



**RANDOM DISASTERS AND DAILY REALITIES:  
RACE, REMEMBRANCE AND RACIALIZED RETROSPECTION**

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The random disasters that periodically lay waste the landscape of our lives and overwhelm our emotions seem to some, maybe most, to have no pattern, make no sense and have little or no roots in the daily realities of the way we live, think and relate to each other and the world. But some of us, who look below the surface of the self-congratulatory portrait U.S. society paints of itself, do see the persistent theme of violence against the vulnerable and the societal acceptance and sanction of the domination, degradation and destruction of different others in this country and the world. And so, whenever I hear about a mass murder, I do not anxiously wonder and wait to learn the racial or ethnic identity of the deranged and ruthless person responsible. For, as I told a student who questioned me concerning this at an out-of-town university lecture last week, I am relatively certain it will be most likely a White male and almost always an American, i.e., an American in the U.S. sense of the word.

It is the way it has unfolded in history ever since the U.S. emerged as a colonial country which began with the decimation of the Native Americans. Like this initial act of genocide, all subsequent national projects of imagined “manifest destiny” have revered violence and victory and reveled in domination and degradation of vulnerable and different others. The pattern of violence is deep-rooted, long-standing, and obviously now out of control, having moved from just men to the inclusion of boy killers and from the early killing fields of conquest and enslavement and the lynching roads and riot-strewn streets of segregation and suppression to now a number of grade schools and college campuses.

So although the media has in retrospection racialized this latest horrific

massacre at Virginia Tech, Cho Seung-Hui, the young man who committed it, can be considered for all practical purposes and social and cultural conceptions as an American. The media and others might want to employ the standard stereotypes of the alone, lonely and inscrutable Asian male, question his relatives and look for links to Korean sources in his parents, papers and past Korean movies, but he saw himself in the company of his Columbine predecessors and he was as clear as they in his commitment to mass killing.

Thus, his name and political nationality were Korean, but his views and values, the way he understood and violently engaged the world, the claimed grounds of his grievance, his alienation and aggressiveness, his Columbine self-comparison, and his cold and calculated willingness to sacrifice others for a false and fleeting sense of place and power, all reflect his intense embrace of the seamy side of American life. He had been here since he was eight, digesting a daily diet of the things that go into the making of an American. It is clear that he was unhealthily attracted to what is often called in racialized language “the dark side of U.S. popular culture,” although it might be more appropriately called the “White side,” if the designation is determined by dominance and numbers.

So, there was no need for the President of South Korea to apologize three times or for Korean groups to hold community vigils and declare personal and communal shock and shame. Nor should they have had to wait apprehensively hoping the killer not be Asian and if Asian, not Korean. And neither should Arabs, other Asians—Eastern or Western, or Latinos or Native Americans or Africans have to hold their breath hoping that a random rampage won’t become

racialized, a source of racial indictment and a new impetus for unprovoked and unwarranted attacks like those on Arabs since 9/11 and Africans since we arrived here. No one asked about the role “Whiteness” played in making mass murderers out of the White boys and young men who most often commit these horrific atrocities. But in the racial protocol of discourse in the U.S., the ethnicity or race of a person of color is openly or covertly counted as relevant and perhaps revealing of a racial defect or deficiency.

It is clearly easier in racialized retrospection to question and talk about the troubled and sick psychology of the killer, ethnic roots and family factors. And it is likewise easier to grieve the easy access to guns, the failure of the mental health services, and the lax security at schools. But at what point in the midst of the meditation on these horrors do we begin the hard questions about society itself? When do we discuss the way we live isolated and vulgarly individualistic lives, the way our caring is most often convenient, superficial and self-serving; how dominance, degradation and destruction are the subject and substance of our media, music, video games, children and adult toys and the talk about “shock and awe,” and bombing cities with a merciless madness that must eventually come back to haunt us?

And what about an honest discussion not only about the visible horrors but also

the hidden catastrophes of history and today? This and similar acts of mass murder always remind me of the official and informal violence and mass murder of Africans, Native Americans, Latinos and Asians, and other peoples of color otherwise classified. And when people say this is the largest mass murder by whatever or whoever in U.S. history, I wonder how this relates to the mass murder of peoples of color under various conditions of official and general violence?

I think also about the daily realities of the extreme racial and imperial violence imposed on the world by this country. And I wonder what sensitivity there is for people of color here and abroad who suffer massacres and other forms of violence with revolting regularity. And if we as a country care, why is it not dealt with in the media and elsewhere in depthful and dignity-affirming ways and why don't we do more to end it in places like Darfur, Iraq, Haiti, Palestine and Afghanistan? No, this is not to say people should mourn less for the loss of loved ones, but that they should mourn also and a little more for others, and avoid a selective morality of human concern. There is no easy answer here, but regardless, we must insist on personal *and* collective responsibility, reaffirm the sacredness of life, and intensify our struggle to create a context in which choice and act are not in the interest of death and destruction but in the affirmation and enhancement of life.

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