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MY TURN

■ Marie Lo



The violence of white masculinity

Even though my daughter is only five years old, she already thinks that being “pink” is prettier than being “tan” or “brown.” Despite my best efforts, I have not been able to protect her from the cultural codes that shape our society’s definitions of race and beauty. These messages are inescapable, and everywhere we go, whether we are at the grocery store, in our car listening to the radio, or playing at the park, we are inculcated in this vocabulary of racial and gendered hierarchies.

The mass murders in Isla Vista last month put into stark relief what happens when those hierarchies are interpreted through the lens of hatred, alienation, and mental illness.

In his 141-page autobiography and manifesto, the killer, Elliot Rodger, detailed his hatred of white women for what he perceived as their rejection of him and their preference for men he considers inferior to him, in particular, men of color.

Though the target of his rage and hate was women, especially blonde white women, his racist attitudes about men of color and his envy of white men were inseparable from the cultural norms of white masculinity, which he — as part Asian and part white — felt he fell short of.

Before going on a shooting rampage that injured many and killed Veronika Weiss, Katherine Cooper, and Christopher Michaels-Martinez, and eventually taking his own life, he stabbed and killed his roommates, George Chen, Cheng Yuan “James” Hong, and Weihan “David” Wang, describing them as nerds who had nothing to offer him.

As Emil Guillermo noted in a blog post on the website of the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund, even at age nine, Rodger was already acutely aware of his difference, and attributed his inability to fit in with the fact that he was not “fully white.” Guillermo cites the following passage from Rodger’s manifesto:

I am half White, half Asian, and this made me different from the normal fully-white kids that I was trying to fit in with. I envied the cool kids, and I wanted to be one of them. ... I had to make every effort to rectify this. I had to adapt.

My first act was to ask my parents to allow me to bleach my hair blonde. I always envied and admired blonde-haired people, they always seemed so much more beautiful.

Not only is beauty and desirability epitomized by whiteness and blonde hair, but being “fully white” is synonymous with being normal.

The irony, notes Noah Berlatsky in his piece, “Elliot Rodger and Poisonous Ideals of Masculinity,” is not that Elliot Rodger is a “deviant,” but that his feelings of isolation, inadequacy, and self-hatred are actually commonplace. Few men, if any, are actually able to live up to the impossible standards of masculinity. But, if whites have difficulty, then it is doubly hard for Asian-American men who have to overcome stereotypes that characterize them as the antithesis of masculinity.

Earlier this year, NPR’s “Code Switch” series featured a piece by Noah Cho titled, “How I Learned to Feel Undesirable.” In it, he described how the lack of positive media images of Asian-American men led to his low self-esteem. Cho is also biracial like Rodger, and clearly Rodger is not alone in internalizing social messages that lead to self-hatred. That Rodger grew up in Los Angeles and was from a family with strong connections to the film industry meant he lived in the epicenter and source of these media representations. Elsewhere they may be escapable; in Hollywood they are suffocating.

Gun lobbyists and activists argue that it is not guns who kill people, but people who kill people. They point to violent video games and our media, which are saturated with depictions of violence. Though I am for stricter gun-safety laws, I couldn’t agree more about our culture of violence. We also need to include racial and gender violence in our accounting of our culture of violence. We need to address the damage done to our children’s psyches as they grow up in a society structured by racism and sexism. There is a through-line in the violence Rodger experienced, internalized, and then expressed in a murderous hateful rage.

This is not a zero sum situation in which taking responsibility for our cultural ideology denies someone like Rodger culpability or responsibility. Throughout his manifesto, he repeatedly described himself as a victim who needed to exact retribution on a society that victimized him. But Rodger was also suffering from mental-health issues, for which he had been seeing a therapist.

The killer’s actions are murderously insane because he interpreted cultural codes literally and narrowly — that to be white entitled him to women, money, and belonging. And short of being white, rich, and desirable, he had nothing to live for, and he decided to take what he couldn’t have away from others.