WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?* **

- The Virginia Tech Shootings and the Korean American Community

Kye-young Park***

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You sir are a rabble rouser trying to stir up trouble. Stop playing the victim. You expected newsmen not to identify the killer by saying Korean American. No one is going to go after Korean Americans. Most Asian boys are terribly misguided by fathers who still react as typical Korean fathers no touch, little communication, study 24/7; you’re no good unless you’re at the top. My brother died to save South Korea and you don’t seem to mention while Americans go…1) so you can rattle on like an ineffective toy.2)

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*** University of California, Los Angeles, Department of Anthropology
kpark@anthro.ucla.edu
1) I am unable to figure out the next word(hand-written).
In the wake of the Virginia Tech shootings, I was bombarded with requests for comments from the news media. Some readers responded to my comments in contrasting ways. A lady from Culver City conveyed to me that not all Angelinos blame the Virginia Technical University tragedy on Korean Americans. As a mother, she lamented that it is a very difficult task to raise a son, nowadays. Even if you do your best as a mother, it still does not guarantee that he will turn out all right. She was sympathetic with the parents of gunman, Seung-hui Cho. I appreciated her phone call. In contrast, a gentleman left a phone message refuting my critique of the way the media identified the ethnicity of the gunman. There were worse responses to my interviews. The postcard cited above was delivered to me. I was dumbfounded to read these lines. I was reprimanded for not acknowledging American sacrifice for South Korea during the Korean War. In other words, some Americans feel that Korean Americans are the same as the North Korean communists of more than half a century ago, even if Korean Americans grew up in the U.S., like gunman, Cho.

As Cho was identified as a South Korean foreigner and alien by the mass media, public discourse on the Virginia Tech shootings developed and circulated throughout South Korea, the Korean American community, and in the American mainstream society. Consequently, in this essay, I critically examine the question of social citizenship (e.g., inclusion, acceptance, membership, belonging, etc.) for gunman and other Korean/Asian Americans a la this public discourse. In other words, who was Cho? What mechanism constituted his social citizenship? When violence is perpetuated by Asian Americans,

2) I received this postcard from somebody in Santa Clarita, dated April 19, 2007. This means that the sender read my interview on the 18 in a local or regional newspaper.
What does that say about the status and social citizenship of other Korean/Asian Americans? Why was gunman Cho related to the Korean War or even Kim Jong Il? In my discussion, I would also like to make the distinction between social citizenship and political citizenship. The latter has better claim to the word citizenship, specifying access to both civil rights and "human" rights, at least as far as enforcement goes. However, there is an American tradition of viewing citizenship as a process of participation, not merely status. That view is reflected in the year-long classes in Citizenship formerly required in High Schools. Secondly, the role of U.S. hegemonic relations with North and South Korea also comes into account. Imperialism will be introduced as an analytic tool, but an aside or development. The advantage of "hegemony" is that it can refer to domination, a heavy exercise of power, or dominance, which implies less overt exercise of power. In other words, the term hegemony alludes to ascendancy to power rather than an overt conquest. Hegemony and ascendancy require maintenance to continue, and that is what I analyze in this paper. The maintenance of an empire can be analyzed in the same way because empires cannot afford to always threaten or send in troops; even empires require social cooperation. Thirdly, when Cho could not be placed outside the U.S. anymore, public discourse replaced old eugenic racial stereotyping by relying on a new strategy: the culturalization and ethnicization of the Virginia Tech shootings. As a result, I would also like to contribute to the discussion on racialization and culturalization through this paper. In addition, I call our attention into the much neglected arena of public policy.

3) I am speaking of High Schools such as the rural one my colleague attended in the 1960's, in which there were no immigrants or minorities.
For some time, as far as second generation Asian Americans are concerned, researchers have been preoccupied with the question of adaptation and assimilation with a concomitant emphasis on status-attainment indicators, such as educational and occupational outcomes. Margaret Gibson and Nazli Kibria, who did pioneering work on second generation Asian Americans, demonstrated that such Asian Americans accommodate, but without fully assimilating into the mainstream. Gibson suggests that Punjabi elders have made a decision not to “assimilate” to America. But the evidence presented here suggests that “to date they have only partly acculturated, true assimilation being largely a decision made by the majority group of a society vis-à-vis its minorities.”

In her book, *Becoming Asian American: Second-Generation Chinese and Korean American Identities*, Kibria examines a variety of identity issues among second generation Chinese and Korean Americans of middle-class status. She argues that the Asian American experience is fundamentally different due to the racialization of Asians as nonwhite. In other words, unlike European Americans, Asian Americans are “both racial minorities and ethnic Americans.” Yet, they do appear to be assimilating into the mainstream as Asian Americans.

In the process, few scholars have talked about the dirty little secret about middle class assimilation: for non-whites, it does not always prevent racial alienation, rage, or depression. According to Lisa Sunhee Park, the previous approaches fail to adequately problematize the impacts of inequality.

especially racism, on second generation, middle-class Asian Americans. Also
underlooked, are the everyday barriers to social citizenship and inclusion that
prevent second generation Americans of non-Western origin, from laying
easy claim to "Americanness" regardless of how successful or culturally
acculturated they are. Lisa Sunhee Park's attention to social citizenship and
its racialized undertones that deny inclusion to non-white groups is most
pertinent to this essay. She asserts that by consuming status-laden objects,
Asian Americans, or the children of Korean and Chinese entrepreneurs in
this case, can absorb their "otherness" and recast themselves as part of the
"normal" mainstream of American consumerism.6 As non-whites have been
excluded from social inclusion in the U.S. in recent years (e.g., voting
irregularities in the 2000 presidential election, government response to
victims of Hurricane Katrina, racial profiling of terrorists, anti-immigrant
policies),7 the racialized meanings of social citizenship is well applicable to
the case in point. Additionally, partially resonating Lisa Park's thesis that
the children of Korean and Chinese entrepreneurs seek to see and present
themselves as Americans through the products that they consume, gunman
Cho attempted to create a sense of social belonging in American society by
consuming American popular culture.

One of the most updated discussions on the question of citizenship is
found in Aihwa Ong's book, Buddha is Hiding: Refugees, Citizenship, the
New America. Characterizing the line of inquiry on the question of citizenship

7) Karen D. Pyke. (Review of) "Becoming Asian American: Second Generation Chinese and
Korean American Identities," by Nazli Kibria (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University
via exclusion, succession, and difference, she maintains that “scholars have moved inevitably beyond a narrow focus on citizenship as a set of legal rights either you have it or you don’t—to a consideration of group membership that includes a variety of citizens and noncitizens.” Likewise, I am differentiating social citizenship from conventional, legal or political citizenship. The following citation shows that there has been extensive scholarship on exclusion based on race, class, gender, or culture:

“Historians have studied how the racial logic that originated in the exclusion of Native Americans was used to marginalize generations of African Americans and came to shape their race and class positions on a grid of citizenship. Similarly, feminists have argued that poor women have long been excluded from social citizenship because of unequal treatment under the law and even by the inadequate protection afforded by the modern welfare state.”

The so-called “Asian” has been the site of multiple anxieties that have marked this subject as the inscrutable immigrant alien (Immigration act of 1924), the subhuman monster (as embodied by the evil machinations of Fu Manchu), or the eerily agreeable “model minority.”

9) Ong, Hiding: Refugees, Citizenship, the New America, 3.
10) Immigration Act (Johnson-Reed Act) restricted all Asians from coming into the United States.
1. Interpellations of Korean Americans

Some Korean Americans and also citizens in South Korea thought that it was natural reaction for them to relate Cho to themselves as fellow ethnic people. In other words, they felt as if they themselves had murdered innocent young lives. They also found it natural to apologize to Americans and felt ashamed about being Korean.

As I recall, the morning of April 16, 2007, NPR reported that 32 people had been shot dead by a lone gunman, apparently Asian, on the campus of Virginia Tech. In addition to sadness, fear, and numbness, I was concerned about the possible racial backlash against all the Asian Americans. By evening, it was reported that the shooter was likely a student from China. Other Korean Americans later shared that they wished the shooter were not Korean. The first New York Times story identifying Cho as the killer called him a “South Korean who was a resident alien,” just as the police had identified Cho as a “South Korean resident, citizen—a legal alien.” They added that this student might be a foreign exchange student. Moreover, police and media made extra efforts to identify his name in a Korean, un-American way. I doubted what I heard. If he were a foreign student from South Korea,¹¹) where guns are banned, it is unlikely that this student would know how to obtain and use a gun. After all, American public discourse promoted by police and media attempted to classify the shooter as

¹¹) Last year, an estimated 93,000 South Koreans were enrolled in colleges and universities in the United States, forming one of the largest foreign student communities, with about 460 South Korean students reportedly enrolled at Virginia Tech alone (NYT April 17, 2007).
foreigner, alien, or terrorist. Ordinarily, he would have been identified as a U.S. resident, holding a green card. Since then, the mass media continued to mention “South Korea,” invoking a South Korean connection. For instance, when CNN repeatedly covered their screen with “South Korea” in big letters, it was impossible for anyone of Korean descent to run away from it. CNN showed a Korean immigrant pounding his own heart, shouting that “I am ashamed about being Korean...” CNN even quickly dispatched their foreign correspondents to India. They interviewed those who planned on coming to the U.S. to study. Indian students stated that they were not discouraged from coming here, despite the gun shooting at a U.S. university.

This situation is a textbook example of what Louis Althusser coins “interpellation” or hailing. Like a man hailed by a police officer and thereby interpellated as an acting subject in the ideological regime the officer embodies, Koreans here in the U.S. and homeland were ideologically hailed and transformed from individuals to categorical subjects. In the words of Althusser, “The hailed individual will turn round. By this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion, he becomes a subject [original emphasis]. Why? Because he recognized that the hail was “really” addressed to him, and that “it was really him who was hailed” (and not someone else).\(^{12}\)

In this way, Koreans were subject to racialized interpellation. In other words, if Cho were a white shooter, his fellow white Americans would not have been called upon. In the past, most campus shooters were white Americans and they were treated as individual human beings. When the news first broke, many had imagined the killer as a white male, like Eric

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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, and numerous other mass murderers in U. S. history. News stories never identify white mass murderers or serial killers by race. Although some talk about the rise of a color-blind society, minorities are subject to racialization through crimes and violence. Racial minorities such as Koreans do not have the luxury to be treated as individuals. Furthermore, although he spent two thirds of his life in the U. S., in some respects, his residency was revoked and he is deported to South Korea.

Thus, American public discourse promoted by police, media, and later politicians succeeded in distancing itself from Cho and in excluding him as an “other.” For instance, the emphasis on Seung-Hui Cho’s racial identity and citizenship status in the New York Times front-page coverage of the Virginia shootings (4/17/06) has no direct relevance to the story and only fueled anti-immigrant sentiment in the U. S. To conservative political commentator and former presidential advisor, Pat Buchanan, the Virginia Tech massacre was the direct result of the Immigration Act of 1965 and Cho’s Korean heritage:

> Almost no attention has been paid to the fact that Cho Seung-Hui was not an American at all, but an immigrant and alien. Had this deranged young man who secretly hated us never come here, 32 people would be heading home from Blacksburg for summer vacation.”

The fact that Mr. Cho is singled out is further demonstrated by the online timeline of “Major Campus Killings” on NYT’s website(4/17/06). Here, only Mr. Cho’s racial identity is mentioned, whereas in the case of the 1996 Texan gunman and Columbine killings, their racial identity is not mentioned because race clearly has nothing to do with this tragedy. Christine Hauser states at the beginning of her article that Mr. Cho is “a resident alien in the United States.” Mr. Cho’s citizenship status has nothing to do with his motivation for killing other students; there is nothing inherently racial about his actions. Mr. Cho had lived here for near 15 years.

In another NYT article (4/17/06), Graham Bowley and Maria Newman described Mr. Cho as being “very quiet,” and “spending his free time playing basketball and would not respond if someone greeted him.” Cho’s family was also said to be “very quite and polite. And always have a smile on their face.” These descriptions evoke racial stereotypes of meek, shy, lonely and submissive Asians and only enable outsiders to “other” Mr. Cho, his family, and other Asians. Another NYT reporter, Marc Santora, writes, “He was never seen with a girl or with any friends for that matter”(4/17/6). This comment only serves to support stereotypes of Asian men as being effeminate, because Mr. Cho’s lack of girlfriends has no direct relevance to the killing. Furthermore, Christine Hauser contradicts this statement by reporting that Mr. Cho searched for his ex-girlfriend.

Bowley and Newman also note how important it is for South Koreans to study in the U. S., encouraging stereotypes of studious, but socially inept Asian students who reap the benefits of American universities, but give

14) I am indebted to Rebekah Park for providing research assistance, as far as this portion is concerned.
little in return. The NYT posted an article online from Reuters(4/17/06) alleging that Mr. Cho wrote a note railing against “rich kids” and “debauchery” implying that Mr. Cho was an ungrateful immigrant who became frustrated with American culture. For a leading newspaper, it is important to report relevant facts, rather than deepen racial stereotypes and spur anti-immigrant sentiment.

The American media was also preoccupied with analyzing Cho’s individual traits and mindset. The question asked was, “What drove this young man to snap and kill?” Particular attention was paid to the two stalking incidents against two females in 2005, two short plays he wrote for a class, and a court ordered mental evaluation. In a CNN program, one psychologist suggested that Cho may have been suffering from a latent homosexuality. The conclusion was that Cho was a deranged individual and improvement in campus security, for prevention, was suggested. The problem with this focus is that “an individual does not operate in a vacuum but in an environment that offers opportunities and inspirations”15)

The media not only reinforced stereotypes of Asians as “eternal foreigners,” rather than showing them as Americans or even as individual human beings, but also exploited old, eugenic, racial stereotypes of Asians as inscrutable nerds—cold, robotic, friendless, cruel, and weird. They would talk about how Asian males presumably have fragile “egos” and, therefore, are culturally prone to engage in kamikaze style violence. These statements will be embedded along with other racist ideas about Japanese military fighters during WWII or the Viet Cong the crazy, calculating, and hidden Asian man

who will fight to the death over presumably nothing.

2. South Korean Reaction

As soon as the shooter was known to be a South Korean citizen, reactions among South Koreans ranged from profound personal shame to a fear of reprisal. Immediately, South Korean President, Roh Moo-hyun, offered his "deep condolences to bereaved family members and wished quick recovery of injured people." The President planned on dispatching a high-level diplomat to funerals of the victims of this violent crime, but failed, wanting better diplomacy.\(^{16}\)

Culturally, Koreans have a strong sense of collective identity both in happiness and in suffering.\(^ {17}\) Korean cultural nationalism or a heightened sense of having one "blood" or a singular ethno-national identity, reinforced through a long history of foreign invasion and occupation, has led to a hypersensitivity about foreign perceptions.

However, when Americans appeared to be a bit puzzled over Korean reactions to the Virginia Tech shootings, especially overapologies, netizens in South Korea, or citizens on the cyberspace, started to debate on whether Cho can be considered a Korean or not. Initially, many thought that he was

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16) The U. S. government declined the South Korean government’s offer, since this shooting was a domestic matter.
17) See Gi-wook Shin, "Korea faces challenges of multiethnic society," The Korea Herald (July 16, 2007). He argues that this incident well illustrates Korea’s psyche (i.e., deeply rooted ethnic national identity).
a Korean, since he was born to parents of Korean descent, reflecting a Korean system of nationality attribution, *jus sanguinis*, as well as Korean ideology of racial/ethnic homogeneity. If he were still a Korean, he would be expected to speak Korean and to practice Korean culture no matter where he lives. Others pointed out that he is no longer Korean, but an American, since he left Korea at the age of 8. Apparently, he did not speak Korean well nor had he ever been back to South Korea. Moreover, others still debated Cho’s citizenship and legal status. In other words, if he obtained permanent residency in the U. S., he should be treated as such. They were sensitive to the increasing demand made by Korean Americans to grant double citizenship, without fulfilling important duties such as military service and tax pay. However, they are not aware that in the U. S. even if you were born here and are, therefore, a U. S. citizen, not everyone is treated the same way. For instance, Asian immigrants were not eligible to qualify for U. S. citizenship until the 1940s and 50s.\(^{18}\) Racial minorities often end up with partial, racialized citizenship, despite having citizenship in the legal sense. Netizens also lack an understanding of the hybrid or negotiated nature of identity formation in the current transnational and globalized context. In other words, they are under the belief that one has only one racial/ethnic identity, therefore one is either Korean or American.

It was a 1.5 generation Korean American, who was born in Korea, but

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18) In 1943, the Magnuson Act Resumption of naturalization rights was granted to Chinese Americans and immigration was permitted from China. In 1946, the Luce-Celler Act Resumption of naturalization rights was granted to Indian Americans and Filipino Americans. Token immigration was allowed with a quota was set at 100 per year from India and 100 per year from the Philippines. In 1947, citizenship was restored to some Japanese Americans who had renounced it.
immigrated to the U. S. at an early age that unleashed the fusillade of terror at Virginia Tech. Biculturalism and multiculturalism, colored by aspects of “double consciousness,” are the most significant criteria in defining 1.5 generation Korean Americans. Kyeyoung Park argues that such high level of valorization of the term “1.5er” has much to do with the political expectations within the Korean American community for 1.5ers to be “bridge builders.” However, some 1.5ers sometimes feel ostracized by second generation Koreans or American peers who look down on their poorer English skills. At the same time, they do not feel fully accepted by first generation Koreans for the opposite reason: having poor Korean skills or manners. Some wonder whether the strains that accompany trying to straddle two cultures may have contributed to Cho’s psychological deterioration. However, there is little evidence that Cho struggled with conflicted loyalties at all. He seemed to know who he was. Cho might have become more alienated via such things as violent movies that often revolve around loners.

Not only lacking critical understanding of the racialized nature of citizenship and residency, citizens in South Korea are also unaware of what is going on among Asian/Korean Americans who were born or grew up here in the U. S. For instance, Pyong Gap Min reported that second generation Korean adolescents are highly assimilated culturally, but strongly attached to their ethnic community in terms of their friendship patterns and identity. As for Cho, he did not seem to belong to the Korean American

19) In this essay, I am using the term 1.5 generation and the 2nd generation interchangeably, meaning the children of the first generation immigrants.
21) Joann Hong and Pyong Gap Min, “Ethnic Attachment among Second Generation
community, either. He was deeply involved in American popular culture. He might have been desperately looking for a place to belong to. Cho's notes left a hint that white supremacy and racism, still a phenomenon in some quarters of our society, may have contributed to his extreme crime of hatred.

When they found that their apologies were received as an over-action or seen as inappropriate, Koreans did some soul searching. Some wanted to understand this awkward situation as a matter of modernity and premodernity, as well as that of Western and Eastern differences. For instance, they noticed that western countries, such as the U. S., had gone through a kind of political individualization while going through industrialization. In other words, many Koreans thought it may be a premodern or Eastern idea to attribute one's individual mistakes to the entire society. In their self-criticism, they wondered whether their fear for the U. S. caused their collective apologies. In the past, the U. S. kept South Korea from invasions from North Korea. In the current, post-cold war era, the U. S. has continued to play a critical role in keeping South Korean economy afloat. Some Koreans speculate whether the Virginia Tech shootings may cause damage to well-cultivated U. S./South Korea relations and alliances.

3. Korean American Community Reaction

Ordinary Korean immigrants and Korean American community leaders were devastated with the tragedy. Not only did they express their condolences.

at the loss of lives at Virginia Tech, but they also took it upon themselves to apologize for the actions of gunman Seung-hui Cho, citing a sense of collective guilt and shame simply by virtue of a shared ethnicity. For instance, the *Washington Post* (April 20, 2007) reported that Washington state Senator, Paul Shin, issued an emotional apology for Cho’s actions to fellow lawmakers and staff, and he cited American sacrifices for South Korea during the Korean War. News reports also indicate that several Koreans have approached police stations throughout the nation, apologizing.

According to the *Los Angeles Times* (April 18, 2007), community leader and president of the nonprofit Korean American Foundation of Los Angeles, Pyong Yong Min, wept while stating, “first, I cried for the families of the victims, then I cried for U. S.-Korea relations. Then, I thought why must we the Korean people, who have been such close allies of America for so long have this burden on our hands?” Min lamented that “[the] image of Koreans aren’t very good,” referring also to North Korean leader Kim Jong-II. At a prayer service, Rev. Dong Sun Lim, founding pastor of the Oriental Mission Church, one of the largest Korean American churches in Southern California, went further by saying, “All Koreans in South Korea as well as here must bow their heads and apologize to the people of America.” He went on to say, “Yesterday [April 16] was the most shameful and tragic day in the 100-year history of Korean immigration to the United States. All we can do is to pray.” The Korean American Coalition, a national civic organization, set up a fund-raising campaign to deliver money to Virginia Tech. This collective sense of sorrow and pertinence can also be seen in comments by South Korean ambassador to the United States. When he attended a candle light vigil attended by 500-600 Korean Americans living in
the region, he could not stop sobbing and instantly suggested that Koreans in the U.S. fast for 32 days one day for each victim. However, it was seen inappropriate for the Korean ambassador to the United States to apologize on behalf of Korean Americans and to speak of the need to work towards being accepted as a “worthwhile minority” in this nation (Washington Post, April 20, 2007). While the Korean ambassador represents the interests of Korean nationals in the United States, and the interests of the republic of Korea, he does not speak for naturalized Koreans here.

An old timer, first generation Korean immigrant shared his take on the Virginia Tech shooting in the following way:

“It is unbelievable how a youngster from our own culture where peace and humanity are of primary value, could cause this tremendous damage to the image of our people—the Korean diasporas in this country, who have worked hard bending over backwards and made a bit of beachhead of settlement in this country over a short span of the last 30 to 40 years, felt as if they saw their world tumbling down like the World Trade Center in New York on that tragic day of 9/11...I, as an immigrant myself, would like to take a chance to extend my sincere condolences, and a word of consolation and apology to the families of the young victims, their friends and the American people in general.”

However, he is critical of American culture and society:

In fact, he might have wanted to be a ‘hero’ of violence himself a reflection

of the American culture of violence, which finds its ejaculation turning Iraq and Afghanistan into killing fields. Hundreds of thousands American soldiers whose primary mission is to keep peace of the world are mobilized to kill thousands upon thousands of innocent people, and most of people in this country accept it in a daily routine the pang of conscience because the victims are 'pagan.'

He is equally critical of the Korean American community:

"[W]hen the Korean community, lost in materialism, turns its face from social injustices abundant within, it is most probable that an endless supply of a Cho and his ilk could be produced."

Many Korean immigrant parents readily admitted that they have not paid sufficient attention to their children's spiritual education, personality and character formation, or their contribution to U.S. society. More importantly, they became critical of the Korean American church focus on overseas missionary work, while neglecting the well-being of second generation Korean Americans.

Other Korean Americans were confused, without knowing what to do. Some even suggested that the best thing to do, at this point, is for Korean Americans to keep a low profile. Others recalled age-old wisdom that the only way for Korean Americans to be redeemed will be through hard work, so that they can regain their trust. Still, others suggested that Korean Americans should participate actively in all kinds of volunteering such as charity work, cleaning parks, beaches, or streets. Some suggested that Korean Americans pay more attention to other communities.
As reported in the media, Korean Americans were worried about possible racial and ethnic backlash associated with the Virginia Tech shootings. It reminded them of the 1992 Los Angeles civil unrest where many Korean owned stores were targeted and burned down. An incident which led to the targeting of Korean owned businesses during the Los Angeles civil unrest of 1992 revolves around a Korean grocer who killed an African American teenager over a dispute over shoplifting. The lenient sentence that the Korean grocer received angered African Americans and apparently led to looting and burning of Korean owned stores during the civil unrest. Although the immediate cause was the white police officers’ beating of black motorist, Rodney King, the way the media portrayed Black/Korean tension and the Du/Harlins incident made it seem like Koreans caused the beating of Rodney King.

Although it was little known to the public, different segments of the Korean American population responded to the Virginia Tech tragedy in different ways. As I mentioned earlier, it was mostly first generation Korean immigrants who readily identified themselves with Cho and offered apologies to Americans. This was less so among their children’s generation, who were either born or grew up in the U. S. The latter were upset that some members of their community were accepting this as collective guilt. Adrian Hong was able to articulate such perspective espoused by the children of Korean immigrants:

Korean Americans do not need to apologize for what happened Monday [April 16]. All of us, as fellow Americans, feel tremendous sorrow and grief at the carnage. Our community, as it should, has expressed solidarity with and
sent condolences to the victims, and as Americans, Koreans certainly should take part in the healing process.

But the actions of Cho Seung Hui are no more the fault of Korean Americans than the actions of the Washington area snipers were the fault of African Americans. Just as those crimes were committed by deranged individuals acting on their own initiative, and not because of any ethnic grievance or agenda, these were isolated acts by an individual, not a reflection of a community...:

The Korean claim to guilt and shame on behalf of Cho Seung Hui is well-intentioned but misguided. We are Americans first. While we share an affinity with Korea and appreciate and respect Korean culture, at the end of the day we are Americans. Our president is in the White House, not in the Blue House. And our response to this crisis should be as Americans, not as Koreans.23)

Points of view still varied among these young generation Korean Americans. Some could easily identify themselves with Cho, who reminded themselves of their own traumatic, racialized growing-up experiences.

It is not unusual to see young Korean/Asian American men who are quiet, shy, lonely, and growing up in the suburbs turn to popular music or computer games. Besides, since Korean immigrants own a fairly good number of dry cleaning businesses, Korean American children can relate themselves to Cho, whose parents ran a dry cleaner. Some questioned the media portrayals of him as “alien” and “non-human.” Since the media never let them forget their race and ethnicity, they have no choice but to claim him and the crime he committed: “As Korean Americans, we share ownership

of this tragedy, the problems it revealed and their potential solutions, just like every other Americans should.”24)

Others refused to relate themselves to Cho. One person stated, “Cho represents the serial killers of America’s past, not Koreans in South Korea or Korean Americans here.” Another one added, “The guy just happened to be Korean born.” They did not see anything in common with Cho and were deeply resentful of being lumped together with a gunman and be further expected to apologize to the public, just because of shared ethnicity. In past school-related massacres, where the majority of campus gunmen have been white, they do not recall receiving any apologies from white Americans.

Furthermore, Korean American apologies were not understood well due to language and cultural barriers. The meaning and practice of an apology varies in different cultures. In the U. S., where an individual is separate and autonomous, one is expected to apologize to a specific individual whom you have done harm, which is not the case in Korean culture.

Some Americans were genuinely impressed with the way Korean Americans apologized. They were intrigued with the different and exotic ways in which Korean Americans offered their apologies. Other minority communities could understand well why Korean Americans apologized. As Andrew Nam aptly put, “an Anglo shooter may be an individual, a loner, but God forbid if a person of color goes on a shooting rampage. His whole tribe would be implicated.”25) To be a minority in America, even in the 21st century, is to be always on trial. An evil act by one indscts the entire community.

24) Julie Ha, “All of Us Own This Tragedy,” KoreAm Journal 18: 5 (May, 2007), 65.
Whoever doubts this need only look at the spike in hate crimes against Muslims and South Asian communities after 9/11.

However, the sense of shock and shame that has engulfed the Korean American community in the wake of the murderous Virginia Tech rampage may seem overdone to some people. Still others, with ethno-centric attitude, were puzzled and increasingly uncomfortable with this Korean American reaction. How can Korean Americans or people in South Korea be legally or morally responsible for someone that they did not know? Korean American response prompted confusion, even derision for some people. John Kobyit of “the John & Ken Show” on KFI-AM (640) poked fun at Korean Americans’ self-blame, accusing them of “playing the race card…” Now look who’s stereotyping” (Los Angeles Times April 19, 2007). Finally, some demanded to stop any more apologies.

The “distancing” attitude promoted by the mass media against Cho and Korean American culture, affected the way American public discourse portrayed Korean Americans in the wake of the Virginia Tech shootings: from racializing to ethnicizing, culturalizing, or pathologizing the Korean American community or family. It took exactly one week or so for the American media to rediscover Cho as Made in America, not as Made in Korea. Around this time, interest in stories about the Virginia Tech shootings dwindled abruptly.

4. New Developments

Nobody knows all the reasons why any news media or other stories
regarding the Virginia Tech shooting suddenly vanished. Partly, I would like
to give some credit to intervention made by some Korean Americans. This
compares favorably with the 1992 Los Angeles civil unrest, 15 years ago. A
few Korean Americans made a point that it is unfair to overly emphasize
the racial/ethnic origin of the shooter. Most campus shootings have been
committed by white American men and their white American ethnic origin
was never made to be an issue. More importantly, an increasing number of
people questioned the portrayal of the gunman as Korean product. Although
he was born in South Korea, he left at the age of 8. He spent the bulk of
his life, 15 years out of 22 in the U. S. He basically grew up in a
middle-class suburb and was educated in the U. S. Los Angeles Times
columnist, Gregory Rodriguez (April 23, 2007) made the important correction
that “he [Cho] was an ‘us,’ not a ‘them’”:

Last week, the point of origin was South Korea, and Seung-hui Cho’s
ethnic “brothers” in Asia and the U. S. grappled with their relationship to him.
Of course, a murderer’s ethnic, religious or racial background is relevant
only if he is acting on what he thinks is a tribal imperative….

Here in the U. S., Korean American organizations issued cravenly
self-serving condolence statements to the victims of the massacre. In a news
release, one organization promised that “the Korean American community will
join the efforts of others in tackling the root causes of these senseless school
shootings that continue to endanger our children and young adults…”.

But the truth is that Cho was an American kid. He had lived in the United
States since he was 8, and he was clearly immersed in the dark side of U. S.
popular culture. In his video ramblings, he compared himself to the Columbine
killers; he spoke English-major English…”.
His horrific crimes are not a reflection on Korean people immigrants or Korean Americans but rather on the state of our cities, campuses, counties and country. We all were, and are, his keepers.

By then, the mass media was heavily criticized for shamelessly exploiting the video tapes which were produced by the gunman. NBC’s decision to broadcast portions of Seung-hui Cho’s angry rants triggered a storm of condemnation from viewers and victims’ relatives, illuminating the treacherous middle ground between exposure and exploitation in a fast-moving news cycle. Gradually, the media tried to refrain from unnecessarily stressing the ethnic origin of the gunman. At this point, coverage on the Virginia Tech shootings virtually disappeared.

Outside the U. S., foreign media, and in particular politicians, indicted the American cultural ideology of gunnism. They could not understand why Americans still hold on to this culture of the bygone era. While there will always be mentally ill people, few of whom are violent, it is our gun-centered cultural diseases that converts mental illness into massacre. Emotions of extreme attachment to and even sacralization of guns pervade American society, and commercial interests shamelessly manipulate those emotions to produce wildly self-destructive policies. Focusing on individual traits would have told us nothing about how to construct policies to prevent such shootings from happening in the future.

If it is so easy and completely legal for a mentally ill person like Cho, to obtain a gun, nobody can guarantee that this will not happen again. According to The Economist (April 21, 2007), there are some 240 million guns in America, where more than a third of adults own handguns. Some
14,000 routine killings were committed in 2005 with guns, 16,000 suicides by firearm and 650 fatal accidents (2004 figures). More Americans have died by American gunfire than have perished on foreign battlefields in the whole of the 20th century.

Many Korean Americans have assumed that there will be plenty of policy debate on gun control and that much will be done. For instance, some democrats such as Senator Dianne Feinstein of California called for tighter gun control. But most politicians have shown little enthusiasm for this idea. President George Bush said that “now is not the time to do the debate [on gun control].”

As Alex de Tocqueville observed, “the American character had been forged on the frontier” (Newsweek April 30, 2007). Far from civilization and the reach of laws, we created the cult of the rugged individual who took justice into his own laws, as written in the second amendment: “A well regulated militia being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the People to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed.” The United States sells more guns and Americans own more than anywhere else in the world. Not surprisingly, we also have the highest firearm death rate among industrialized nations.

In the 1990s, the Democrats tried to impose modest gun control. For example, in 1994, President Bill Clinton approved a bill banning assault weapons (covering semi-automatic rifles plus high-capacity magazines for handguns). The year before that, he approved a bill imposing a requirement for background checks. But since Democrats lost the presidency in 2000, President Bush allowed the assault weapons ban to lapse in 2004. Only a third of American households now have guns, down from 54% in 1977. Poll
after poll, a clear majority has supported the idea of tightening controls on guns. However, very few Americans support a complete ban, even of handguns. The NRA treats any curb on gun rights as a first step towards complete disarmament. Without their 240 million guns, it argues, Americans will be defenseless not only against criminals but also against tyranny. Many people feel that they need to be able to protect themselves from violence prevalent in the U.S., which was expressed even in the wake of the Virginia Tech tragedy.

The assault-weapons ban should be renewed. Major newspapers such as NYT and LAT wrote their editorial on the lack of political will to do anything about gun control. According to The Economist, the only exception is Michael Bloomberg, the mayor of New York, who has put together a coalition of no fewer than 180 mayors to fight for gun control (April 21, 2007).

Fortunately, there has been more discussion on the provision of mental health services. Although we do not to know what extent Cho suffered from mental illness, he received an official note, requiring voluntary treatment. Given the enormous stigma attached to mental illness within the Korean/Asian American community, this was much needed. There were workshops

26) The NRA draws on history to support its arguments. The first European settlers conquered America with guns, British soldiers tried to confiscate them, but the Americans revolted and shot off the superpower's yoke (Economist April 21, 2007).
27) No civilian needs an AK-47 for a legitimate purpose, but you can buy one online for $379.99. The Economist recommends the following: mandatory fitting of child-proof locks to improve gun safety. Also recommended are: a system of registration for guns and gun-owners, cooling-off periods, a much more open flow of intelligence, tighter rules on the trading of guns, and a wider blacklist of those ineligible to buy them (April 21, 2007).
and seminars to address how to seek treatment for any mental illness, which were well attended within the Korean American community. However, public discussion has also been a bit misleading, as if services are available to everybody. To make matters worse, at 52 percent, Korean Americans have the highest uninsured rate among all ethnicities. And according to the Surgeon General, nearly one out of two APIs will have difficulty accessing mental health treatment because they are limited-English-proficient or cannot find services that accommodate their language.  

5. Living Legacy

As discussed above, it was positive that we were able to pay more attention to the provision of mental health services. However, one unfortunate consequence was to generalize all mentally ill people as violent: whether they are slightly depressed or psychotic. As Anuradha Gupta warns us, "Cho's mental illness is just one of the many issues in the terrible tragedy in Virginia. But most types of mental illness do not have a component of psychosis. In fact, many people with psychosis are rehabilitated with medication, counseling and monitoring and never turn violent" (Time International/Asia Edition) 160:19 (May 21, 2007), 8.

It is good that more journalistic reports have been made regarding the stigma attached to mental illness within Asian American community. Now

we can put the model minority thesis to rest. In other words, previous to this tragic incident, the Asian American community was perceived as having a low rate of mental illness, therefore failing to attract any serious attention to related issues. In regards to mental health issues in the wake of the Virginia Tech slayings, Sharon Law, an Asian American psychotherapist wrote a letter to the Los Angeles Times, echoing the necessity to reach out to the Asian American community:

As an Asian American psychotherapist, the tragedy in Virginia has alerted me to the challenges in reaching out to the Asian American population, which tends to be underserved in my experience...  

Asian Americans can be particularly vulnerable to isolation by the dominant culture because of their different physical features and languages. Also, because of xenophobia... (Los Angeles Times, April 24, 2007)

Others wondered how poverty and unfamiliarity with mental health services might inhibit a family’s ability to deal with mental illness.

While it was much needed to publicize mental health problems within the Korean/Asian American community, at some point it was unclear whether media reports try to address problems or to perpetuate negative stereotypes. NYT (April 19, 2007) quoted a recent study financed by the National Institute of Mental Health where it was found that Asian Americans are less likely to seek care for mental health problems than other groups. The study, which sampled 2,095 Asian-Americans of various backgrounds, concluded that Asians born in the United States and those who immigrated as children had higher rates of mental disorders, especially depression, than Asians who
immigrated to the United States as adults. However, the same is true of other immigrant groups such as the Latino community.

Similarly, CNN reported that Asian American women, ages 15-24, show the highest rate of suicide among women of any race or ethnicity for that age group. Experts cited “model minority” expectations and family pressures as factors.29) NYTs (May 23, 2007) had an article reporting that South Korea has a higher suicide rate than the U.S., according to figures released by the OECD (the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development). 

Not all of such reports are without certain validity, but why now? In connection with the May being Asian Pacific American heritage month, there were also numerous reports on Asian Americans and Education. When I was approached for the interview on Korean Americans and IVY League Universities, I had to check before the interview whether this would be in conjunction with the Virginia Tech shootings.30) Just because his sister attended Princeton while Cho attended Virginia Tech, it was speculated whether he was not treated as well by his parents. We do not have clear evidence speaking to any school-related favoritism by his parents.

The media insinuated that the “cultural” aspect of Cho’s background has some role in leading to his violent mass murderer tendencies. Reporters tried to find out more about Korean culture, history and immigration as if there is something in there to be blamed. In responding to the Los Angeles Times article (April 22, 2007), “Bright daughter, brooding son: enigma in the Cho

30) Many Korean American parents and children highly respect the best schools, such as IVY Leagues, but not as much as before.
Household,” Elayne Rodriguez, a teacher, wrote:

This article presents a narrow view of a complicated societal issue. It appears to blame Seung-hui Cho’s family and culture for the killings at Virginia Tech….

I think we need to wait for more facts before we start blaming the Cho family or the sexism in Korean culture for Cho’s acts. Obviously he was deeply ill and deranged….

After so many reports on Asian American issues, but always stressing the cultural gap in the Asian American culture from the mainstream society, it appears that we have fetishized and reified aspects of Asian American culture. For instance, CNN had a special program based on a series of interviews on Asian American issues conducted by Yul Kwon, winner of last year’s television contest “Survivor” and a lawyer. One was about the glass ceiling. Despite its title, the focus was on the Asian American culture, again. They wanted to provide an explanation of why less than 1% of Asian Americans are CEOs, while more than 50% are college educated. Their answer lies in the unbridgeable cultural divide between Asian Americans and the mainstream. Their interviewees were the U.S. born Asian Americans and they listed such cultural characteristics: Asian Americans rarely ask for their promotion, they avoid risk taking, they rarely challenge authority, etc. To put it simply, the problem lies with Asian Americans and their culture, not with the system. Of course, this is not the first time that Asian American cultural differences have been noted. However, such

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comments are reflective of the notion of “cultural racism,” which has been reported in many European countries. There, immigrants, mostly from Muslim, African or Middle Eastern countries are seen as too different from the host countries in terms of culture and, therefore, they need to be distanced.

Overall, in the wake of the Virginia Tech shootings, our public debate focused on individual or personality factors of the gunman, Cho, and on Korean American ethnicity, culture, or family. This is in contrast to the previous campus shootings involving white American men. We did not delve into “whiteness.” In this way, we were greatly distracted from societal factors. We failed to prevent, unfortunately, any similar campus shootings, in the future, involving shooters of different backgrounds.

Although we have not experienced any organized backlash against Korean Americans, there have been series of isolated cases of anti-Korean sentiments. Racist slurs and stereotypes directed at South Korean and Asians appeared in online discussion forums and popular social networking sites, such as Facebook.com. According to figures compiled by the Asian Pacific American Legal Center, since the Virginia Tech shooting they have documented 12 hate crimes against Korean Americans (Korea Times, May 16, 2007). Korean American organizations have reported that some in the community have had their cars egged, been told to go back to where they came from, or been spit on by strangers. Authorities in Auburn, Ala., investigated whether an assault of an 18-year-old Korean student by four white males at Auburn University was a hate crime in retaliation for the Virginia Tech shooting.32)

Without experiencing organized backlash against Korean Americans, some

32) Julie Ha, All of Us Own this Tragedy,” KoreAm Journal 18: 5 (May, 2007), 64.
Korean Americans find it a blessing to live in this civilized, generous, and benevolent country that is U. S. An educator was deeply impressed with an affectionate writing dedicated to the gunman, Cho: “I am sorry that I couldn’t be a friend to you.” In addition, some Asian Americans remember receiving comfort from their fellow American co-workers. A writer concluded that, “Through this terrible incident, I came to witness that the U. S. is indeed a big country, with big heart” (Korea Times Los Angeles May 2, 2007). They compared this calm and civilized reaction with the massacre of Koreans and Chinese in the aftermath of the Great Kanto [Japan] Earthquake of 1923. The Christian Science Monitor (April 19, 2007) reported from Seoul, South Korea that many people appreciated the lack of anti-Korean feelings among Americans. A Korean student who has been studying at Virginia Tech since 2005 stated, “My Caucasian friend was shocked at first to learn that it was a Korean, but he instead wanted to protect and take care of us.” Several people lamented that had an American student living in South Korea killed 32 people, American expatriates would face serious reprisals: “In addition to the groundswell of anti-American activism during negotiations for the recently signed free trade agreement between the U. S. and South Korea, the country also saw a protracted uproar after American soldier hit and killed two young girls while driving a convoy in June 2002.” However, those two cases are not comparable to each other. Cho was a severely mentally ill person, whereas those Americans belong to the U. S. army. More importantly, in South Korea it was a turning point in critically examining the hegemonic role of the U. S in South Korea. For the first time, Koreans were able to problematize the U. S. army stationed in South Korea, despite accumulated cases of their violent crimes against civilians.
6. Where Do We Go From Here?

In brief, social citizenship for gunman, Cho, did not exist. Although he established his legal residency and lived two thirds of his short life here, it is as if he never existed in the U. S. Being a true “Citizen” or “American” in the U. S. connotes whiteness, which means that regardless of legal citizenship, racial minorities will always be seen by some as less than full citizens.

If citizenship is defined as a bundle of rights and duties the state confers upon individuals, but with a boundary which separates the included from the excluded, then one can conclude that state power (which is represented by the media, police, and politicians) stripped Cho and other Asian Americans of any rights or humanity. As for an implicit contract between immigrants and the states in which their labor is employed, Susan Bibler Coutin asserted:

> When migrants contribute to a society through their labor, the society incurs certain obligations to the migrants, including the obligation to recognize them as full social and legal persons. Through various forms of social participation (going to school, forming a family, obtaining an address, working), migrants “imitate citizens” and thus act on the rights that this implied contract promises.\(^3\)\(^3\)

Regardless of his citizenship status, Cho lived pretty much as an American. He went to school here and even invested in the sensationalistic, expressive

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popular culture via media, without establishing meaningful social relationships.

According to Chikako Kashiwazaki, the settlement of immigrants and their families in Western European countries led to the extension of a range of “partial” citizenship rights to resident aliens. This new group of non-citizens, or “denizens”, has permanent resident status and enjoys extensive civil and social citizenship rights. In Cho’s case, the U. S. goes against incorporating “partial” citizen or “denizen” status to Cho and other Asian Americans. His legal permanent residence was treated as illegal, un-American, and non-human. His social citizenship and the public discourses on the Virginia Tech shootings have much to do with the U. S. foreign intervention in Korea and have been shaped by and large, by asymmetrical relationship between the U.S. and South/North Korea. Cho reminded some Americans of the raw, reclusive, autistic, cruel, violent and evil North Koreans who killed Americans during the Korean War. In the meantime, South Koreans were seen reformed over time, due to U. S. influence.

On the other hand, South Korean apologies on behalf of Cho and their identification with Cho, due to common ethnicity, are now critically being debated. People wonder how this will affect future U. S./South Korea relations and alliances. Cho will be talked about as acting “out of character” from other “good South Koreans” who come here to quietly and dutifully work towards the American dream. Operating behind the scenes, of course, is a diplomatic relationship between the U. S. and South Korea forged through bombs and military zones during the Korean War and expressed

through new free trade agreement negotiations between the two countries. Although the relationship between the U. S. and South Korea has never been a slave/master or white/black relationship, Frantz Fanon comments on Korean self-deprecation:

The white man, in the capacity of master, said to the Negro, “From now on you are free.” But the Negro knows nothing of the cost of freedom, for he has not fought for it. From time to time he has fought for Liberty and Justice, but these were always white liberty and white justice; that is, values secreted by his masters.35

In this globalized era, South Korea operates as a political protectorate of the U. S. Empire, given the fact that until 1994 South Korea did not have control over the deployment of its own troops. That is why police and media latched on to Cho as a South Korean foreigner or alien and held on to stories about South Korea, without looking into his acculturated life in the U. S. This was easy way out of the American ideology of equality, inclusiveness, or multiculturalism. “Alongside the nationalistic history of the United States as a nation of immigrants are other, less-celebratory histories, involving labor exploitation, racism, and foreign intervention.”36

When public discourse led by the media could not continue to displace or deport Cho into South Korea, the initial eugenic racial stereotyping strategy was replaced by the culturalization and ethnicization of the matter. In other

words, partly intrigued with the particular way in which Korean Americans apologized, public discourse ended up pathologizing Korean culture, the Korean American community, and the Korean American family. Unfortunately, the use of culture is problematic here. It greatly fetishized and reified Korean/Asian cultural differences and disintegrated from other aspects of culture: culture as a process, history, or relational phenomenon. As a result, we missed the opportunity to relate to aspects of social relationships or societal factors.

The Korean American community missed the political opportunity to employ the public attention brought on by its apologies. Despite the genuine nature of their apologies, they remained an emotional reaction. They could not make their apologies concrete by not taking any follow-up action. Even though everybody is pessimistic about gun control, Korean Americans can practice what they have learned by organizing Korean Americans for gun control and working together with other Americans, lobbying for gun control. But the game is not over. As we speak, gun sellers in Virginia state are also organizing themselves in order to raise money to fight back any type of gun control. Since many Korean immigrants run small businesses, they seem to own guns at their business establishments. Nobody knows how quickly they adopted this aspect of American culture. If you own a gun without knowing how to use it, it will invite only trouble and risk to you and your family.*

* 본 논문은 2007. 11. 11. 무고되어, 2007. 11. 15. 편집위원회의 심사를 거쳐 제재가 완정되었다.
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■ 연구 후기

논문을 한국어로 번역할 시간이 없어서 영어로 제출하게 되어 양해를 구하고자 한다. 한국학을 어떻게 정의하느냐에 따라서 달라지겠지만 본 논문은 넓은 의미에서의 한국학에 속한다고 본다.

이 연구를 진행하는 데 있어서 한국어 구사능력이 어떤 도움을 주었는지 간단히 논하고자 한다. 가장 중요한 공헌은 실제적인 경험에서 얻은 증거를 제시하는 데 절대적이었다는 점이다. 즉, 한국(남한) 사회에서의 브리지나 테크 총격 사건에 대한 일반 담론(네트론 논쟁포함)은 물론 언론 보도와 학자들의 논의 발전 과정 등을 분석하는 데 큰 도움이 되었다. 또한 제미 한인 사회 내에서의 담론 본석 역시 한국어 이해 능력 없이는 불가능한 일이었다. 소문도 포함이 되었다.

또 한 가지 덧붙일 사항은 이 논문의 이론적 핵심을 논의하는 데 있어서 한국어 구사는 물론 한국 역사와 문화 이해가 절대적으로 도움이 되었다. 예를 들어면, 조승희의 버지니아 테크 총격 사건에 대한 한국에서 또 제미 한인 사회 지도자들이 일반 시민들이 조의를 표하고 사과(謝過)하였다. 이 사과에 얻은 오해와 논쟁을 이해하기 위해서는 한국 문화에서 사과의 의미와 관련된 관행 등을 철저히 파악하지 않고서는 불가능하다. 수치(羞恥)의 의미와 성격에 대해서도 마찬가지이며 조승희 씨의 성격에 대한 진단도 한국 문화라는 맥락 하에서 다른게 해석된다. 또한 한국 역사와 사회에 있어서의 인종 및 민족 그리고 국가의식 이데올로기를 검토하는 데 있어서도 한국어 구사 능력은 물론 한국 역사와 문화 이해가 절대적으로 필요하다.
WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?
- The Virginia Tech Shootings and the Korean American Community

Kye-young Park

As gunman, Seung-hui Cho was identified as a South Korean foreigner and alien by the mass media, public discourse on the Virginia Tech shootings developed and circulated throughout South Korea, the Korean American community, and in the American mainstream society.

Consequently, in this essay, I critically examine the question of social citizenship (e.g., inclusion, acceptance, membership, belonging, etc.) for Cho and other Korean/Asian Americans who found themselves at the heart of this public discourse. Secondly, the role of U.S. hegemonic relations with North and South Korea also comes into account. Thirdly, when Cho could not be placed outside the U.S. anymore, public discourse replaced old eugenic racial stereotyping by relying on a new strategy: the culturalization and ethnicitation of the Virginia Tech shootings. As a result, I would also like to contribute to the discussion on racialization and culturalization through this paper. In addition, I call our attention into the much neglected arena of public policy in terms of gun control.

[Key Words] The Virginia Tech shootings, social citizenship, racialization, culturalization, U.S. Empire
음악

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