Racializing Pity: The Haiti Earthquake and the Plight of "Others"

Murali Balaji

In this essay I argue that the mediated responses to the Haiti earthquake reflect the racialization of pity and the privileging of a white view of the dark world as dysfunctional, childlike and dependent. This racialization has been cultivated and affirmed by mediated representations of disasters and their aftermath, particularly through the development of a narrative that places the fate of the dark world in the hands of a benevolent white one. I argue that the mediated discourse of pity exposes the subtle power relations existing between whites and blacks.

Keywords: Race; Otherness; media coverage of disaster; Haiti; pity

In the days and weeks following the January 2010 earthquake that killed thousands of Haitians and left Port-au-Prince in ruins, an international response—led primarily by the US—mobilized. But the billions in planned governmental aid was not what American media attention focused on; instead, it was the spectacle of donating to Haiti and the repetition of images underscoring the country's pitiful state. Words such as chaos, dysfunction, violence, and hopelessness were common in virtually every news story about the earthquake. Haiti became a celebrity cause as former American presidents and other prominent figures appeared in numerous public service announcements urging Americans to donate to the rebuilding efforts. The response included a remake of the 1985 "We Are the World" song and several other singles that were featured regularly on the radio, internet and music video channel playlists. Moreover, the coverage of the disaster and the donation efforts that mobilized in the immediate wake of the quake seemed to highlight the best of human empathy and compassion. As author Jeremy Rifkin noted shortly after the quake, "human beings have come together as an extended family in an outpouring of compassion and concern. For these brief moments of time, we leave behind the many

Murali Balaji is the mass communications program director at Lincoln University and the author of several books. He has also co-edited several volumes and numerous articles on cultural production, race and identity. He welcomes feedback at mbalaji@lincoln.edu

differences that divide us to act as a species. We become Homo empathicus" (Rifkin, 2010).

But the response to the Haiti earthquake—replete with images of Haitians amid the rubble and functioning in chaos—also highlighted the construction of black people as somehow hopelessly dependent upon the charity of whites. Countless images of white aid workers helping to rescue blacks out of the rubble, as well as stories of Americans rushing to Port-au-Prince to answer an heroic duty, were shown in opposition to what Haiti was before the aid (and the earthquake): a desperate and lawless nation that could not function without assistance. Moreover, Haiti's dysfunctionality made it a longstanding object of international pity, and the earthquake only added to that narrative. Noting its proximity to the resorts of the nearby Bahamas, one philanthropist remarked, "How can such a poor place, even prequake, exist so close to these centers of luxury? Only Dickens could appreciate the juxtaposition" (Roberts, 2010).

Webster's Dictionary defines empathy as "the intellectual identification with or vicarious experiencing of the feelings, thoughts, or attitudes of another" and pity as "sympathetic or kindly sorrow evoked by the suffering, distress, or misfortune of another, often leading one to give relief or aid or to show mercy." Empathy implies a sentiment based on equality. Pity, on the other hand, assumes the one pitying holds the power over the pitied. We might empathize with victims of disaster, terrorist attacks or some other calamity (which would lead us to still try to resolve the crisis) if we had a connection to them, but we tend to *pity* them when they do not share anything in common with us, at least in mediated representations. When the subtext of race is factored, the processes of pitying Others become a study in how our biases impact our emotional responses to tragedy.

Indeed, race is central to how pity is enacted, appearing both invisible and hypervisible at the same time in mediated discourse. The racialization of pity (and other human emotions) is a colonial construction that has remained embedded in postcolonial discourse. In fact, race becomes a driving force in the relationship between those who pity and those who are pitied; this dynamic is further amplified in American and other Western media where race is an already intensely charged discursive formation. Race is so pervasive in cultivating pity that it becomes lost in the rhetoric surrounding pity, yet it is instrumental in creating an Other.

In this essay, I argue that the mediated responses to the Haiti earthquake reflect the racialization of pity and the privileging of a white view of the dark world as dysfunctional, childlike and dependent. As Fanon (1967) has noted, the white–black binary also manifests itself in an adult–child hierarchy that is exacerbated in times of tragedy and disaster. This racialization has been cultivated and affirmed by mediated representations of the disasters and their aftermath, particularly through the development of a narrative that places the fate of the dark world in the hands of a benevolent white one (Friedman, 2000). In the case of Haiti, the raw emotions conjured up by the tragedy were in part cultivated by American news media all too

eager to make the quake into a mediated spectacle of pity. Using a postcolonial framework, a rhetorical analysis of several news articles and commentaries, as well as context from the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and Hurricane Katrina in 2005, I argue that the mediated discourse of pity exposes the subtle—and not-so-subtle—power relations existing between whites and blacks. Although people of color were also among those to show pity to Haiti's victims, the not-so-subtle rhetoric of power and functionality continue to be shaped along a white–black binary. This has been shaped in large part by American media industries, which have cultivated an almost irreconcilable I–Other dialectic among their audiences (Gilens, 1996; Entman & Rojecki, 2000; Jackson, 2006). Moreover, instead of acknowledging that the vast majority of global media consumers are people of color, American media industries export depictions to transnational audiences that reaffirm a discursive adult–child relationship between whites and Others.

Through analysis of selected media texts later in this essay, I also argue how this discourse has been framed so that the victims of the Haiti quake have become homogenized into a tragic and dysfunctional Other. The homogenization of the victims and the emphasis on chaos in the aftermath of the disaster has also made these Others more consumable to white audiences, whose mediated pity drives them to donate to relief efforts. This pity—which is markedly different than empathy—is also what contributes to the spectacle of giving—telethons, celebrity songs, and celebrity public service announcements—that have made these specific tragedies into media events. Ironically, while we give millions out of pity, those we pity are left out of mediated public discourse.

Blackness, Tragedy, and Pity: A Fanonian Approach

Long before the Haiti earthquake, mediated representations of disaster, strife, and other tragedies have been racialized in order to create an I–Other binary that differentiates the pitied from those pitying. Images of dark-colored children running through dilapidated villages or playing on landfills beckon viewers to take pity and sponsor them. The famine in Ethiopia during the 1980s, for example, was a heavily covered subject in American newspapers and newscasts. Moreover, it was that famine—with its haunting images of children dying in their parents' arms—that motivated Michael Jackson, Lionel Richie, and Quincy Jones to assemble an all-star cast to record "We Are the World" and sing it during the Live Aid concert in 1985. The concert provided the music industry with a unique footing to compel audiences to consume by linking the consumption with civically responsible ways to address the horrific images of poverty and famine.

But this poverty and famine have long been associated with a dark non-white world, a place where tragedy and hopelessness reign and where one's success is determined by the compassion of (white) Others. This construction of the dark world has usually been through a mediated frame, as Fanon argues, and not direct contact between whites and their Others. More importantly, for Fanon, race and the creation of Otherness are shaped by language and its inscriptions, which he exemplifies

famously by noting "whoever says rape says Negro" (Fanon, 1967, p. 166). This same kind of I–Other dialectic is apparent contemporarily when the term "urban" is used to imply the black underclass. Similarly, the use of language, when tied to race and a colonial ideology, helps to affirm the binaries of the I–Other dialectic. If we examine the mediated representation of tragedy, it becomes clear that race is inextricably connected to the binary between hopelessness (black) and hope (wahite). Fanon (1965, 1967) explains that whites–or more broadly, those with power–view the Othered (powerless) as pitiful and disdainful, yet necessary in order to function. One of Fanon's primary arguments is that the Other is a subject and that the relationships between dominant culture and Others is a dialectical and essentially symbiotic one; that is, both need one another in terms of definition. But, in mediated discourses, racial Others are objects and have already been defined for audience members as such. For example, during the 1994 Rwandan massacre, U.S. and European media showed daily images of Hutus hacking Tutsis to death. Western viewers expressed awe and pity, but their views reflected the distance—both in terms of geography and humanity—between them and the mediated violence they witness. An exchange during the film *Hotel Rwanda* between Don Cheadle and Joaquin Phoenix encapsulated the views of Western (white) viewers to the destruction they watched. "I think if people see this footage, they'll say Oh, my God, that's horrible," Phoenix's character tells Cheadle's. "And then they'll go on eating their dinners."

This quote encapsulates the racial politics of pity. Blacks in other countries are seen as helpless, hopeless, and unequal, thereby shunned or marginalized in mediated civic discourse (Gilens, 1996; Myers, Kklak, & Koel, 1996; Entman & Rojecki, 2000; Simpson, 2008). News coverage of the Rwandan massacre, when compared with the coverage of the massacre of Bosnian Muslims by Serbs in the mid-1990s, highlights this marginalization. In Europe, such slaughter is constructed as barbaric and exceptional. The Rwandan massacre is constructed as the norm, drawing us to back why international audiences—particularly those in the West—responded with such a low level of emotional attachment to the death and violence. As Myers et al (1996) argue, this conflict is also rarely contextualized and humanized for (white) Western viewers. Instead, "Rwanda's troubles create a continent-wide conflagration. Instead of uniformed units doing their routine and orderly cleansing work, there is a poorly clad mother thrusting her crying child out of Africa's (read: Hades') chaos. Indeed, the message is that Rwanda-Africa is as unknown and unknowable as Hades" (p. 38).

Similarly, Steeves (2008) argues that American media, particularly recent reality shows such as *Survivor*, *The Amazing Race*, and *American Idol* have framed Africa as homogeneous, alien, in peril, in need, and without voice. In fact, Steeves highlights a significant problem in the way the West views Africa: without voice and agency. This dynamic also manifested itself frequently in covering the Haiti earthquake. Steeves argued that our interpretations of the expansive continent are often filtered through a Western (white) narrative that privileges the white voice at the expense of the natives'. As a result, the entire media spectacle about Haiti becomes a commodity that we consume, whether for Haiti's alien and Othered quality or for our satisfaction of helping the "less fortunate" (Steeves, 2008). Media coverage helps to "create new

commodities from old narratives of imperialist travel, appropriation, exploitation, and self-inferiority" (Steeves, 2008, p. 439). While Haiti is just miles away from the coast of Florida, it is symbolically linked with the dysfunctionality of a homogeneous Africa. Its dysfunctionality and chaos have been rhetorically connected to its blackness, thereby rendering its population objects of pity to outside audiences.

This brings us back to Fanon. Fanon's primary concern about the discourses of power that shaped the dialectic between the colonizer and the colonized was that the colonizers often spoke for the colonized or appointed spokespersons of the colonized to affirm the opinions of the colonizer. In the case of Haiti, as I argue, this was especially apparent in the on-the-ground media coverage in the weeks following the earthquake. As Fanon writes, the discourses of colonialism are driven by notions of uplift—the charity of the colonizer to help bring up the colonized. He notes that through these discourses, the colonized is "elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's standards" (Fanon, 1967, p. 18).

From a Fanonian perspective, the Othering of blacks and other global nonwhites has been a result of a sustained process of signification, particularly when images neatly align with pre-existing ideologies and biases. The homogenization of global blackness, for example, helps to collapse the diversity of the various cultures and peoples of the African Diaspora. The Kenyan, Nigerian, Haitian, Jamaican, Afro-Brazilian, and African American become consumable Others through tropes such as conflict, struggle, poverty, violence, and dysfunctionality. This is what American conservative commentator Bill O'Reilly meant when he noted a few days after the Haiti earthquake that the South Side of Chicago resembled Haiti:

> If you've ever been to the South Side of Chicago, I mean, it's a disaster. Alright? It's like Haiti. It's like—I've been to Haiti a couple times, and I support some charities there, but Haiti just never gets better no matter how much money you put in there because they don't have a system. (O'Reilly: South Side of Chicago "Like Haiti")

O'Reilly did not need to clarify his comments, since his viewers could quickly infer what he meant: that black-dominated areas—including those in the US.—are dysfunctional and chaotic. Moreover, by making the connection with Haiti, O'Reilly's deeper implication was that the South Side of Chicago was pitiful and reminiscent of a (non-white) third world country. This remark added to the universalizing of the black experience as being pitiful, inferior, and incapable of functionality. As Fanon (1965) argues, blackness and its Otherness can be implied through code words. O'Reilly's use of the South Side of Chicago and Haiti allow the viewer to make a visual connection without having to work hard to interpret the message.

But the O'Reilly comments also strike at the heart of how mediated representations of tragedy spark varying levels of emotion among viewers. Simply put, if we view the victims as equal, we empathize and draw from our own experiences to find connection. If we view victims as an Other, we tend to show pity: an emotion that places some distance between the subject and the object. As Coonfield and Huxford (2009) point out, our emotive responses to mediated tragedies are triggered by

cultural performance. As a result, "news becomes both a cultural storehouse and a stage where the lively possibilities of performance can be held, enacted, contested, even set aside for still other, future use" (Coonfield & Huxford, 2009. p. 474). When taken in these contexts, we are almost expected to show pity to images of tragedy when victims aren't relatable to us. Moreover, by responding with pity, we are tacitly acknowledging our privilege and power over a helpless Other.

Fanon's primary concern about this dynamic is that the Other is forced to acknowledge his/her inferiority and thereby becomes what the colonizer expects him to be. Haitians, in this regard, are ideal objects of pity because the narrative of hopelessness and despair has been uninterrupted for many years. But a postcolonial framework to viewing a disaster such as the Haiti quake is not without its critics. For example, De Zengotita (2005) takes a swipe at postcolonial discourses, especially the notion of the Other, by noting that "making the Other less other is not something most people steeped in the discourse of otherness have typically wanted to encourage" (p. 226). He adds that too many of us get carried away with the rhetoric of exploitation, noting that groups use Otherness for self-commodification. While De Zengotita is certainly right that our (academic) notions of Otherness and dynamics of power sometimes get wrapped in a cocoon of isolation from daily discourses, he misses an important point: in cases of tragedy such as the Haiti quake, victims do not have a say in how they are viewed. The amount of power—both physical and symbolic—that one group has over another is a key determinant in the degree of pity levied from subject to object. Because Haiti has been dependent on international aid for many years, a point re-affirmed by news coverage of the quake, global audiences were primed to consume quake victims as pitiful. The skin color of the victims also helped to pre-determine their objectification.

Another important aspect of understanding this empathy/pity dynamic is how Western media focused on the response to disaster by emphasizing the benevolence of the (white) West. The aid efforts of American or European charity organizations or individuals who were inspired to help are highlighted in news coverage, while those who are receiving the assistance become a homogeneous whole. However, we must examine whether such charity efforts do more harm than good when it comes to humanizing the victims. Pity becomes a powerful rhetorical device when organizations and individuals use it as a means of highlighting their good deeds (without giving the recipients of those deeds a voice). Pity has been used rhetorically (and framed as compassion) by corporations such as Chevron, GAP and Starbucks, which have spent millions in recent years highlighting their charitable donations to "Africa" (Kuehn, 2008).

But pity and its accompanying images are not just confined to foreign countries where dark peoples comprise the majority. Indeed, the U.S. has had longstanding issues in humanizing African Americans in public discourse, a problem that was shown clearly during Hurricane Katrina and the discourses that followed (Scott, 1997; Giroux, 2006; Kahle, Yu, and Whiteside, 2007). The images of Hurricane Katrina, replete with dead bodies floating in the water and desperate people atop

buildings holding up help signs, play into this same I–Other discourse, with poor blacks as the irreconcilable Other.

Regardless of philosophical motivations, mediated images of blacks contribute to notions of pathology, invoking pity and, at the same time, a sense that they are beyond help (Mastro, Lapinski, Kopacz, & Morawitz, 2009). More troubling is that these images have export value and can reaffirm prejudices among audiences outside of the U.S., as Jackson (2006), Olofsson and Rashid (2008), and Steeves (2008) argue. In an era of globalized media traffic, these images cannot easily be dismissed, and they only add to a prevailing notion among whites and their Others that discourse cannot take place on equal terms.

Deconstructing Disaster Victims as Objects of Pity

In order to maximize pity, cultivate empathy, and generate an emotional response from viewers, media construct faces for tragedy. These faces are used as embodiments of destruction and hopelessness, begging the viewer to feel empowered by donating money, with such phrases such as "the cost of a cup of coffee could feed a child for two days." In this frame, the viewer—regardless of race or ethnic background— ostensibly becomes the supreme agent, the difference between whether the victim on the television or computer screen lives or dies. These dynamics, as Bhabha (1994) points out, are similar to the emotional persuasions Christian missionaries used to build support for proselytizing campaigns in colonized lands. The natives were barbaric children in need of the adult hand of civilized Christians in order to grow and join the ranks of full humanity, they argued. While stripped of the religious undertones, images of disaster, particularly when most of the victims are non-white, conjure up the same adult–child dynamics of the colonial period.

Due to its mixed postcolonial history, Haiti is the eternal child in American media consumption. As Dayan (1996) points out, Haiti has been viewed as impoverished, sickly, and inferior since the colonial era, when slaveowners used these tropes as a rationalization for keeping blacks in bondage. In Fanonian terms, Dayan argues that "if the justification of slavery depended on converting a biological fact into an ontological truth—black = savage, white = civilized—the descendant of slaves must not only pay tribute to those who enslaved but also must *make himself white, while remaining black*. Further, the acquisition of the forever unreal new identity is paid for by negation of the old self" (Dayan, 1996, p. 8). She further argues that this racialized inferiority was inscribed upon Haitians long after its independence, as the "complex working out of personal identity through a duplicity or doubling of color proves crucial to the making of a nation" (p. 8). In the case of Haiti's postcolonial history and its contemporary image, this inscription is also vital for the consumption of the nation and its people.

Said (1993) argues that white privilege and racism manifest themselves through mediated discourse, even in representations that appear "positive." He argues that the lessened human value of Others is re-affirmed through these depictions. Friedman (2000) adds that imperialism is often enacted through emotions, particularly as

Others become more clearly defined in public discourse. In viewing tragedies such as the Haiti earthquake, the dynamics of imperialism are more easily noticed because mediated depictions highlight the plight of victims as the opposite of the heroism of the colonizers.

This frame, repeated enough through various tragedies, becomes a norm for American media audiences, who have become accustomed to being emotionally distant and anesthetized to events involving dark people (Myers et al., 1996). We—as in the viewers, presumably white, but not always—are superior in our comforts and our sense of civilization. Our superiority, particularly through our consumption of mass mediated images of far-away tragedies, is reflected in our ability to pity and help them, the homogenized Others whose civilization is in need of our assistance. These dynamics of pity, particularly how we racialize our sense of pity to construct an abstract dark Other, are framed by media coverage. Disasters such as the Haiti quake and Hurricane Katrina only add to this construction. As Gotham (2007) notes, "in the contemporary era, disasters are becoming a mode of spectacle in which the characteristic features of entertainment—for example, ephemerality, fragmentation, immediacy and intense drama—determine the representation of tragic events and catastrophes. The cultivated and mediated distance between the viewer and the viewed also aids this notion of spectacle.

Although news executives are unlikely to admit it, covering darker people across the globe and in local settings often only occurs when those people are in states of dysfunction and chaos. As Van Dijk (1989) observes:

> According to dominant (Western) news values, the media favor stories about negative events, and such stories are generally recalled better, especially in the case of outgroup members. This means that there is a complex ideological framework in which intergroup perception, prejudices, White group dominance, cognitive strategies as well as journalistic news values all contribute to the negative representation of ethnic minorities in the press. (p. 204)

Moreover, the aspects that make darker people pitiful through these mediated lenses contribute to a missionary mentality among media consumers, as exhibited by the spectacle of Western do-gooders (Steeves, 2008). The Haiti quake, as I will show later in this essay, was a textbook example of how do-gooders became the privileged subject of stories, while the Haitian victims blurred into the background as merely the objects of the good deeds.

But pity is not just manufactured by the media, since audience members often need little persuasion to show pity towards a racialized Other displaced by disaster. Audience studies on race provide some clue as to why something such as the Haitian earthquake invokes such strong emotional responses and affirms a racial hierarchy through such emotions. Van Dijk (1989) notes that mediated representations of race—largely based on racial stereotypes and out-grouping—continue to influence audiences because "there exists a body of generally shared beliefs on which such discriminatory actions are based, and which provides the tacit legitimation of the power exercised by the dominant in-group" (p. 202). Van Dijk additionally notes,

"Controlled ignorance about out-groups, combined with group self-interest, favors the development of stereotypes and prejudices" (p. 204). Given how little interaction most Americans have had with Haiti or even Haitian expatriates, it is logical to see why quake victims were so easily out-grouped.

Gilens (1996), and Entman and Rojecki (2000) argue that blackness has been so ingrained in the minds of American audiences that many audience members tend to greatly overstate the link between blackness and poverty, and violence and crime. Condit (1989) additionally notes that audiences are structurally primed to differentiate between in-groups and out-groups through mediated discourse, and their level of interpreting texts is heavily dependent upon their cultural fluency. This is especially difficult to do in a case such as Haiti when so few Americans have prior context, or, if they do, information that diverges from the dominant media narrative of Haiti as a dysfunctional, impoverished, and pitiful(ly) black state.

More importantly, the irreconcilability of Otherness requires Western media to construct a lens by which far-away tragedies become empathized and not pitied. For example, when terrorist attacks hit Lahore, Pakistan and Mumbai, India, in 2008, cable news networks such as CNN took great pains to emphasize local connections. Otherwise, the attacks—like the ones that take places in irreconcilably Othered places such as Mogadishu, Jaffna, and Jos—become pitiful and do not generate the same emotional response from viewers as those with which they can develop a stronger connection (Coonfield & Huxford, 2009). Perhaps this is why pity—which inherently assumes an inequality in power relations—becomes more socially acceptable than indifference.

The Haitian earthquake was just one example of many in recent years when pity is cultivated through mediated representations. Moreover, the coverage of the quake followed a predictable narrative in which non-white victims are presented as needing the charity of (white) philanthropy in order to live. By presenting raw and emotionally intense images to global audiences, media industries are able to perpetuate a cycle of racialized pity that privileges those who pity and pathologizes those who are pitied. As in the case of the Indian Ocean tsunami, pity became a powerful tool used by media industries to increase consumption of the spectacle of tragedy.

In my experience as a journalist covering the tsunami aftermath, I was told by my editors in the U.S. to make sure I could "bring the tragedy home" for Americans. I did this by emphasizing what needs tsunami victims had and what Americans could do, but I also realized that, by doing so, I was affirming the very paternalistic concept of charity—that Others are incapable of helping themselves and that we must do so. This dynamic played itself out in India, where nationalistic pride drove the government's decision to reject foreign aid for tsunami reconstruction. Western media presented stories of how Americans were sending clothes and food to storm-ravaged areas, but never showed what happened to their donations. Indeed, as some Indian media outlets reported, most of the clothes donated to tsunami victims were of little use to locals. After all, jeans and sweaters hardly fit the lifestyle of fishermen and women who spent most of their days on boats.

But presenting such images would go against the dominant narrative that Western media sought to present, one that reified notions that our aid was saving the storm-ravaged natives. Both Van Dijk (1989) and Friedman (2000) point out that media industries put their viewers on a pedestal so that they may look down upon mediated Others, particularly when those Others are affected by some calamity. Given my nearly 10 years as a journalist prior to becoming an academic, it is hard for me to dispute this claim. As a member of the media (although culturally and linguistically connected to the tsunami victims in southeast India), I was directed to affirm the inherent power dynamics between my audience and their Others—the tsunami victims. The highlighting of Western charity is a consistent narrative when Western mainstream media seek to justify covering disasters when the most or all of the victims are non-white. More importantly, in order to make the victims less pitiful, coverage highlighted the Western (white) victims of the tsunami (Olofsson & Rashid, 2008). The privileging of the white victims helps to make the tragedies more consumable and more relevant to (white) audiences far away. Olofsson and Rashid (2008) point out that, in Sweden, media focused on Swedish tourists trapped in Thailand, and, as a result, "substantially narrow the scope of the catastrophe to a domestic disaster. ... Thailand is described as a (Swedish) tourist destination and when places like Pog Suk and Phi Phi Island were destroyed as the devastation of the 'Swedish paradise'" (p. 11). The de-privileging of the native victims' voice, while emphasizing the ownership of the tourist (colonizer), fits into the dominant media narrative of making tragedies more empathetic than pitiful. Through the lens of race, it is easy to understand how Western media attempted to connect the tragedy to their audiences.

Haiti's blackness makes it irreconcilable to American audiences, and the narratives constructed from the earthquake made Haiti "both exotic and comfortably distant" (Myers et al., 1996). The distance is not just geographic, but symbolic, as evidenced by the American media's coverage of Hurricane Katrina and its subsequent construction of pity towards the hurricane's victims. As in the case of Haiti, as Kahle et al. (2007) argue in their study of news images following Katrina, blacks were seen overwhelmingly as the "faces" of the disaster. Moreover, the coverage of blacks conformed to stereotypical notions of black victimhood and "consistently put Anglos in the role of helper and African-Americans in the role of helpless victim, supporting previous stereotyping literature, such as African-Americans being lazy and not self-reliant" (Kahle et al., 2007, p. 86). Consequently, the victims of the hurricane became pitiful. As Heldman (2007) adds, "focusing on certain aspects of an event–like coverage of Katrina that focused on race rather than class–primed news consumers to think about this disaster in a specific way" (p. 11).

But as I pointed out earlier, the pity that Americans showed towards the (black) victims of Hurricane Katrina, particularly those who lived in New Orleans' poorest and most flood-prone areas, also turned to backlash. One of the reasons for this transformation from pity to anger towards the victim is the inherent (white) American ideal that individuals can "pull themselves up" from adversity. Systemic factors such as housing segregation, environmental racism, and chronically poor

education are dismissed in favor of a view that if the victims cannot immediately repair their lives, they are at fault. Part of Americans' trouble with Katrina is that it happened within their borders and that mediated images of the disaster seemed to depict a country far away, not along their own Gulf Coast.

Many African American scholars and public figures commented on the notion that Katrina seemed distant from the American public sphere because its victims were mostly black. Moreover, it was clear that the response seemed framed by a first world/third world binary. But the third world comparisons were especially ironic from New Orleans rapper Juvenile, who railed against the American government and the media for ignoring and de-humanizing the disaster. Emphasizing the irreconcilable Otherness of Katrina's victims in the mainstream media in his 2005 song "Get Ya Hustle On," Juvenile raps:

> Whoday! You must be feeling your folks
> Just them crackers behind them desks that ain't hearin' us though
> We starvin'! We livin' like Haiti without no government
> Niggaz killing niggaz and them bitches is lovin' it.

Juvenile's lyrics indicate that Katrina's victims felt a strong sense of betrayal and helplessness usually reserved for an "Othered" country, yet it also alludes to the lack of daylight between the black victims of a hurricane in the U.S. and their counterparts from tragedies in other parts of the globe. Moreover, when Juvenile mentions Haiti, he is—like O'Reilly—conjuring up image of a dysfunctional society where chaos reigns.

In mediated coverage of disasters, it is often almost impossible to convey black victims of disaster as worthy of empathy or any other positive human emotion, perhaps because discourses surrounding blackness have been so focused on an exaggerated Otherness that symbolically and visually stands opposite to a rhetorically and symbolic (white) American value system (Zizek, 2005). This is also perhaps why, just as in the case of Haiti, so many American viewers were ready to believe the worst when it came to the behavior of Katrina's survivors in the days and weeks after the storm. Zizek (2005) has a blunt assessment of why the news media cultivated the discourses of pity and animus towards the black victims of the hurricane:

> Even if *all* the reports on violence and rapes had proven to be factually true, the stories circulating about them would still be "pathological" and racist, since what motivated these stories were not facts, but racist prejudices, the satisfaction felt by those who would be able to say: "You see, Blacks really are like that, violent barbarians under the thin layer of civilization!" In other words, we would be dealing with what could be called *lying in the guise of truth*: Even if what I am saying is factually true, the motives that make me say it are false. (Zizek, 2005)

Zizek's comments highlight the pathologies of race in American media and why these pathologies continue to re-perpetuate Otherness even within the American public sphere. As a result, it became almost impossible for Katrina victims to be viewed as equals in mediated discourse. The mediated racial rhetoric that helped to

shape coverage diminished the victims' value as human beings and in doing so, cast them as pitiful Others. If the Otherness manifested itself so strongly in Hurricane Katrina, rendering its victims pitiful, then trying to construct Haitian victims as worthy of empathy would be impossible given current media structures. As I show in the next section, the American media's desire to cultivate Others helped to frame a racialized discourse of pity that emphasized Haitians' helplessness.

The Haiti Earthquake: A Rhetorical Deconstruction

Of recent natural disasters, the Haiti earthquake seemed to be tailor-made for Fanonian constructions of Otherness. Western media, with only spotty coverage that highlighted Haiti' dysfunction, corruption, and warlord-driven bloodshed, as noted earlier, had long ignored the country. When the earthquake struck, the magnitude of its human destruction was too much for international media to ignore. However, immediately after the quake, American media focused on Haiti as a dysfunctional country and its people as unorganized amidst institutional chaos. As in the case of Katrina, highlighting the Haiti's chaos allowed news media outlets to focus on covering the quake's victims from a standpoint of pity than one of empathetic equality (Giroux, 2006). Moreover, the news media coverage routinely covered the actions of the American/European do-gooders at the expense of Haitians' efforts at helping their countrymen in the wake of the disaster.

This is part of Haiti's symbolic position as a dependent of American philanthropy. Dayan (1996) notes that as Haiti's social history became constructed primarily by non-Haitians in discourses outside of the country; the image of Haiti became synonymous with savagery and chaos. Dayan's observations about Haiti as an object of foreign inscription could be seen in not only the American media's coverage of the country's political instability—particularly during the 1990s—but also in the aftermath of the quake.

In a *Miami Herald* article chronicling the desperation in the days after the quake, the country was portrayed as one in shambles, whose populace was not only pitiful but hopeless as well. The article quoted a young Haitian woman venting her frustration at the disorganization in the country:

> "Nobody is coming," she said. "I think only God is in charge. The government should be here, any government. There is no government in the palace right now, I don't even really know if Haiti has a government today."
>   The 22-year-old's feelings of frustration were shared by many aid workers, agencies and medics, who said that three days after a 7.0 magnitude earthquake devastated this nation, they were not clear who was in charge of relief. (Charles, Daniel, Robles, & Chang, 2010)

In this vein, news media images often shifted the focus to what journalists were doing to help. As in the case of Dr. Sanjay Gupta, CNN's medical expert, journalists on the scene began to insert themselves into the story, highlighting their involvement as impromptu aid workers. In one instance, Gupta expressed shock at being left alone

with victims while other Haitian aid workers left. "I've never been in a situation like this. This is quite ridiculous," Gupta said (Redman, Dellorto, & Bonifield, 2010). "What is striking to me as a physician is that patients who just had surgery, patients who are critically ill, are essentially being left here, nobody to care for them." CNN reported that the medical staff left because of security concerns, adding that many aid workers did not feel safe amidst reports of violence. Such actions only served to marginalize the quake victims more, blurring them into a homogeneous and helpless Other relying on Western (media) support to save them. The *Washington Post* noted the ethical implications of the so-called Gupta effect:

> [Journalism ethics expert J.A.] Ward says such 'emotion-based' reporting has its place, but it can become manipulative and obscure the larger picture. Worse, it can become self-promotional: "Is this compassion or is it congratulations?" he asks. "It's almost as if the networks are saying, 'Look at our correspondent down there.' It gives me an uncomfortable, queasy feeling." (Farhi, 2010)

But the rhetoric of chaos and dysfunction, while shaping the image of the pitiful Haitian in American viewers' minds, might have been an exaggeration to fit viewer preconception. In a report by *Democracy Now!*, a doctor refuted Gupta's claims about disorder, noting that there were no "security issues." The doctor further explained that the term "security issues" was a sign of veiled racism:

> One thing that I think is really important for people to understand is that misinformation and rumors and, I think at the bottom of the issue, racism has slowed the recovery efforts of this hospital. . . . We've been circulating throughout the city until 2:00 and 3:00 in the morning every night, evacuating patients, moving materials. There's no UN guards. There's no US military presence. There's no Haitian police presence. And there's also no violence. There is no insecurity. (Gonzalez, 2010)

The Haiti earthquake aftermath became a mediated spectacle because of the repeated references to the helplessness of Haitians and a celebrity-driven, commodified charity effort in the wake of the disaster. While the "We Are the World" remake and Haiti telethon effort netted millions for Haiti's reconstruction, it emphasized the humanity of the philanthropists rather than that of the victims. Moreover, Haiti was not just a *cause celebre*; overnight, its citizens became a commodity used to sell songs and other products. This commodification of the tragedy in Haiti, just like the commodification of hunger and HIV/AIDS in parts of Africa, further dehumanized the earthquake's victims. It might have created a sense among Americans and Europeans that they were helping to "save" a country by donating to charities or downloading Haiti relief songs, but the process of acting on their pity further constructed Haitians as aliens to media consumer.

A *Philadelphia Inquirer* editorial published days after the quake reminded readers that Haiti has had a dysfunctional postcolonial existence, noting that "in fact, as devastating to Haiti as the earthquake was, it could end up being a blessing of sorts, if the attention it is receiving can help put it on a path out of poverty . . . Our countries

have had a special relationship, not always good, ever since the former French colony's slaves successfully revolted in 1803" (Help for Haiti, 2010). While the editorial took great pains to point out the need for empathy for Haitian quake victims by paralleling their plight to those affected by the tsunami, the implication in the above excerpt is that Haiti's dysfunctionality could be ameliorated through America's benevolence. Similarly, journalist Bob Greene's (2010) column on the Haitian recovery seemed almost self-congratulatory on America's role in the effort:

> But the United States has been at the forefront, as it has so often seemed to be in so many places when hope was in short supply. It is almost beyond imagining to think what has been in the terrified minds of the citizens of Haiti who have been without water, without food, without a way to rescue their trapped and dying children. When there is nothing left to depend on, when all is desolation and despair, what must the hungry and the hurt wish for as they look into the empty distance? Someone to care. (Greene, 2010)

While well-intentioned, mobilizing charity work through media through op-ed pieces or news commentaries reified notions of American superiority and Haitian inferiority. While these commentaries were meant to inspire action and goodwill, they also were based on an underlying premise that the pitiful Haitians were so helpless that they could only be saved through American philanthropy. In a column published six months after the quake, CNN anchor Soledad O'Brien (an African American) notes the benevolent hand of Americans saving Haitian children from even more calamity. But she concludes her opinion piece with a more somber assessment of the future:

> Their government is fractured, their history promises little revival. American generosity is far reaching but fleeting. These kids will likely never know the advantages and possibilities handed to people like me just a boat ride away. I have a sick child on my lap. But I can help. I can be here. I can hold Adriano on my lap while they successfully negotiate his rescue. I can tell his story. I can teach my daughter that she may just bring these kids stickers and smiles today but the growth in her heart can help her reach far beyond this sunny afternoon in Haiti. (O'Brien, 2010)

Further fueling the notion of Haiti's racialized, desperate Otherness was the Chilean earthquake, which was more powerful than the Haiti quake but caused less damage. Shortly after the February earthquake in Chile, the Associated Press (AP) highlighted the disparity between the two disasters. Implicit in the AP article was the notion that Chile—a "lighter" country—was more civilized and therefore merited no pity from the world. In fact, the larger media narrative constructed following the Chile quake showed how independent Chile was in contrast with Haiti—the dark "child" nation dependent upon the help of the rest of the world. There were no telethons for Chile and no CNN reporters in Santiago walking through the rubble and congratulating themselves on helping earthquake victims. The American media framed a dichotomy between a functional nation and a pitiful one, emphasizing

Haiti's lawlessness and desperation as indicators of the latter. In one AP story, for example, Haitians were quoted as contrasting the effectiveness of the Chile recovery with the ineffective of their own country's, further highlighting the incapability of a dark nation to improve. The story quoted a reggae singer in Port-au-Prince who "could only shake his head at his government's reliance on international relief to distribute food and water. 'Chile has a responsible government,' he said, waving his hand in disgust. 'Our government is incompetent.'"

Using the native voice to highlight the pitiful condition of Haiti is another way of reaffirming dynamics of power and powerlessness. This, in many ways, follows the missionary tactic of using converted natives to extol the power of the colonizer and the pitiful state of the colonized. Bhabha (1994) uses the example of Anand Messud, an Indian converted to Christianity and subsequently used by missionaries to spread the Gospel, and the superiority of the whites to other Indians. In Messud's case, an internalization and acceptance of Otherness was required for proselytizing and eventually converting the natives. In the aftermath of the Haiti earthquake, "converted" natives were quoted to highlight the illegitimacy of their society in comparison to the Chile—the civilized country to which Haitians were Others. The media's deployment of natives' voice legitimizes discourses of power and inequality, rationalizing pity as a *constructive* emotion towards those being pitied.

Racializing Pity, Reaffirming Hegemony

The Haiti quake shows how news media's responses to tragedy are heavily racialized and conform to a colonial hierarchy. While Othering can be fluid, the irreconcilability of a white–black, I–Other binary in mediated discourse coagulates the role of race in how Others are pitied. These constructions of pity, as Friedman (2000) and Zizek (2005) lament, fit into how we have neatly and yet irreconcilably segregated Others in order to keep them from our (mediated) notions of reality. "More and more, they live in another world, in a blank zone that offers itself as a screen for the projection of our fears, anxieties and secret desires" (Zizek, 2005).Friedman (2000) adds that discursive equality would damage the neatly constructed neoliberal framework through which American media functions. From a more day-to-day standpoint, Jackson (2006) argues that mediated discourse helps whites to keep a safe distance from their Others. Tragedies, which can help to construct narratives about shared humanity, can also build those of victimhood and pathologies of Otherness.

The other essays in this issue have discussed the challenges we face in cultivating civic discourses, particularly as supposedly "new" public spheres are constructed through new technologies. As Giroux (2011) argues in his piece, public values are eroding in an era where technology puts the individual over a sense of shared humanity. That often manifests itself in power relations, when too often emotional responses to disaster—such as the Haiti quake—are implicitly selfish and rooted in our desire to assert power over our Others. The question we must answer is whether racializing pity in media coverage, both old and new media, prevents an equal footing in civic discourse. As the aforementioned examples show, mediated representations

of the tragedy invoke pity—and other reactions—based on racial assumptions as well as a tacit acceptance of inequality between whites and their Others. We are often unaware of how our emotional responses to tragedy are steeped in power relations and are steeped in racial subtexts. Even an emotion such as pity, which is wrongly conflated with empathy, can seem harmless and is often constructed as commendable ("I felt so sorry for them . . ." or "I pity them . . ."), but it actually reinforces notions of power and privilege. If blacks and other darker peoples are seen as needing pity and charity, then could whites ever view them as equals in policy, discourse, and social relations? Moreover, if the plight of blacks and non-whites affected by tragedies continues to be framed as pathological, then is equality in the public sphere viewed as exceptional rather than the norm?

This question can only be answered by acknowledging the continued power and influence of American media in cultivating public opinion and shaping discourses on in-groups, out-groups, the "us" and the Others. In this light, a disaster such as the Haitian earthquake, is a vivid example of how "political and economic elites and powerful organizations model disasters as a form of amusement where tragic events are abstracted from the reality of human loss and suffering, and transformed into images that viewers passively consume (Gotham, 2007, p. 95). The victims of the Haiti quake are made into pitiful objects for consumption, a process made easier by their racial Otherness and their "distance" from American viewers.

The fact is that race continues to be a visible part of our discourses as well as emotional reactions to mass mediated images we consume. As a result, our responses themselves become racialized. The racialization of pity affirms the I–Other discourse and underscores the dynamic of power that has long privileged whiteness at the expense of Others. These dynamics, which are subtle in our daily discourse, become amplified in the wake of tragedy. The images of black (and other dark people's) helplessness during disastrous events and calamities contribute to a solidifying of I–Other binaries steeped in racial inequality. Moreover, as Entman &and Rojecki (2000) argue, the biases that many whites have conveniently met the images they consume regardless of their ideological backgrounds. Simpson (2008) adds that white privilege is so ingrained in American and other Western society that whites fail to acknowledge that their view of racial Others is inherently biased, especially when those Others are affected by disaster. As a result, she notes, white privilege in mediated discourse "denies and devalues the lived experiences of many people of color and provides no space or mechanism for those perspectives and experiences to meaningfully inform a collective understanding of our social world" (Simpson, 2008, p. 142). If we cannot see this privilege in our media coverage, we are failing to understand the inherently unequal frames by which Others are presented to us. The dominant news media paradigms, coupled with the spectacle of tragedy, make it almost impossible for viewers to look at disaster victims of another color as equals.

We must also look at these tragedies as further evidence that the public sphere theory advanced by Habermas (1989) does not take into account the histories of marginalization that have shaped subaltern publics. By discounting notions of power, privilege and race, the Habermas approach to the public sphere is inadequate since it assumes that

we all have equal access to democratic discourse (Squires, 2006). Indeed, the racial politics of pity, particularly through mass mediated representations, are enough to tell us that we are far from equality. This is why, as Myers et al. (1996) point out, it is "vital to disrupt the discourse of difference conveyed through tribal and other primitive terms and images," particularly since they contribute to the racialization of pity and the upholding of the practices that have kept Others voiceless in mediated discourses (p. 43).

This inequality in discourse will continue to manifest itself in American media through an I–Other dialectic that shuns the voice of Others, particularly blacks (Jackson, 2006). Moreover, this discourse is "an act of framing that is deeply implicated in the endurance of western racism, intolerance of people who are portrayed as different, and indifference to their struggles" (Myers et al., 1996, p. 43). Thus, to counter Rifkin's earlier claim, the Haiti quake did not cultivate global empathy but only re-affirmed a racialized pity towards black victims of calamity. Without understanding the power dynamics and racial subtexts of pity, we continue to consume tragedies and their victims, keeping ourselves physically and psychologically beyond arm's reach. As a result, Others are left to dwell in the subaltern, their identities marginalized and indistinguishable—until the next tragedy.

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