Asian American masculinity has long been charted as emasculating within the field of Asian American Studies. Frank Chin and Jeffery Paul Chan point out in their groundbreaking essay "Racist Love" that through stereotypes, Asian American men "…are contemptible because we are womanly, effeminate, devoid of all the traditionally masculine qualities of originality, daring, physical courage, creativity." [Chan and Chin 68] Scholar Yen Le Espitsu writes the racial construction of Asian American manhood has "been excluded from white-based cultural notions of the masculine." [Espitsu 90] In *Racial Castration: Managing Asian American Masculinity* David Eng writes: "both mainstream and minority, remain invested it the normative identifications, stereotypes, and fantasies that maintain the dominant social order." [p.28].

Identified as the school shooter of the Virginia Tech tragedy, the late Seung Hui Cho instantly became the most "famous" Asian American. Within moments, his image permeated every website, TV segment, and radio clip. While the catastrophic event signified the tragedy of thirty-three lives lost, the overwhelming media blitz constructed a "man" through racialized and sexualized portrayals of Cho. Representations of Cho present a complicated case of the intersections of race, sexuality, and gender.

In this paper, I am particularly interested in investigating the Orient/Occident and Natural/Freak. In Rachel Adams' critique of freaks in literary fiction, freaks are "characters constrained by corpoeal anomalies that defy the imposition of normative categories of identity." Moreover, "…freaks suffer an alienation from their bodies that parallels their experiences of estrangement within and isolation from the society of others." Deconstructing representations of Cho provides how Asian American masculinity are contested and created within these binaries.

Light and Darkness: Sister and Brother

As media outlets search for answers for motivations of Cho's acts of violence, articles focused on the particularities of the family. Through the trope of dynamics with his sister, a dichotomy of Asian American women and men is depicted through gendered and racial characterizations. In a *Washington Post* article, it's illustrated, while Cho "did not want to be hugged…when Cho fought with his sister, he would punch her with shocking violence." (Cho and Gardner). "In *The Los Angeles Times* article, "Bright Daughter, Brooding Son: Enigma in the Cho household" additionally describes a dichotomous relationship, "While her brother tried to disappear at Westfield High, Sun-kyung Cho was soaring. She'd had offers from Harvard and Princeton and chose the latter because the scholarship was better." (Drogin, Fiore, Kang) This comparison is further bolstered, as "her college social life was as rich as her brother's was barren." (Drogin, Fiore, Kang)

Moreover, "Sun-Kyung" is described through her relationship with the State, as she is employed with the Iraq Reconstruction Management Office. "By junior year, Sun, as she came to be called, had developed an interest in global economics. She traveled on an internship to the Thailand-Myanmar border...' They were the most amazing three months of my life." Dynamic and "bright" Sun Cho is described as a dutiful Asian American woman. In addition to her academic and career success, she is remembered as 'a very humble person,' a deeply spiritual woman who did not smoke or drink and wore little makeup." Through the existing critique of representations on Asian American women, the Dragon Lady and the Lotus Blossom are dichotomous: one cunning, evil, and sexualized; the other submissive, good, and sexualized. Sun Cho through her relationship

with the State and "little makeup" is represented as an Asian America Lotus Blossom. Moreover through characterizations of Cho's parents, it characterizes particular gender dynamics in a Korean America family: "And he was raised in a South Korean family and culture that so values boys, his mother once told her employer that she wished her son had attended Princeton instead of her daughter." (Drogin, Fiore, Kang)

Although the Virginia Tech shootings provoked discourse on gun control, mental illness, and citizenship, there seemed to be a deafening silence around Asian American masculinity and agency. The gendered and racialized depictions of Cho and his sister Through analysis of media news outlets, I argue mainstream discourse treads the line between Oreintalist fantasies of Asian American masculinity and contestations by Asian American agents using violence and gender performance. Through simultaneously emasculating and contending with violent agency, depictions of Cho conjures the fantasy of the "Other" which characterizes Asian American masculinity as "freakish."

I discuss this case as it was represented in three media news outlets, primarily *The Washington Post, The Los Angeles Times,* and *The New York Times*. Through an extensive Lexus Nexus archive search, from April 14 to May 14, 2007, I compiled articles around the Virginia Tech Tragedy and Cho to illustrate inductively, emerging themes around Asian American masculinity. Additional sources such as online media, television, and illuminating conversations with others have helped shape my understanding of the emerging themes. However for the purposes of this paper, I will limit my analysis to representations in the respective newspaper articles.

The Face of the "Other"

Cho's visage overwhelmingly appeared in varied media outlets throughout the weeks following the Virginia Tech tragedy. In addition to his visual representation, descriptions of Cho's face throughout the narrative of the tragedy, illustrates how Cho is depicted as freakish and fantastical "Other." Among various articles that focused on Cho's face, *The Washington Post* article, "What Killers Want," describes how Cho's method of suicide "so obliterated his features that he was unrecognizable…He was literally faceless." The article implicates Cho's "faceless" face may be preferable as "Would that he had remained so. Instead, that strangely slack, absent-eyed countenance is now permanently burned into our collective consciousness." (Shriver) Countless articles within my sample ruminate on Cho's "blank face" and "lack of expression." Those watching television or surfing the web after the tragedy may have seen Cho captioned as the new "face of evil." Another article on Cho's face in *The New York Times* simply states: "that haunted face." (Kleinfield)

Cho's emasculation through his inability to express himself recounts Oreintalist renderings of his "face." Edward Said's theory of Orientalism, which is a Western system of thought which projects European values onto the 'oreintal' and creates a binary of the Orient and the Occident. (Said) "When the Group is Wise," others who attempted to reach out to Cho is described by their faces and eyes, "maybe they signaled their openness with a slight nod, a friendly opening of the eyes." while Cho "[seemed] indifferent to every small act of human kindness any effort to connect …" (Benedict)

While Cho's face created alienation to those who saw him, in *The New York Times* article, "Praying for Troubled Souls and Mourning for Victims" Cho's face is

claimed through portraying Cho as foreign. In the article, the church near Cho's hometown is described through 'Oreintal' food, as "...bowls of steaming noodles were passed around to people seated around long tables." While the article provides a context of a Korean American church, it also presents a foreign setting. It is illuminating as Reverend Myung Sub Chung is quoted, "I never imagined that type of face, he said. That face looked like my son's." While previous articles illustrate Cho's face as "haunted" "strangely slack" a freakish "Other" it is only the Korean minister who claims Cho's face as his own. The other instance where Cho is claimed with expression, are within descriptions of Cho's self-authored digital films. Here, Cho is described as the first time, with expression on his face.

Queer Body

Characterizations of Cho's body illustrate the complicated relationship of body to masculinity. Cho's body is described as "skinny and boyish-looking, his hair cut in a short military style fashion." Dating back to Cho's high school experience, his body figures as a point of outcast from the other students, "High School did not help Seung Hui Cho surmount his miseries…He was scrawny and looked younger than his age." Not only was Cho, "scrawny," "he wore geeky clothes, not stylish or popular, the kind his parents might have picked out." Cho's "geeky clothes" provides stereotypical representations of Asian American immigrant parents as foreign.

When represented as the school shooter, Cho's body and clothing is simultaneously emasculated while contending with violent acts. A *New York Times* article described him, as "wearing an outfit that resembled a boy scout and trying to push through doors that were barricaded by students." However, in a vastly different version

Cho is characterized as hyper-violent: "He was wearing cargo pants, a sweatshirt, an ammunition vest, and a maroon cap, the school colors. He carried a backpack, a receipt for one of the guns stuffed inside. And he was carrying chains and some knives."

Foreign Violence

In an attempt to understand the inspiration behind Cho's violence, newspaper articles relied on allusions to media for answers. In *The New York Times* article, "Drawing A Line from Movie to Murder" one author writes on the complicated nature of Cho's racial and ethnic identity, "…since it appears that some of the films he may have seen, and which may have fed his disordered soul, were foreign." (Scott) Through the media discourse, Cho's violence is constructed as foreign, through connections to Korean and Asian cinema. "A photograph of Mr. Cho wielding a hammer was thought by some commentators to resemble an image…doing something similar in *Old Boy*, a bloody and critically esteemed revenge tragedy…" (Scott) While Cho's viewing of *Old Boy* was not confirmed, in a *Washington Post* article, *Old Boy* as well as John Woo's films are named as inspirations for Cho's violence, "*Old Boy* must feature prominently in the discussion of Mr. Cho's possible motivations…on the surface, it seems a natural fit, at least in the way it can be presumed that Cho's hyper-fervid brain worked. It's a Korean story -- he would have passed on the subtitles and listened to it in his native language…" (Hunter)

Queer Theory

COOPER: Dr. Morrison, what do you make -- you know, in his (Cho's) writings, …He seemed to need to prove his masculinity a lot. □□

MORRISON: Well, one of the early theories about paranoia is that it's a defense against the person's own urges of homosexuality…But the focus on the sexuality of females was only masking what appears to have been a tremendous fear that he (Cho) was not truly attracted to females. •

(excerpt from *Anderson Cooper 360*)

Some of the provocative and illuminating insights on Asian American masculinity delve into the intersections of sexuality and race, particularly in the context of pornography. Darrell Hamamoto observes in the film, "World's Biggest Gang Bang 2" the only Asian man worked in cleaning up the sexual secretions on set. Hammomoto describes him as "the desexualized function as custodial attendant and 'homosexualized' eunuch which denies him basic social agency." (Hammamoto 34) Additionally, filmmaker and scholar Richard Fung writes in regards to gay pornography:

> As with the vast majority of North American tapes featuring Asians, the problem is not the representation of anal pleasure per se, but rather that the narratives privilege the penis while always assigning the Asian the role of the bottom: Asian and anus are conflated. (Fung 121)

Fung's writings bring a vital component to understanding Asian American masculinity, the intersection of queer theory and race, as argued by various scholars on the intersections of sexuality and race. (Sullivan) Queer theory attempts to uniquely develop its own relational approach to a particular system, and disruptively giving agency to the abnormal, tabooed, and unheard. Queer theory moves to challenge binary oppositions and portraits of authenticity, often by transgressing boundaries of the self and other, insider and outsider, natural and freak. As exhibited through the newspaper articles and the *Anderson Cooper 360* excerpt above, Cho's sexuality was explicitly and implicitly an issue within mainstream media discourse. Understanding the binaries around Cho's case, such as the issue of freakism, provides utilizing queer theory may be

useful and necessary to deconstruct Asian American masculinity through Cho's representations.

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