects that cater to white audience's need to *understand* the incident over the need to *engage* with the suffering of the victims, and how political elites employed emotions strategically to direct attention towards partisan politics and away from the roots of the shooting. Implications were drawn with regard to how such discourse absolves the collective system of moral guilt and responsibility concerning the minority's distress and further delineating social and symbolic boundaries between racial groups.

Key words: critical theory, cultural studies, self/other.

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Introduction

The concept of 'the Other' has been one of the main concepts in the tradition of critical theory and cultural studies. Stuart Hall, bell hooks, and many other scholars have written extensively on the imagined projection of the Self in relation to the Other, and how such projection is embedded in the deep-rooted ideology and social power dynamic. Any skewed juxtaposition that grants utmost significance to the self and devalues the other would result in misguided and inaccurate representations and portrayals of the latter. From a critical and cultural perspective, this is the prolonged problem with the Western scholarship and its depictions of the minority. Hall, in his seminal piece "The Spectacle of the Other", elaborated on the inherent conflict in the self/other binary. The relationship between self and the other is by no means neutral; it is a relationship of opposition between the common/less common, the marked/unmarked, white/non-white, etc., where the power dynamic is almost always in favor of one and not the other. 'Differences' are the basis on which humans make sense of their identity and relationship with others and the external world, but the differences highlighted in the Western "regime of racialized representations" characterize the racial minorities in negative and biased light. bell hooks attributed such prejudiced representations to a postcolonial attitude to control and dominate. Mohanty (1991) criticized the Third World women images portrayed in European feminist scholarship, which places them in a far lower social, economic, and cultural status compared to their Western counterparts.

These critical examinations are significant in both their capacity to illuminate and denounce the popular understanding promoted by dominant ideological discourse, and their close inspection of the trajectory of such discourse across time and place. The diverse sociocultural contexts and relational interactions examined in these works indicate that the nature of the power dynamic is complex and changeable. Another theme weaved through all of them is the sentiment of empathy. In 'Eating the other' in particular, bell hooks considers sympathy and empathy as the desire to consume and incorporate the other into the self. She eloquently argued that such seemingly innocent desire to get to know the Others is actually a mutated form of the white's desire to continue their oppression over the racial Other. But there exists a question of how sentiments and the implications they hold has any important say in the influence of changing historical context and power dynamic on the ideological discourse about the Other. Would emotions and sentiments be used to allow it to morph into more complex and socially desirable form? And how would the prejudiced Western gaze change to adjust for such factors? It is this aspect of contextual variation that this essay addresses. I was mainly concerned with the white ideological discourse about the suffering of the racial Other, in particular the questions of how the racial Other's misfortune is portrayed in the elite media and political discourse, and to what extent such discourse incorporates empathy as a way to express sincere concern for the welfare of the Other?

One of the contentions of this paper is that in the same way that social discourse on phenomena such as racism or Orientalism transforms over the course of history, the modern discourse on the Other has become much more nuanced. Compared to the past, when words, images and descriptions were employed in an arguably overt manner to

draw attention to the difference between the Other and the natives (Hall, 1997), the modern ideological discourse could strategically make use of positive emotions such as empathy in characterization of the minority's suffering to consolidate its legitimacy. Similar to comments containing colorblind racism that often escapes censorship and remain posted on online news sites (Hughey and Daniels, 2013), nuanced language of the empathy discourse can be shown to disguise the superficial identification of the white with the pain of the Other.

I conducted a critical analysis of political and media discourse surrounding the Charleston shooting in 2015 in which nine African Americans were shot dead while praying in a church by a white man under the motive of racial hatred. Particularly, I examined editorials and op-eds published by the elite media outlets as well as commentary made by politicians in the two-month period after the event. My analysis showed that both public figures and the elite news media drew on various discursive and rhetoric strategies to express concerned thoughts and condolences concerning the tragic shooting. Such expressions of sympathy suggested a sense of "passive empathy", which led to a collective white failure to connect emotionally with the loss of the African Americans. Passive empathy was seen in how the news media defined the shooting incident, framing it as an individual crime committed by an extremist, mentally troubled young man, and totally dismissing the racial element of it. It was also seen in how the elites turned the emotional aspect of the shooting into another ideological device of partisan politics. The overall tone of such discussion and rhetoric was sympathetic and sentimental, but the racial Other was never the main focus. References to the victims stripped of their identity and the narratives painted the shooter in a morally ambiguous

manner. With the rise of emotion in politics, the inclusion of superficial sentiments in the dominant white ideological discourse about the other has important implications. Passive empathy discourse prevents a full recognition of the collective responsibility of society with regard to the pain of the racial other, further delineates the social boundaries and thereby reinforcing the hierarchical order of self/other relation.

In the following, I look at the "empathy" and the development of the concept in philosophical and psychological traditions. Then, I attempt to develop a conceptualization of 'passive empathy' as a form of superficial sentiment, its operationalized measures and lastly, demonstrate how such passive empathy was practiced in discourse about the Charleston shooting using the analytical framework of critical discourse analysis.

Literature review

Empathy – Concept in theory

The concept of Empathy has been studied extensively and most influentially in two traditions: philosophy and psychology. According to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, psychologist Edward Titchener first introduced the term "empathy" into the English language in the early 20th century. The concept, rooted linguistically in ancient Greek and translated from the German meaning "feeling into", was first conceptualized to express human ability to "feel into" nature. Later, Theodor Lipps was the one to transform empathy into a concept in social and human sciences, referring to human perceptual encounter with other human beings, or the ability to recognize other minds. In the psychological tradition, empathy is understood in two broad senses: the cognitive ability to understand others' state of mind, and more essentially, the affective state of human emotion. Contemporary research, particularly in the arenas of social and moral

psychology, increasingly recognizes the significance of the concept in understanding the construction of human agency, altruistic motivation, prosocial attitudes and behavior.

In this study, empathy is broadly understood as the capacity of humans to emotionally relate to the suffering of other human beings, assuming the consciousness of such suffering. The reason why empathy is closely related to suffering is because suffering is understood as a socially shared experience. Author Joan Kleinman (1997) considered two ways in which such argument is meaningful. First, all sorts of social experience, including suffering, can be learnt and taught in a collective manner. For example, people encounter and overcome different kinds of obstacles, some of which are universal. Such common experiences play an important role in the formation of individual perceptions and expressions. Second, the individual experience of suffering, in turn, could be greatly influenced by social relationships and interactions. For example, a person's coming to terms with his innate disability or illness has a lot to do with the socialization processes through which he interacts with others such as his family, or members in his community. Both the "collective" and "intersubjective" aspects of social experience, as the authors put it, are relevant to empathy and its construct of human-to-human emotional responsiveness.

Empathy can be easily confused with some other familial concepts like sympathy, compassion, or pity. One mechanism unique to "empathy" that helps conceptually distinguish it from other concepts is '*perspective taking'*, or how one learns or adopts a perspective of another. For instance, sympathy, though very closely related to "empathy", does not share this assumption. If an observer is said to be "sympathetic" to the sufferer, then it does not necessarily require the former to feel similar emotions with the latter,

only the recognition that the latter is suffering. In short, for sympathy, the apprehension of pain is more critical than the emotional responsiveness; the affective felt is detached rather than shared. Another way in which empathy is unique is the highest degree of '*identification*' with the other assumed in its conceptualization (Boler, 1999). In comparison, sympathy or compassion calls for a certain degree of identification, or the capability to *imagine* taking the perspective of the other. Pity does not require the need to identify with the other at all. Instead, pity in Aristotle's vision of the concept even implicates the inferiority of the others as the observer considers the 'pitiful' status of them, the feeling of "I feel bad for them".

Intuitively, empathy as a concept accentuates the acknowledgment of self/other difference, which is the idea of binary opposition in Hall's writings. Then comes the question of when empathy is expressed and articulated in public discourse to respond to the pain of other human beings, especially when these other human beings are different from "us", how would such nuanced semiotics manifest? I argue that the consideration of whether the empathetic emotions expressed are superficial or genuine would be contingent on two processes at the historical root of empathy, "whether or not such reactive emotions are self- or other-oriented, and whether or not they presuppose awareness of the distinction between self and others" (Eisenberg and Strayer, 1987).

Empathy in relation to the projection of self versus the distant Other

In a provocative essay titled "Is empathy necessary for morality?" included in the book "Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives", Jesse Prinz (2011) proposed a number of problems with empathy, claiming that it is not a helpful concept in judging and evaluating morality. One of his arguments refers to how empathy is subject

to proximity effects. Prinz claimed that to the American audience, domestic suffering would invariably mobilize more empathic support than suffering of the Other in distant countries. He cited the case of Katrina hurricane in the US in 2005, critically comparing it with other disasters happening elsewhere in the world with much larger death toll and damage and yet receive much less media and public attention, for example the Indian Ocean Tsunami in 2004, Java's earthquake in 2006, the attempted genocide in Rwanda where at least 800,000 Tutsis were killed. The author concluded, "empathy increases for those who are nearby, culturally and geographically" (p. 16).

Findings on journalistic reporting of the suffering of the distant Other more or less corroborate this neglect. Ibrahim Shaw (2009) documented two major ways in which news media cover international humanitarian crises: the evocative style of reporting, excessively drawing on graphic images and dramatic storytelling techniques that ultimately distracts audience from the real issues, and the diagnostic style which inadvertently induces a detached audience while trying to provide historical background contexts to facilitate understanding. In a more admonishing and critical tone, Joan Kleinman (1997) denounced the "cultural appropriations" of suffering in modern times. She focused particularly on how images depicting victims of natural disasters, famine, substance abuse, domestic, crime, and privations of destitution are widely and indiscriminately appropriated by the news media that "remake", "thin out" and "distort" such experience. Miserable experience, as part of human existential condition, are shown, discussed, and made become a vehicle for observers, such as media photographers, to earn awards and fame. The commodification of the Other's suffering creates a vicious circle that perpetuates and reinforces over time.

This is not an exclusive phenomenon to the US media. Stijn Joye (2009), through an analysis of critical discourse, discovered how Belgian television news employed discourses of hierarchy and inequality in reporting foreign natural disasters. This study showed that suffering in the West (US and Australia) was differently articulated compared with suffering in the East (Indonesia and Pakistan). Eastern victims were painted as the distant Others, who bear no resemblance and closeness to the local public. Innocent victims like the suffering children, however, were captured in close-ups as a way to suggest Western rescue, urging Western audience to care and act to relieve their misery. Joye argued that this representation underlined a vision of hierarchy, in which Euro-America stands at the center of the world and further consolidate the global power hegemony.

Altogether, these findings point to the potential of further exploring the nature of affective identification with the suffering Other, and how such nature manifests in public discourse. Empathy towards the racial Other, in particular, is the topic of interest in this study. Jesse Prinz was spot-on with his observations of unbalanced empathy towards domestic and international victims; however, it would be inadequate to mention the Hurricane Katrina without considering how the collective tokens of empathy were (or were not) offered to a specific group of victims, the Black people, in the mainstream discourse. Indeed, Hemant Shah (2009) found that conservative media narrative and conservative political elites' commentary regarding the Black victims were devoid of empathetic tone, instead suggesting prejudiced racial criteria that demarcate them from the rational White majority. From the same perspective of critical theory and cultural studies, authors have written about the White empathy in the context of cross-racial

relation with a pessimistic tone (Doris Sommer, 1994; Susan Gubar, 1997). Their criticism is based on the premise that people of color have experience that is unique to their own. Through 'white sympathy', such subjective experience is "erased" and "reclaimed" by the White in a way that deprives the racial Other of their own pain or joy. Expressions of sympathy from white liberals, thus, are considered as "an egocentric appropriation in the guise of an embrace", or an "annihilation of the other's otherness". An important and yet unanswered question in this line of research, I argue, is the implications of such white empathy discourse in the legitimization and maintenance of the ideological social discourse.

Empathy and white ideological discourse

I consider it crucial to establish the relevance of the concept of empathy to not only the Other's suffering but also the ideological system in which the self/other power differential is fundamentally highlighted. There are evidences to suggest that empathy towards the social minorities might be more likely to be found in the liberal discourse. Studies that look at the role of emotion in politics have found that political conservatives and liberals (particularly in the US) differ in how they rate the importance of different sets of moral foundations. For instance, liberals tend to care more about harm and fairness, whereas conservatives care less about these moral factors but more about in-group, authority, and purity. This suggests that compared to conservatives, liberals are more likely to show empathy towards the weaker, more vulnerable others and endorse protective policies favorable to them. But does this mean that this is the kind of ideological discourse that would collectively promote empathy towards the racial Other? Not likely.

Arguably, liberal ideology bears at its core John Stuart Mill's idea of freedom (Jenkins and Brickley, 1989). This ideological approach proposes that one's right to do something and his decision to enact this right (or his action) is to be ideally dependent on his consideration of the consequences that his right or action would pose to the right of the others. When making such considerations, one would rationally think about whether such action would lead to negative or unwanted consequences to the other. In the language of empathy, it means considering oneself to be in the position of others and ask the question of what and how others will feel if I proceed with this action. As Berkowitz (2009) said, "in order for the tenets of an ideology to be re-articulated, empathy with, and not merely recognition of, the Other is necessary" (p. 2). However, since the idea of understanding others' perspectives cannot be materialized under the regime of hegemony, ideology must give rise to *superficial* recognition of, or empathy with the other. Arguably, such superficial empathetic feelings could even be a vehicle for ideology to "insulate power relationship and quells dissent" (p. 14).

Cultural boundaries between self and Other can be drawn not by cold denial of the Other's suffering (Cohen, 2001), but the way people convince themselves that they have come to understand others' position but relate to them in a superficial way. Recuber (2015) found that commentaries in an anti Occupy Wall Street website showed little empathy towards the difficult situation of the poor in a falling economy. Through narratives of their own life stories, commenters engaged in discursive processes that suggested that suffering of the poor is manageable and bearable. In the context of human rights, Seu (2012) found how people use the trope "in countries like that" to draw boundaries and rationalize the detached, passive connection with the victims of atrocities

committed in far-away lands.

As the literature indicates, downplaying obstacles faced by others hinders the effort to truly relate with their pain. “Passive empathy” is what I propose to be the kind of empathy that could be disguised via various rhetoric and discursive strategies employed by actors in the ideological discourse. The term “passive empathy” appeared in Megan Boler’s essay (1999) on “The risk of empathy”. Philosopher Martha Ussabaum proposed that urging schoolchildren to read books and memoirs about the Holocaust would promote their empathy towards the victims of the genocide. Boler, however, disagreed with this view. She opined that what actually involved was the reinforcement of the power relationship that obliterates the differences permitting empathy in the first place. The readers are absolved of responsibility and guilt with regard to the other’s suffering. They end up judging the other’s suffering and not the reflections of their moral culpability. This mechanism of justification and validation is analogous to how empathy could be articulated in ideological discourse.

Passive empathy was similar to Aristotle’s “pity” and Nussabaum’s “compassion” (Boler, 1999). But here, I propose two ways in which it could be understood in relation with ideology by referring to its conceptualization in psychology by Eisenberg and Strayer (1987). First, “passive empathy” needs to have ‘the self’ as the locus of concern. In other words, passive empathy is egocentric. Instead of expressing concern for the sufferer, discourse of passive empathy focuses on the self, the pitier, the observer’s perspective *about* the other’s suffering. Second, “passive empathy” puts more emphasis on recognizing the difference between the self and Other than the actual desire to put oneself into the Other’s shoes to understand and appreciate their experience. In other

words, it is similar to feeling “I would understand your pain if I am in your position but the fact is I am not”.

To illustrate the articulation of passive empathy, I analyze the public discourse surrounding the Charleston shooting incident in 2015, and show that both political conservative and liberal commentary as well as elite media discourse took on various rhetoric and discursive patterns that resulted in a failed attempt to identify with the loss of the black community.

Methodology

The mass shooting took place at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in downtown Charleston, South Carolina on the evening of June 17, 2015. Dylann Roof, a 21-year-old white man shot and killed nine African American members of the Church during their prayer service. Among the victims was senior pastor, state senor Clementa Pinckney. This incident has undeniable racial element in it, as the church is traditionally a black church with a long history in the civil rights movement and the shooter later found to embrace extremist beliefs on race and white supremacy. Dylann Roof has been charged with crime of nine murders and 33 federal hate crimes.

The shooting has raised a widespread and heated social debate over controversies like whether the term “terrorism” should be used to refer to its atrocity, the meaning of the Confederate fag, gun control laws and ultimately, the deep-rooted racial tension in the U.S. Media and public discourse were loaded with expressions of emotions in the aftermath of the event. A whole range of sentiments of sorrow, sympathy, sadness, rage, grief was displayed. To examine how empathetic concern for the loss of the nine black people was articulated, I analyzed media and political commentary by social and political

elites following the shooting. Passive empathy inherent in such discourse was detected through critical discourse analysis.

Operationalized definition of passive empathy could benefit from the literature on modern racism, as both involve the disguise of affective and social phenomena. Bonilla-Silva (2006) documented transformation in the racism discourse in the US. Different from the overt racist tone in the past, discourse of colorblind racism draws on new discursive forms that allow perpetuation of veiled prejudice. For instance, "abstract liberalism" focuses on individual choice and individual responsibility to explain racial issues, "naturalization" downplays racial phenomena as natural occurrences, "cultural racism" denotes differing values, traditions of racial Other to suggest their inferiority, and lastly, "minimization" dismisses the impact of racism in modern society.

Among these, I consider *abstract liberalism* to be one of the mechanisms behind 'passive empathy'. With regard to the suffering of the other, the ideological discourse helps exculpate collective implication and moral responsibility in the other's misery by limiting suffering to individual matter of concern. In "Language in the news: Discourse and Ideology in the Press", Roger Fowler detailed how personalization in news functions to promote "straightforward feelings of identification, empathy or disapproval". It is, however, a very "creative" aspect of ideology, in a sense that it diverts attention to individual cases and problems instead of background social factors. *Dehumanization* is also a mechanism through which passive empathy materializes. To indicate the social and cultural boundaries, ideological discourse could accentuate the distantness, remoteness, suggesting that the suffering racial Other has little to do with the observer. Graphic images could be used to highlight their 'victim' status, but representations of them would

be devoid of relatable details or descriptions.

Stan Cohen (2001) formulated three states of denial as cultural, political and psychological strategies to excuse concerted responsibility for the suffering of others. Literal denial refers to the negation of facts or knowledge of the facts, "interpretive denial" designates how the raw facts are not denied but assigned different meaning, and "implicatory denial" refers to the denial of implications of facts. As he puts it, these are "justifications, rationalizations, evasions that we use to deal with our awareness of so many images of unmitigated suffering" (p. 8). In relation to this study, moral or empathetic passivity would be signified when the ideological discourse dismisses or abbreviates the reality of the event, its interpretations, or its psychological, political or moral implications.

The designation of social boundaries by words like "we", "they", "us", "them" is also suggestive. Norman Fairclough (1995) in "Media discourse" noted the common and inclusive use of the designator "*we*" in political discourse. "Vagueness about who exactly *we* identifies, and the constantly shifting reference of *we* are important resources in political discourse" (p. 181). Fairclough highlighted the "ideological work of media language", in which ideology produces and reproduces unequal relations of power (p. 14). The language of 'we' and 'us' could be used extensively to create a sense of "we are all in this together", a sense of shared loss and suffering, especially in political discourse. But it is important to realize what sort of identities such discourse imagines, what types of audiences it addresses, as well as the social values and relations it signifies.

Lastly, the use of rhetoric, particularly Aristotle' logos-pathos binary could be useful in detecting passive empathy patterns. Considering how political elites might

employ these rhetoric strategies, passive empathy could be seen in how the use of rationality and logics such as attributions, reasons, figures, arguments is given higher visibility than words or phrases that display sympathetic sentiments or emotions. This pattern in discourse indicates more analytical and rational contemplations on the part of the observer, rather than an active emotional identification with the other.

Findings

A look at how the news media and political elites reacted to the Charleston shooting generates some noteworthy observations. First, in general, the common response to the tragedy was outpouring expressions of grief, shock, rage, and sympathy towards the victims, their families and the Charleston community - emotional feelings that Mona Charen, writer of the National Review, claimed, "should be taken for granted among all civilized people" ("*Awaiting the Politicization of Horrorific Murders*", June 18). Looking deeper into the content of news coverage, it is not difficult to see how despite all the sympathy and empathy expressed, the victims and their stories were not the center of national discussion. In about 30 news articles I browsed, the names of the victims were never clarified (the Huffington Post's "*Charleston Church Shooting Victims Identified*" article was an exception). Among the victims, the only person whose name was mentioned the most in the media was the Church pastor who was a Democratic state senator. Referrals to these victims were reduced to generalizations like "nine black people", "nine Church members", "the pastor and members of the church", or "nine black Americans". This is in contrast to how the news media report about the deaths of members of the white community, with extended coverage and human angled narratives, to paint them as human beings with their own stories.

The perpetuator of atrocity, Dylann Roof, was the more newsworthy material in the eyes of media professionals. Who he was and what led him to commit the act took up a large part of coverage. Passive empathy was shown through such disproportionate attention, which justified the need to *understand* the cause of the shooting and the shooter' motive for the observer's self-orientation purpose, rather than to *engage* with the pain of the victims. Dehumanization technique was seen through only a few mentions of the black victims, contrasting to how the shooter was humanized and clearly depicted through pictures, narratives about his education, personality, eccentricities, from all sorts of sources from his friends, families, to professional psychiatrists. He was rarely referred to as a 'white' grown man, but "an introverted kid with few friends", having a "troubled, confused childhood", a "baby-faced killer" ("*Suspect in deadly Charleston shooting apparently introverted with few friends,* June 18*; "Charleston shooting suspect's life: confused, troubled childhood then racial radicalization*", June 18). From news value aspect, it could be understood why the atrocious nature of the shooting would invite journalists to dig deep into different aspects of the story. But the imbalance and clear bias in how such information was put out by the media reflected the social hierarchy in reality, where news decisions are made in consideration of the major white audience, to whom the details concerning the sufferers might be of less relevance to those concerning a member of their group.

Passive empathy was also seen in the way elite news media and political elites drew symbolic boundaries to explain the shooting as an isolated, random crime to absolve the societal responsibility and guilt of enduring racism issue in the country. In the Washington Post op-ed on June 18, 2015 "*Shooters of color are called 'terrorists' and*

'thugs.' Why are white shooters called 'mentally ill'?, Anthea Butler complained how mainstream media never used the term 'terrorism' or 'terrorist' to refer to the shooting. The suspect, Dylann Roof, was not described as 'a possible terrorist', and most of explanations given in news media about his action were 'mental illness'. An article in Dalas News attempted to 'humanize' the shooter by having his father speak up for him saying that he 'might not mean any harm' (Grobmeier, June 14). Another article from LA Times focused on the aspect that he was being bullied at school and that he was an outsider throughout his growing up, which might explain what he did. Such direction taken by the media is further validated by the voices of authority quoted and referenced in coverage. For instance, CNN featured a speech made by the former FBI special agent Jonathan Gilliam right after Roof was arrested, saying that Roof had mental issues. Butler observed that this is not the only case where the news media frame crimes committed by the white as a single, individual and extreme incident. This also happens to media commentary on other white shooters like James Boulware ("*Gunman's father doubts he meant harm*", Dallas News, June 14, 2015") or Adam Lanza ("*Report finds missed chances to help Newtown shooter*", CNN November 23, 2014).

As with many other issues in a polarized America, there were distinct differences in the way the shooting was portrayed in politically slanted sources. In the liberal discourse, or progressive news outlets like MSNBC, the New York Times or the Huffington Post, the discussion topics associated with the shooting were race and gun control, whereas in the conservative media discourse, exemplified by Fox News, Wall Street Journal and blogs like Talking Points Memo, they were justifications and rationalizations of how the shooting is tragic, but merely an isolated act by a mentally

disturbed person. The Wall Street Journal published an editorial that compared the racial situation 25 years ago with the current one in the US, claiming that "The universal condemnation of the murders … and Dylann Roof's quick capture … is a world away from what President Obama recalled as "a dark part of our history.", and that "Today the system and philosophy of institutionalized racism identified by Dr. King no longer exists" ("*The Charleston Shooting: An echo of 52 years ago, but also a crucial difference*", June 18). The editorial reasoned that what caused a "young man" like Roof to "erupt in homicidal rage" is evidence that "evil still stalks humanity" and that "it is no small solace that in committing the act today, he stands alone".

In a similar tone, Fox News – a mouthpiece of the conservatives – diverted the majority of its coverage away from the racial element in the story. In Slate magazine, Justin Peters lamented how the news staff in Fox, from its reporters, hosts, to guests were "all too willing to say what the incident wasn't" ("*The One Thing Missing from Fox News' Coverage of the Charleston Shooting"*, June 19). He cited quotes by Neil Cavuto, who criticized "bringing guns into [discussion] and talk about how this is a unique American problem" and Tony Sayegh – a Republican strategist, who called for "allowing the facts to come out before injecting our own personal political narratives into the conversation". Interestingly, Sayegh suggested "talking more about healing the country", drawing on the superficial empathy card to appeal emotionally while at the same time steering the discussion away from addressing the root of the problem.

Such strategic use of sentiments and emotions was also evident in how Republican politicians or presidential candidates used them to refrain from making any

clear statement and strong opinion regarding the event. Jeb Bush said "I don't know what was on the mind or the heart of the man who committed these atrocious crimes, but I do know — I do know what was in the heart of the victims." New Jersey Governor Chris Christie said the act was “depraved”, “unthinkable”, and added "Laws can't change this. Only the goodwill and the love of the American people can let those folks know that that act was unacceptable, disgraceful, and that we need to do more to show that we love each other."

The sentimental discourse about the victim status of the other soon escalated into a topic for ideological fight between two sides, where the conservatives condemn the liberals including President Obama for ‘politicizing’ and ‘exploiting’ the murders and the liberals retaliated such attacks. In the article “*The shameful liberal exploitation of the Charleston Massacre*” on July 1 in National Review, writer Heather Mac Donald condemned the ‘boilerplate rhetoric’ employed by the Democratic elites to “opportunistically turned Roof into a stand-in for white America”. Likewise, Mona Charen, in “*Awaiting the Politicization of Horrorific Murders*”, felt “depressed” not at the event, but at how feelings of empathy and outrage were “exploited” for political purposes. At the center of such partisan criticism were President Obama and his speech, which was said to “confirm liberal tropes regarding a racist America”. It is interesting how in his speech, the President called for action beyond sentimental feelings, but he was condemned by the Right wing for turning such feelings into “cynical uses”. By focusing their attacks on Obama and the liberal rhetoric on gun control, the Republican side was able to divert from the implications of the shooting, and morally exclude themselves from political topics on gun control or institutional racism.

Passive empathy discourse was not unique to the conservative side. President Obama, in his eulogy speech, clearly did not linger too long on the emotional consequences of the event but focus instead on its implications with regard to the US society. He said "*Maybe we now realize the way racial bias can infect us even when we don't realize it," Once we "realize" how we are "infected" with bias, we will be "guarding against not just racial slurs, but . . . also . . . against the subtle impulse to call Johnny back for an interview but not Jamal. So that we search our hearts when we consider laws to make it harder for some of our fellow citizens to vote."* From the language, it can be seen that his speech was clearly intended to deliver to the central audience of the ideological discourse, the white audience, with words like 'we' and 'our hearts'. The African American community were addressed as "Jamal", "our fellow citizens". To the white audience, these words indicated "them", "the Other" and definitely the Other who are vulnerable and who need "our" realization, "our" consciousness of implicit social racial inequality to have a better chance in life. As indicated, passive empathy could manifest through the use of nouns or words that suggest a sense of community, a sense of "we are all in this together". Political discourse is particularly more likely to employ such rhetoric, but here, it is clear that Obama embraced full identification with his main audience, the white Americans, and not the African American community in distress. Also, even though the issues addressed in his speech were issues related to the fight against racial injustice, one could see that all of them (job equality, voting laws) are in pale comparison to the tremendous tragedy and injustice attached to the Charleston killing and its resulting distress. Like what Boler (1997) wrote, 'semiotics of empathy' emphasizes the power and social hierarchies', thus

when examining how passive empathy could be employed as an element in rhetoric, one should take into consideration "who and what benefits from the production of empathy" and "what kind of fantasy spaces that the speakers and receivers of such messages come to occupy through the construction of the emotions produced by being exposed to such rhetoric?" (p. 255). The rational, logical speech delivered by the President and populated through the media gave the public a good excuse not to get too emotional over the pain of the racial Other.

What would genuine empathy look like? Predictably, black writers expressed anguish, fear, shock, and full identification with the loss of their fellow African Americans. In a New York Times op-ed, Patricia Williams Lessane wrote "For me, last night's events signal several visceral truths. One, that we African-Americans have no sanctuary. Charleston is a wonderful city, but in some very real ways, my children are no safer here than they were in Chicago." The writing was personal and intimate, and definitely addressed to the black audience "I didn't go to the office yesterday, nor did many of my friends. Instead we talked, in person and online, about what comes next. We must, of course, honor the spirits of Clementa Pinckney and of my friend Cynthia Hurd, a veteran librarian who loved books and encouraged all children to read, and of the seven other victims." ("*No sanctuary in the Holy City*", June 19). The same sentiments were shared in another op-ed on The Washington Post by Eugene Robinson, "My mother's side of the family came from Charleston…, this tragedy feels personal. I couldn't sleep Wednesday night, thinking about the terror those innocent victims were forced to experience in their final moments." ("*After Charleston, will America finally do something about guns*?", June 18). These writings illustrated the type of active empathy, as they

actively considered themselves to be in the vantage point of the victims, and expressed their full identification with them through acclaiming their identity and personal connection with the event. Instead of using logical arguments, these were thoughts and reflections of the black writers on the tragedy; they were also the attempts to connect emotionally and spiritually with fellow African Americans all over the country believed to share the same sorrow.

Conclusion

This study explores how the suffering of the Other is articulated in elite media and political discourse. In the case of the Charleston shooting, when the atrocity of the crime towards the innocent racial Other makes it difficult for the ideological discourse to draw symbolic boundaries and justify moral exclusion (Seu, 2012), public discourse adopted various rhetoric and discursive tactics to remain relevant with the popular sentiment. The recognition of the Other's suffering is characterized by language of empathy and condolences. However, such the type of passive empathy expressed minimizes important implications of the shooting and absolves the collective responsibility of social justice system. By doing so, passive empathy results in an incomplete identification with the Other's distress at the emotional level, and further reinforces the social and symbolic boundaries.

Social critics have voiced concerns over how empathy could "fail as a political device", hinder meaningful social change, or even be turned into a vehicle to erase cultural differences. Lauren Berlant is one of the most vocal ones among them. She criticized how sentimental discourse is used in politics to "privatize the political",

"sustain the hegemonic field" (1999, p. 54), and lamented how "ethical imperative toward social transformation is replaced by a civic-minded but passive ideal of empathy. The political as a place of acts oriented towards publicness becomes replaced by a world of private thoughts, leanings, and gestures" (1998, p. 641). She was also very critical of the social power dynamics she believes is implicit in how empathy operates. As she puts it, "compassion is a term denoting privilege: the sufferer is other there" (2004, p.4). Discourse of passive empathy found in the Charleston shooting case suggests that social hierarchy is never to change if the emotion deprives the sufferer of their agency to take control over their plight and gives the observer the superior feeling of being kind and benevolent.

The discourse of passive empathy could be employed to examine other social issues where the Other is concerned. One interesting case for research would be the massive outpouring of sympathy when photos of Aylan Kurdi, the two-year-old boy who washed ashore in the refugee crisis in September 2015, spread virally in global media. It would be interesting to see whether the debate over the European migrant crisis would change its course to a more sympathetic and understanding tone towards the refugees who were also the victims of this 'humanitarian crisis' after the publication of these photos. Even more interestingly, language of empathy could also be used as a device to contrastingly highlight the atrociousness of ISIS, the emerging ideological enemy of the Western world.

'Passive empathy' as a concept is valuable for further research as it holds important implications about the emotional transfer from social and media elites to the

public. As the same mechanism can be applied to the mediated experience, the experience delivered from white or black writers could be communicated to an audience in various ways. If passive empathy discourse is practiced, the audiences might also dismiss their own moral reflections and embrace the perspective of a cynical observer, eventually erasing the emotional engagement with the Other's pain.

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