

Discourses of Whiteness in Media Uptake of Mass Shooter Manifestos in the US  
Jessica Ray and Mary-Caitlyn Valentinsson, University of Arizona  
115th Meeting of the American Anthropology Association  
November 20, 2016  
Minneapolis, MN

## INTRODUCTION

Although the Pew Research Center reports that gun violence has been on a decline since 1993, the mass shootings of recent years have captured an increasing amount of popular media attention. Following these events, news media coverage often turns towards investigating the gunmen's personal history to determine the motivations behind such acts. Discursive objects produced by the shooters are taken up by the media as evidence of their inner motivations. Using Irvine and Gal's (1995) concepts of erasure and iconization, as well the related concept of highlighting from Bucholtz and Hall (2004), we investigate the uptake formulations (Agha 2011) of mediatized discourses surrounding the discursive, textual objects--notebooks, websites, and telephone calls--associated with certain mass shooters in the United States.

By closely attending to the language used to report on these discursive objects, we show how media uptake of these texts is used to (de)legitimize the rationale behind such acts of violence. This leads to the erasure of the structures of violence in which shooters act, and upholds the iconization of images of white mass shooters as solitary and disturbed 'Lone Wolves'. Conversely, media uptake of discursive objects attributed to non-white shooters highlights their associations with cultural sources of violence that are seen as un-American. This demonstrates how language in mass media can shape images of racial aggression and violence and maintain whiteness as an unmarked, unexamined social category.

Research on representations of race in the mass media (e.g. Hodges 2007, 2015) shows how these narratives shape popular discourse about racism and violence. This paper builds on

such work, as well as work on how ideologies of whiteness are shaped in and by public discourse (Hill 1995, 1998), to ultimately speak to how discourses of violence in the media shape and are shaped by racial ideologies.

## DATA AND ANALYSIS

[#5] Here, we consider a variety of mass media examples in which different orientations to the discursive or textual products of mass shooters are demonstrated. In order to gather reasonably similar data points about a range of these sorts of events, we followed a methodology building upon Jane Hill's research on the intertextual analysis of the Mock Spanish lexical item *mañana* (Hill 2005). Using Google search<sup>1</sup>, we typed the name of the gunman plus the discursive object attributed to him, however it had been popularized in the media-- such as “manifesto”, “website”, or “notebook”. We selected the top five results that came from mainstream news organizations or blogs for this analysis. This means that conspiracy theory websites, or personal blog posts were excluded.

In looking at these news publications, we focused how the media reporting about discursive objects associated with mass shooters is used to either iconize the shooter as a ‘Lone Wolf’, or associate the shooter with some other non-white, un-American source of violence. We consider the cases of four men who committed acts of mass violence within the last five years-- Dylann Roof, James Holmes, Omar Mateen, and Chris Harper-Mercer--and how media uptake of their respective ‘manifestos’ shaped how their acts of violence were (de)legitimized.

---

<sup>1</sup> All searches were conducted in a private browsing window, which prevents site cookies from tracking your searches. Repeatedly searching for the same or similar terms over and over again could color the results that certain web-browsers show.

**Dylann Roof:**

[#6] Dylann Roof, a 22 year old white man from South Carolina is currently awaiting trial for his role in the shooting of an African-American church congregation in Charleston, South Carolina, on June 17th, 2015. Shortly after the shooting, police discovered Roof's personal website, titled *The Last Rhodesian*. This site drew widespread media attention due to the use of white supremacist and neo-Nazi symbols and language throughout its pages.

[#7] In all of the 5 surveyed mass media reportings of this shooting, this website was referred to as a "manifesto". While the strict denotation of this word is simply "a public declaration of beliefs", from a Western capitalist perspective, the strongest associations with this term might come from people's knowledge of it as part of the title of Marx and Engel's *Communist Manifesto*. Such associations frame texts named "manifestos" as products of fanaticism and radicalism-- a framing that is supported by various discursive tactics used in the media sources covered. [#8] Media coverage of Roof's website frequently highlighted the unsophisticated writing, organization, and design. Gawker.com called it "a crudely designed website"; The Daily Beast claims that the manifesto shows poor analysis of other work it references, noting that Roof mentions various slave narratives "without naming the texts or pausing to consider whether they had been coerced"; and multiple publications emphasized its long, ranting voice, as well as the ending line of the text, in which Roof apologizes for typos. [#9] The metalinguistic emphasis on the (lack of) narrative and textual sophistication is further enhanced by repeated references to Roof's lack of education/poor socioeconomic standing. Roof is referred to as having "dropped out of high school before finishing the 10th grade", and is

described as “an unemployed former landscaper”, without a “sophisticated knowledge of white supremacy.”

This language supports the iconization of Dylann Roof as the classic ‘Lone Wolf’ shooter: poorly educated, mentally deranged, and acting out of individual hate and bias. The emphasis on Roof’s association with White supremacist ideologies represents an instance of the “hunting for racists” language game (Hodges 2016), which reinforces the folk ideology of race and racism (Hill 2008) that locates racism solely within the acts of individuals and erases considerations of systemic racism. The media reporting of Roof’s website as a “manifesto” highlights this image of Roof, and erases the complex historical processes that create conditions for this kind of white radicalization at a structural level. Indeed, while his own racial hatred is discussed in close detail via the website, none of the news reports surveyed discussed Roof’s own racial identity-- despite the fact that many of the passages quoted from the website explicitly discuss his preoccupation with Whiteness, both his own and others.

### **James Holmes:**

[#10]Then 28-year-old James Holmes was convicted in 2013 for the mass shooting at an Aurora, Colorado movie theatre. Unlike Roof’s website, which was discovered in the course of police investigation after the shooting, Holmes mailed a notebook full of writings detailing his plans to his psychiatrist just hours before the shooting. The media take-up of this object was reported on in two ways: with references to a “manifesto” as well as seemingly more neutral references to a “notebook”. For this analysis, then, we conducted two separate searches

(following the methodologies described above), culling this larger list into a set of 5 articles to match the other cases<sup>2</sup>.

[#11] The overwhelming focus of these 5 articles is whether and how Holmes' notebook should be taken as evidence in support of an insanity plea. Media reports describe the notebook as a "computation book-- filled with Holmes' scrawling cursive and drawings" (Buzzfeed). The writing inside it is described as "little more than disjointed ramblings" interspersed with other passages that demonstrate "a logic, even if it seems warped" (CNN), laid out with "scrupulous detail" (NYT). The plans to commit mass murder that Holmes wrote about in the notebook are described as "chilling" and "incomprehensible" (LA Times), yet simultaneously as dealing with "philosophical questions of life, death, and human value... featuring diagrams, pro and con lists, and other observations" (Buzzfeed).

The reports of this discursive textual object construct somewhat contradictory images. On the one hand, Holmes' notebooks and the "ramblings" contained therein are meant to invoke the image of an unhinged, mentally unstable 'Lone Wolf'. On the other hand, as the prosecution in Holmes' case argued, the methodological detail in which his plans were laid out reflects the decisions of a calm, rational, and sane actor. However, both of these perspectives actively concern themselves with the inner mind of James Holmes. Just as in the case of Dylann Roof, the media uptake of these textual objects in the wake of these acts of violence reifies them as authoritative windows or insights into the minds of uniquely troubled individuals. By emphasizing the disjointed, irrational, and/or confusing construction of the discursive objects, this media uptake maps these qualities onto the shooters themselves. This process iconizes them

---

<sup>2</sup> Articles that didn't meet the criteria described above were cut; articles that appeared separately in each search were only counted once; articles that were exceptionally short or which didn't focus on the notebook were also cut, ultimately leaving us with 5 articles.

as ‘Lone Wolves’, allowing the public to avoid conversations about systemic sources of mass violence at a structural level beyond the individual.

**Omar Mateen:**

[#12] When acts of mass violence are committed by people of color, on the other hand, discourse surrounding the gunmen and the discursive objects attached to their names takes a different approach. We have demonstrated how white shooters are generally portrayed as exceptions to the norm in a way that prevents discussions of whiteness when attempting to identify the source of violence. Discourse directed at objects associated with non-white shooters, however, often *does* point to structural sources of violence, and more specifically, sources of violence that are seen as un-American and ultimately distant from Whiteness.

The next case we examine considers media discourse in the wake of the Pulse shooting in Orlando in June of 2016, in which Omar Mateen killed 49 people, and injured another 53. Media attention quickly turned towards Mateen’s 911 calls during the shooting as a source of potential explanation for the shooting. Similar to the media uptake of George Zimmerman’s 911 call the night of the Trayvon Martin shooting (Hodges 2016), the content of Mateen’s calls was recontextualized through ‘tape fetishism,’ in which the transcripts were reified as points of access to Mateen’s intentions the night of the shooting. The significance of these transcripts is evidenced by the coverage of Speaker of the House Paul Ryan’s disdain towards the fact that they were initially released in a redacted form, as shown here..

[#13] Of the five articles collected, all refer to Mateen as “the gunman” or “the shooter,” but most often by his name, highlighting its ‘foreign’ origins. Mateen’s use of Arabic was also

highlighted in a CBS news article, which you see here. [#14] Of the 5 articles, only CNN and AlJazeera commented on the fact that the FBI did not find any evidence that Mateen was acting under the direction of a foreign group. In fact, one even described Mateen as a “lone wolf”. Despite this admittance, however, the focus of these two articles, along with the other three, was directed towards Mateen’s professions of allegiance to ISIL. Similarly, only AlJazeera acknowledged Mateen’s American citizenship, although the article described him as “born in the United States to Afghan immigrants,” again highlighting his association to un-American cultures.

Although Mateen was not entirely excluded from the ‘lone wolf’ narrative, media uptake of his 911 calls does not capitalize on this iconized figure and instead works to link Mateen’s actions to wider discourses of terrorism. Diverging from the typical qualities of ‘lone wolves’ such as Roof and Holmes, who were described as emotionally unstable, Mateen was instead described as lacking in emotion completely. Whereas the the white gunmens’ manifestos were framed by news media to explain their acts of violence as being individually motivated, news media surrounding the Pulse shooting instead attributed Mateen’s actions to Islamic extremism and the religion of Islam as a whole. Not only were aspects of the transcripts highlighted in media coverage used to determine a cultural source of violence rather than an individual source of violence, but this source was seen as inherently foreign to the United States, despite Mateen’s American citizenship.

**Chris Harper-Mercer:**

[#15] The role of media discourse in framing these mass shootings becomes even more complex when considering instances of shooters who do not easily fit into the categorical binary of white versus non-white. In October of 2015, Chris Harper-Mercer, who self-identified as “mixed race,” committed a mass shooting at Umpqua Community College in Roseburg, Oregon. The attack resulted in 10 deaths, including his own suicide. Numerous articles were published online following the shooting regarding Harper-Mercer’s “manifesto.” Of the five articles yielded by our search, all referred to him as “the Oregon shooter” rather than by name. Each article included the same picture of Harper-Mercer holding a gun shown on the slide.

[#16] Media uptake of Harper-Mercer’s manifesto worked to both include and exclude the shooter from the iconized ‘Lone Wolf’ narrative associated with white shooters. An Opinion piece published on The Daily Dot explicitly posits the manifesto as a potential source of *explanation* for his acts of violence. The ‘Lone Wolf’ theme of the mentally disturbed individual is clear, as one article referred to Harper-Mercer as having emotional health issues (Telegraph), and another commented on his loner tendencies (People).

[#17] Despite this attention to Harper-Mercer’s mental state, media uptake also positions Harper-Mercer outside of the ‘Lone Wolf’ narrative in many instances. Similar to Roof and Holmes’s manifestos, media discourse offered metalinguistic criticisms of Harper-Mercer’s writing to make claims about the shooter himself. However, Harper-Mercer’s writing is described as “whining,” “gripping,” and “blaming everyone else for his problems” (NYPost), which offers a stark contrast to depictions of Holmes and Roof as being irrational, out of control, and emotionally unstable. Like Mateen, Harper-Mercer was also described as emotionless in some instances, described as “laughing” at his victims during the attack (NYPost).



[#18] Harper-Mercer was additionally excluded from the ‘Lone Wolf’ narrative as his actions were attributed to causes that go beyond an abnormal individual acting alone. Attention was placed on Harper-Mercer’s targeting of Christian students, referring to an “obsession with Satan” evidenced in the manifesto. Similarly, The Daily Dot associated Harper-Mercer’s mention of being “girlfriendless” and fear of “dying a virgin” in the manifesto with the cultural construct of toxic masculinity, in which men prioritize “violence, sex, and status.” Traditional American models of masculinity would certainly be relevant in all four cases that we have addressed in this paper, but it only appeared in the data related to Chris Harper-Mercer. This relates to the ways in which men of color are often portrayed as hyper-masculine, and therefore more violent, more aggressive, and more dangerous (hooks 2004). Highlighting Harper-Mercer’s anti-Christian sentiment and his association with toxic masculinity serves to locate the source of his violence in cultural sources, inviting discussion on these topics in a way that white shooters are not subject to in this data.

## **CONCLUSION**

These brief glances at the media uptake of the textual or discursive ‘objects’ associated with recent mass shooting events in the U.S. offers a glimpse into how the media specifically, and American culture more broadly, justify and legitimize violence. We have shown how media uptake of the ‘manifestos’ of white shooters creates ‘lone wolf’ narratives. Drawing on the stigmatization of mental illness, news media maintains the position that arbiters of mass violence are non-normative members of society, suggesting that their acts of violence stem from individual shortcomings as opposed to widespread cultural issues in the United States. Cases like Dylann Roof and James Holmes show a deep preoccupation with what the ‘manifestos’ of these

shooters reveal about the personal, inner mental state of white shooters. Simultaneously, the uptake of these texts contributes to the erasure of the possible sources of violence that extend beyond the individual. Cases like Omar Mateen and Chris Harper-Mercer show less consideration of the mental state of these gunmen, and give more attention to linking their acts of violence with larger, un-American or non-white sources such as “radical Islam.” This is in opposition to sources such as homophobia that have been historically prevalent within American culture. When potentially American sources of violence, such as toxic masculinity, are brought up in relation to these discursive objects, it only occurs when the shooter is non-white.

By investigating how the language used to describe these discursive texts produced prior to, and during, acts of mass violence differs for white shooters versus shooters who are people of color, we can see how processes of semiotic differentiation (Irvine and Gal 1995) work to solidify certain narratives about race and violence. This discussion contributes to broader anthropological conversations about structural and indirect violence (Bourdieu 1990) and racial ideologies in the mass media (see again work by Hill (1995, 1998) and Hodges (2007, 2015)). Further work on this topic must continue to attend to the role that language plays in producing and reproducing these narratives.

## REFERENCES

- Agha, A. (2011). Meet mediatization. *Language & Communication*, 31(3), 163-170.
- Bourdieu, P. 1990. *The Logic of Practice* (trans.) R. Nice. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Bucholtz, M., & Hall, K. (2004). Theorizing identity in language and sexuality research. *Language in Society*, 33(04), 469-515.
- Gal, S., & Irvine, J. T. (1995). The boundaries of languages and disciplines: How ideologies construct difference. *Social research*, 967-1001.

- Hill, J. (1995). Junk Spanish, covert racism, and the (leaky) boundary between public and private spheres. *Pragmatics*, 5(2), 197-212.
- Hill, J. H. (1998). Language, race, and white public space. *American anthropologist*, 100(3), 680-689.
- Hill, J. H. (2005). Intertextuality as source and evidence for indirect indexical meanings. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, 15(1), 113-124.
- Hill, J. H. (2009). *The everyday language of white racism*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Hodges, A., & Nilep, C. (Eds.). (2007). *Discourse, war and terrorism* (Vol. 24). John Benjamins Publishing.
- Hodges, A. (2015). Ideologies of language and race in US media discourse about the Trayvon Martin shooting. *Language in Society*, 44(03), 401-423.
- Hodges, A. (2016). Hunting for "Racists": Tape Fetishism and the Intertextual Enactment and Reproduction of the Dominant Understanding of Racism in US Society. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, 26(1), 26-40.
- hooks, b. (2004). *We real cool: Black men and masculinity*. Psychology Press.