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The Cultural Defensibility of Heteromasculine Citizenship in the Virginia Tech Massacre and the Don Imus Affair

amy l. **brandzel** and jigna **desai**

> You had everything you wanted. Your Mercedes wasn't enough, you brats. Your golden necklaces weren't enough, you snobs. Your trust fund wasn't enough. Your vodka and cognac weren't enough. All your debaucheries weren't enough. Those weren't enough to fulfill your hedonistic needs. You had everything.
>
> Seung-hui Cho

"TODAY, WE ARE ALL HOKIES"[1]

PERHAPS THE SHOCK JOCK, Don Imus, did not shock many when his white male appeal seemed to digress too neatly into the domain of blatant racist speech. The sexual/racial/gender-loaded phrases by which he characterized the Rutgers University women's basketball team saturated the media, as commentators repeatedly asked along the way whether it was or was not acceptable for him to say what they said over and over. The phrase, not needed here, was hotly defended by numerous Imus supporters, especially through the deployment of the color-blindness rhetorical maneuver of equivalency. In the process, the violence of Imus's speech was removed from the field of white masculinity and quickly displaced onto African American communities and rap music: if African American rap artists can say it, why can't Don Imus?[2] But, the Don Imus affair quickly receded into the back pages as another event unfolded: the "Virginia Tech massacre," as

it soon became called.[3] The defense here was more subtle as Asian/American groups, and Korean/Americans in particular, were held (in/directly) accountable for the redeployment of another age, old dichotomy: the unassimilated Asian and the American citizen.

While it might appear to be an odd pairing, we want to use the Don Imus affair as a lens through which to examine the privileges of normative citizenship and the "cultural defenses" that circulate in regards to violence in the United States. Put differently, we want to ask, how does the juxtaposition of Don Imus and Seung-hui Cho[4] allow us to see the ways in which certain citizen-subjects are afforded and sanctioned the "right" to violence?[5] How might we use this opportunity to interrogate the reoccurring appeal of white wounded masculinity as a "cultural defense" for violence, a violence borne from unobtainable heteronormative ideals? While the connection was rarely made obvious, what made Seung-hui Cho's actions palatable were the ways in which the media worked to squeeze him into the wounded-masculinity narrative: he fit the "type" for young male school shooters. He was a loner, a nerd, and a young male ostracized from the community due to his inability to access male privilege, social capital, confidence, and, most importantly, women. In many ways, this might merely be another way to describe the historically produced stereotype of Asian American masculinity, yet increasingly this "type" is also becoming the description of white middle-class suburban boys who are unable to utilize the properties of white heteronormative masculinity and who are increasingly becoming framed as the most wounded victims within and of the nation. But as much as Cho could be made to fit within this typecasting, he refused such analysis. Through his series of videos, polemics, and photos, Cho highlighted the ways in which his isolation was directly related to normative white citizenship, the alienation of Asian Americans, and disenfranchised racialized "queer" masculinities. Therefore, we suggest that perhaps the media, and white America in general, worked so hard to fit Cho within the wounded-masculinity type in order to avoid the other hermeneutical option: the racially oppressed retaliating for their isolation from the privileges of normative citizenship.

Don Imus: In Defense of the Good Ole Boys

White heteromasculinity is a pervasive discourse that depends upon the presumption that it is and always will be "on the defense." Moreover, as a discourse, it is not directly tied to particular types of bodies—rather, anyone can participate and further white heteromasculinity by ventriloquising the narrative of the loss of privilege of masculinity and/or whiteness at the hands of feminists, progressives, academics, and racially aware others (as discussed below). Too often, whiteness is only seen as "defended" when it invokes the terms and conditions of white supremacy. In this way, more often than not, white heteromasculinity as evoked by folks like Don Imus is interpreted as the kindler, gentler, more thoughtful "analysis" as compared to the more virulent articulations by media personalities like Bill O'Reilly or Rush Limbaugh. Working against such a distinction, our agenda here is to emphasize the ubiquity of the defense of white heteromasculinity; while the tone might be slightly different, the content and the repercussions remain the same.

It is in defense of "disenfranchised" white suburban boys, especially as they become men, that Imus and the myriad of other white male talk-show hosts speak. More often than not, articles and news reports on the Imus incident pointed toward its regularity. It was, in other words, merely one more incident amongst many whereby a large number of the American populace tunes in to hear the sexist rantings and xenophobic remarks made by white middle-class men. Rather than demonstrate concern for the trend in which tropes about race, gender, nation, and sex are consumed readily and easily within wartime American culture, however, these articles simply suggested that the focus on Imus was unfair and unwarranted, and at the very least "hypocritical," because his comments were simply "business as usual." As Eric Alterman of *The Nation* suggested, "Most right-wing radio and much of cable resembles a sonic cesspool of anti-black, anti-gay and anti-almost anything but white Christian male rhetoric."[6] But as soon as Alterman notices the ubiquity of white male angst, he, along with numerous others, turns to locate the origin of racist misogyny within African American culture, arguing that "white radio shock jocks are granted the same pass when it comes to transgressing the boundaries of good taste and verbal violence that has been accorded to gangsta rappers."[7]

It is only within the logics of color-blindness and its insidious appeal to equivalency that one can consider defenses of white masculinity within the same frame as African American youth culture. Within the logics of color-blindness, whiteness is transformed from a normative and historically privileged racial identity in American politics into one color among many on the color wheel of multicultural America. Placed within this schema, whiteness does not retain any particular historical residue of responsibility, yet the predictability of its defense reveals otherwise. In reviewing the news reports and media analyses on the Imus controversy, none of them spent any significant amount of time or energy considering the ways in which Imus himself might be representing, speaking for, or protecting the normative interests of white Americans. Instead, he is figured as a *victim* of rap music, a victim of "their culture." In *Time* magazine, James Poniewozik claims that Imus asks "a pretty good question" when he suggests that, "This phrase that I use, it originated in the black community. That didn't give me a right to use it, but that's where it originated. Who calls who that and why? We need to know that. I need to know that."[8] In locating the sexual objectification of black women on the door step of "their culture," Imus effectively diverts attention from the ways in which his epistemic violence refers to and relies on the history of white male sexual exploitation and devaluation of African American women since slavery. In other words, the exclamations of "they did it first" can only occur with the erasure of the white male supremacy that allowed the ownership and objectification of African American women in the first place. In seeking an "origin" to his misogyny, Imus draws attention away from white culpability to claim a moment of racial and sexual innocence prior to contamination by the misogyny of African American cultures.

Here, racist and misogynist phrases become matters of "cultural borrowings" whereby Imus merely repeats what he learned from "the street": not the historical and social discourses in which he is severely inculcated but in the media of the Other. But, perhaps what we are also not seeing are the ways in which the Moynihan Report rears its ugly head throughout this incident. In 1965, the Moynihan Report (officially entitled "The Negro Family: The Case for Action") famously characterized the African American family as pathological for its non-heteronormative structure, most easily identified by the presence of female-headed households

and emasculated men.[9] The stereotype of the "strong African American woman" thus became a rationale for anxiety, an anxiety shared by white middle-class American men in which feminism continues to erode their social and political legitimacy. Within this framing, Imus, like African American male rap artists, might be thought of as merely reacting to the threat of the potential social mobility of African American women. This connection was most directly made by Mortimer Zuckerman in *U.S. News & World Report*, when he made the following rhetorical leaps:

> Imus, it has been said, was doing no more than spewing the language of sexual and racist aggression mouthed by African Americans in rap and hip-hop (and talk radio, movies, TV, etc)- and financed by corporations. If you look at the current top 10 rap albums they relish the "N" word and insult "ho's" and "bitches." That does not make the revealing language acceptable. In fact, it takes us back to a core issue: *why the increasing stature of African-American females seems to have caused the male culture to demean them.*[10] (Emphasis added)

After asking how African American women have engendered their own misogyny, the article continues by offering "evidence" of the "female gains" of African American women, supposedly at the expense of African American men (and, we suspect, of Imus as well). According to (whitenormative) media narratives, what unites African American rap artists and the white shock jocks is less the rhetorical devices of musical media than the shared bogeywomen of feminism.

We are immersed, of course, within what Lauren Berlant so aptly described as the "scandal of ex-privilege," whereby "iconic citizens" (in this case, normative white/male/heterosexual citizen-subjects) relentlessly tell the stories of their loss. The loss includes nothing less than the ability not to have identities, "when it used to be that other people had them."[11] In order to restore themselves to normative citizen status and normative non-identities, these subjects rehearse an argument for restoration. This argument is thus premised on:

> rage at the stereotyped peoples who have appeared to change the political rules of social membership, and, with it, a desperate desire to return to an order of things deemed normal, an order of what was felt to be a general everyday intimacy that was sometimes called "the American way of life." To effect either restoration of the imagined nation, the American

> ex-icon denigrates the political present tense and incites nostalgia for
> the national world of its iconicity, setting up that lost world as a utopian
> horizon of political aspiration.[12]

The narrative of ex-privilege allows men like Don Imus, Glenn Beck, Rush
Limbaugh, or Bill O'Reilly to cloak themselves as defenders of that past,
of the "good ole days," without (seemingly) suggesting that those days
included abject forms of racial, gender, and sexual segregation. It is against
an apparently powerful lobby of "political correctness" that Imus, et al.
recreate white heterosexual men into de-privileged subjects, victims to
the recognitions of the -isms of racism, sexism, and homophobia. But as
was noted over and over throughout the media analyses of the Don Imus
"scandal," crass racist, misogynist behavior is merely and only everywhere
and everyplace. The "scandal of ex-privilege" has become so routinized
within the wide range of American cultural media that conversations
about race, gender, or sexuality are often transformed into analyses of
how to "restore" the nation and its iconic citizen-subjects to an imagined
American way of life.

While Berlant attempted to name and circumvent the "virulent
revitalized national heterosexuality"[13] that had become, in her analysis,
exemplary of the Reagan era, we must also consider how these narratives
are being rehearsed well into the current century in contemporary national
narratives. As she explained, her text was oriented towards pointing out
"the routes by which some reactionary arguments have become prosaic.
Paradoxically, once they become banal, they are their most powerful: no
longer inciting big feelings and deep rages, these claims about the world
seem hardwired into what is taken for granted in collective national life."[14]
We are concerned, then, that the defenses of white heteromasculinity have
become naturalized within the American imaginary in a way that goes un-
noticed. The more cliché they appear, the more dangerous they become.

From Columbine to Virginia Tech:
Whiteness and Heteronormativity in School Shootings

The reactionary arguments represented by Imus, et al. are also retold within
the stories of school shootings, and it is a narrative that is interestingly
complicated by Seung-hui Cho and Virginia Tech. The Columbine High

School massacre on April 20, 1999 has become the paradigmatic model for such stories, not only in the sense that this event tends to be recited by other school shooters (including Seung-hui Cho) but because the media continues to use it as the standard by which other violent events via (particularly white) youths are measured. In the process, the perpetrators, Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris, have become prototypes themselves for violent white youths, a type that continues to cast a shadow over other young men. One particularly daunting reason for the perpetuation of the typecasting of Columbine is due to the fact that it fit neatly within the scandal of ex-privilege, as described above. Importantly, narratives of Virginia Tech and Blacksburg, Virginia are similar but not identical to those of Columbine High and Littleton, Colorado, the latter being conceived of as quintessentially American through the excision of foreignness and through the evocation of national tragedy that is narrated through a cultural defense of masculinity.

The Columbine shootings, in which Klebold and Harris killed twelve students and one teacher, wounded twenty-three others, and then killed themselves, appeared to spark a series of debates about the influence of violence in media, gun control (or the lack thereof), and the tyranny of high school cliques. But upon further investigation, as some scholars have noted, the "debate" that was staged worked fastidiously to evade two of the central identifications of Klebold, Harris, and Littleton, Colorado: masculinity and whiteness. Masculinity scholar Jackson Katz, in particular, has asked us to consider the ways in which the media and scholarship on school shootings continue to neglect a central thematic, which is that they are perpetrated by boys.[15] In the process of neglect, then, masculinity becomes reified as the proprietor of violence. Indeed, as Michael Kimmel and Matthew Mahler describe in their analysis of school shootings from 1982–2001, the media is unable to see the ways in which these boys "are not psychopathological deviants, but rather overconformists to a particular normative construction of masculinity, a construction that defines violence as a legitimate response to a perceived humiliation."[16]

The "normative construction of masculinity" references scholarship in masculinity studies that argues for an understanding of hegemonic forms of masculinity, forms that are, in many ways, maintained through discourses of heteronormativity. Put differently, many masculinity scholars

claim that homophobia keeps masculinity in check. Again, in Kimmel and Mahler's words,

> Research has indicated that homophobia is one of the key organizing principles of heterosexual masculinity, a constitutive element in its construction. And as an organizing principle of masculinity, homophobia—the terror that others will see one as gay, as a failed man—underlies a significant amount of men's behavior, including with other men, women, and violence. One could say that homophobia is the hate that makes men straight.[17]

Kimmel and Mahler argue that one of the central thematics throughout the school shootings is that the perpetrators—the boys—were in fact "gay-baited" and unable to obtain the privileges afforded to (white) heteromasculinity. While the media might have noticed the ways in which Klebold and Harris were ostracized from jock high school culture, the media rarely noted the ways in which these boys were often accused of being "homos." Understood in this light, however, we begin to see the ways in which violent white boys are given a cultural license to "retaliate" for being victims of the loss of heteromasculine privilege.

Klebold and Harris were, of course, part of what became a provocative frame of reference for the media: they were members of a group called "The Trenchcoat Mafia." The group was most often described as a community of losers, nerds, and geeks —that is, a group of disenfranchised white men— and central to this community formation were discourses of white supremacy and white privilege. As Audrey Kobayashi and Linda Peake note, it is astonishing to see the ways in which the media failed to follow through on reports of the shootings being at least partially racially motivated.[18] There is evidence, for example, that Klebhold and Harris were not only specifically targeting "jocks," but were also "out to kill African-American and Hispanic students."[19] However, the media's emphasis on Littleton, Colorado worked to fictionalize the town as normatively and nostalgically middle-American, identifying Littleton with what Stuart Aiken refers to as the geographical imaginary of "mythic white America."[20] As Aiken as well as Kobayashi and Peake argue, the morally loaded refrain "How could it happen here?" works to invoke an unspoken referent to urban violence and the notion that race—and racially motivated violence—happens elsewhere, not in suburban white America nor, as its synecdoche, in

racially segregated and white-dominated Littleton, Colorado. As Aiken suggests, "moral panics ensue when the killings are of white students, by white students, who are ostensibly contextualized by the American small town/suburban dream."[21]

What must be understood here are the ways in which whiteness is continuously masked and divorced from any sense of responsibility. As in the case of Imus, the media seems to work tirelessly in order to deracialize the events at Columbine. It was, no less, Hitler's birthday, a day that held special significance for the Columbine shooters. But as Kobayashi and Peake astutely point out, "whiteness is indicated less by its explicit racism than by the fact that it ignores, or even denies, racist indications."[22] In reconfiguring Littleton, Colorado as the geographical equivalent of the American Dream, Klebold and Harris along with other (white, male) school shooters become reconfigured as victims to racialized, gendered others who have stolen the Dream away from normative citizen-subjects. In this manner, while some narratives continue to vilify them, most others recuperate the two iconic shooters as citizen-subjects whose victimization and wounding were proof, ultimately, not of their monstrosity, but of their humanity. In other words, Klebold and Harris became more human and more American as embodiments of wounded white masculinities, as they could now be seen not as privileged and normative but as vulnerable and disenfranchised.

Upon first glance, the fact that Klebold, Harris, and the Trenchcoat Mafia were accused of both homosexuality and neo-Nazism might appear contradictory. Any sustained analysis of neo-Nazism, for example, would consider the ways in which white supremacist discourse configures homosexuality as degenerative and repulsive, along the lines of interracial sexual practices. But, this accusation continued to circulate, so much so that one member of the Trenchcoat Mafia exclaimed, "We're not a homosexual group, or Satanists, or neo-Nazis."[23] But, again, it is critical to consider the ways in which discourses of heteromasculinity serve to scapegoat homosexuality for all forms of heterosexual, particularly violent, deviance. The homosexual panic defense, in fact, relies upon the notion that latent homosexuality can manifest in uncontrolled, animalistic violent behavior. It is always a possibility then, in the logic of heteromasculinity, that violent and misogynist men are *merely acting homosexually*. In an article

describing Seung-hui Cho as part of the pattern of male violence in the U.S., *New York Times* columnist Bob Herbert suggests that, "Violence is commonly resorted to as the antidote to the disturbing emotions raised by the widespread hostility toward women in our society and the pathological fear of so many men that they aren't quite tough enough, masculine enough—in short, that they might have homosexual tendencies."[24]

As much as the scholarship on masculinity and whiteness, when combined, allows us to see the ways in which masculinity and whiteness are defended via the media representations of school shootings, we need to consider the ways in which Klebold and Harris are also seen as victims to feminism and to women in general. One of the reoccurring themes, which has become part of the "profile" of school shooters, is that these boys were rejected by women. While the "gay-baiting" might do some of the work of displacing these boys from the privileges of heteromasculinity, perhaps one of the leading presumptions of the media's analyses of such events are the ways in which white male suburban youth are victims of feminism: they are victimized by the fact that many of their mothers work outside of the home; they are victimized by school reforms that have become increasingly (as the story goes) attuned to gender dynamics within the classroom and, therefore, reformulated to empower girls; and, most importantly, they are victimized by not getting the attention and devotion they deserve from their female peers. In fact, Kimmel and Mahler end up suggesting that while gay-baiting might be one of the connections among school shooters, one of the reasons why many boys who experience gay-baiting do not retaliate violently is because they receive heteronormative attention from girls:

> It may be that the boys who are able to best resist the torments of incessant gay-baiting and bullying are those who have some girls amongst their friends, and perhaps even a girlfriend, that is, girls who can also validate their sense of masculinity (which other boys do as well) as well as their heterosexuality (which boys alone cannot do).[25]

Putting aside the debatable point as to whether boys alone can or cannot act to "validate" heterosexuality for other boys, the problem here is the way in which Kimmel and Mahler inadvertently fall prey to the common thematic throughout narratives regarding school shooters. Women as moth-

ers and girls as potential love interests have a huge sense of responsibility within this schema; without their heterosexual and reproductive labor, boys will retaliate and innocent victims will suffer the consequences.

More Alien than Alienated: "A Frustrated Nobody Who Failed Repeatedly With Women"

Seung-hui Cho was placed quite neatly within this failed-heterosexuality framing. As Professors Richard Vatz and Lee Weinberg noted in *USA Today*, Cho was a "frustrated nobody who failed repeatedly with women."[26] In this way, Cho merely fit the pattern of campus killers, in which the rejection by women is one of the primary elements. As psychologist Robin Kowalski is quoted as observing in her study of school shootings, among the common factors of all school shooters, "The first is an acute rejection episode —such as a break up with a girlfriend—which usually takes place before the killer acts."[27] What is critical about these narratives are the ways in which violence against women is normalized, if not explicitly excused. Note, for example, that Virginia Tech authorities chose not to warn the campus about the potential perpetrator after they discovered the first two victims, Emily Jane Hilscher, a freshman, and Ryan Clark, her resident adviser. After the horrid discovery, campus police initiated a search for Hilscher's boyfriend, presuming that this was merely a "lover's quarrel."[28] In this way, we might read this as part of a larger narrative in which the mass violence against women, particularly at the hands of their intimate male partners, is normalized throughout U.S. culture. Indeed, one of the central arguments against including "gender" within hate crime legislation is that it is, presumably, discrete and bounded within the domestic sphere, and, most importantly, that if we did include "gender" within hate crime legislation and truly recognize rampant violent misogyny it would overload the system.[29]

News articles were quick to point toward the ways in which Cho was a failed heterosexual, emasculated and non-normative as he (reportedly) stalked women on campus, often through text-messaging, picture-taking of female students under their desks, and communicating fantasies about a girlfriend who lived in outer-space or was an invisible supermodel. These stories —or rumors— are barely necessary as Cho was already configured

within this framing: as a school shooter and an Asian American man, his narrative access to heteromasculinity was already foreclosed.

Fitting Cho into the framework of wounded masculinity becomes somewhat possible through collapsing failed white heteromasculinity with Orientalist constructions of Asian American masculinity. Already characterized as effeminate or gay, Asian American masculinities are often constructed through an association with lack or racial castration.[30] Put differently, to the extent that Asian American men are seen as passive, impotent, and simultaneously lascivious, heteromasculinity is not so much a failure as unavailable or a lack. This inability to achieve proper masculinity and heterosexuality may lead to dangerous excess, one that can threaten the object of its desire—namely, white women. Hence, the charges of stalking that were associated with Cho characterize him not only as deviant and inadequate but also as threatening. In this case, Asian American men can also be framed through a sexualized narrative of deviance, evoking the historical threat of the "yellow peril" ready to harm white femininity with contamination and miscegenation by the uncontrolled nonnormative sexuality of the Asian American men. Hence, what is abject and associated with lack also becomes associated with terror, thereby shoring up heroic and proper white heteromasculinities and femininities.[31] We might ask, then, in what ways have previous narratives about the violent retaliation of white nerdy boys who are rejected by women shape discourses about Cho? Or, perhaps even more interestingly, how might the emasculation of Asian American men inform the effeminacy of geeky white boys?

Discourses of alienation surface within both domains of white suburban "outsiders" like Klebold and Harris and Asian Americans like Cho. But, one of the most important differences is the way in which the media and academic scholars do not offer a sustained interrogation of Cho's alienation. For example, while Cho was taunted in high school, much like Klebold and Harris, the nature of his taunting and harassment is clearly racialized. As his former high school classmate reports,

> Once, in English class, the teacher had the students read aloud, and when it was Cho's turn, he just looked down in silence, Davids recalled. Finally, after the teacher threatened him with an F for participation, Cho started to read in a strange, deep voice that sounded "like he had something in his mouth," Davids said. "As soon as he started reading,

the whole class started laughing and pointing and saying, `Go back to China,'" Davids said.[32]

But, this racialized alienation was rarely discussed or considered by the media; and when it was discussed, as in this example, the racism was dislocated spatially and temporally from Virginia Tech and from the present.

In this manner, like the taunting in the schools, there was more framing of Cho as alien than alienated. First, the conflation of Asians and Asian Americans in which the latter are perpetually foreign disallows complete recognition of Cho as American. Coverage of Cho's status as an immigrant allowed him to be excised from the nation and read not as Korean American, but as Korean. For example, while news and scholarly reports suggested the Harris and Klebold's violent acts were borne from the violence of American media and video games, Cho's violence was seen as stemming from the hyperviolence of Asian cinema (including films by John Woo), and of Korean cinema more specifically (especially the film *Oldboy*[33]), rather than American films such as *Taxi Driver* or more generally horror or slasher films.[34] This is not to say that Cho was not influenced by cinema. It is, rather, to remark on how immediately and thoroughly the citation of Korean cinema became part of the narrative, indicating the ways in which Cho was already read as perpetually foreign. Additionally, this perception was clearly palpable throughout the coverage and was even felt in South Korea, so much so that that the Foreign Ministry spokesman, Cho Byung-je, sought to clarify: "We here in Korea also were very much shocked at the horrific incident, and we Korean people and the Korean government would like to express our heartfelt condolences to the victims and the bereaved families of the American people."[35]

Moreover, Cho's own alienation was routinely overwritten by racial discourses of Asian Americans *as* aliens. In this manner, popular discourses rehearsed and rejuvenated multiple racist paradigms including Cho as sexual deviant and yellow peril as discussed above, but also as gook and model minority.[36] Most coverage of Cho emphasized his coming from a "hard-working" and "entrepreneurial" family, and thus stressed by contrast his failure to conform to the model minority stereotype.[37] This inability to assimilate properly, of course, sought cultural explanations that realigned Cho as an alien Oriental. This emphasis on the model minority also made

clear that terror and violence were expected from South Asian and Arab ethnicities, but not usually from South Korean immigrants.[38] Other more rightwing coverage simply equated all immigration with possible terrorism and argued that rather than practice gun control this event simply indicated a need for immigration control.[39]

The understanding of Cho as hyperviolent and foreign also allows the formulation of him as gook. While media coverage could hardly use the terminology, some coverage linked Cho's rampage with other instances of Asian American men's gun violence. For example, references to Chai Vang, a Hmong American hunter who fired on and killed several white hunters in Wisconsin, were repeatedly made within Midwest media coverage. This image of the gun-toting cold killer also plays off and reinforces depictions of Cho as a cold, inhuman, and mechanical killer. We see multiple references to Cho as mute,[40] affectless, and robotic—in other words, as a cyborg Other. Constructed as a racial Other, the Asian American formulated as alien has sometimes meant alien as in non-human. References to the robotic refer not only to stereotypes of inscrutability as being unreadable (both in terms of unknowable but also without affect), but also refers to Asians as hyperanalytical, without emotion, mechanical, methodical, and, consequently, subhuman or inhuman.

As noted earlier, Columbine elicited a series of investigations into violence amongst youth, such as the bulky U.S. Surgeon General Report on "Youth Violence,"[41] the influence of violent media, the isolation of middle-class youth, and the hierarchical nature of high schools. Throughout the years since these shootings, media and scholars have attempted to interrogate and take seriously what could have caused Klebold and Harris to "snap." Cho does not elicit the same level of interrogation. Virginia Tech does not serve as a vehicle to consider video games, alienation, or disenfranchisement. The fear might be that if we continued down this line of thought, we might hit head-on into the ways in which normative white citizenship serves to disenfranchise and perpetuate, historically as well as contemporaneously, Asian Americans as being outside the normative privileges of citizenship. Put differently, it could force us to interrogate whiteness and the ways in which U.S. citizenship continues to rely upon Orientalist discourses. But, when it comes to white school shooters, the media and scholars choose to wax endlessly about the possible ways in which

(unspoken white) middle-class suburban boys experience alienation—at the hands of athletic jocks, distracted mothers, and inattentive girls. Here then, we can increasingly understand that white boys are excused for violent behavior, for retaliating for the scandal of ex-privilege, while Cho's rationale for retaliation remains, supposedly, a mystery.

The Cultural Defense

We want to ask what types of cultural defenses are being made on behalf of white men, like Imus, Klebold, and Harris, and how the cultural defensibility of white heteromasculinity has become such a normative framing that it can remain one of the banal, albeit still quite reactionary, arguments that Berlant warned us about. Importantly, the notion of a "cultural defense" is most often equated with immigrant defendants in U.S. courtrooms. While it does not stand as a lone defense in U.S. law—that is, one cannot receive an acquittal based on the explanation that their "culture" excused their behavior—culture "difference" can serve as a mitigating factor that might lessen a sentence or help to explain a formal defense, such as self-defense. Legal scholars have debated about the merits of a cultural defense for at least twenty years, and, while some scholars argue for the implementation of a formal cultural defense, some argue against any consideration of "cultural factors," and still others argue for some type of compromise between the two. The arguments around the legal implementation of a "cultural defense" have become another way in which legal scholars debate as to whether the U.S. legal system is an always-already subjective and, in fact, implementing white-normative cultural expectations, or the understanding of law and the legal arena as an objective, colorblind, and cultural-less domain.

The fight for-and-against a cultural defense has most recently been redefined as a battle between "multiculturalists" and "feminists," due to the ways in which such defenses have most often been applied in cases involving gender and familial relations–in particular, the violence against women at the hands of their intimate male partners. But, let us not escape the critical ways in which questions of gender and familial "otherness" are most commonly applied to Asian and Asian American defendants. As legal scholar Leti Volpp has noted in numerous articles on the topic,

the notion of a cultural defense relies upon U.S. Orientalist discourses by which Asian culture is perceived as inherently different, Other, and inassimilable. Moreover, via Orientalism, Asia becomes symptomatic of the ways in which people of color, and women of color in particular, are victims to their supposedly static, misogynistic, and inherently patriarchal cultures. In the process, misogyny and male violence against women originate elsewhere, "over there" as opposed to "back home" in the United States. As Volpp observes, "Extraterritorializing of problematic behavior by projecting it beyond the borders of 'American values' has the effect both of equating racialized immigrant culture with sex-subordination, and denying the reality of gendered subordination prevalent in mainstream white America."[42]

Importantly, however, the application of cultural defenses in regards to "Asian culture" directly mimics white heteronormative cultural imperatives whereby women and children are beholden to men. As legal scholar Nancy Kim notes, when cultural defenses are accepted, they just so happen to mirror familiar forms of oppression, ones that white heteromasculinity inexplicitly condones. Put differently, applications of cultural defense, particularly in the name of static misogynist Asian culture, are most often successful when they are aligned with U.S. heteromasculinity. But, we have been arguing throughout this essay that there is, in fact, a widespread, and unfortunately banal, cultural defense of white heteromasculinity. In law, then, we must examine the ways in which rape law, domestic violence, and the continuing refusal to include gender within hate crime protections are merely the legal and congressional manifestations of white cultural defenders like Don Imus and white school shooters.

In the case of Cho, cultural defense and cultural explanations play out in multiple forms. For example, characterizing Asian "cultures" as less likely to seek assistance for mental health issues, a mainstream periodical explained the lack of preventative interventions as resulting from Korean stigmatization of mental illness:

> One question is whether Cho's culture played a role in his apparent refusal to accept help. In general, experts say, members of minority groups in the United States are less likely to use mental health services. "In Korea, mental diseases carry significant stigma," says Young Shin Kim, an assistant professor of child and adolescent psychiatry at Yale

University Medical School, who is Korean. "If you have a person in the family with a mental disorder, then your whole family is damned."[43]

Raising the specter of danger, this media coverage frames Americans as vulnerable to immigrants who do not understand and practice normative behaviors around health, the body, and race. Furthermore, by ignoring the white American stigmatization of mental illnesses this comment alludes to the trope of contamination to frame "Asian culture" as a physiological and social threat to America.

DISALLOWED: RETALIATION BY THE OPPRESSED

Numerous articles continue to ask what caused Cho to snap, who were his targets, and what was his purpose? The answer was repeated over and over: *we'll never know.* This declaration of lack of knowledge is troubling to us because Cho left behind a particularly detailed, albeit complicated and chaotic, narrative and visual explanation for his violent act. Nevertheless, revitalizing a standard racial trope, he was continually framed as "inscrutable." From his violent creative writing essays and his self-posed photographs to his videos and "manifesto,"[44] Cho's texts were repeatedly read as "unintelligible," "rambling," "rantings," and "diatribes," thereby dismissing any explanations of his actions that do not fit within the rationales of failed masculinity or mental illness. We are not in any way suggesting that Cho had any particular righteous motive, nor do we want to diminish the travesty of his actions. But, we would like to consider the ways in which, through his series of videos, writings, and photos, he highlighted how his isolation was directly related to normative white citizenship, political economy, and the alienation of Asian Americans. In this way, we want to suggest that perhaps the media worked so hard to fit Cho within the wounded-masculinity narrative in order to avoid the other option: the racially oppressed retaliating for their isolation from the privileges of normative citizenship and for economic and social inequities. The sustained refusal to interrogate Cho's motivation and rationale are directly informed by the prevalent anxiety that he might, in fact, have a rationale that is directly related to racialized oppression, U.S. xenophobia, and the myth of the American dream.

The "Question Mark Kid" (as he was called by Virginia Tech peers) did not leave behind question marks—he left us a series of analyses and images, confusing as they may be, about the ways in which class, race, and gender privileges converge to displace multiply-situated Others from normative citizenship. We see this play out repeatedly in the public and pathologizing discourses on Cho. First, as much as Cho is marked, particularly by his peers and by mental health professionals, as suffering from "social mutism," we must acknowledge the ways in which Cho is repeatedly *muted by* the lack of serious or sustained interrogation of his motivations, his experience, or his history. Second, that Cho experienced (racial, sexual, and otherwise) negation should certainly not be in question. As he signed many of his class attendance sheets with a question mark, one can see an (internalized response to the) erasure of his identity, his selfhood, and his humanity made visible. Moreover, the characterization of Cho as the personification of violence redirects questions about Cho as a victim of epistemic, social, and physical violence, a victim who may have been compelled to speak out, to make visible the negation of his subjectivity, and to retaliate violently.

We would like to suggest that this anxiety about the retaliation of the racially oppressed directly informs the ways in which Cho's racial and ethnic identity is circumscribed in the media. Importantly, there is a lack of sustained and direct discussion of Cho's racial and ethnic identity; rather, his racial and ethnic identity is marked and then denied as significant. While Cho's "difference" is noted quickly and readily in the first reports, as the media analyses continued in the days after the shooting Cho is increasingly described as similar to or even identical to all school shooters, and as one amongst many of the mentally ill college students throughout U.S. campuses. Put differently, we would suggest that the more that Cho could be seen as a representative of immigrant experience, the more in danger white America would become as there would be a direct recognition of racialized oppression. In some ways, then, the application of the colorblindness doctrine (in this case, the various desires to declare that Cho's racial difference makes no difference at all), works here to allow a blindness to the pain and violence of racialized oppression in the United States, a violence that might retaliate.

As easy as it was to deploy the characterization of Cho as an unassimilated outsider, there was also an active effort to discontinue this strain of analysis. Cho cannot be seen as acting on behalf of an ethnic or racial group as this would suggest the ways in which ethnic and racialized groups are victims to rhetorical and physical violence on a daily basis via the apparatus of normative white citizenship. Korean Americans were required, in many ways, to respond to this unspoken accusation as demonstrated by the apologies on behalf of the South Korean nation and Korean American communities that were littered throughout the media. Adrian Hong in his Washington Post article, "Koreans Aren't to Blame," assured the American public Korean Americans have nothing to apologize for because Cho was not acting on behalf "of any ethnic grievance or agenda," but was merely an isolated individual acting on his own accord.[45] As much as Cho cannot therefore be seen as acting on behalf of a racial or ethnic grievance, as this quotation suggests, the African American women on the Rutgers's basketball team can only be congratulated over and over in the media for acting with dignity, grace, and poise. We are not, of course, suggesting that the women did not act accordingly; our concern here is the ways in which the media needed to congratulate the women for not retaliating, for not verbalizing a racial or gender grievance.

"Virginia Tech: Only Connect"

The Nation ran a commentary on the first page of its May 14, 2007 edition entitled "Virginia Tech: Only Connect." The commentary, written by Bruce Shapiro, ended up articulating a different type of "connection" than the one we are seeking here. In his piece, Shapiro suggested that the connections that are needed are to see the ways in which aberrant individuality, loose gun control, and the media's whorish relationship to violence continue to feed incidents such as Virginia Tech. It was merely one of many diagnoses offered by the media. In answering the question as to how we can avoid another Virginia Tech, media along with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services "Report to the President on Issues Raised by the Virginia Tech Tragedy" claimed that we merely needed more and better surveillance. In accordance with post-9/11 rhetoric, one of the reasons

why Cho was not stopped earlier was because liberal systems (typified by the academy) refused to utilize profiling and surveillance methods that are available to them. The connections that are needed, then, are connections amongst police, mental health, immigration, and other surveillance authorities in order to do better tracking and maintaining of citizens and non-citizens alike.

To make surveillance consensual requires a particular understanding of who and what is connected. The understanding that surveillance, profiling, and other methods of state power will keep "us" safe requires an interpellation of an "us" that needs protection from a "them." As the incidence at Columbine was clearly marked as happening to "us" (white middle-class America), the need to locate Cho within this framework and thereby establish us as innocent victims within the context of Virginia Tech requires some particular maneuvers that domesticate white anxieties about his immigrant status and racialization. To erase the tinge of racism and xenophobia that mark white normative citizenship, a different understanding of the nation had to be constructed.

The attempts to map Cho and Virginia Tech directly onto the white-washed image of Harris and Klebold and Littleton, Colorado do not fully succeed. The impossibility of bleaching Blacksburg, and Virginia Tech itself, into the narrative is clear from the outset. In other words, the student and faculty body of a university like Virginia Tech are difficult to formulate as homogenous white suburban America. Instead, Virginia Tech and Blacksburg, Virginia needed to become representative of a post-9/11 *transnational* America. As universities often represent our most liberal understandings of the nation, they not only reflect America as educated and middle class but also as multicultural and transnational. Report after report about the Virginia Tech victims, including faculty and students of color and international students and faculty, emphasized that these victims are and were part of a post-civil rights and explicitly transnational America. Placed inadvertently against the imagery of Cho, immigrant victims were especially noted, often described as much more readily and capable of embracing the benevolence of inclusionary America, and Asian immigrants in particular were described as assimilated. Furthermore, references to the unity and spirit of the local community that has overcome its history

of racism were frequent. And, African American women faculty, such as Lucinda Roy and Nikki Giovanni, served as critical and authentic insiders that could report and reveal that Cho was a mentally ill *individual*—such validations overdetermined and worked to stifle any other readings of his actions as a member of the racialized underclass.

In the process, Blacksburg, Virginia becomes reimagined as the quintessential post-civil rights transnational American space, divorced from its history of colonization and racialized segregation and separated from the fact that its student body does not even come close to representing the racial make-up or the history of the state of Virginia.[46] In order for the narrative of white wounded masculinity in the heartland to succeed, the presence and visibility of the transnational and multicultural at Virginia Tech must become domesticated into the nation, and simultaneously a history of empire and colonialism must be erased. May 2007, after all, marked the four-hundred-year anniversary of nearby Jamestown. Therefore, in the end, we are immersed in a specifically transnational, multicultural request that we all become a part of and participant in the "Hokie Nation." While it certainly plays in a slightly different register, the request to join the Hokie Nation looks eerily similar to the demand that we unite as a global empire in order to defend whitenormative citizenship against the tyranny of Islamic Orientalism.

In lieu of the connections offered by the media and the requirement that we join hands under the "Hokie Nation," we would like to offer a different series of connections: on April 4, 2007, Don Imus epitomized his racist misogyny in his rhetorical violence against the African American women of the Rutgers's basketball team; on April 16, 2007, Seung-hui Cho killed thirty-three people and wounded at least fifteen others at Virginia Tech; on April 18, 2007, the U.S. Supreme Court reified the conservative right's rhetorical creation of the "partial birth abortion" by upholding a Congressional ban on the (imaginary) procedure; and, on the same day, five car bombs exploded in Baghdad, killing nearly 200 Iraqi civilians. In the name of the wounded nation, we want to ask who, exactly, are the wounded? Are they the racialized American immigrants, African American women, women seeking reproductive rights, Iraqi civilians, or white upper-class heterosexual men?

Notes

1. This phrase appeared everywhere simultaneously including Facebook pages, news coverage headlines, a speech by George Bush at Virginia Tech (April 17, 2007, www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2007/04/20070417-1.html, last accessed January 10, 2008), and an email sent by the University of Minnesota inviting its members to an event commemorating the victims.

2. Certainly, Imus is not the only one to make racist statements and be excused. His statement evoked a term that resonates with a long history of framing African Americans as dirty, unkempt, and generally unclean. Presidential candidate Joe Biden similarly commented on Barack Obama: "you got the first mainstream African-American who is articulate and bright and *clean* and a nice-looking guy. I mean, that's a storybook, man." (our emphasis). Xuan Thai and Ted Barrett, "Biden's Description of Obama Draws Scrutiny," CNN Online (February 9, 2007) http://www.cnn.com/2007/POLITICS/01/31/biden.obama/index.html (last accessed January 10, 2008).

3. Often touted as the largest single massacre in US history, a careful consideration of historical events (e.g., Native Americans murdered at Wounded Knee and African Americans in Tulsa, Oklahoma) might prove otherwise. One might also consider the irony that on the same day of the incident in Blacksburg, Virginia, over 170 people were killed in Iraq.

4. Following Korean conventions, the media first referred to Cho as Cho Seung-hui, listing the last name first. However, the family intervened and insisted on the American form of the name with the surname last. We use the American form of the name throughout the essay.

5. Here we are referencing the insights of critical race scholars, such as Cheryl Harris, who describe the ways in which whiteness has been formulated into a form of "property." We are interested, then, in the ways in which certain citizen-subjectivities are formulated into property whereby the usage of this property would include the right to violence. See Cheryl I. Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review* 106 (1993): 1706–91.

6. Eric Alterman, "The Post-Imus Conundrum: The Liberal Media," *The Nation*, May 21, 2007.

7. Ibid.

8. James Poniewozik, et al. "Who Can Say What?" *Time* 169.17 (23 Apr. 2007).

9. Roderick Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004). The Moynihan Report is available online at http://www.dol.gov/oasam/programs/history/webid-meynihan.htm (last accessed December 12, 2007).

10. Mortimer B. Zuckerman, "Why 'Ho' Is So Hurtful," *U.S. News & World Report* 142.15 (30 Apr. 2007).

11. Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham: Duke UP, 1997): 2.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid., 19.

14. Ibid., 11.

15. Jackson Katz, in the documentary, *Tough Guise: Violence, Media and the Crisis of Masculinity* (Dir. Sut Jhally, 1999)

16. Michael Kimmel and Matthew Mahler, "Adolescent Masculinity, Homophobia, and Violence: Random School Shootings, 1982–2001," *American Behavioral Scientist* 46.10 (2003): 1440.

17. Kimmel and Mahler, 1446.

18. Audrey Kobayashi and Linda Peake, "Racism out of Place: Thoughts on Whiteness and an Antiracist Geography in the New Millennium," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 90.2 (2000): 392–403. Mia Consalvo also makes this observation in "The Monsters Next Door: Media Constructions of Boys and Masculinity," *Feminist Media Studies* 3.1 (2003): 27–45.

19. Kobayashi and Peake, 392.

20. Stuart C. Aiken, "Schoolyard Shootings: Racism, Sexism and Moral Panics over Teen Violence," Antipode 33.4 (2001): 593–600.

21. Ibid., 598.

22. Kobayashi and Peake, 394.

23. As quoted in Consalvo, 34. One can infer that the reference to Satanism exposes the ways in which proper white heteromasculinity is also inflected by Christianity, an aspect of normative citizen-subjectivity that is outside of the scope of this discussion.

24. Bob Herbert, "A Volatile Young Man, Humiliation and a Gun," *New York Times* (19 Apr. 2007).

25. Kimmel and Mahler, 1454.

26. Richard Vatz and Lee Weinberg, "Any Lessons from Virginia Tech?" *USA Today*, July 2007: 64.

27. As quoted by Kathryn Westcott, "Cho Fits Pattern of Campus Killers," *BBC News* (27 Apr. 2007).

28. One article attempted to showcase the ways in which Virginia's history of intolerance towards interracial sex played a role in the campus mis-readings. As Alton H. Maddox Jr. noted, because Hilscher was white and Clark was black, perhaps campus authorities read this not only as a "lover's quarrel" but also as retaliation for interracial sexual liaisons as Hilscher's boyfriend is white. See Alton Maddox Jr., "Racism and the Virginia Tech Massacre," *New York Amsterdam News* (26 Apr. 2007).

29. Amy L. Brandzel, "Patriotic Acts: Hate Crimes and the Specters of Citizenship," Queering the Subject(s) of Citizenship: Beyond the Normative Citizen in Law and History, Ph.D. Diss, University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, 2006.

30. David Eng, *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America (Durham: Duke UP, 2000);* Richard Fung , "Looking for my Penis: The Eroticized Asian in Gay Video Porn," *Asian American Sexualities,* ed. Russell Leong (New York: Routledge, 1996): 181–200.

31. Here it is clear that several different Orientalist images of Asian American men are at play simultaneously.

32. Matt Apuzzo, "Former high school classmates say Va. Tech gunman was picked on in school," Associated Press, April 19, 2007. http://www.thetimesnews.com/articles/cho_903___article.html/police_tech.html. Accessed Dec. 17, 2007.

33. That the film, *Oldboy,* is actually a revenge film may be of particular interest. Framing his actions within the context of revenge and betrayal might allow for a broader reading of his alienation.

34. Additionally, that Cho himself was quite savvy about *American* media was not remarked upon by the majority of commentators.

35. Quoted in "The World Reacts to Virginia Tech Massacre and Asks Why," ABC NEWS online, http://abcnews.go.com/International/Story?id=3049423&page=4 (last accessed December 18, 2007).

36. Robert Lee, *Orientals: Asian Americans in Popular Culture.* Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 2000.

37. The phantasm of the model minority stereotype also solidifies around the same time as and in relation to the Moynihan Report. While African Americans were being vilified for their economic and political disenfranchisement supposedly due to their aberrant gender roles, familial structures, and culture of failure, Asian Americans were touted, in direct contrast, as a group whose supposed cultural proclivities towards education, patriarchal family structure, and hard work led them to economic and social assimilation within the United States.

38. Rumors abounded about the specific ethnicity (e.g. Chinese, Arab, or Pakistani) of the "Asian male" cited as the perpetrator. Furthermore, as Cho made reference to "Ismail Ax" and "A. Ishmael," there was much speculation about an Islamic influence underlying Cho's motives. Of course, "Ishmael" as a figure appears in a wide range of literature from the Torah and the Bible, to *Moby Dick* and the Koran; that many focused primarily on the Muslim reference is itself telling.

39. Peter Brimlow. "Virginia Tech Massacre: Gun Control—Or Immigration Control?" http://www.vdare.com/pb/070418_vt.htm. April 18, 2007. Accessed 12/17/07.

40. Social mutism was also presented as part of Cho's mental illness.

41. See "Youth Violence: A Report of the Surgeon General," http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/youthviolence/youvioreport.htm (January 2001) (last accessed December 10, 2007)

42. Leti Volpp, "Blaming Culture for Bad Behavior," 12 *Yale Journal of Law and Humanities* 89 (Winter, 2000). See Leti Volpp, "(Mis)Identifying Culture: Asian Women and the 'Cultural Defense,'" in *Asian American Studies: A Reader*, eds. Jean Wu and Min Song (Rutgers University Press, 2000): 391–0422, and

43. Nancy Shute and Avery Comarow, "What Went Wrong?" U.S. News & World Report. vol 142, issue 15. (4/30/2007): 42–46.

44. Calling Cho's writings a manifesto both implies a coherent treatise and alludes to (the threat of) communism.

45. Adrian Hong, "Koreans Aren't to Blame," Washingtonpost.com (20 Apr. 2007).

46. As of 2000, Virginia Tech had an only 4% African American student body compared to an over 20% African American population within the state. See "Virginia Tech Struggles with Racial Diversity," *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* 26 (Winter, 1999–2000): 65.