Güçler, A. (2022). Politics of national eulogies: Obama and Dr. King's legacy. *Uludağ University Faculty of Arts and Sciences Journal of Social Sciences, 23*(42), 495-519.

DOI: 10.21550/sosbilder.991904
Research Article

POLITICS OF NATIONAL EULOGIES: OBAMA AND DR. KING'S LEGACY

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Sending Date / Gönderim Tarihi: 6 September / Eylül 2021
Acceptance Date / Kabul Tarihi: 29 November / Kasım 2021

ABSTRACT

Eulogy is a key rhetorical tool for the public to come to terms with national tragedies. While eulogies can bring the nation together during times of hardship, they can also undermine political mobilization by placing excessive emphasis on national unity. This paper will analyze this political aspect of national eulogies by providing a close reading of two pivotal political figures in American politics. These figures are the President Barack Obama and the African-American political activist Dr. Martin Luther King. The paper argues that Obama's eulogy is deeply depoliticizing as he shifts the focus from politics to theological reasoning. King's eulogies, on the other hand, are more political as he underlines the theme of individual responsibility. Yet King's discourse also loses its political salience when he taps into the theme of equalizing power of death. This analysis is important to understand the ambiguous nature of eulogies, which makes these speeches oscillate between being a conservative and transformative rhetorical tool in politics.

Key Words: *eulogy, nation, Barack Obama, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jacques Derrida*

Ulusal Anma Konuşmaları ve Politika: Obama ve Dr. King'in Mirası

ÖZET

Anma konuşmaları halkın ulusal felaketlerin üstesinden gelmelerine yardımcı olan önemli retorik araçlardır. Böyle zor zamanlarda ulusu bir araya getirebilme yetisine sahip olan bu konuşmalar, ulusal birliğe fazla vurgu yaptıkları için politik oluşumların

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önünü de tıkayabilirler. Bu çalışma ulusal anma konuşmalarının politik yönünü Amerikan siyasetindeki iki önemli şahsın anma konuşmalarını yakından inceleyerek çözümleyecektir. Bu şahıslar Başkan Barack Obama ve Afro-Amerikalı siyasi aktivist Dr. Martin Luther King'dir. Çalışma, Obama tarafından yapılan anma konuşmalarının politikayı dini temalar üzerinden bastırdığını savunur. Diğer taraftan, King'in yaptığı anma konuşmaları daha politiktir çünkü bireysel sorumluluğun altını çizer. Fakat King'in söylemi de ölümün eşitleyici gücüne vurgu yaptığı anlarda politik gücünü yitirir. Çalışma en son olarak anma konuşmalarını daha politik bir yerden okumak için yüzünü Jacques Derrida'ya çevirir. Bu analiz, politikada muhafazakâr ve dönüştürücü bir retorik araç olmak arasında gidip gelen anma konuşmalarının muğlak yapısını anlamak için önemlidir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *anma konuşması, ulus, Barack Obama, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jacques Derrida*

Introduction

On June 27, 2015, in the aftermath of the mass shootings in the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal in Charleston, President Obama gave his eulogy to commemorate and mourn for the death of Rev. Clementa Pinckney and eight other African American church members who lost their lives in this atrocity. The 21-year-old shooter, Dylann Roof, had left no doubt about the racially motivated character of his actions, which galvanized the nation and sparked a new round of debates regarding racism, the Confederate flag, and gun violence in the US. It was in this context that President's eulogy was highly important to demonstrate the way the nation was going to come to terms with these issues. The eulogy was particularly marked by that brief couple of seconds when the President sang 'Amazing Grace' and invited others in the church to join him to demonstrate the strength of America's unity as a nation.

For those people who dug deeper into Obama's speech, however, there was nothing accidental or surprising about his choice to end his speech with this hymn since he had organized the entire eulogy around

the idea of grace. He started it by reminding the audience that "the Bible calls us to hope, to persevere, and to have faith in things not seen" (White House, 2015). This opening remark set the general tone of his speech. Building on this theme of things not seen, he called the shooting "an act that he [Roof] imagined would incite fear, recrimination, violence, and suspicion; an act that he presumed would deepen divisions and trace back our nation's origin sin. Oh, but God works in mysterious ways, God has different ideas, he did not know he was being used by God" (White House, 2015). Roof had intended to deepen the divisions in the nation and spark hate. What he had not realized was the fact that God's grace was already conspiring against his intentions by marking the event as a blessing for the nation's survival in unity. He was touched by God's grace without even knowing it since this atrocity would eventually be inscribed in history as one of those moments when the nation learnt the importance of sticking together and affirming its unity instead of allowing hateful individuals to divide it.

The President's decision to frame the event as a testimony to American national unity received harsh criticism by some commentators who found it too self-defeating. In her article titled "Dear White People: Come See How Black People Bury Our Dead," for example, Stacey Patton called Obama the "Eulogizer-in-Chief" and claimed that "What Obama did last Friday was offer a safe vehicle in the performance of Blackness – as president, as a Christian, as forgiver-in-chief. Why can we celebrate him for singing but not for pointing out racism, even as White America gets outraged… Even Obama participated in portraying Blackness as a cultural performance, as opposed to honoring and continuing its history of civil disobedience, fueled by the community rage at living under the conditions of racist violence" (Patton, 2015a). Patton saw Obama's speech as repressing the anger that the harmed felt towards their perpetrator. Instead, Patton invites Obama to use eulogy to dwell in the empowering potential in the type of cracks and tensions that this event had allowed the public to witness. In other words, Obama should have

treated this tragic event as a political resource to mobilize the people against an order that is informed by systemic racism.

It is along these lines that Obama's reference in his eulogy to God's mysterious agency underlines an important paradox in his speech, which will constitute the heart of this paper. On the one hand, Obama taps into the mysterious character of God's deeds to testify to the force of a larger, cosmic power that conspires against our human intentions. In other words, he chooses to use mystery in the sense of something remaining unknown to us, but still having a determined direction and aim. On the other hand, however, by using the idea of mystery as such, he misses a more fundamental sense of the concept, which means something that remains truly undetermined and does not have a designated *telos*. This paper will take this paradox as its point of departure to understand the political implications of eulogy as a rhetorical tool in American politics, particularly in relation to the way the nation tries to mourn for its African American citizens in the aftermath of targeted killings that are motivated by racial hatred. I start the paper by studying Obama's eulogy that he delivered for the victims who lost their lives in the tragedy in Charleston. This analysis will particularly be informed by the literature on presidential eulogies in the US. The second section visits another key figure in the history of African American politics, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., whose eulogies, I claim, set a precedent for the kind of tensions that I observe in Obama's speech. I will particularly focus on King's *Eulogy for the Martyred Children*, which he delivered for four African American girls who lost their lives in a church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama. The last section of the paper briefly develops an alternative politics of mourning and eulogy by tapping into Jacques Derrida's reflections on the topic.

Keeping The Nation Intact

In order to understand the political significance of eulogies, we need to remember Aristotle's tripartite typology in understanding

rhetoric (i.e. deliberative, judicial, and epideictic) (Garver, 2009). In his translation of Aristotle's canonical work titled *Rhetoric*, George A. Kennedy defines epideictic rhetoric, which also include eulogy, as "speeches that do not call for any immediate action by the audience but that characteristically praise or blame some person or thing, often on a ceremonial occasion such as a public funeral or holiday" (Kennedy, 1991:7). In such ceremonial speeches, the audience acts as a spectator, which is different from deliberative or forensic (or judicial) speeches where the audience plays an active role. Eulogies fall under the category of epideictic (or ceremonial) speeches since it is about consoling an audience that suffers from the pain of losing someone important in their lives. Eulogies can be addressed to family members or close friends. Yet if the deceased is a renowned or a symbolic figure, as in the case of fallen soldiers, the addressee of eulogies can be as large as the entire nation. A good example for the latter would be Pericles' Funeral Oration, which commemorates the soldiers who lost their lives during the Peloponnesian War.

Contra to deliberative and judicial rhetoric, which invite contestation and disagreement, the epideictic form "has been seen as a rhetoric of identification and conformity whose function is to confirm and promote adherence to the commonly held values of a community with the goal of sustaining that community" (Sheard, 1996: 766). Yet others read epideictic rhetoric more as a subversive form that can open "a path to alternatives" (Atkins, 1994: 632). This makes epideictic rhetoric "at once revolutionary and conservative" (Atkins, 1994: 629). In this article I will study eulogies in the context of this ambiguity that is attributed to epideictic rhetoric. On the one hand, I will shed light on the more conservative aspect of eulogy as a public speech that reaffirms the commonly held national values at the expense of political agonism. On the other hand, I will also highlight the politically subversive aspects of this epideictic form by focusing on Dr. King's eulogies. I will ultimately

conclude that both Obama and Dr. King privileges the conservative aspect of eulogy over its transformative potential.

Historically, eulogy has been a key outlet for Americans to mourn for those who have lost their lives in national tragedies. These events, of course, can be as diverse as natural disasters such as earthquakes and man-made atrocities such as mass shootings. Regardless of their nature, however, national eulogies have the general characteristic of trying to console the nation and reassure the American public that it can survive such tragedies without losing its unity. Not surprisingly, the president is the main political actor who conventionally takes on this role of addressing the nation in the aftermath of a national tragedy and eulogizing the ones that have lost their lives. As Michael Nelson puts it, during times of emergency and tragedy, everyone turns their eyes to the president as "the chief of state" who can utter "unifying words of resolve and reassurance" to make sure that "the crisis will be met" (Nelson, 2010). That is why scholars such as Brian Amsden designate national eulogies as social and political glues that "help the nation mourn" and ultimately manage to generate "shared understanding, and rearticulate common values" (Amsden, 2014). Michael Dennis and Adrianne Kunkel also make a similar point when they claim that all other aspects of national eulogies that are given by American presidents come after "the main goal and responsibility of consoling audience and self" (Dennis & Kunkel, 2004). In short, the literature shows us that even though presidential eulogies are about loss, pain, and injustice, their aim turns out to be to solace the entire nation and remind it of its unity.

Building on this premise, Campbell and Jamieson (2008) deduce two specific characteristics about presidential national eulogies and juxtapose them to those eulogies that are delivered for individuals. The first key characteristic pertains to the fact that in national eulogies the president focuses not only on the event and the victim, but also on those who survive the event. This is different from an individual eulogy where

the focus tends to be on the event that took place and the people who have lost their lives because of such events. Put in temporal terms, they are focused not only on the past, but more importantly on the future of the nation, which drives them to ask questions pertaining to the survival of the nation as one single, wholesome organism. This leads us to the second point that is underlined by these authors. In individual eulogies, the speaker mostly narrates the event that has happened without trying to understand why such a tragedy took place. This happens because eulogies are deemed as inappropriate places to dig into the reasons behind someone's death. The pain remains too fresh to take such an investigative stance on the matter. In national eulogies, in contrast, the president deems it his responsibility to pose some fundamental questions about why such tragedy took place and what can be done about it: "As the nation turns to the chief executive for leadership, it asks two questions: what does this catastrophe mean, and how is the country to act to ensure that it does not recur?" (Campbell and Jamieson, 2008: 84). Eulogies, in other words, provide an opportunity for the nation to think deeper about its core problems and address them as urgently as possible so that similar atrocities, particularly hate crimes, do not happen again.

The other key element that is underlined by the literature regarding the national eulogies has to do with the overtly religious undertone of these public speeches. National eulogies, Campbell and Jamieson note, frequently borrow from theology because the religious discourse enables the community to believe that religious references are inclined to convince the public that there is a superior force that works behind the scene to bring the nation back on its feet. As Campbell and Jamieson put it, "when presidents invoke God… it is to suggest that they recognize a higher power and seek to place the nation under its protection" (Campbell and Jamieson, 2008: 83). The sense of an omnipotent being hovering over the finite realm of human beings and its invisible upper hand managing the order of things, including the destiny of political community, enables the people to cope with the tragedy

better. It also gives the presidential eulogies a certain sense of authority that the president would otherwise not be able to garner on his own. It is important to note that such references to an interventionist, sovereign God has always been an important aspect of American political thought and leadership as exemplified by James Madison's famous first inaugural address: "… we have all been encouraged to feel in the guardianship and guidance of that Almighty Being whose power regulates the destiny of nations" (Richardson, 1910: 453).

President Obama's eulogy in Charleston in that regard is a good example of these features that I have associated with national eulogies thus far. Even though Obama is addressing a specific African-American church community, which grieves the loss of its beloved members due to a criminal act that is motivated by racial hatred, a closer analysis of the text reveals that the addressee of the speech is much larger and comprehensive than this specific group. Obama addresses not only that specific church community, but the African American community at large who have historically suffered and still suffers from similar forms of racially-motivated violence and injustice that is exemplified by the specific event in Charleston. As he puts it: "Over the course of centuries, black churches served as 'hush harbors' where slaves could worship in safety… bunkers for the foot soldiers of the Civil Rights Movement. They have been, and continue to be, community centers where we organize for jobs and justice… When there were laws banning all-black church gatherings, services happened here anyway, in defiance of unjust laws" (White House, 2015). Also, Obama's eulogy addresses the non-African American population in the nation: "A sacred place, this church. Not just for blacks, not just for Christians, but for every American who cares about the steady expansion of human rights and human dignity in this country; a foundation stone for liberty and justice for all" (White House, 2015). His eulogy includes them as members of a political community who should be bearing witness to this national tragedy.

An even more important point pertains to the fact that Obama not only speaks to the nation, but also speaks on their behalf in the sense of calling them to action and making claims for them that they might agree or disagree. As highlighted by Jamieson and Campbell before, presidential eulogies have a representative function since they focus both on the past and the future of a political community. This is pretty much what Obama does when he draws the attention of his audience to see this event as a symptom of the larger problems that afflict the American nation as he talks about "our children" who "languish in poverty, or attend dilapidated schools, or grow without prospects for a job or for a career" (White House, 2015). He invites the entire community to acknowledge "those lost young men, tens and tens of thousands caught up in the criminal justice system" and calls all American to come to terms with the fact that "racial bias can infect us even when we don't realize it" (White House, 2015). He holds them accountable for thinking more thoroughly about the persistent patterns of racial injustice in the nation and act on these matters. I consider this aspect of Obama's eulogy as deeply political as it foregrounds "this tragedy," in his own words, "to ask some tough questions" (White House, 2015) that grapple with the very fundamental problems in American society and solicit the people to act otherwise. In that regard, the fact that Obama's eulogy addresses the entire nation and holds each member accountable to change the dominant patterns of behavior in American society constitutes the powerful and politicizing aspect of his eulogy. It demonstrates how he uses a specific tragic event to shed light on other problems that are a part of the nation.

There is, however, also the religious element in his eulogy, which, I claim, underlines this aspect of his speech and places excessive emphasis on forgiveness and national unity and ultimately undermines the empowering role that political conflict and grievances can play in a eulogy. As I mentioned in the beginning of this paper, I relate this to his use of the concept of grace. I would now like to show why I find his use of grace problematic and how my critique is related to eulogies as

rhetorical and political tools. As established earlier, a central paradox constitutes Obama's reflections on God's grace, which represents, for Obama, the mysterious machinations of an omnipotent force that shapes our world beyond the finite power of human intentionality. Further, it means that even an event as atrocious and tragic as the one that happened in Charleston ultimately should ultimately be interpreted as a blessing that reminds us of God's bountiful grace, which harbingers the promise of a much brighter future to come:

> "*He [Roof] didn't know he was being used by God. Blinded by hatred, the alleged killer could not see the grace surrounding Reverend Pinckney… the light of love that shone as they opened the church doors and invited a stranger to join in their prayer circle. The alleged killer could have never anticipated the way the families of the fallen would respond when they saw him in court – in the midst of unspeakable grief, with words of forgiveness. He couldn't imagine that*." (White House, 2015)

Let's unpack this passage and try to understand the kind of discursive performativity that goes into it. At first, Obama refers to that morning before the tragedy took place and talks about the unconditional welcome that the church members had shown to Roof by accepting him as a part of the congregation. This highlights the church members' commitment to universal hospitality. He then relates such hospitality to the events that happened after the tragedy by referring to the forgiving words that the family members uttered to Roof in court and the kind of shock that such gracious behavior must have produced in the criminal's mental and emotional world. By tying these two gestures of grace together (accepting someone to the church to worship together and forgiving a criminal who is responsible for the death of many people), however, Obama not only construes his understanding of grace, but also his thoughts about disgraceful and unworthy behavior, which can have certain disciplinary effects on those who are left with the duty to forgive a criminal who have hurt them very deeply and who symbolizes a larger injustice in society such as racial hatred. For example, the idea of hatred

plays exclusively a negative role in Obama's speech. He depicts this emotion as something that blinds us from seeing reality. He does not consider the fact that hatred can also be encapsulated as a powerful emotion that opens our eyes to realities that we are otherwise accustomed to repress or as a powerful defense mechanism that protects us against those who are resolute to harm us. Therefore, Obama loses a key distinction between the hatred of the perpetrator and the hatred of the harmed because his unconditional faith in God's grace does not allow him to consider such nuances.

Again, this takes us back to the paradoxical function of the idea of mystery plays in his eulogy. As I noted earlier, presidential eulogies have historically used religious tropes because this rhetorical strategy has the function of reassuring the public and giving them the feeling that there is a higher power in charge of things that are beyond human comprehension. This is what he means by God's mystery. Roof was used by God's mysterious powers even though he did not know what was happening to him. This ties nicely to Obama's earlier reflections on grace. Those family members who immediately chose the option of forgiving Roof did so because they had unconditional confidence in God's grace and for that reason they could see in this extremely personal tragedy the bountiful nature of God's grace and the power of forgiveness.

Even though this rendition of what took place in Charleston might at first look quite empowering, it is also easy to see how this determinate meaning that Obama ascribes to the event and its aftermath can be quite debilitating for the African American population who have been a victim of similar atrocities for centuries. For example, Obama's eulogy risks generating a sense of guilt for those who might feel strong resentment and even hate towards the perpetrator. It also places a disproportionate weight on the shoulders of the harmed as it ends up making them the spectacle of judgment, which takes the attention away from its due locus. To quote Obama again, "the alleged killer could not imagine how the city

of Charleston… would respond not merely with revulsion at his evil act, but with big-hearted generosity and, more importantly, with a thoughtful introspection and self-examination that we so rarely see in public life" (White House, 2015). It is ironic that the tragedy happens in consequence of an individual who is unquestionably motivated by racial hatred and Obama's speech and most of the mainstream media outlets focus on the African American population's duty to be self-reflective (or introspective). We had also witnessed a similar misplacement of responsibility and public gaze in the case of the riots in Baltimore in 2015. The media turned a mother chastising his son for joining the riots into a spectacle of both positive and negative judgment. By doing that the media not only redirected the attention of the debates from the public and political to the private sphere and framed the issue as a matter of violence/non-violence instead of delving deeper into the questions that pertain to the social, economic, and political reasons behind the Baltimore riots (Patton, 2015b). It is, of course, vocalized in the form of praise, which congratulates the families of the victims for remaining calm and not reciprocating the type of hatred that was demonstrated by Roof. But the praise also works as a burden and a disciplining mechanism because it obliges them to show (unconditional) love towards the very person who is responsible for their grief.

In the remaining parts of the paper I will try to show that Dr. Martin Luther King's eulogies set a precedent for Obama since the former was caught up in a similar paradox of using eulogies both as a means of political mobilization for African Americans while also having excessive faith in the connection between unmerited suffering and the promise of liberal progress. I will do this by looking at some of King's eulogies. I will end the paper by offering a more politicized sense of eulogy through Derrida's reflections on the matter. I will claim that the idea of mystery in eulogies can be utilized in a more political manner if it is used in the sense of something remaining truly undetermined and open to new possibilities.

King and The Burden of Unmerited Suffering

As reminded by President Obama himself in his eulogy in Charleston, African American churches have historically been a target of racial hatred and violence. September 15, 1963 was another episode of these tragic set of events when a bomb was detonated at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, which results in the death of four African American girls and left many injured. Right after this atrocity, on September 18th, Dr. King delivered his Eulogy during the funeral of three of these girls, which he called the "Eulogy for the Martyred Children" (King, 1986). This tragedy left its mark in history by being highly important in demonstrating the depth of racial hatred towards the African American population in the US. The utterly tragic character of the event gave the Civil Rights Movement a new momentum to garner more supporters against claims of white supremacy. However, it also coincides with the period of King's life where he was becoming more disillusioned with his own political ideology since it was not garnering the type of mobilization that he was interested in achieving. His trust for the conscience of white population and his faith in the promise of liberal progress had started to be too self-defeating. It is in view of these issues that I would like to show here that Dr. King's eulogy is also caught up in a similar paradox that I have observed in Obama's case. We might even claim that King's eulogy set a precedent for Obama and the kind of issues that I have detected in the latter.

Like Obama, King's eulogy oscillates between calling the entire nation to question the very fundamentals of society and downplaying the productive role that conflict and hatred can play in politics. On the one hand, his eulogy is deeply politicizing. He reminds his audience that even though the deceased might have suffered a physical death, their memory will remain alive and well in our minds. The tragedy will keep holding the American public responsible to remind each member of the society to tackle the issues that revolved around race. The victims, in other

words, will survive the event in our imaginary because their loss will work as a moral signpost to understand who to hold responsible for racial inequalities and violence in the US. As King puts it:

> "*These children died nobly. They are the martyred heroines of a holy crusade for freedom and human dignity… They have something to say to a federal government that has compromised with the undemocratic practices of southern Dixiecrats and the blatant hypocrisy of right-wing northern Republicans… They have something to say to every Negro who has passively accepted the evil system of segregation… They say to us that we must be concerned not merely about who murdered them, but about the system, the way of life, the philosophy which produced the murderers.*" (King, 1986: 221)

In short, similar to Obama, King uses eulogy as a means to address the entire nation and remind them of their responsibilities. His speech has the representative quality of making claims on behalf of its addressees, which include both the white and black population in the US. It particularly invites the white population to question their convictions so that such atrocities do not happen again. This is what I designate as the more politicizing aspect of King's eulogy, which does not eschew from targeting the responsible actors and pointing to systemic injustices that are prevalent in society in the name of enacting a fundamental change in society and inviting a radically different future to come. Used in this manner, eulogy becomes a politically empowering vehicle that can mobilize the masses and impart a universal message that is able to go beyond the immediacy of its context.

My problem with King's eulogy starts when his discourse attains a more religious character, which I think works against his efforts to produce political mobilization. King develops an argument that resembles Obama's reference to God's grace and its power to produce good where it is least expected. However, he pursues this argument not through the concept of grace, but through the idea of unmerited suffering. As he puts it, "God still has a way of wringing good out of evil. And

history has proven over and over again that unmerited suffering is redemptive… We must not despair. We must not become bitter" (King, 1986: 222). Whereas Obama places the emphasis on the interventionist character of God and its ability to remain mysterious to the finite character of human comprehension, King seeks solace in the equalizing character of death before God's presence: "I hope you can find a little consolation from the universality of this experience. Death comes to every individual. There is an amazing democracy about death… Death is the irreducible common denominator of all men… let this daring faith, this great invincible surmise, be your sustaining power during these trying days" (King, 1986: 223).

This specific interpretation of death, however, significantly diminishes its political implications. The consoling tone of King's eulogy risks becoming complicit in repressing the pressing political tensions because it does not see how such anger, and even hatred, can be highly promising in mobilizing the harmed and for holding a hegemonic society responsible for its actions and privileges. A strong emphasis on equality before God in this manner is not strong enough to form a discourse that could exclude those who are not (yet) worthy of equal respect because it tends to presume the conditions of tolerance, respect, and civic agreement where there is none. Also, it puts the emphasis on the wrong places. King tells the family members who lost their lives that "life is hard, at times as hard as crucible steel. It has its bleak and difficult moments… But if one will hold on, he will discover that God walks with him… and that God is able to lift you from the fatigue of despair to the buoyancy of hope and transform dark and desolate valleys into sunlit paths of inner peace" (King, 1986: 222). My point is not to question the faith of those who attended the church. Rather, the point is to show the self-defeating character of putting exclusive emphasis on the hopeful, and graceful, character of this event, which does not allow King to see that his faith in the idea of a progressive history is a quite contingent one. By presuming a natural tie between the experience of unmerited suffering and the

promise of liberal progress, he misses the fact that liberalism's emphasis on individualism, private rights and property have also proven to perpetuate such suffering. That is why death should be interpreted not only as an equalizing force, but also as a differentiating force, particularly in the case of unmerited suffering through criminal actions that can be used politically to mobilize the affected communities and unearth the kind of feelings and resources that the dominant social order teaches us to repress. This is what I see as being promised, but ultimately compromised in King's eulogy. As I will now show, King became more acutely aware of the contingent character of this tie between unmerited suffering and the presumption of liberal progress when he delivered a similar eulogy two years later.

On March 9, 1965, Reverend James Reeb, who was a white religious leader who openly supported the Civil Rights Movement and supported King in pushing for voting rights in Selma, Alabama, was brutally killed in front of a whites-only restaurant. He lost his life two days after the attack. On March 15, King delivered a eulogy for Reeb. Like his earlier eulogy, King reminds the audience that even though Reeb might be dead in person, his legacy will not experience a social death. He also points to the more systemic character of problems that revolve around the question of race in the US and tries to see this event as a manifest symptom of these larger issues: "Reverend James Reeb has something to say to all of us in his death… When we move from the who to the what, the blame is wide and the responsibility grows" (King, 1965). King then designates "every minister of the gospel who has remained silent," "the irresponsibility of every politician who has moved down the path of demagoguery," "brutality of every sheriff and law enforcement" and many other actors including the "federal government" (King, 1965) itself as responsible for the murder of this activist. In short, King uses eulogy to question the very fundamentals of an unjust society and invites his audience, both white and black, to question "the system, the way of life, the philosophy which produced the murder" (King, 1965).

However, right after this political gesture, which I find quite productive in mobilizing the public in the direction of fighting against racially-motivated violence, his eulogy attains a religious tone, which shows strong resemblance to Obama's reference to God's grace: "God still has a way of bringing good out of evil. History has proven over and over that unmerited suffering is redemptive… Indeed, this tragic event may cause the white South to come to terms with its conscience… Somehow we must still believe that the most misguided among them will learn to respect the dignity and worth of all human responsibilities" (King, 1965). Again, we are observing a faith in the connection between unmerited suffering and liberal progress, which speaks to the conscience of the wrong-doer. But it is also important to underline a slight change in King's voice since he seems significantly less sure about the fate of such progress as he starts to use phrases such as 'may cause' and 'somehow we must believe.' It is obvious that he still has commitment to it, but it proves to be much more contingent than before in his discourse. He tells the audience that "this is the second time within the last two weeks I've had to stand in this state, in the black belt of Alabama, to eulogize individuals who have been brutally murdered" (King, 1965). The eulogy gives some signs that during two years, from 1963 to 1965, his faith in the power of unmerited suffering and its blessings has been shaken.

This shift in King's discourse can be observed beyond the immediate context of his eulogies. Starting by early 1960s, King's commitment to American exceptionalism and the liberal fiction was criticized by many actors within the African American population such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Malcolm X, and Black Panthers. His critics wanted to see the US not as the harbinger of a lost liberal promise, but as an empire with an unending thirst for oppression and exploitation. African American population was a colonized subject within this empire that had to be countered by a discourse of liberation and communal control instead of integration. These criticisms underline the main paradox that I am trying to draw our

attention to. As George Schulman puts it, "when legitimacy requires piety for a founding legacy, they must redeem its promise to oppose its exclusionary practice; when legitimacy requires speaking to and for everyone in a nation, they must discount the depth of division to redeem it; when legitimacy derives from the moral authority of a redemptive role, actors must disown in themselves the partiality and power that signify corruption in the social body they would purify" (Schulman, 2008: 119). Towards the middle of 1960s, King started to become more aware of the contingency of the connection that he was making between unmerited suffering and the promise of liberal progress. Richard Lischer articulates King's frustration in these following words: "King's rage was second to none, neither Stokely Carmichael's nor Malcolm X's, but his commitment to Christianity offered him no outlet in the rhetoric of violence" (Lischer, 1995: 108). Over the course of years King saw himself marginalized because he was neither fully embraced by the white America nor by the radical critics of white supremacy.

I am drawing attention to this crisis that King had to go through towards the mid-1960s to make two key points in relation to my analysis of his eulogies. First, it is possible to see the kind of paradox that I am locating in his eulogies as an exemplary manifestation of a tension that is central to the entirety of his political thought. That is why it is quite productive to read King's eulogies in consideration of the general trajectory of his political journey and the kind of impasses that he hit along the way. Second, when we start reading King's eulogies from this historical viewpoint, it becomes possible to detect some of the subtle changes that took place in them that might otherwise go unrecognized. This is what I tried to do in my comparison of the two eulogies that King delivered in 1963 and 1965. During the time span of these two years, King has become more hesitant in strongly affirming the promise of an ever-progressing liberalism that educates itself through the pains of unmerited suffering. However, his overall discourse remains bound by this paradox because he is not ready to let go off the type of connection

that he presumes between such suffering and liberal progress. That is why, King's eulogies ultimately remain stuck in a similar tension that I have observed in Obama's decision to use God's grace as a point of reference, which unfruitfully oscillates between calling people to question the fundamentals of American society, including its liberal premises, and seeing such suffering as the automatic sign of a much brighter future to come. The last section of this paper will briefly draw on Jacques Derrida's thought to give us a glimpse of a different politics of mourning and eulogizing, which I will juxtapose to the discursive strategies I have observed in Obama and King.

Derrida and The Work of Mourning

As I shown above, the core problem with both Obama's and King's eulogies is their urgency to give a determinate meaning to the legacy of the mourned. Obama wants to reduce the event to the manifestation of God's grace and King interprets such tragedies as the redemptive force of unmerited suffering. These religiously motivated frameworks rely on a distinct sense of mystery, which means that there is a determinate destiny awaiting the American people that is empowered by the promise of liberal progress. All these atrocities are meant to work as a ladder, either in the form of bountiful grade or redemptive suffering, towards the direction of getting one step closer to this ultimate *telos*. I have tried to show that this reasoning can be politically dangerous and even violent since it takes the attention from away the culprit and channels it towards the sufferer.

Concluding Remarks

I would like to end the paper by offering a more political interpretation of public eulogies. As discussed in the earlier parts of this paper, one of the most politicizing aspect of a public eulogy is its capacity to speak not only about the past (the tragic event) or the present (the intense suffering), but also of the future (new beginnings). When national

eulogies take the representative form of making claims on behalf of different actors that constitute the nation, they posit the mourned as a haunting presence that will keep coming back in the future and keep calling us to political action. Obama and King are both partially able to accomplish this aspect of mourning, but they short-circuit it by ultimately relying on a liberal telos that sees moments of divisions, anger, and conflict as something to be domesticated as quickly as possible instead of treating them as productive phenomena that teaches the public to question its fundamental values.

When they use this rhetorical form to call the nation to action in the name of challenging systemic racial violence and injustice, their eulogies become politically engaging. However, as shown in this article, both of these political figures are not very affirmative towards those moments of ambiguity when the identity of the mourned remains open to political interpretation. Given that they are determined to give their speeches a certain *telos*, which is national unity, they choose to repress such indeterminacy and reduce the identity of the mourned either to God's bountiful grace or the merits of unmerited suffering. This goes back to the conservative aspect of epideictic rhetoric that was highlighted in the earlier sections of this article.[1] However, it is important to

[1] Jacques Derrida's work on the concept of mourning can be an interesting point of departure to understand these issues pertaining to teleological reasoning. Derrida does not write about eulogies per se. But his reflections on mourning sheds light on politics of eulogizing. For Derrida, while the act of mourning is valuable in terms of its capacity to commemorate the loss of someone, he also sees a potential danger in any act of mourning. That is, the mourner can morph the memory of the mourned in an image that is comfortable for the former and hence does not respect the singularity of the latter. As Derrida puts it, in works of mourning the mourned risks surviving his death as an "image, idol, or ideal" (Derrida, 1989: 6). That is why the work of mourning should remain open to heterogeneous interruptions so that I do not "interiorize it [the mourned] totally and it is no longer other" (Derrida, 1985: 58). As Penelope Deutscher puts it, "of course, fidelity to the other implies that one must mourn the loss of the other. Failing to mourn suggests infidelity to the other. But perhaps the failed mourning of incorporation

remember that eulogies cannot be reduced to this conservative function because this would do injustice to the ambiguous character of eulogies as an epideictic form. As shown in the article, eulogies do have a transformative function in politics. This transformative aspect of eulogies, however, becomes almost completely eclipsed in Obama's commemoration of Rev. Clementa Pinckney. In Dr. King's case, his eulogies are more open to such political transformation. Yet his insistence to rely on theological tropes ultimately undermines this political aspect of his eulogies as he emphasizes our common vulnerability in the eyes of God at the expense of political agonism.

Information Note

The article has been prepared in accordance with research and publication ethics. This study does not require ethics committee approval.

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is a greater fidelity to the other? Successful mourning assimilates or digests the other. But in failed mourning, I cannot assimilate the other" (Deutscher, 1998: 166). Hence, Derrida thinks that such acts of incorporation and domestication are inevitable. But he also wants to remain aware of the kind of violence that we commit towards to the singular legacy of the mourned when we perform such domestications. That is why Derrida argues that mourning is, and should be, an open-ended process that keeps bringing back the memory of the mourned anew and sometimes in highly unanticipated ways. In other words, the work of mourning has the aporetic character of only being successful when it fails to become complete. The mourned, Derrida writes, "continues to lodge there like something other and to ventrilocate through the 'living'… the dead person continues to inhabit me, but as a stranger" (Derrida, 1985: 58). There is an ethical duty to respect the singularity and hence the otherness of the mourned because otherwise the person becomes too much of our own memory and imagination, and hence loses their singularity. The mourner should have an affirmative relationship with the interruptive moments in our processes of mourning.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Eulogy has been a key rhetorical outlet for Americans to mourn for those who have lost their lives in national tragedies. Not surprisingly, the president is the main political actor who conventionally takes on this role of addressing the nation in the aftermath of a national tragedy. Even though presidential eulogies are about loss, pain, and injustice, they try to solace the entire nation and remind it of its unity. In national eulogies, the president focuses not only on the event and the victim, but also on those who survive the event, which is different from an individual eulogy where the focus tends to be on the event that took place and the people who have lost their lives because of such events. Also, in national eulogies the president deems it his responsibility to pose some fundamental questions about why such tragedy took place and what can be done about it. Another key element is the overtly religious undertone of these public speeches. The sense of an omnipotent being hovering over the finite realm of human beings and its invisible upper hand managing the order of things, including the destiny of political community, enables the people to cope with the tragedy better.

It is in view of these distinct qualities pertaining to national eulogies that this paper will study the relationship between politics and this rhetorical form. The paper will show that while eulogies can bring the nation together during times of hardship, they can also undermine political mobilization by placing excessive emphasis on national unity. It will do this by providing a close reading of two pivotal political figures in American politics. These figures are the American President Barack Obama and the African-American political activist Dr. Martin Luther King. The paper argues that Obama's eulogy is deeply depoliticizing as he shifts the focus from politics to theological reasoning. Obama does this by tying two senses of theological grace together (accepting someone to the church to worship together and forgiving a criminal who is responsible for the death of many people). He, therefore, invites the nation to forgive the criminal to hold the national unity intact. This depoliticizes the atrocity being committed and burdens the impacted population disproportionately without addressing the core injustices in society such as racial hatred.

King's eulogies, on the other hand, are more political as he underlines the theme of individual responsibility. These speeches invite the white population to question their convictions so that such atrocities do not happen again. This is what I designate as the more politicizing aspect of King's eulogy, which does not eschew from targeting the responsible actors and pointing to systemic injustices that are prevalent in society to enact a fundamental change in society. My problem with King's eulogy starts when his discourse attains a more religious character, which I think works against his efforts to produce political mobilization. King develops an argument that

resembles Obama's reference to God's grace and its power to produce good where it is least expected. However, he pursues this argument not through the concept of grace, but through the idea of unmerited suffering. Whereas Obama places the emphasis on the interventionist character of God and its ability to remain mysterious to the finite character of human comprehension, King seeks solace in the equalizing character of death before God's presence. This specific interpretation of death significantly diminishes the political implications of his eulogies. Consequently, the consoling tone of King's eulogy risks becoming complicit in repressing the pressing political tensions. This analysis is important to understand the ambiguous nature of eulogies, which makes these speeches oscillate between being a conservative and transformative rhetorical tool in politics.