

On the Virginia Tech Massacre

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Written exclusively for SKAS, April 21, 2007.

I often feel that there is a subterranean current in our society that erupts in moments of crisis, bringing into view some things that are ordinarily hidden. For instance, some Americans, accustomed to images of Denzel Washington as savior of the nation, Will Smith as President of the U.S., and Morgan Freeman as God and to the feeling that they have an African American friend because they watch the Oprah Winfrey Show every afternoon, might have been shocked by the images of real African Americans stranded for days on end after Hurricane Katrina. During crises, a bright spotlight often illuminates dark corners for a brief moment, giving us the chance to see things differently.

I would like to open a space for a few additional or alternative viewpoints about the mass killings at Virginia Tech, soon after which I began receiving email messages from Asian American and especially Korean American students and friends. Forgetting for a moment that most people in the U.S. don't differentiate among Asian ethnicities, Chinese and Vietnamese American students admitted that they were relieved to hear that Cho was Korean. Korean American students reported that their parents called them, asking them to come home or telling them not to go out. Were the parents over-reacting? Perhaps they remembered the backlash against South Asians, Arabs, Muslims, and even Latinos who "looked Middle Eastern" in the U.S. after 9-11 or were thinking of what happened to Korean and other Asian shop-keepers in the wake of the L.A. riots. Some of them might have known the internment of Japanese Americans as enemy aliens" during World War II or even about the long history of racial exclusion and violence against Asian immigration and labor.

Many students wrote that when the news first broke, they had imagined the killer as a white male, like Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold of the 1999 Columbine High School massacre in Colorado, Timothy McVeigh of the Oklahoma City bombing that killed 168 people in 1995, Jeffrey Dahmer of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, who murdered and ate 17 boys and men, many of whom were Asian Americans, between 1978 and 1991, and numerous other mass murderers in U.S. history. They knew that news stories never identify white mass murderers or

serial killers by race. "I really envy white people," wrote one student, "because when white people do something so brutally and horribly wrong, nobody says, 'Do you think it was because he's white?' There are no headlines calling him 'the white shooter.' No one mentions race, because no one thinks his race has anything to do with his crime."

After the Columbine massacre, one television news story after another conjectured to an assumed white middle class viewership about what had made these boys "go wrong." Though angry and alienated like Seung-hui Cho, Harris and Klebold were represented as part of the community, not outside it. In contrast, the Virginia Tech stories invariably described the shooter at first as foreign and later as a lone lunatic. Even though he came to the U.S. at the age of 7 or 8 and spent 2/3 of his life here, attending primary school, middle school, high school, and college in the U.S., Cho was described as Asian, South Korean, Korean, of Korean descent, an immigrant from South Korea, or a Korean "alien resident." Like many other Americans, although he had a green card, he spoke fluent English and was, in fact, much more "American" than "South Korean." One student thought that the news media tried to designate what he did as a "Korean" - as opposed to a crime that was "made in the U.S.A." Another thought that the media stories about the tragedy not only reinforced stereotypes of Asians as "eternal foreigners" rather than as Americans or even as individual human beings but also exploited old racial stereotypes of Asians as inscrutable robotic nerds - cold, robotic, friendless, and weird.

Since the media never let them forget their race and ethnicity, some students remarked that they could not help feeling connected to Seung-hui Cho, even though they if don't want to be. Unpopular as their viewpoint might be, some, without excusing or condoning Cho's actions, did not ascribe to the media portrayals of him as "alien" and "non-human." His face reminded them of friends and relatives.

I couldn't help but feel like this man deserved...sympathy. Delusional or not, he felt like he was standing up for himself and for others like him, people who were tormented and traumatized for not being able to speak English at first, for the way they look, for being who they are. There's no possible justification for his actions, but it's sad to think about what he must've gone through to finally reach this brink. It's a shame and a pity that there are probably many people who can relate to him because they feel as alone and angry as he did.

Clarity of vision can come in a moment of crisis. In the wake of the Virginia Tech slayings, students wondered how poverty and unfamiliarity with mental health resources might inhibit a family's ability to deal with mental illness. They

thought about what would have happened if there had been better gun control and about the insanity of the gun lobby's suggestion that all students be armed. The crisis also exposed the power of the mass media. Of course everyone is horrified and saddened by the murder of innocent people, regardless of race or nationality, several students said, but the South Korean government's condolences are not extended to Iraq, even though more than 200 people were killed and 150 wounded in the four days immediately before and after Virginia Tech. We don't know what those people's faces looked like or what their stories were, not just because they aren't Americans but also because American stories dominate world news 24/7, as Iraqi - and South Korean stories do not. The sudden and massive national attention on a Korean American made them think about how invisible Korean Americans usually are in U.S. national culture.

I am hoping that this crisis will give us all new insights that will stay with us, giving us new courage to express otherwise marginalized views so that we can all participate in dialogues that will strengthen multiracial democracy.