

[Slide 1: Title.]

Margaret Price
Assistant Professor
Department of English
Spelman College
Atlanta, GA 30314 USA
price.spelman@gmail.com
<http://www.spelman.edu/~mprice2>

Assaults on the Ivory Tower: Representations of Madness in the Discourse of U.S. School Shootings

Many nineteenth-century experts believed that mental illness was the result of some brain defect or disease, and that one could uncover such defects through dissection.

— “Exhibit: Insanity and Criminal Responsibility,” Mütter Museum, Philadelphia, PA (USA)

Introduction

Thank you very much for having me here today. I will be talking about representations of madness in the discourse surrounding school shootings in the U.S.

[Slide 2: Summary of *The Rhetoric of Madness*.]

This is part of a larger project, tentatively titled *The Rhetoric of Madness*, in which I explore the intersections of madness with academic discourse. I’m interested in the ways that people with psychosocial disabilities access academic discourses. By *discourses* I mean not only written spaces, which are important, but also dynamic and social spaces such as classrooms, conference panels, talks like this one, job interviews, and so on. What does it mean for a student with severe depression, or Asperger Syndrome, to “participate” in classroom discussions? What does it mean for a faculty member who has agoraphobia or panic disorder to go on a campus visit or job interview? Why do conferences so often involve features such as crowds, fluorescent lights, competitive exchanges, and travel to unfamiliar locations? My main goal is to offer

provocative questions about the way academic discourse is usually conducted, and to argue for the value of broadening, and in some cases radically changing, those conventions.

[Slide 3: Terminology.]

A word on terminology: I use *psychosocial disability* to incorporate mental health service users, neuroatypicals, psychiatric survivors, persons who self-identify as having “mental illness” or “mental disability,” and in general persons with disabilities that affect the mind. Since I am a rhetorician, I’m very concerned with how persons and phenomena are named, and the larger project does contain a longer discussion of the choices we make in naming madness in various ways. I’ll be glad to chat about this more in the Q&A, or to provide a copy of the more extended discussion that appears in *The Rhetoric of Madness*.

[Slide 4: Why focus on school shootings?]

Most of *The Rhetoric of Madness* is taken up with everyday life in academic discourse—teaching, studying, presenting, learning. However, while conducting my research, I found that I also needed to pay attention to the extreme boundaries of the madness/academia intersection—that is, what happens when violence arises on U.S. campuses, and in particular, how madness is represented in such events. Although school shootings are rare, they have an enormous influence on public consciousness. Everyday policies and attitudes regarding madness in academia are deeply inflected by what is said, and what is done, in the wake of school shootings. These attitudes and policies will be my focus today.

Madness as Mechanism

In 2007 and 2008, two mass shootings occurred on two U.S. college campuses, Virginia Polytechnic Institute (Virginia Tech) and Northern Illinois University (NIU). The shooter at

Virginia Tech was a 23-year-old undergraduate English major named Cho Seung-Hui; the shooter at NIU was a 27-year-old graduate student in sociology named Steven Kazmierczak. At Virginia Tech, Cho killed 32 people and wounded 25; at NIU, Kazmierczak killed six and wounded 18. Both shooters killed themselves. Following these events, an onslaught of opinions about the relationship between psychosocial disability, violence, and academic discourse appeared in venues including newspapers, blogs, academic journals, and government reports.

Much of the coverage that followed the events (ranging from sober *Wall Street Journal* accounts to lurid *Esquire* articles to online blogs and bulletin boards) focused on the killers themselves: what they looked like, talked like, what they wrote, what medications they took (or declined to take), whom they dated, what their parents’ professions are, what sorts of weapons they used and how they acquired them—on and on and on. I argue that such representations function as case studies of the killers, that is, as narratives of mental pathology escalating toward extreme violence. Each killer is relentlessly individuated, and the tiniest details of his life taken apart and re-constructed in a narrative aimed to show that he was a “time bomb that sputtered for years before he went off” (“Framing”). Through these representations, Cho and Kazmierczak are diagnosed with a host of disorders, and the disorders taken as evidence of the progression of each man’s life toward its bloody conclusion.

One of the most detailed (and gruesome) case studies is David Vann’s 13-page article in the August 2008 issue of *Esquire*, titled “Portrait of the School Shooter as a Young Man.” To introduce this article, editor David Granger writes that Vann’s story “begins to answer the one question we have to ask before we get to why: Who?” (16). It would seem that most writers who have discussed the events agree with Vann and Granger. In fact, it appears that *who* doesn’t just come before *why*, but is posited as the key to learning *why*.

[Slide 5: Text of headlines.]

In the days immediately following each event, details of the shooters’ lives were dug up and reported pell-mell, as fast as the news wires could collect and distribute them. Headlines shouted:

- “From Disturbed High Schooler to College Killer” (Golden)
- “Inside Cho’s Mind” (Moran)
- “Bright Daughter, Brooding Son: Enigma in the Cho Household” (Kang, Drogin & Fiore)
- “Steve Kazmierczak: The Secret Life” (Fast)
- “Who Was the Illinois School Shooter?” (Friedman)
- “Portrait of a Killer” (*Guardian*)

Writings like these (I have selected just a few from dozens of choices) portray Cho and Kazmierczak as individuals whose “secret lives” must contain the details which explain their violent acts. Such representations do not merely reflect, but also help construct, prevalent beliefs about psychosocial disability, violent behavior, and academe. They locate madness *within* the individual killers, marking the “crazy,” “troubled” aspects of their personalities, and hence reify “our” (the putatively normal readers and creators of such representations) status as normates.

Underlying this approach are several intertwined assumptions: that madness is a defect of the individual, that it involves violent behavior, and that it must be cured or contained. In his talk here last year, Peter Beresford eloquently explained how these myths intertwine:

[Slide 6: Peter Beresford, CDS.]

Psychiatry has helped us become confused about what bad and mad mean. Increasingly when some terrible crime is committed, there is some awful act of violence, abuse or assault, then we are encouraged to feel the person must be mad to do such a thing. ... While psychiatry may say it cannot treat the people so identified, it will be happy to attach labels to them. So they are included as mentally ill and increasingly shape public and personal understandings of madness and distress and couple it more and more closely with crime, violence and threat. (4-5)

Both Cho and Kazmierczak were mental health service users. My concern is not to argue whether or not they *were* mentally ill; they certainly were labeled as such by various doctors and

institutions, and based on the information available, both were in great distress. Rather, I want to look at how their madness is represented in the case studies which have appeared in various media, including mainstream news, academic discourse, online blogs and discussion groups, and government reports.

[Slide 7: My main argument today.]

In these representations, madness is generally assumed to be the *cause* of the shooters' actions. My re-reading makes an alternative argument: that in fact, madness operates in the representations as a *mechanism* through which the shooters are placed in a space of unrecoverable deviance. This move enables such accounts to separate Cho and Kazmierczak—and by extension, madness itself—from everyone else. By individuating the shooters and detailing every nuance of their “odd” or “disturbed” behavior, these representations reify the belief that madness and sanity are two extremely separate spaces—one dangerous, one safe. To extend the metaphor of academe as an ivory tower, these representations attempt to form a moat which both *defines* and tries to *protect* academe as a sanctuary of reason. The moat separates the “normal,” non-crazy people, from the crazies, who are “time bombs.” Shoring up the moat are not only the endless case studies of Cho and Kazmierczak, but also the many descriptions of U.S. campuses as being “under siege,” or the objects of “campus terrorism,” as well as the widespread policies that have emerged to ensure “preparedness” for such disasters.

While all this energy goes to digging the moat, what gets lost is the *social* in *psychosocial*. Has anyone noticed that any given student's chance of being shot on campus is infinitesimal? With all the calls for “public safety,” are we thinking about the systemic violence done by schools and service agencies to students who exhibit differences of all kinds, including not only disability, but racial and class differences? Might we consider links between this so-

called “war” on our campuses and the fact that persons fighting one of the U.S.’s literal wars are developing depression, anxiety, and PTSD while being denied adequate care?

“From the Beginning”: Case Study and Individuation

[Slide 8: Use of minute detail.]

About a week after Cho Seung-Hui killed 32 persons and himself at Virginia Tech, the New York *Times* ran an article that began:

From the beginning, he did not talk. Not to other children, not to his own family. Everyone saw this. In Seoul, South Korea, where Seung-Hui Cho grew up, his mother agonized over his sullen, brooding behavior and empty face. Talk, she just wanted him to talk. ... Interviews with investigators, relatives, classmates and teachers offer inklings of how he progressed from silence to murderous rage. (Kleinfield)

The article continues in this dramatic style through Cho’s childhood in Seoul, move to the United States, experiences in grade school and high school, and matriculation at Virginia Tech. The story culminates on April 16, slowing to a minute level of detail: “[On Monday morning] Mr. Cho dabbed moisturizer on his eyes and slid in contact lenses. He brushed his teeth.” It closes with a passage describing the letter and video Cho had sent to NBC: “In death, Seung-Hui Cho finally spoke.” This article is one of many that attempt to reconstruct Cho’s entire life, from birth onward, in an effort to attach some rational cause to the killings. These stories function like medical case studies in several ways: they focus on pathology and deviance; they locate pathology within the individual; and they assume that violent behavior can be explained by examining the individual’s deviance from childhood. Their choices of language and style create an overdetermined narrative of madness leading inexorably to a violent explosion. In doing so, they reify the myth that madness leads to violence, as well as the myth that academe is a madness-free zone which should be protected from the dangerous incursions of insanity.

[Slide 9: Juxtaposition.]

An important strategy used in these case studies is *juxtaposition*, the placing of pieces of information side-by-side to imply a connection. This strategy is especially prevalent in early writings about the shooters. Here is an example from a profile written about Kazmierczak the day after the shootings at NIU:

Stephen [sic] Kazmierczak, the 27-year-old who opened fire on a crowded Northern Illinois University lecture hall, killing five, and then himself on Thursday, was discharged from the United States Army in February 2002 for unknown reasons, ABC News has learned.

Kazmierczak enlisted in September 2001, and was separated before he completed basic training, a defense official told ABC News.

Reasons for his separation include not revealing a condition during initial screening, or not adapting to military life.

The Privacy Act forbids the Army from characterizing the reason for Kazmierczak's discharge.

Kazmierczak had most recently been studying mental health issues at the University of Illinois, and had taken a job at a prison, according to his academic advisor. (Friedman)

Without including explicit connections between the paragraphs, this article moves across five points: first, the shooting; second, Kazmierczak's separation from the Army; third, the possible reasons for separation, which include “not revealing a condition during initial screening, or not adapting”; fourth, Kazmierczak's interest in “mental health issues” as a topic of study; and fifth, his employment at a prison. The paragraph breaks separate these pieces of information, but also imply that they constitute a logical, even causal progression. Perhaps as a means of reinforcing the connections the reader is asked to make, the same juxtapositions appear in telegraphic form in the article's subheadline: “Kazmierczak, 27, Killer of 5 Students, Studied Mental Health Issues, Worked at Prison.”

In “Media Depictions of Mental Illness: An Analysis of the Use of Dangerousness,” Ruth Allen and Raymond G. Nairn argue that such omissions invite the reader to “supply the missing elements, explicitly becoming a co-creator of the text and its meaning” (379). Moreover, media

accounts generally do not leave the reader much flexibility in how to fill in those missing elements; rather, “the reader is compelled to draw on existing stereotypic knowledge to explain the behaviour and, in so doing, to confirm the relevance and adequacy of that knowledge” (379). We can observe this strategy at work in Friedman’s article as it juxtaposes Kazmierczak’s choice to shoot people, his separation from the military, his association with prisons, and his interest in mental illness. As Allen and Nairn emphasize, the strategy of juxtaposition/omission does not merely invite the reader to draw certain conclusions; it also *implicates* the reader in those conclusions, so that the reader becomes a *co-creator* of the association between violence and mental illness.

An interesting feature of Friedman’s article about Kazmierczak, and other early writings about him, is that they appear a bit confused by the glowing testimonials he received from friends and teachers. Not worthy of appearing in the headline, but included in Friedman’s article, is a quotation from one of his professors, Jan Carter-Black, who said that Kazmierczak was “a very committed student, extremely respectful of me.” Despite this, the overdetermined role of his deviance in Friedman’s article is clearly apparent. Immediately after Carter-Black’s positive comments, and a note that he had received a dean’s award, comes the information that he “was a co-author of an essay entitled ‘Self-Injury in Correctional Settings: ‘Pathology’ of Prisons or Prisoners.’” This is followed, improbably, by a quotation from an unnamed “music site message board,” on which an unnamed commenter referred to Kazmierczak as “mental.”

[Slide 10: Dramatizing the “revelation.”]

Another article, published by CNN.com, even seems to gloat at Carter-Black’s realization that her highly-regarded student had committed murder: having published the same statement, that she knew Kazmierczak as “extremely respectful,” CNN adds a video link that reads, “Watch

Carter-Black deal with painful news” (“University Shooter”). By inviting us to view this supposedly pivotal moment, CNN frames it as a revelation, as though the scales had dropped from the teacher’s eyes: Kazmierczak was crazy all along. A few days later, more damning evidence was found: Kazmierczak had been taking a “cocktail of 3 drugs” for anxiety and depression (Boudreau & Zamost). Yet even before this discovery, the case studies had labeled him mentally ill by association.

The interstices between these juxtaposed pieces of information encourage the reader to draw stereotypical conclusions about madness, violence, and academic discourses. The narrative goes something like this: Each young man had a history of association with mental illness. Eventually he committed horribly violent acts. His reported mental illness was a contributing factor in his violent behavior. His previous writings provide evidence: in Cho’s case because these writings were “twisted,” and in Kazmierczak’s, because they pertained to mental illness. Cho’s “sullen” and “unnerving” presence is taken as evidence of his life’s progression toward violence, while Kazmierczak’s image as a “committed” and “respectful” student is framed as having been only a mirage, whose dissolution should be dramatized by a video of his teacher “deal[ing] with the painful news.” Each man is presumed to have been a “time bomb that sputtered for years before he went off” (“Framing”).

Marking Deviance

Although madness is the primary form of deviance marked in the case studies of Kazmierczak and Cho, it’s important to note that these writings also pay considerable attention to other stigmatizing features of the men’s lives, including race, class, religion, and even body size.

[Slide 11: Marking deviance, Kazmierczak.]

In his portrait of Kazmierczak, theatrically written in present tense, David Vann in *Esquire* sketches Kazmierczak’s childhood:

Steve grew up watching horror movies with his mother. Fleshy, enormous, laid out beside him on the couch. Middle of the day, and all shades are drawn. Dark. She’s protective, doesn’t want Steve to go outside. Won’t let him play much with other children. She’s not mentally right, according to Steve’s godfather...

Horror movies and the Bible, those are what animate this living room, those are Steve’s inheritance. A close fit, the plagues, the tortures of Job. God’s sadistic games, teaching his flock to appreciate the value and meaning of their lives. The flesh of no consequence. Late night, his mother can’t sleep. An insomniac with anxiety problems. A history of depression on his father’s side, Steve’s grandfather an alcoholic. So they continue on, still watching. (116)

Horror movies, fatness, darkness, psychosocial disability, apocalyptic religious beliefs, alcoholism: all these crowd together in Vann’s terse sentences to form a kind of smorgasbord of stereotypical deviance. This marking continues throughout Vann’s article: Steve built pipe bombs, Steve looked at “porno” (117), he got a tattoo, he dressed as Jigsaw from the *Saw* movies for Halloween. While the primary emphasis remains Kazmierczak’s psychosocial disabilities—every trip to a group home or psychiatric ward is documented, along with medication shifts and suicide attempts—these other marks of deviance are used to further stigmatize the madman at the story’s center.

There is an interesting difference between the case studies’ treatments of Kazmierczak and Cho, however. In my review of writings about the NIU shootings, I did not come across a single reference to Kazmierczak’s whiteness. This is unsurprising: although most school shooters are white males, no one ponders the stigmatizing effect of this fact on white males in general. In 1999, shortly after the Columbine shootings, Orlando Patterson asked why the actions of white youths Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold had touched off “an orgy of national soul-searching,” while crimes committed by young African American or Latino men inspired no such

reflection. Astutely, Patterson argues that what is really at stake in such orgies and omissions is the popular notion of what constitutes normality:

[Slide 12: Orlando Patterson, *New York Times*.]

What is at issue here is the principle of infrangibility: our conception of normalcy and of what groups constitute our social body—those from whom we cannot be separated without losing our identity, so that their achievements become our own and their pathologies our failures.

As Patterson’s argument suggests, the deepest fear engendered by the news of sudden, apparently senseless murders committed by supposedly “normal” persons is not that we, the watching and listening public, will be directly threatened. Rather, our deepest fear is that we ourselves could be capable of such acts. Accordingly, we search for markers of deviance that will separate the killers from us.

[Slide 13: Marking deviance, Cho.]

Patterson’s remarks were prescient, which becomes sadly apparent in the case studies of Cho, which extensively mark his race, ethnicity, immigration status, and class. He is called a “Korean immigrant” (Cho and Gardner) or an “Asian immigrant” (Kang, Drogin & Fiore), a “resident alien” (“Professor”) who “had a green card” (“Source”). Often such racial/national markings mix with class markings, as in this article from the *Los Angeles Times*:

The three-story beige town house on Truitt Farm Drive stands as the Cho family’s symbol of middle-class success, precisely what they were searching for when they left a dank basement apartment and a life of struggle in South Korea. ...

Asian immigrants tend to emphasize education and success, and by all accounts, the Chos were no exception. (Kang, Drogin, and Fiore)

These presumptions about “Asian immigrants” run through many of the case studies of Cho.

While the *Los Angeles Times* reporters cite a professor of ethnic studies to back up their claim, other accounts blithely discuss the significance of Cho’s race and class without referencing anyone in particular. An example, from the *Washington Post*, reads:

As [Cho’s] name was broadcast to the world, Koreans abroad and in the United States struggled with their reactions, *cultural analysts say*. The South Korean government expressed fears of a backlash against all Koreans. Korean pastors and civic leaders who had no relationship to the family or Virginia Tech apologized on behalf of the shooter. *Academics said* the reactions revealed how personal the shooting has been for Koreans and Korean Americans. It was as if Cho was one of their own family members. Shame and blame boiled to the surface. (Cho and Gardner, emphasis added)

This passage lacks specific evidence for the applicability of the stereotypes in Cho’s case: the opinions are not attributed to anyone in particular, but to vaguely situated “cultural analysts” and “academics.” Only two persons are cited in this section of the article, one of whom actually refutes its pronouncements. Like Vann’s case study of Kazmierczak, this description of Cho’s life references darkness—its subhead reports “Family ‘Humbled by This Darkness’”—and seizes upon every possible detail to form a portrait of deviance. It even describes the mildew coating the basement apartment the family had rented years before in Seoul.

Diagnosis and Blame

[Slide 14: Diagnosis and blame.]

Much is made of Cho’s and Kazmierczak’s experiences with the mental-health service industry, and especially their failures to take drugs or attend therapy. For example, one headline from the UK *Guardian* reads, “Portrait of a Killer: Virginia Tech Gunman Was a Loner with Mental Health Problems Who Shunned Treatment.” This invites the reader to participate in a narrative of blaming them for failing to overcome their psychosocial disabilities. If they had only gone to therapy and taken their medications, the narratives suggest (and in some cases, directly say), they would never have done such terrible things. Blame is also extended to other parties in the stories, including the men’s parents and friends, their therapists, and their schools. The supposition underlying this narrative is that madness can be overcome, and that the key to

overcoming is control or containment of the mad person by means of medical treatment and incarceration.

News reports about Cho dig into his childhood, marking early “warning signs” to establish not only that he was crazy, but that he had always been crazy. The *Washington Post* states that “Warning signs about Seung[-]Hui Cho came early in his life” and dwells on Cho’s “antisocial behavior,” which largely consisted of not speaking and of writing about violent events (Cho and Gardner). Although some persons who knew Cho are quoted saying that they found his quietness “docile” and “well-behaved” (Kang, Drogin & Fiore), writers of the case studies generally choose more portentous adjectives: “haunted” (Kleinfield), “sickly” (“Portrait”), and “brooding” (Kang, Drogin and Fiore).

[Slide 15: Screen shot of the cover of the *Report*, which is black and mostly taken up with a large image of the Virginia Tech campus, illuminated by lit candles held by persons during a vigil.]

Diagnostic accounts of Cho reach a culmination in the *Report of the Virginia Tech Review Panel* (hereafter *Report*). Researched and authored by a panel formed by Virginia governor Timothy Kaine, the *Report* aims to study the shootings and make recommendations “that will reduce the risk of future violence on our campuses” (viii). An entire chapter of the *Report* is dedicated to the “Mental Health History of Seung Hui Cho.”

[Slide 16: Screen shot of the first page of the *Report*’s table of contents, with a yellow line drawn around the chapter “Mental Health History of Seung Hui Cho” and its many sub-sections.]

This chapter draws on interviews with Cho’s family, teachers (both high school and college), staff at counseling centers where he was treated, transcripts and school records, and Cho’s own writings from various classes. Like earlier newspaper accounts, it attempts to explain Cho’s violent actions by piecing together evidence from his life experiences, and, as its title indicates, the primary topic of interest in his life is his mental health.

One of the most intriguing themes in this chapter is its repeated references to Cho’s difficulty with speech. He was diagnosed in high school with “selective mutism,” which the *Report* summarizes as follows:

[Slide 17: *Report* on selective mutism.]

Selective mutism is a type of an anxiety disorder that is characterized by a consistent failure to speak in specific social situations where there is an expectation of speaking. The unwillingness to speak is not secondary to speech/communication problems, but, rather, is based on painful shyness. Children with selective mutism are usually inhibited, withdrawn, and anxious with an obsessive fear of hearing their own voice. Sometimes they show passive-aggressive, stubborn and controlling traits. The association between this disorder and autism is unclear. (35)

Although the language of this description is restrained in comparison to the more lurid newspaper and magazine accounts, note the value judgments it attaches to silence. According to the *Report*, someone with selective mutism is “unwilling” to speak (rather than “unable” or “afraid”). The absence of speech is also characterized as a “failure.” It is associated with “passive-aggressive, stubborn and controlling traits.” According to this description, it also has some murky association with autism which is not discussed further.

The *Report*’s extensive attention to Cho’s quietness as a “failing” (36) stands in stark contrast to its lack of attention to social factors that may have contributed to it. For example, the *Report* offers a description of an early medical trauma that seems to have been the beginning or trigger of Cho’s quietness. The anecdote reads, “When he was 9 months old, Cho was hospitalized ... [D]octors conducted cardiac tests ... This caused the 3-year-old emotional trauma. From that point on, Cho did not like to be touched. He generally was perceived as medically frail. According to his mother, he cried a lot and was constantly sick” (31-32). Let me be clear: I am not pointing to this incident as some sort of diagnostic keystone which “explains” Cho’s violent behavior, nor am I interested in mining the details of Cho’s past, as all these case

studies do, in order to draw yet another map of mental disturbance creeping inexorably toward violent behavior. Rather, I am pointing out how little attention is paid, even in an exhaustive account like the *Report*, to the many traumas Cho seems to have undergone. The information in this account could provide an opportunity to consider what trauma and psychosocial disability are like as experiences; however, that opportunity is not taken up. Although the *Report* spends a great deal of time enumerating the failures of various health-care agencies, these are perceived as failures to *contain* and *control* Cho, rather than failures to listen to, or attempt to alleviate, his obvious distress.

[Slide 18: *Care versus control.*]

The *Report's* documentation of Cho's contacts with mental-health professionals and brief experience of involuntary commitment is an example of this tendency. According to school records, Cho made several attempts to obtain counseling from Virginia Tech's Cook Counseling Center and was not successful. However, the *Report* does not mention the effects this might have had upon him, focusing instead on the failure of the counseling centers to take adequate notes or follow up on the case. Again, the incident is framed as a failure of *control* rather than a failure of *care*. The *Report* states that Cho called Cook Counseling Center on November 30th and was scheduled for an appointment nearly two weeks later. He did not appear for that appointment, but called the same day and was sent right back to triage.

I have experienced telephone triage through a large university's counseling center before; simply put, it's no fun. When I made my own first call to seek help from my university, I was met, as Cho was, with an impersonal telephone triage process, followed by the information that I would not actually be permitted to meet with a counselor until weeks later. I remember feeling rejected, discouraged, and afraid; when one is experiencing mental distress, two weeks is a very

long time. I can't assume that Cho's feelings were the same as mine, but I would argue that the experience of having to wait so long for a first appointment, missing it, calling immediately, and being sent back to triage must have been stressful, at the least. Yet, instead of acknowledging the stress of this process upon Cho, the report again focuses on recording the center's bureaucratic failings. The report mentions, but does not dwell upon, the fact that Cho never got to see a counselor at Cook Counseling. When it states that Cho was *again* triaged by another agency about a month later (following an involuntary commitment hearing due to a message he sent to a suitemate saying “I might as well kill myself” (47)), the report notes merely that “the triage report is missing ... and the counselor who performed the triage has no independent recollection of Cho” (49). It then concludes, “Cho never returned to Cook Counseling Center” (49).

[Slide 19: Harassment of Cho.]

This lack of attention to Cho's experience or point of view continues throughout the *Report's* description of his painfully isolated social life. Evidence from the *Report* indicates that Cho was bullied and intimidated in school from a young age. However, this information is passed over rather quickly and does not detail the cruelty of these experiences, which have been reported elsewhere to include students laughing at him, ridiculing him in class, and offering him dollar bills if he would speak (Cho & Gardner). Despite the possible significance of this harassment, the *Report* chooses to provide a paraphrase of a statement from Cho's sister Sun Kyung that downplays it:

His sister said that both of them were subjected to a certain level of harassment when they first came to the United States and throughout their school years, but she indicated that it was neither particularly threatening nor ongoing. (37)

By all accounts, Sun Kyung operated much more easily in social space than her brother: The Los Angeles *Times*, for instance, says that she “soar[ed]” in high school, traveled abroad for a “transforming” internship, and had a “rich” social life in college (Kang, Drogin & Fiore). Given this, it would seem that her experience of harassment might have been very different than Cho’s. One of Cho’s high-school classmates reported that when Cho read aloud in class, for example, other students “started laughing and pointing and saying ‘Go back to China’” (“Ex-Classmates”). Yet the *Report* assumes that Sun Kyung’s experience must reflect Cho’s as well.

Moreover, the language of the *Report* places the onus for being harassed upon Cho himself. For example, it states, “Cho continued to isolate himself in middle school” (34) and that “[in high school] his manner of speaking and accent sometimes drew derision from his peers” (37). Note the way these statements arrange agency so that the responsibility lies with Cho: he isolated *himself*, and it was his manner that *drew* the derision.

A similar tendency to blame Cho for his difficulty operating in social space seems to have been practiced by some of his professors, whose judgments are recorded in the *Report*. For example:

[Slides 20 and 21: Professor Giovanni on Cho.]

Cho’s actions in the poetry class taught by Nikki Giovanni that semester are widely known and documented. For the first 6 weeks of class, the professor put up with Cho’s lack of cooperation and disruptive behavior. He wore reflector glasses and a hat pulled down to obscure his face. Dr. Giovanni reported to the panel that she would have to take time away from teaching at the beginning of each class to ask him to please take off his hat and please take off his glasses. She would have to stand beside his desk until he complied. Then he started wearing a scarf wrapped around his head, “Bedouin-style” according to Professor Giovanni. She felt that he was trying to bully her.

Cho also was uncooperative in presenting and changing the pieces that he wrote. He would read from his desk in a voice that could not be heard. When Dr. Giovanni would ask him to make changes, he would present the same thing the following week. (42)

My objective here, again, is not to suggest that such behavior can always be accepted in the classroom, nor to assign blame, but to point out the way Cho’s behaviors are cast in a narrative that constructs him as a willfully “disruptive” individual. His professor “put up with” his behavior, and even “would have to” force him to take off his hat and glasses. (This leads me to wonder—why did she “have to” do this?) When he resorted to another form of protective attire, his behavior is interpreted as “bully[ing].” And his quietness, rather than being a sign of distress or lack of ability to perform a certain kind of participation, is a “lack of cooperation” and “disruptive.”

[Slide 22: Professor Bean on Cho.]

Another professor, Carl Bean, constructs Cho as having been even more willfully disruptive, even conniving:

[Bean] told the panel that Cho was always very quiet, always wore his cap pulled down, and spoke extremely softly. Bean opined that “this was his power.” By speaking so softly, he manipulated people into feeling sorry for him and his fellow students would allow him to get credit for group projects without having worked on them. Bean noted that Cho derived satisfaction from learning “how to play the game—do as little as he needed to do to get by.” (*Report* 50)

This interpretation of Cho’s behavior depicts him as a kind of evil genius: not a person in distress or afraid, but someone deliberately “manipulat[ing]” people and a system in order to get what he wanted. Although the *Report* details Cho’s diagnoses of selective mutism and an unspecified mood disorder, it quickly brushes off the notion of mental distress in favor of Bean’s evil-genius interpretation.

[Slide 23: Pitiable or Murderous.]

Immediately after Bean’s statement, the *Report* muses, “This [Bean’s] profile of Cho stands in contrast to the profile of a pitiable, emotionally disabled young man, but it may in fact represent a true picture of the other side of Cho—the one that murdered 32 people” (50). According to this

rather amazing comment, the best one can hope for, if psychosocially disabled, is to be considered “pitiable”; and in Cho’s case the “true” interpretation is not even pitiability, but “the other side”—that one is a murderer.

Cho Seung-Hui did commit murder. My re-reading of these case studies is not meant to exonerate him, nor to demonize the people around him, many of whom, by all evidence, went to great effort to listen to, understand, and help him. Rather, I want to move away from narratives of blame, and pay attention instead to the ways that Cho’s portrait is drawn through these case studies as *willful* madness *resulting in* murderous violence. We do not actually know very much about the relationship between psychosocial disability and violence, despite longstanding scholarly and popular fascination with this topic. But if we are ever to learn more, we will have to move beyond narratives which simply reify the myths we think we already know.

Conclusion

[Slide 24: Further discourse analysis.]

I’m not reading the full chapter today, because it’s quite long, so I’ll wrap up here. The rest of the analysis focuses on ways that academic discourses have made use of the narratives of diagnosis and blame in discussions of issues including “public safety,” “preparedness,” free speech, and student writing. A basic presumption made in most of these conversations is that being mentally ill means one is predisposed to violence—despite the fact that decades of scholarly research on the topic, including a very recent special issue of *Psychiatric Services* (February 2008), has found that the link is indirect, heavily mediated by other demographic features, and often simply mythical. Another alarming trend is the many calls for sharing of information between schools and other institutions about persons who have accessed mental-

health services in the past—suggestions which generally presume such information should be shared without those persons’ consent or even their knowledge. And finally, many American teachers of creative writing, weighing in on the events, have argued that mad persons—“nutters,” as one put it—are lousy writers anyway and hence shouldn’t be in the classroom in the first place. These arguments attempt to accomplish a task that I call “digging the moat”—that is, if academe is imagined as an ivory tower, these points of view are efforts to pretend that it is a madness-free zone, and one that should be protected from the violent incursions of madness.

That is a very quick view of the second half of this chapter. However, other voices in this discussion do give us greater cause for hope. I want to close with one such voice, that of Edward Falco, who taught Cho Seung-Hui in a playwriting class. Shortly after the shootings at Virginia Tech, Falco sent the following message to the other students in the class:

[Slide 25: Professor Falco on Cho.]

There was violence in Cho’s writing—but there is a huge difference between writing about violence and behaving violently. We could not have known what he would do. We treated him like a fellow student, which is what he was. I believe the English department behaved responsibly in response to him. And please hear me when I say this: It was our responsibility, not yours. All you could have done was come to me, or some other administration or faculty member, with your concerns—and you would have been told that we were aware of Seung-Hui Cho, we were concerned about him, and we were doing what we believed was appropriate. Look, all our hearts are broken. There’s no need to add to the pain with guilt. (“Creative Writing” 60)

I find this message extraordinarily hopeful, for several reasons. First, it refers to all persons respectfully and without resorting to derogatory remarks. Second, it does not attempt to pretend that the mystery of Cho’s violent actions has an easy answer. Third, it names Falco’s own emotion and indicates to his students that emotion is an appropriate response.

We will not find answers to the terrible events of April 16, 2007 and February 14, 2008 by searching inside the heads, or the pages, of Cho and Kazmierczak. We might as well dissect a

human body in an effort to find its soul. In the fear and sorrow following the shootings, representations of these two men have both played upon and reinforced a series of commonsense assumptions. By constructing intricate case studies of the shooters and examining their deviance, they convince readers that each shooter was, indeed, not a “normal” person subject to unbearable social circumstances, but in fact a “time bomb waiting to go off” (“Framing”). They imagine that the shooters’ disabilities caused the violence, and extrapolate from this to imagine that all persons with psychosocial disabilities are potential threats. This results in a culture of hatred and fear in which persons with psychosocial disabilities are stripped of our rights, further stigmatized, and the very real violence—both personal and institutional—that we face is ignored. Larger social forces contributing to a culture of violence, including the U.S.’s bizarre positions on access to firearms, are brushed off. It is easier to focus on individuals, because if one presumes that the problem lies within individuals, one can continue to believe that the problem will go away if those individuals are cured. Or incarcerated, or eradicated.

If there is any hope to be found in the terrible mystery of sudden violent attacks, it will not come from attempts to vilify or diagnose students with psychosocial disabilities, or to take away their civil rights. Nor will it come from videos, software or federal grants which encourage students, faculty and staff to develop their “survival mindset.” Creating an academic environment marked by fear and hatred of madness will do nothing to end violence. The hope I find is in voices like Falco’s, which offers simply the truths he knows: The shooter was a fellow student. We were concerned about him. All our hearts are broken.

Works Cited

- Allen, Ruth & Raymond G. Nairn. “Media Depictions of Mental Illness: An Analysis of the Use of Dangerousness.” *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry* 31 (1997): 375-381.
- Beresford, Peter. “Violence and Psychiatry: Rethinking Relationships.” Paper presented at the Centre for Disability Studies, University of Leeds, UK. 5 December 2007.
- Boudreau, Abbie & Scott Zamost. “Girlfriend: Shooter Was Taking Cocktail of 3 Drugs.” CNN.com. 20 Feb. 2008. 22 Aug. 2008.
<<http://www.cnn.com/2008/CRIME/02/20/shooter.girlfriend/index.html>>
- Cho, David & Amy Gardner. “An Isolated Boy in a World of Strangers.” *Washington Post*. 21 April 2007. 2 Sept. 2008 <www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/04/20/AR2007042002366.html>
- “Creative Writing and the Virginia Tech Massacre.” *Chronicle of Higher Education* 53.36 (2007): 60.
- “Ex-Classmates Say Gunman Was Bullied.” MSNBC.com. 19 April 2007. 10 September 2008.
<<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/18169776>>
- Fast, Jonathan. “Steve Kazmierczak: The Secret Life.” *Huffington Post*. 16 Feb. 2008. 1 Sept. 2008. <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jonathan-fast/steve-kazmierczak-the-se_b_87031.html>
- Friedman, Emily. “Who Was the Illinois School Shooter?” ABC News. 15 Feb. 2008. 22 Aug. 2008. <<http://abcnews.go.com/US/story?id=4296984>>
- “Framing the Virginia Tech Tragedy.” *Rockridge Nation*. 17 April 2007. 22 August 2008.
<<http://www.rockridgenation.org/stories/framing-the-virginia-tech-tragedy/index.html>>
- Golden, Daniel. “From Disturbed High Schooler to College Killer.” *Wall Street Journal*. 20 Aug. 2007. 10 Sept. 2008.
<<http://online.wsj.com/public/article/SB118756463647202374.html>>
- Kang, K. Connie, Bob Drogin, & Faye Fiore. “Bright Daughter, Brooding Son: Enigma in the Cho Household.” *Los Angeles Times*. 22 April 2007. 2 Sept. 2008
<<http://articles.latimes.com/2007/apr/22/nation/na-cho22>>
- Kleinfield, N.R. “Before Deadly Rage, a Life Consumed by a Troubling Silence.” *New York Times*. 22 April 2007. 2 Sept. 2008.
<<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/22/us/22vatech.html>>
- Moran, Terry. “Inside Cho’s Mind.” ABC News. 30 Aug. 2007. 2 Sept. 2008.
<<http://a.abcnews.com/Nightline/story?id=3541157&page=1>>
- Patterson, Orlando. “When ‘They’ Are ‘Us.’” *New York Times* 30 April 1999. 7 Sept. 2008
<<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?sec=health&res=9506EFD8103DF933A05757C0A96F958260>>
- “Portrait of a Killer.” UK *Guardian*. 30 Aug. 2007. 31 Aug. 2008.
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2007/aug/30/internationaleducationnews.highereducation>>
- “Professor: Shooter’s Writing Dripped with Anger.” CNN. 18 April 2007. 27 Aug. 2008.
<<http://www.cnn.com/2007/US/04/17/vtech.shooting>>
- “Source: Gunman Angry at ‘Rich Kids.’” CNN. 18 April 2007. 27 Aug. 2008.
<<http://www.cnn.com/2007/US/04/17/cho.profile/index.html>>

“University Shooter Interested in ‘Peace and Social Justice.’” CNN. 16 Feb. 2008. 31 Aug. 2008.

<<http://www.cnn.com/2008/US/02/15/university.shooting.suspect/index.html>>

Vann, David. “Portrait of the School Shooter as a Young Man.” *Esquire* (August 2008): 114-126.

Virginia Tech Review Panel. *Mass Shootings at Virginia Tech: Report of the Review Panel*.

Presented to Governor Kaine, Commonwealth of Virginia. August 2007. 2 Sept. 2008.

<<http://www.governor.virginia.gov/TempContent/techpanelreport.cfm>>