

## The Virginia Tech Shooting and the Politics of Excessive Apology

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### Abstract

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On April 16, 2007, Seung-Hui Cho, a Korean student at Virginia Tech, shot and killed 32 people and wounded 17 others. Immediately after the tragedy, Koreans and Korean government officials issued public apologies for Cho's crime. The Korean Ambassador to the United States urged the Korean American community to repent and join a 32-day fast, one day for each victim. Many observers attribute this sense of collective guilt and responsibility to the collectivist and nationalistic culture among Koreans, dismissing it as strange and inappropriate. Drawing on the concept of "model minority," this essay argues that the excessive apologies provide a new perspective to analyze the dynamics of race and ethnicity in the United States.

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**Keywords:** Virginia Tech Shooting, Seung-Hui Cho, Model Minority, Honorary White, Apology, Korean Americans.

### 1. Introduction

On April 16, 2007, Seung-Hui Cho, a senior at Virginia Tech, shot and killed 32 people and wounded 17 others. Born in South Korea, Cho moved to the United States (the U.S.) with his family when he was eight years old, and became a permanent resident in the U.S. Although Cho had spent more than fourteen years in the United States and was mostly raised in American society, he was still a Korean national. Immediately after the attack, not only Korean American communities in the U.S. but Koreans and Korean government officials, including then President Roh Moo-Hyun and Korean Ambassador to the U.S. Lee Tae-Shik, issued apologies for what Cho did to the innocent Americans at Virginia Tech. Ambassador Lee even urged the Korean American community to "repent" and join a 32-day fast, one day for each victim, to prove that Koreans were a "worthwhile ethnic minority in America" (Durbin, 2007).

Koreans' public and collective apology, whatever its good intentions, however, caused some controversy among Koreans and Korean Americans. Foreign governments and their officials rarely make apologies for their citizens' crimes committed in the U.S. jurisdiction. Some regarded those apologies as unnecessary and even inappropriate. Firstly, Koreans, Korean Americans, and Korean government officials had no reason to apologize for Cho's crime, which had nothing to do with his Korean identity. It was not clear if Cho's shooting was related to any political, ethnic, or racial agenda. Second, those apologetic gestures could draw unnecessary and hostile attention to Korean Americans and Korean immigrants.

For scholars and analysts, the collectivist culture and strong nationalism among Koreans contributed to this sense of "collective guilt" and "collective responsibility," which resulted in an excessive apology for a tragedy they had nothing to do with. While cultural or ideological factors do explain Koreans' and Korean Americans' expression of collective regret, it is also true that this type of collective apology is rare in other ethnic or racial groups known to have strong nationalist sentiments. Apologies from foreign government officials for the crimes committed in the U.S. by their nationals are even more rare. After all, Korea is not the only country with a strong nationalist and collectivist ethic, and government officials from even more collectivist and nationalistic countries rarely issue apologies. Hence, the more important question is what caused or compelled this excessive apology from Korean government officials.

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Drawing on the public condolences and apologies from Koreans and Korean Americans for Cho's crime, this essay examines how to understand such excessive apology in the context of ethnic dynamics in the U.S. For this purpose, this essay will analyze the concepts of "model minority" and "honorary white," and how those concepts shaped and imposed specific ethnic identities, not only for Korean Americans but also for all ethnic and racial minorities. The excessive apology after the Virginia Tech shooting ironically reveals ethnic and racial injustice in the U.S.

## 2. The Virginia Tech Shooting and Excessive Apology

Seung-Hui Cho was born in South Korea in 1984. His father decided to immigrate to the United States in 1992 as "it [was] difficult to live here and...it [was] better to live in a place where he is unknown" (Chang, 2007). Settled in suburban Washington D. C., the Cho family started a dry cleaning business. While his sister coped with her new life in the U.S. relatively well and eventually went to Princeton University, Cho struggled from his early childhood. He exhibited signs of mental health problems during his childhood, and had received psychiatric treatment and counseling since then. Cho's middle school teachers found suicidal and homicidal ideations in his writings. While it is not clear if it directly contributed to his mental issues or the shooting itself, Cho had been a victim of racist bullying and harassment, according to the official report presented to then Virginia Governor Tim Kaine (The Virginia Tech Review Panel, 2007, p. 3, 33, 37).<sup>2</sup> Throughout his college years, Cho continued to show clear signs of mental instability. Among those signs were disruptive and uncooperative behavior in class, wearing headscarf, and bullying and stalking his professors and classmates.

In the early morning of April 16, 2007, Cho shot and killed two students in a dorm at the Virginia Tech campus. He returned to his room to rearm with more than 400 rounds of ammunition, a knife, and other weapons. Then he went to the Blacksburg post office off-campus and mailed a package to NBC News in New York as well as a letter to the university's English Department. In the package, Cho included a video-recorded "manifesto," blaming the rich, snobbish, sadistic, but unnamed enemies for "[vandalizing his] heart, [raping his] soul, and [torching his] conscience," and ultimately "[forcing him] into a corner" (Killer's Manifesto, 2007). About two hours later, Cho showed up in a classroom building and shot and killed thirty students and faculty members, finally killing himself. It is beyond this essay's scope to analyze Cho's motive or the root cause of the tragedy. The official report to the governor made it clear that the main issues over the Virginia Tech Shooting were Cho's personal mental problems, Virginia Tech's deficient and ineffective response, and the difficulties within Virginia's mental health care system. The report concluded that Cho's Korean background was not related to this tragedy, and that Cho's murder was not directly attributed to ethnic or racial agendas. In fact, while Korean was spoken at home, Cho did not write or read Korean (The Virginia Tech Review Panel, 2007, p. 32).

Cho's shooting made headlines not only in the U.S. but also in Korea. The Virginia Tech shooting was the worst mass shooting in the U.S. modern history, and the fact that the shooter was a Korean national shocked many Koreans. Considering Cho family's immigration history to be an exemplar of the "American dream," Koreans were not able to make sense of the terrible incident done by a Korean national. After all, the Cho family was running a successful business and Seung-Hui Cho's sister graduated from Princeton, one of the most prestigious universities in the world, and worked for the government (the Department of State), which were considered typical signs of success by many Koreans and Korean immigrants. More importantly, most Koreans, especially those of the older generation, remembered the U.S. as the country that saved them from the communist invasion during the Korean War and supported Korea throughout its industrialization and democratization periods. Almost 30,000 U.S. troops are stationed in Korea. The slogan of ROK-US Combined Forces Command is "*Gachi Gapsida (We Go Together)*."

This historically special relationship between the two countries may explain why many Koreans felt sorry for their fellow Americans. Candlelight vigils, online tributes, and religious services for the victims continued in Korea. *The Chosunilbo*, one of the most popular newspapers in Korea, wrote, "This is a sensitive time...We must ensure that our true intentions, to share the sorrow, can travel across the ocean and reach the hearts of grieving Americans" (Herman, 2007). Then President of Korea Roh Moo-Hyun publicly expressed his condolences to the victims, their families, and the American people in general at least four times (Roh, 2007). The Prime Minister also expressed his "deep regret" at a government meeting he chaired.

<sup>2</sup> The panel was composed of eight members specializing in law enforcement, psychology, and higher education, including former Secretary of Homeland Security Tom Ridge

The Korean foreign minister and other officials repeatedly expressed their regret as well. After learning the killer was a Korean national, a foreign ministry official handling North American affairs told the reporters that "We are in shock beyond description...We convey deep condolences to victims, families, and the American people." (S. Korea 'In Shock' Over Shooting, 2007)

Expressing collective regret, condolence, and solidarity with a foreign country and its people during tragic events such as terrible accidents, natural disasters, or terrorist attacks is not unusual. Homage and gestures of condolence and solidarity from around the world are popular, as we have seen in the recent cases of terrorist attacks in Boston, Paris, and London. However, after they learned that the attacker was a Korean native, Koreans and Korean officials did something that seemed unusual and strange. They did not merely express regret, but also felt a collective shame and responsibility. Then they apologized. A reporter who talked to Korean community members after the shooting said that "The No. 1 word that comes up is 'shame'...It is amazing how much responsibility a community can feel" (Woo, 2007) Korea's ambassador to the U.S., Lee Tae-Shik, said during a candlelight vigil at Fairfax County of Virginia that the Korean American community needed to "repent" and "prove that they were a worthwhile ethnic minority in America," suggesting a 32-day fast, one day for each victim (Hong, 2007). In another memorial service sponsored by the Council of Churches and the Korean-American Association at Washington D.C., Lee also said that "With this shocking incident, the Korean-American community should take the change to reflect and try to meld once again into the mainstream of American society" (Roh, 2007).

While mourning together and showing solidarity would be appreciated, taking responsibility and apologizing for what they did not do just because they happened to have a shared national origin are quite unusual. No Saudi Arabian government officials issued public apologies or took responsibility for the September 11 attacks in spite of the fact that 15 out of 19 hijackers were Saudi citizens and that at least five Saudi government officials were involved in those terrorist attacks (Shenon, 2016). The bombing at the Boston Marathon was carried out by Kyrgyzstan-born and Chechen-raised American citizens, but neither Kyrgyzstan, Chechen, nor Russian officials apologized. There was no vigil or memorial service specifically sponsored by Kyrgyzstan, Chechen, or Russian communities in the U.S. In fact, the head of the Chechen Republic Ramzan Kadyrov stated that the attackers had nothing to do with Chechnya, and even argued that the root cause of the terrorism should be found in the U.S.: "They grew up in the U.S., their views and beliefs were formed there. The roots of evil must be searched for in America" (Rapoza, 2013; Elder & McCarthy, 2013). The 2015 terrorist attack in Paris resulted in more than 130 deaths and 368 injuries, and many of the Paris terrorists, including the main culprit Abdelhamid Abaaoud, turned out to be Belgian nationals or born in Belgium. Nevertheless, neither Belgian government officials nor the Belgian people in France apologized or took collective responsibility for the mass murder their natives committed in Paris (Paris Attacks, 2016).<sup>3</sup>

Those who found Koreans' and Korean government officials' collective sense of guilt and apology unusual and excessive have criticized the collectivist, nationalistic, and even Confucian culture that is assumed to be dominant among Koreans. A reporter wrote that Koreans think very much in terms of national identity than individual identity, and thus while they are quick to take group credit from afar, they also "fear facing group reprisal after Cho's shooting spree" (Herman, 2007). Adrian Hong, the director of the Mirae Foundation, which provides mentorship and empowerment to Korean American college students, argues that Korean Americans would have to express solidarity with and send condolences to the victims as "fellow Americans," not as Korean Americans. Cho's actions were neither the fault of Koreans or Korean Americans nor related to any ethnic grievance or agenda, but were instead "isolated acts by an individual" (Hong, 2007). Moreover, the Korean ambassador's comment on the Korean-American community in the U.S. was inappropriate, as his job is to represent the interests of Korean nationals in the U.S., and he should not speak for Korean Americans in the U.S.

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<sup>3</sup> On November 13 and 14, 2015, multiple groups of terrorists affiliated with so-called the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant coordinated attacks in six different locations in Paris, resulting in over 130 deaths and 368 injuries. Many terrorists who were arrested and killed by the police, including the main culprit Abdelhamid Abaaoud, were Belgian nationals or born in Belgium.

A Korean American college student says that "When Koreans automatically feel ashamed and responsible, that's completely ridiculous...With the shootings at Columbine, should all Caucasians feel ashamed?" (Woo, 2007). Lim Jie-Hyun, a history professor in Korea, points out that "There is a confusion [in Korea] between individual responsibility and national responsibility" (Veale, 2007) It is true that nationalist and collective culture may have contributed to excessive apologies from Koreans and Korean government officials. However, dismissing the excessive apologies simply as ridiculous "sheer nonsense," which might have been derived from Koreans' misunderstanding of American culture, is also unrealistic. In fact, cultural impartiality in the U.S. is not a reality for many ethnic and racial minorities in the U.S. As such, the excessive apology that may look strange, ridiculous, and even un-American reflects the ethnic and racial dynamics of not only Korean Americans but also all minorities. A close analysis of those excessive apologies suggests new insight in investigating ethnic and racial inequality deeply rooted in the society. The excessive apologies after the Virginia Tech shooting did not merely originate from a specific ethnic culture, but rather were the product of a political concept: the Model Minority.

### **3. Model Minority and Honorary White**

In his public apologies to the victims as well as the American people, the Korean ambassador Lee Tae-Shik used a couple of controversial terms. First, he said that Korean Americans "prove" that they were a "worthwhile ethnic minority in America." He also emphasized that "the Korean-American community should take the change to reflect and try to meld once again into the mainstream of American society." While Cho's act was indeed horrendous, some may ask why Lee and other Koreans interpreted an isolated crime committed by a troubled individual in the context of all Korean community members. William Mingus and Bradley Zopf's research analyzes the collective apologies of Koreans in terms of the concept of "honorary white." Koreans and Korean government officials were shocked by Cho's shooting not merely due to his nationality but because the shooting endangered the status of Korean Americans and Koreans as a "model minority" and "honorary whites" (Mingus & Zopf, 2010, pp. 69-70).

The term "model minority" has been used to describe Asian Americans' higher level of achievement compared to other racial and ethnic minorities in the United States, specifically regarding their economic success, academic achievement, family values, law-abiding spirit, and low involvement in crime (Chou, 2008, p. 219). Asian Americans have been known for their achievements in "education, occupational upward mobility, [and] rising income" as well as "problem-free in mental health and crime" (Wong, 1998, p. 56). The 2014 census data shows that Asian Americans earn a greater household income than whites (\$73,568 vs \$57,674), blacks (\$35,902), or Hispanics of any race (\$40,337) (DeNavas-Walt & Proctor, 2015, p. 6). Educational attainments from the 2015 census show a similar pattern: a greater percentage of Asian Americans earn college and advanced degrees than whites (53.9% vs 32.8%), blacks (22.5%), and Hispanics of any race (15.5%) (Ryan & Bauman, 2016, p. 2). Asian Americans' social, economic, and educational success stories have been also illustrated by some journalists as "Asian advantage." (Kristof, 2015)

At this point, it becomes clear why Lee urged Korean Americans to prove that they are a worthwhile minority in the U.S. and that they need to meld into mainstream society. He wanted to restore the image of Korean Americans as a law-abiding, successful, and achieving minority, which image might have been tarnished by Cho's horrible crime. However, if Korean Americans had truly been a model minority or if their status of a model minority had been truly solid, they would not have had to worry at all; their status would not have been endangered by one incident. Cho could have been dismissed as just an outlier. Lee's and other Koreans' fear of losing model minority status indicate that the model minority title has always been unstable and fragile, and therefore could be easily taken away by the majority, or, the "mainstream society." In other words, it did not really matter in the first place whether Cho's act was related to any ethnic agenda or if the shooting was an isolated crime committed by a troubled individual. Cho's act already carried an additional political meaning, which has had a critical impact on the status of his ethnic group as a whole.

Although Asian Americans appear to have enjoyed the best reputation possible among all the ethnic groups in the United States, the original image of Asian Americans was far from a "model." On the contrary, until the 1960s, Asian Americans were often dubbed as "yellow peril" or a "problem" minority. Due to their non-European culture, language, appearance, and relatively short history of immigration, the presence of Asian Americans was considered a threat to white American culture, society, and its economic order. In fact, Asian Americans suffered from systematic political and social discrimination since the beginning of their immigration history.

For example, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 unfairly prohibited all immigration of Chinese workers who built the Transcontinental Railroad, whereas immigration of European workers was continuously granted. (Ma, 2000, p. 57). Even labor unions, the members of which were mostly immigrants from European countries, openly discriminated against Asian immigrants and denied them membership (Omatsu, 1995, p. 33). Asian Americans have been one of the easiest targets of hate crimes, along with African Americans, people of Jewish faith, and homosexual men ("Racial Violence against Asian American," 1993, p. 1926). The negative image of Asian Americans suddenly changed from "yellow peril" to "model minority" during the civil rights movement in the mid-1960s (See Park, 2011).<sup>4</sup> Mass media suddenly started contrasting Asian Americans, a successful "model" minority who obey law and order and who respect the mainstream norms and culture of the United States, with other "problem" minorities who disturb and resist the mainstream order and structure (Chun, 1980). In other words, stereotyping Asian Americans in such a way served for deepening tension and division among racial and ethnic minorities, and consequently for stabilizing established racial dynamics and structural racism in society. The term "model minority" was invented as a political project from its beginning, not as a sincere compliment to Asian Americans' success.

Here, we see how problematic the model minority myth is. Granting or recognizing the status of "model minority" or "honorary white" on a specific minority group intends to reinforce the rule of the dominant order, norm, culture, values and language. In his article titled "Success Story, Japanese-American Style," published in 1966, William Petersen speaks highly of the success of Japanese Americans in American society, overcoming prejudice, racism, and the label of "problem minority." He writes, "By any criterion of good citizenship that we choose, the Japanese Americans are better than any other group in our society, including native-born whites" (Peterson, 1966, p. 21). According to Petersen, the most important reason of Japanese Americans' success in the United States was their willingness and eagerness to respect and follow the dominant norms, systems, and culture of the United States.

As implied by the term "model," the model minority stereotype was constructed by the idea that there exists a stable and monolithic definition of what America is and who Americans are: a strong work ethic, respect for traditional values and institutions, a law-abiding spirit, and fluency in English. Establishing a hierarchy among racial and ethnic minorities on the basis of how close they come to the idea of imaginary "true Americanism," the myth of the model minority eventually accomplishes its ultimate political goal. The model minority stereotype forces different racial and ethnic minorities, sometimes including "un-American whites" who are not willing to accept the dominant norms and values, to continuously emulate and reproduce the fantasy of Americana's and whiteness. Accordingly, it also urges them to compete against, hate, and destroy each other. At the end of his article, Petersen intentionally contrasts African Americans with Japanese Americans, asking why they do not follow the Japanese Americans' model, even though African Americans are the "most thoroughly imbedded in American culture, with the least meaningful ties to an overseas fatherland" (Peterson, 1966, p. 43). By implanting prejudice and hatred among minorities, the model minority myth effectively prevents them from working together to fight structural racism and injustice.

#### **4. The Irony of the Model Minority: Burden of Proof**

While the myth of the model minority was originally produced and imposed by the majority society onto Korean Americans, Lee's remarks regarding the "worthwhile minority" and "melding into the mainstream society" indicate that Koreans and Korean Americans have utilized the myth for themselves as well, as if the model minority status would protect and enhance their position in U.S. society. That was why Lee and other Koreans desperately tried to restore the model minority status, which they deemed to be at risk due to Cho's shooting, by collectively repenting and apologizing to American society. However, reclaiming the model minority and the honorary white status operated in exactly the opposite way. The model minority status did not protect Koreans and Korean Americans when they needed protection from society, just as Korean immigrants were abandoned by law enforcement forces during the Los Angeles Riot of 1992, which left 2,280 Korean American businesses looted or burned, with \$400 million in property damage (Chang, 2014, p. 647).

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<sup>4</sup> The term "honorary white" is related to the "honorary Aryan" status Nazi Germany granted to Japanese nationals during World War II. In 1961, the apartheid regime of South Africa started offering some white privileges to East Asians, mostly Japanese, Koreans, and Taiwanese nationals, and even allowed them to live in the residential areas reserved for white South Africans.

Right after Cho's shooting at Virginia Tech, many Koreans were worried if Korean Americans would be targeted again as it happened in Los Angeles: "Koreans still remember the riots in L.A., so we are worried about some revenge against Koreans...We are really worked about the image of our country" (Veale, 2007). Although Senator Dick Durbin insisted that "Korean Americans do not need to apologize for the tragedy at Virginia Tech...[T]he fear many Korean Americans and Korean immigrants have expressed of being persecuted and blamed are not being realized," their fear was proved to be not unfounded when they heard of "tired being slashed and slurs being thrown" in Korean churches and cultural organizations (Korean-American, 2007). Bill O'Reilly singled out Cho's nationality emphasizing that "the Virginia Tech killer was Korean, not American" (O'Reilly, 2007). This singling out of Cho's ethnic origin resulted in racist comments against Koreans and the Korean government, and frightened Korean students began leaving the Virginia Tech campus (Kellner, 2008, p. 35). Some cyber-bullying cases against Korean and Asian students took place in schools and colleges, but they were soon abated (Shariff, 2008, p. 243). The Korean government was worried about Korean nationals' safety in the U.S., including travelers and students (See Choe & Onish, 2007).<sup>5</sup>

Aside from such isolated incidents, no mob violence or racist retaliation against Koreans was reported after the Virginia shooting. No mob retaliation against Koreans occurred. However, the fear of retaliation itself proved that the model minority and the honorary white status would be rather fragile and unstable. The need to apologize in order to restore model minority status means that this status did not guarantee real protection when it was needed. The "honorary" title does not come with real entitlements or privileges, and is respected only if it remains "honorary," which would continuously remind Koreans and Korean Americans that they would not be welcome in mainstream (white) society. Korean Americans thought that they had earned the honorary white title through their hard work and willingness to assimilate to mainstream society; however, it turned out that they would have to prove forever that they are a worthwhile minority in the U.S. to keep the title.

The model minority status and the honorary white title could be taken away anytime by one single unfortunate incident, such as Cho's shooting. Unlike the white majority, minorities have the burden of proof; they are responsible for proving that their culture and their way of life are not dangerous or threatening to the majority. This unfair burden drives minorities into a brutal and endless battle for survival to gain a higher ground against other minority groups by proving that they are, in essence, more American than the other groups. Therefore, the issue is the majority system that tests and verifies whether a minority culture is un-American or less American. On the other hand, the white majority do not have to verify themselves as American, since all are already settled and established. Minorities are asked to continuously ensure that they are getting closer to the imaginary "true Americanness," or "whiteness." The illusion of the model minority works powerfully in this structure, continuously compelling minorities to ask themselves and each other, "How American are we?" and "How American are they?"

This explains why Caucasians did not have to apologize after the Columbine shooting. They did not have to apologize or repent even when explicitly racist massacres occur, such as the Charleston shooting of 2015, which left 9 people dead. The shooter's ethnicity would be easily dismissed, and the shooter would be regarded merely as an outlier. Unlike the majority, who did not even have to try to dismiss his ethnicity, Koreans and Korean Americans "had to" dismiss Cho's ethnicity and "had to" prove that he was an outlier, by apologizing and repenting. In some sense, the call for collective apology proves that Korean Americans will remain "forever foreigners," regardless of how close they may come to achieving "whiteness," regardless of how hard they may try to obey and reproduce the mainstream's norms, rules, culture, and systems (Mingus & Zopf, 2010, p. 70).

## 5. Conclusion

Ironically, the tragedy at Virginia Tech lumped together the two minority groups that looked almost unrelated before the event: Korean Americans and Muslim Americans. When the Virginia Tech shooting occurred, the media first identified Cho as an "Asian male." Right after the first reports about the shooting, conservative commentator Debbie Schussed "speculated" that the shooter might be a "Paki" Muslim, which is a disparaging term for a person of Pakistani descent, and insisted that the shooting might be "a coordinated terrorist attack" (Kellner, 2008, p. 34).

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<sup>5</sup>As of 2007, the U.S. Embassy in Seoul interviewed more than 2,000 visa applicants a day, and approximately 93,000 Koreans were studying in the U.S.

Even after Cho's Korean ethnicity was finally revealed, Schussed continued to focus on the "Ismail Ax" tattoo on one of Cho's arms, alluding to a possible connection between Cho and Muslim terrorism (Schlussel, 2007). She insisted that "even if it does not turn out that the shooter is Muslim, this is a demonstration to Muslim jihadists all over that it is extremely easy to shoot and kill multiple American college students" (Kellner, 2008, p. 35). Some stories presented by media also mentioned that Cho had Muslim neighbors. Cho, an isolated individual, was suddenly linked not only to all Korean Americans, but also to Muslim Americans. Ibrahim Hooper, the spokesperson for the Washington-based Council on American Islamic Relations, had to assure that the Muslim religion had nothing to do with the Virginia Tech shooting: "If you read the killer's profile, it is clear he had absolutely nothing to do with Islam or Muslim...Any attempt to link Islam or Muslims with this tragic incident should be rejected by all reasonable people" (Iqbal, 2007).

Although Muslims and Muslim Americans are not typically associated with model minority, we see that a version of the model minority stereotype is still working. Amid strong anti-Muslim sentiment in the U.S., Hooper "had to" prove that Muslims were innocent and had nothing to do with the shooting, although the allegation itself was completely unfounded. In fact, Muslims in America are asked to verify that they are not a threat to the U.S. society whenever an isolated incident involving a Muslim, although that accident has nothing to do with the Islamic religion itself. It does not matter how many Muslim American soldiers fought and died to protect the country and American values. Even the parents of Humayun Khan, an U.S. Army officer who was killed in Iraq and was posthumously awarded a Purple Heart and a Bronze Star, were mocked and ridiculed for being "an angry Muslim with a thick accent" (Chasmar, 2016). No matter how hard Muslim Americans try to prove that they are true Americans and that they are worthwhile Americans, one single isolated incident will completely tarnish their efforts.

The Fort Hood shooting in 2009 could be a good example. When Nidal Hasan, a U.S. Army major and psychiatrist, shot and killed 13 people and injured more than 30 others, it was concluded that the shooting was an isolated crime committed by a person with a mental illness, Muslim communities in the U.S. "had to" prove that they had nothing to do with that horrendous crime (See Goldman, 2009).<sup>6</sup>As Hooper said after the Fort Hood shooting, "As soon as we saw what appeared to be a Muslim name, we issued our statement...So often, Muslims are accused of not condemning these kind of acts". In fact, some Muslim activists pointed out that Muslims in the U.S. have chosen silence because in fact they want to be model minorities, hoping that they could be assimilated into mainstream society: "So many Muslims are concerned with being a model minority and trying to paint this perfect picture of Islam" (Springer, 2016).

It has been argued that a color-blind society, built upon a set of impartial rules and principles, will achieve true racial and ethnic equality. The absurd and unsuccessful effort to connect Cho and Muslim Americans indicates that a color-blind society is imaginary. All minorities, including so-called model minorities and other minorities, are compelled to prove that they are getting closer to the imaginary "true Americanness." However, it is also true that no matter how hard they attempt to reach this true Americanness, they are destined to fail. It is not because they did not work hard, not because their English is not good, and not because their culture is un-American. Rather, it is because true Americanness has never existed. It is because there is no "mainstream society" defined by any solid demographic, cultural, or religious standards. Ethnic and racial minorities do not have to "prove" that they are "worthwhile" minorities in the U.S. As Sarah Song points out, acknowledging the distinctive ways of belonging to the political community and different interpretations of that community will empower citizens of all ethnicities and races to debunk the myth of true Americanness and the model minority (Song, 2009, p. 36).

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<sup>6</sup> In the court-martial, the Army judge limited prosecutors from introducing evidence, including emails to a known Al Qaeda operative, that would establish accused Nidal Hasan's 'jihadi' motives, which indicated that Hasan's shooting rampage was not an act of terror, but an isolated crime.

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