

## JAMES HOLMES AND THE MONSTROSITY OF WHITENESS

Serial killers in popular culture appear as both evil monsters and insane maniacs who have suffered childhood traumas. This obviously represents two warring discourses united in the same terrifying figure. Insanity suggests a severe mental disability, one that could perhaps receive and respond to various therapies. A monster is, however, beyond the ken of human experience. Monsters cannot be treated and rehabilitated, only destroyed. (Poole 151)

The term *monster* is often applied to human beings who have, by their own horrific actions, abdicated their humanity. (Asma 8)

*My friend K.R. has given me a couple of different dates to choose from to celebrate his birthday with a night out at our favorite hangout. I choose July 19<sup>th</sup> because I like the crowd on Thursday nights. This is against the protests of my partner who wants to go to the midnight showing of The Dark Night Rises. It wouldn't be the first time we go to a midnight movie at the theater, but I tell him he has to wait a day because I need to celebrate with K.R. who will soon be leaving Denver to start a doctoral program. Begrudgingly, he agrees. When I finally get home after two a.m., I quickly log online and see one of my neighbors is posting about a shooting at our theater; the Century 16 in Aurora. Telling my partner about the shooting, I almost don't believe it. It doesn't feel real and it doesn't seem serious. I assume it was a drive by shooting. Later, I will question this assumption. Growing up in south Phoenix every night on*

the news or in the stories of friends I would hear about drive by gang shootings. I turn on the television wondering if there will be any news coverage. Local news anchors stand in front of the bright lights of my movie theater. Cellphone footage of people running out of the front doors is replayed. Little to no details are online yet. Someone opened fire in a full movie theater. The numbers of those who have been killed or injured continue to rise. I have only experienced shock once before; when I was in a bad accident in Syracuse during a snowstorm and my car was totaled. This will be my second time.

People on the news and online start crafting narratives that paint the shooting as unsurprising, because Aurora is a "bad" part of town. I don't believe this as I have frequently been someone who has lived in the "bad" part of town and I know what this means. It is a coded way to refer to a place where communities of color converge. Once the shooting becomes national news I share online that I am okay. I don't really want to talk to anyone so this feels like the most efficient way to keep people at bay. All I feel is anger as I tell my partner, "You know that is probably some unstable white guy that did this." Hours later as more details emerge he comes to me and says, "The suspect is a twenty four year old white guy." My anger boils over as I learn more about the suspect. I'm disgusted as I hear and read more and more allowances being made for the alleged shooter in the mainstream media. They are coupled with the demonization of Aurora; a community largely consisting of people of color. A community I have called home since I moved to Colorado. An upper middle class straight white boy came into our space and brought the violence. I sometimes wonder if white people know they scare some of us? Not only men like this, but the Mitt Romneys and Paul Ryans of the world whose rhetoric paints a world that terrifies me as a queer woman of color. This is what I fear. These are the terrorists who scare me.

I do not leave my home the next day. I don't even change. I am completely freaked out. I do not feel safe anymore. All I can do is cry and watch the same news over and over again. Though no new details emerge, I cannot change the channel. I eagerly wait for any new details. When I finally do leave the comfort of home after a day or two, it is to go to the grocery store. I look at everyone with new eyes and levels of suspicion. I wonder if they look at me the same way, yet simultaneously I feel a bond with them as we share in the affect of violation. No one's lives will ever be the same after this.

The emotional and physical proximity of the shooting are too close. I don't mean to sound callous in saying this. I wonder if I have been so desensitized to violence that it literally had to be just down the street for me to feel something. I have gone to that theater for midnight openings many times. I have sat in that theater where

the shots were fired and in the theater next door where bullets penetrated walls. After the shooting, the possibility of our bodies being there is just too much.

In the early morning hours of July 20<sup>th</sup> 2012, just after 12:30 a.m. James Eagan Holmes allegedly opened fire in theater nine of the Aurora Century 16 movie theater during a screening of *The Dark Knight Rises*, killing twelve people and injuring countless others (Pearson). Moviegoers in theater eight, next to theater nine where Holmes allegedly opened fire, were hit by bullets that went through the walls. Holmes, a failing doctoral neuroscience student at the University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus, was taken into custody shortly after the shooting outside of the theater. Dressed in full body protective gear, including a gas mask, Holmes is alleged to have used an AR-15 rifle, a twelve-gauge shotgun, and a .40-caliber handgun found at the scene (Pearson). After being taken into custody Holmes told police about his booby-trapped apartment, which included ammunition, trip wires, and home-made explosives (Fahrenthold, Farnam, and Achenbach). In Holmes' apartment, agents discovered "a pyrotechnic box with six-inch fireworks shells attached to a number of black balls filled with gunpowder, gas, and oil on top of the fridge. Holmes told detectives that the detonator to set off the box was attached to a remote control outside next to a garbage dumpster, a boom box, and a remote-controlled car" (Pelisek "Inside James Holmes's"). Holmes was charged with one hundred and sixty six felony counts ("Judge Rules").

As more details emerged about Holmes, the public learned that Holmes had not been doing well in school, as he failed his oral examinations, which led to him dropping out. During this time he began stockpiling weapons and ammunition. It was also revealed that Holmes had met with three mental health professionals at his school, including Dr. Lynne Fenton ("James Holmes Saw"). Holmes' medical records indicate that Dr. Fenton forwarded his name to the University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus' Behavioral Evaluation and Threat Assessment Team ("James Holmes"). According to Johansson, Fenton "told campus police that Holmes talked about killing people. She also told police she was reporting the comments because of Holmes' 'danger to the public due to homicidal statements he had made.'" In the weeks prior to the shooting, Holmes created dating profiles on Match.com and Adult Friend Finder with the ominous tagline, "Will you visit me in prison?" (Asmar).

Holmes offered to plead guilty to the charges against him and spend the rest of his life in prison if he would not have to face the death penalty; however, his plea was rejected by prosecutors seeking the death penalty (McKinley and Ng). In response, Holmes entered a plea of not guilty by reason of insanity.

Though his trial began on April 27, 2015, I will not be drawing on it in this analysis as I am concerned with media framings of Holmes.

As has been widely reported, Holmes' hair was dyed bright orange when he was apprehended by the police. Similarly, the photos of him on dating and adult sites showed him with his dyed hair. It was also noted that Holmes told police he was "the Joker"; a villain in Batman films famously played by Jack Nicholson and Heath Ledger (Esposito, Date, Thomas, and Ferran). It was in Ledger's portrayal that the Joker sported an orange wig. Holmes mailed a notebook to his therapist Lynne Fenton prior to the shooting. "The notebook and \$400 in burned \$20 bills" were sent to Fenton, mirroring "a scene from 'The Dark Knight,'" which "features actor Heath Ledger as 'The Joker' burning stacks of money" (Johansson).

Holmes' invocation of the Joker, a key villain in *The Dark Knight*, the film that preceded *The Dark Knight Rises*, is significant for several reasons. Ledger's Joker is represented as an agent of chaos who sees chaos as fair; a role Holmes may have been mimicking. Of the Joker, Ledger described his interpretation of the villain as a "psychopathic, mass-murdering, schizophrenic clown with zero empathy" (Lyall). The Joker sees himself as a freak who has been rejected by those he loves, including his family and his wife. In his mind, there is no real sense of morality, instead "it's a bad joke" (*The Dark Knight*). This sentiment is echoed by the film's other villain, Two-Face, who says, "You thought we could be decent men, in an indecent time! But you were wrong. The world is cruel, and the only morality in a cruel world is chance. Unbiased, unprejudiced ... fair" (*The Dark Knight*). As Batman tries to figure the Joker out, his butler Alfred suggests, "Some men aren't looking for anything logical, like money. They can't be bought, bullied, reasoned, or negotiated with. Some men just want to watch the world burn" (*The Dark Knight*). For the Joker and Two-Face, the world is monstrous and cruel and the only thing that can set it right is chaos and chance. At the end of *The Dark Knight*, the corrupt and monstrous nature of humanity as represented by the Joker and Harvey Dent/Two-Face, and the death of innocence and love as represented by the death of Batman's love, Rachel Dawes, leads Batman/Bruce Wayne into withdrawal and utter despair. Thus, monstrosity in what has been termed "The Dark Knight killings" looms large over this tragedy in many layered ways.

As more details about Holmes' life began to emerge, so did an increasingly vocal group of young people, mostly young women, on the Internet who began to share their attraction and support of Holmes. Following Holmes' first court appearance, tweets about his "hotness" were abundant; "I thought

James Holmes was looking kinda cute in the courtroom, lololol" (Stephanie), "I think James Holmes is kinda hot. I'd hit it" (Joseph) or "murderer or no, James Holmes is hot" (Taco). These individuals who go by the name Holmies began to make their presence known on both Tumblr and Twitter showing their love of Holmes by wearing plaid (what Holmes was said to have been wearing when he was taken into custody) and drinking Slurpees (a favorite of Holmes'). Online media outlets like Gawker, BuzzFeed, and Jezebel were quick to pick up the story. However, it should be noted that Holmies were not the only ones to comment on Holmes' appearance; even mainstream news sources such as Reuters wrote, "A picture of Holmes released on Friday reveals nothing unusual: Instead of a bulletproof vest, he is photographed wearing a burnt-orange crewneck T-shirt. He is a handsome young man with dark hair, sloping and uneven eyebrows and long sideburns. There is a slight smile across his face; stubble covers his chin" (Simon and Graham "Colorado Shooting Suspect"). Additionally, other media outlets started to paint a sympathetic profile of Holmes as a talented and brilliant youth who was simply suffering from mental illness or took a wrong turn. Even more inane explanations popped up on YouTube such as the documentary *The James Holmes Conspiracy*, which argued that Holmes was set up as a government patsy (Howitt).

In unpacking the framing of James Holmes in the media I use a critical rhetorical framework driven by intersectionality to explore popular discourse about Holmes to examine what I term the monstrosity of whiteness. Poole writing of serial killers in the 1980s argues that they became monster figures "who threatened not only the lives, but also the values of middle-class Americans" (149). In a similar manner, Holmes asks us to examine our cultural values. I unpack the media framings of Holmes' life in San Diego versus his life in Aurora to consider how he is constructed as a brilliant all American (white) boy who was infected by the Otherness of Aurora, Colorado. I searched Lexis-Nexis for newspaper and magazine articles about Holmes immediately after the shooting until November 2014. I also searched online media outlets like *The Huffington Post* and CNN. Through discourses that frame Holmes as a misunderstood, troubled, but brilliant mentally ill youth who ran across hard times, readers are subtly encouraged to identify with Holmes, through inferential discourses of white privilege. As Willis-Chun argues in her study of the Columbine and Virginia Tech shootings, "The press does more than report the news; it shapes the public's understanding of events by drawing up (and contributing to) common cultural values" (49). In undertaking this analysis, I am reminded of Dyer's words, "The point is to see the specificity of

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whiteness, even when the text itself isn't trying to show it to you" (28). Dyer's point is even more central as Holmes' shooting occurred during what has been termed a post-racial and post-feminist era, which marks part of its difference from the Columbine shooting. Though initially it would appear that race is not a factor in this story, my analysis argues otherwise. While Hoerl's analysis of the coverage of the Columbine shootings demonstrates how news outlets make monsters or anomalies out of the shooters in order to restore faith in the suburbs and the American Dream, I argue that coverage of Holmes creates a dichotomy between his life in San Diego and his life in Aurora in order to again normalize the tranquility of whiteness, while stigmatizing racial Otherness. The focus on Holmes as an individual problem rather than as a product of an increasingly violent culture was a similar strategy used by conservatives in the framing of mass shooter Jared Loughner (Smith and Hollihan). I further unpack Holmes through the framework of white privilege and entitlement as an aggrieved narcissist in a so-called post-racial era that allows his acts of violence to be subtly displaced through narratives that depict him as a victim of multiculturalism, which then allows him to exist in Joshua Atkinson and Calafell's gray area of hegemonic masculinity that permits an avoidance of responsibility. I also include my narrative as a resident of the area alongside this analysis to further contextualize the tragedy.

## A White Utopia

Reports about the tragedy often construct a dichotomous narrative of Holmes' life in San Diego and his life in Aurora. Holmes' neighbors in San Diego described him as a "typical American kid" (Gembrowski, Bello, and Hughes) or an "everyday guy, a smart kid who was otherwise unremarkable," (R. Martin) or who was always "happy and smiling" (A. Martin). He grew up in "an upper middle-class community of picturesque hacienda-style homes surrounded by hills and canyons" (Gembrowski, Bello, and Hughes). Holmes was a "nice kid" (Martin) from the kind of "community where neighbors are friendly and know each other" (Gembrowski, Bello, and Hughes). Of Holmes, Graham and Gallagher write,

If you were looking for James Eagan Holmes on a weekend, you might find him washing the family car or mowing the lawn. If he wasn't at home, you could try at the local sporting fields where he could be wearing the No. 16 jersey for his varsity junior soccer team or running for his high school cross country squad. Or you could check his room—like many teens he was reportedly addicted to video games. But not the

gruesome shoot-'em-ups associated with previous mass killers, rather the more teen friendly Guitar Hero.

The Associated Press notes that the Holmes family "belonged to a Presbyterian church and hosted a Christmas party for residents." Holmes' pastor, Jerald Borgie, remembered him as a "shy boy who was driven to succeed in school ... and took pride in his academic ability but didn't brag about it" (The Salt Lake Tribune). A former classmate of Holmes stated, "He never seemed the type to do something like this" (Reynolds), while one of his elementary school teachers shared, "He was a good, sweet, hardworking kid and I would have expected him to succeed wildly. He was brilliant" (Reynolds). Pelisek writes of Holmes' life in San Diego,

Holmes's life seemed to be going in the right direction. He grew up in a well-to-do area of San Diego with a nurse mother, Arlene, and dad Robert, a software-company manager. A father whose son played soccer with Holmes recalls that the young man was "kind of a strange, standoffish kid. ... He didn't talk a lot, but you could tell he was smart. ... But it seemed like he thought he was better than the other kids somehow. He just seemed to think he was smarter than everyone else. Maybe he was. But I don't think he was a real popular kid." ("Colorado Shooting Suspect")

A high school classmate of Holmes described him as "really shy, really quiet, but really nice and sweet," while another classmate noted he was always willing to help others (The Week Staff; see also Fahrenthold, Heath, and Leonnig; see also Reynolds; see also Leonnig and Achenbach; see also Tedford). Similarly, Sumit Shah, a high school classmate of "Jimmy," who claimed to be close with him, said, "He was pretty shy, but once he got comfortable with you, he was the funniest, smartest guy. ... He always had something witty to say" (A. Martin). Another neighbor of the Holmes family shared, "He was a good student. He lived in a nice home. And then he just loses it. It's crazy. This is a kid that I just don't recognize. The kid they talk about on the news is not the kid that lived on our street" (Pelisek "Colorado Shooting Suspect"). Other sources describe Holmes in San Diego as "quiet" and "awkward," "but bound for big things" (The Week Staff). He was "A science student from Southern California who won scholarships and internships" and "graduated 'at the top of the top' from the University of California Riverside" (The Week Staff). The Chancellor of his alma mater, Timothy White, described Holmes as "Quirky in the sense that he probably had a wry sense of humor," and noted that, "He kept to himself more than he socialized. But he was social. He wasn't a hermit or an introvert. He wasn't a loner" (The Week Staff). Holmes, who

attended UC Riverside on a “merit-based scholarship,” according to White, “really distinguished himself” (Gembrowski, Bello, and Hughes). News accounts also note that Holmes had previously worked at a camp for underprivileged children (Bartkewicz; Daily Mail Reporter “Pictured”; Glynn; Ng and Katrandjian). These articles paint a picture of Holmes as a “normal” guy, who though shy and introverted, seemed to be destined for big things. His life in San Diego seemed idyllic, as he came from a good white upper middle class family. In these reports, he and his family are constructed as an all American (white) family. One article even traced Holmes’ lineage back to the Mayflower (Daly). To further give some context, recent demographic data indicate that the estimated median income in San Diego in 2012 was \$62,395, while the number for the state of California is \$58,328 (“San Diego, California”).

“The framing of Holmes’ and his family’s class status is similar to those strategies used to mark the Columbine killers Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris (see Consalvo; Hoerl; Willis-Chun). Willis-Chun argues, “In regard to Columbine, several news reports noted that the violence was particularly out of place—given the setting—a middle-class suburban high school” (50). Willis-Chun notes that news accounts printed the costs of Klebold and Harris’ homes, as a way to implicitly show that “while violence is imaginable and even expected in urban areas, violence is inconceivable in the suburbs and from suburban kids” (50). Thus, the Columbine shooting “was all the more shocking because it defied American assumptions about both whiteness and middle-classness” (Willis-Chun 51; see also Hoerl). It is important to note a central point of difference between the Columbine shooting and the Aurora shooting, as I will discuss later in this chapter, though Holmes was raised in the (white) suburbs, his act of violence did not take place there, it took place in a community of color. As I will argue, the shooting reified Otherness as a site of danger, while again normalizing white suburban utopias as the only safe havens.

Further adding to the narrative of Holmes as a victim of societal ills, a neighbor said that his mother claimed he was unable to find a job, “so she sent him to a school in Colorado to earn an advanced degree” (Gembrowski, Bello, and Hughes). The “clean-cut, quiet, responsible” (Castillo and Carter) Holmes, “couldn’t find a job after returning to San Diego several years ago. For a year or so, he worked part-time at McDonald’s” (A. Martin; see also Dillon and McShane). Though McDonald’s denies that Holmes ever worked for the company (Delaney) this story has been repeated multiple times in the popular press. These stories paint Holmes, who comes from an upper middle

class family as a victim of a bad economy and scarce jobs (a rhetoric that is only a leap and a jump away from the scapegoating of immigrants). Whether or not Holmes was able to find a job after graduation, it is clear his family’s economic standing provided him with a safety net. Holmes’ father Robert, who holds a doctorate in statistics from UC Berkeley, works as a senior scientist with FICO, which “produces management systems, fraud protection, and credit scores” (Daly). Holmes’ mother Arlene is a nurse (Daly).

One of the most sympathetic and offensive framings of Holmes came from writer and performer Lisa Buscani in her piece “Losing James Holmes.” I quote Buscani at length here:

In the mass murderer story arc, James Holmes, the latest alleged lone gunman, is an unabashed cliché, the quiet young man who never caused trouble but who no one ever knew, who brought home the grades and played soccer like all the rest of the white suburban kids but failed to walk at commencement. He went from doing honors work in undergrad to working at a dead-end job at McDonald’s to entering a prestigious UC Denver neuroscience doctoral program to withdrawing from that future.

You’ve known guys like James Holmes. What you don’t know are the details of the spin out. I mean, think about it. What it’s like to be that smart and yet unable to share; to be of the world and never in it. It’s like the dreamer who pushes through race walls for a third or fourth wind and crosses through tape to a roar of adulation only to wake to a brace and a walker. It’s a high-flying mind dragged down and buried under a suffocating wet blanket of a personality that offers no impact. It’s madness. It’s a slow death. (Dries).

Buscani constructs Holmes’ oral examinations as a failure because of his inadequate social performance in front of academics, who are disciplining gatekeepers having no patience for his awkward social performance (Dries). She ends with “James Holmes is responsible for these losses but we are responsible for losing him” (Dries). Her piece blames not Holmes for the massacre, but a society that failed to nurture his awkwardness and bad social skills. There is no accountability as she casts Holmes in a “gray area” that shields him from responsibility (Atkinson and Calafell). Joshua Atkinson and I describe the gray area “as the nebulous and confusing space where responsibility for inappropriate actions becomes tangled and lost” (3). It often becomes a way to excuse white male violence.

Over and over again I hear stories of his “brilliance” by those who know nothing about how academia works. When I state that white privilege permits mediocrity, a white woman friend tells me that he must have been exceptional to be admitted to his

doctoral program despite the quotas requiring them to admit international students and domestic students of color first. I shake my head. As a faculty in a doctoral program, there are no such quotas that guide our decisions. Are these the assumptions people have about my admission to my alma mater for my doctoral program? She is the first of many others I will hear construct a narrative of Holmes' brilliance being the thing that allows him to rise above the undeserving hordes of people of color who take the spaces of more qualified whites who deserve to be in doctoral programs, but must compete with us minorities who have an "unfair" advantage. This is the myth that is supported by media coverage of white women like Abigail Fisher who sued the University of Texas because she attributed her denial of admission to affirmation action quotas (Yandoll). In this so-called post-racial period it is white people who are now suffering. At least that is what is believed by many white people (See "Study Finds").

### Infected by Otherness

In contrast to the idyllic life Holmes lived in San Diego, is his life in Aurora, which is constructed in the popular press as a place "where drugs and gunshots were not uncommon" (Simon and Graham "Colorado Shooting Suspect"), and "a mostly Hispanic enclave of dusty lots and brick apartment buildings, residents say the area is not as safe as it once was" (Frosch). The neighborhood Holmes lived in was also described as "gritty" (Goode, Kovaleski, Healy, and Frosch), "gang ridden" (The Week Staff), "run-down" (Simon and Graham "Suspected Gunman"), and "rough" (The Week Staff). In another essay, Holmes' apartment is labeled as being in a "largely Hispanic neighborhood of low-rent apartments and ramshackle homes ... rife with gangs crimes and drugs – some of which stem from the crack motels on nearby Colfax Avenue" (Pelisek "Colorado Shooting Suspect"). It is noted that "in the last three months, two people have been shot and killed within a few blocks of Holmes's apartment ... in the crime-ridden north side of Aurora" (Pelisek "Colorado Shooting Suspect"). Residents of the area corroborate this description, such as "parolee" Rosando Casaus, who shares, "This is old-school ghetto. ... This place isn't safe for nobody" (Pelisek "Colorado Shooting Suspect"). A neighbor of Holmes, Tori Lynn Everhart, remarks of their apartments, "It's not like true ghetto. It's not the safest neighborhood, but it's definitely improving" (Castillo and Carter).

Johansson notes that in Holmes' apartment, "police found hundreds of bullets, unidentified powder, fuses, wires and other bomb making equipment ... a 'Batman mask' among the other items." Additionally, the apartment was filled with

prescription bottles of sertraline, which is commonly known as Zoloft and is an anti-depressant; clonazepam, known as Klonopin, a sedative; and loratadine, known as Zyrtec and is an allergy medication. Investigators also found bottles of hydrocodone pain medication and ibuprofen in addition to hundreds of other pills that were not identified. Police noted that Holmes had nearly 50 cans of beer, all types, in addition to bottles of high-proof rum and whiskey. ... Holmes had nearly 15 textbooks related to his schoolwork at CU and several popular video games including "Skyrim," "Starcraft," and "Oblivion." The walls in his small 1-bedroom apartment were littered with posters too, according to police. Posters from movies including "Pulp Fiction" and "Anchorman" were found, as well as a poster from "Soldiers of Misfortune," a paintball movie. A chart of the human brain was also found and a paperback copy of "Starfist" a science-fiction novel was also retrieved.

The description of items in Holmes' apartment is interesting because it signals back to discourses that construct his life in San Diego as that of a "normal" young man; however, it also highlights his potential mental illness by naming the various medications Holmes had in his possession.

A bar and grill that Holmes would sometimes stop by is described as "a seedy local dive with two bullet holes in its large metal front door" (Pelisek "Colorado Shooting Suspect"). According to Goode, Kovaleski, Healy, and Frosch, Holmes

avored a Mexican food truck in the mornings, buying three chicken and beef tacos but refusing sauce, and at night he sometimes dropped by Shepes's Rincon, a Latin club near his apartment, where he sat at the bar and drank three or four beers, a security guard there said. But he spoke no Spanish, and other than placing his order talked to no one.

Further describing the multiculturalism of Aurora, Frosch writes,

This is a place that seemingly merges America—where one can find extraordinary Korean barbecue as easily as a 24 Hour Fitness gym, a place where a mosque is part of the suburban landscape and where Spanish can be heard alongside the crisp military diction of the many veterans who have settled here.

Frosch accurately describes the cultural diversity of Aurora, which according to 2012 statistics is 48% white, 28% Latina/o, 15.8% black, 4.3% Asian, 3.2%

two or more race, 0.4% American Indian, .02% Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander, and .09% other race alone ("Aurora, Colorado"). What the numbers don't reflect is the diversity of individuals of African and Middle Eastern countries that live in Aurora as well. Additionally, in 2012 the mean household income in Aurora was \$50,512 compared to the \$56,765 mean income of the state ("Aurora, Colorado"). What is significant about the construction of Holmes' life in San Diego versus his life in Aurora is the absence of Otherness in framing of San Diego despite racial demographic information that would indicate otherwise. For example, in San Diego according to 2012 data, 42.6% of the population is white, 30.5% is Latina/o, 16.9% is Asian, 6.2% is black, 3% is multiracial, .04% is Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, .03% is American Indian, and .1% identify as other ("San Diego, California"). Clearly, San Diego is a multicultural city; however, narratives of Holmes' life there don't address this in the same way narratives of his life in Aurora do despite the fact that San Diego is also diverse. Perhaps his family insulated itself from Otherness through financial means. The framing of Holmes' life in Aurora operates at the level of the nexus of race and class specifically focusing on a culture of poverty that Holmes became infected by. One of Holmes' neighbors, Rachel Reed, hinted at Holmes' potentially racist attitudes sharing that when she saw him at a local bar, Zephyr, and she put a song by rapper Lil Wayne on the jukebox, Holmes didn't like the song. He came over and "made some racially charged comments about rap" (Simon and Graham "Colorado Shooting Suspect").

The mall property where Century 16 is located is described as having a troubled history of violence and racism. For example, Hines writes of the Town Center at Aurora,

Management, seeking to weed out what it perceived as undesirable customers, set a curfew for minors and enforced a dress code for shoppers. In 2004, a mall leasing agent was caught on audio tape explaining that the mall wanted to attract more whites and "reduce negative aspects" like "young, black customer(s)."

Given this policy by management, many of those who frequented Century 16 would have been racially profiled, while Holmes would have been largely invisible. Residents reacting to the shooting stated, "This is why we don't hang around aurora (sic) mall/Century 16," one resident tweeted hours after the shooting (as qtd. in Hines). "Aurora mall has always been ghetto, tho" said another (as qtd. in Hines).

Across the way from the mall, just a short distance, a dark cloud of another tragedy hangs over. On December 14, 1993 Nathan Dunlap opened fire at an Aurora Chuck E. Cheese killing four people and injuring another (Ng). According to Hernandez, Dunlap who had previously worked at the restaurant entered at closing time and after shooting his victims, he stole money from a safe. Dunlap was sentenced to death for the murders, but remains on death row (Hernandez). During Dunlap's trial witnesses testified that,

Dunlap was enraged over being fired from Chuck E Cheese's the previous summer. For months afterward, he haunted the restaurant, invariably ordering a ham and cheese sandwich. Some waiters were so accustomed to his order that, upon seeing him, they would ask: "Ham and cheese?" Occasionally, other employees said, Dunlap bragged that he would shoot the man who fired him for insubordination. (Katz)

The stigma associated with Aurora because of these two shootings and the framing of the city by white locals as "Saudi Aurora," a comment about its location as a suburb of Denver, the epicenter of white hipster youth desiring "safe" urbanity, and a veiled racist reference to its cultural diversity, make Aurora and its residents an easy scapegoat. In my experience as a former resident of the area, I can attest to the classism and snobbery performed by some Denver locals, particularly hipsters and wannabes, who would try to shame me because I chose not to live in downtown Denver or another gentrified area. When I explained that I wanted to be near other people of color, these individuals would look flabbergasted. In his study of space, race, and the use of mapping, Hoops marks a similar phenomenon;

While some white participants opt to identify the area only according to the income level, others (both white and Hispanic) note its racialization, known to Farmvilleites by its unofficial moniker, "Tortilla Flats." This example of racialization, or projection of racial qualities onto physical terrain, illustrates "the hegemonic social relations between racialized people." (200)

The stigma associated with Aurora because of the way it has been raced and classed, and because it is home to many immigrants is very palatable, especially when espoused by the increasing number of white hipster youth who have already gentrified other parts of Denver, such as the historically Latina/o Northside, which is now referred to as the "Highlands." The proximity of the "Highlands" to downtown Denver and other points of interest that hold

cultural cache drive this gentrification. There is no cultural cache or desire to live in Aurora.

★ The construction of Aurora is similar to what Bloodsworth-Lugo and Lugo-Lugo term monsterification

of certain people and places in a decidedly 9/11 way – that is, by presenting amorphous terroristic threats ... the monster does not have a consistent representation, for at times it is portrayed as an external/outside threat; other times, it is portrayed as residing within – within our borders, communities, and selves. Thus, representations of the monster in these films are a synthesis of both outside and inside threats ... we link an examination of the enemy within to 9/11 threats in two particular ways: the enemy/monster as *place* and the enemy/monster as *person*. We note a movement, or a transformation, from familiar terrain (such as knowledge of oneself, expectations around the role of authority figures, or the look and feel of one's city or neighborhood) to unfamiliar territory (such as becoming a stranger to one's self, being threatened by those with authority, or facing insecurity within one's typical place of comfort). (74–75)

Aurora becomes the place that is monstrous in contrast to San Diego. It further transforms Holmes from a self-assured, intelligent, young man to a failing and insecure graduate student.

*I still can't go to the movies. I don't know if I ever will be able to again. It's not that I fear a repeat incident of violence, instead it feels claustrophobic and I feel violated. My partner shares that people react with surprise again and again when he tells them he has not seen the Batman movie and he doesn't know if he ever will. They don't understand our anger and the loss of something I cannot even yet name. I hurt because it feels like everyone is forgetting as we become yesterday's news. I hurt because the gunman has "fans"; misguided white youth who relish any fact they can discover and share that on Wednesdays they wear plaid because the suspected gunman was wearing plaid at the time of the shooting. They dye their hair orange and post pictures of themselves drinking slurpees in his honor. They write porn and create images of him in suggestive sexual positions. They mock the victims through memes.*

## The Monstrosity of Whiteness

Underlying the dichotomy presented in the narratives that cast Holmes' life in San Diego in stark contrast to that in Aurora, and the narratives that embrace Holmes as a victim, misunderstood, or simply mentally ill, is white privilege. Though popular narratives present Holmes as brilliant, other accounts argue that Holmes was not so extraordinary. For example, David Eagleman, who

worked at the Salk Institute for Biological Sciences where Holmes took a summer course, said Holmes had a reputation as a "dolt" and shared that Holmes' "credentials were no better than those of an average student" (Bello and Vergano). The mass killing suspect is "no elite neuroscientist" (Bello and Vergano). Eagleman stated, that Holmes "parroted his advisers' words in his presentation on temporal illusions. ... 'He was just given the presentation to read'" (Bello and Vergano). Another former researcher of the Salk Institute, John Jacobson, whose lab Holmes worked in during his time there described him as a "mediocre' student who was stubborn and did not listen to direction" (Bello and Vergano) and as "thickheaded, uncommunicative, and irresponsible" (Dillon). Additionally, Holmes was supposed to write computer code for Jacobson but didn't finish the project (Bello and Vergano).

I point to the discussion about Holmes' "brilliance" because of public perception of Holmes as gifted and the assumption that if he was accepted into a doctoral neuroscience program, he must have been extraordinary. My point is not to make a judgment about Holmes' intelligence or motives, but rather to consider how (white/male/upper class) privilege shapes discussions of Holmes in unmarked ways. Twenge writes of Holmes' failings in research despite his good grades, "So after being told for years how smart and brilliant he was, he then found out that he wasn't actually anything special." Bushman and Baumeister conducted an experiment in which participants were told that another participant had read one of their essays and suggested that it was "the worst I've ever read" (Twenge). According to Twenge, "Those who scored high in narcissism then took their revenge by acting aggressively against the person who insulted them. Self-esteem didn't predict who would be more aggressive after an insult, but narcissism did." In Twenge's work with Keith Campbell, she found that if the "insult was a social rejection, narcissists were also aggressive toward an innocent person—very similar to this shooting and other mass killings such as Columbine and Virginia Tech." Twenge believes Holmes is an example of an insulted narcissist. Though he may not be seen as a narcissist because of his shyness, she argues that his ego may have been stroked because of an education system that "rewards A's for mediocre performance. In 1976, only 17% of high school students graduated with an A average. Now it's 34%."

Kimmel's work complicates Twenge's discussion of the insulted narcissist through his conceptualization of aggrieved entitlement among white men. Kimmel describes it as

that sense that "we," the rightful heirs of America's bounty, have had what is "rightfully ours" taken away from us by "them," faceless, feckless, government bureaucrats,

and given to "them," undeserving minorities, immigrants, women, gays, and their ilk. If your despair can be massaged into this Manichean struggle between Us and Them, you, too, can be mobilized into the army of Angry White Men. (32)

Kimmel frames an example of aggrieved entitlement through the web viewers of conservative pundit Rush Limbaugh's site. Visitors to his site self report their demographic information, which Kimmel uses to characterize the typical website visitor as

a downwardly mobile white male, whose career never really panned out (college or grad school but only modest income) and whose family life didn't either (majority childless). That is the recipe for aggrieved entitlement. Everything was in place to partake of the American Dream, and it didn't quite work out. Just whose fault is that? (33)

Kimmel, like Twenge, connects this aggrieved entitlement to the ego through humiliation and a sense of emasculation. He writes, "Humiliation is emasculation; humiliate someone, and you take away his manhood. For many men, humiliation must be avenged, or you cease to be a man. Aggrieved entitlement is a gendered emotion, a fusion of that humiliating loss of manhood and the moral obligation and entitlement to get it back" (Kimmel 75). Many of the boys who have committed school shootings have been described as "different from the other boys—shy, bookish, honor students, artistic, musical, theatrical, nonathletic, a 'geek,' or weird" (Kimmel 81). Kimmel surmises that, "Theirs are stories of 'cultural marginalization' based on criteria for adequate gender performance – specifically the enactment of codes of masculinity" (81), an argument also echoed by Willis-Chun. Consalvo makes a similar point in her study of the Columbine killers as they most likely were frustrated that they were not granted "a privileged position promised to them" (40). Kimmel surmises that school shooters are acting out of an expectation and entitlement that they must strike back at those who persecute them. We can further frame this within Trujillo's discuss of hegemonic masculinity and his understanding of frontiersmanship as a property of it. Trujillo describes this aspect of hegemonic masculinity as being tied to a "white male with working class values" who performs a "shoot 'em up" Western mentality (291). This informs an understanding of the gray area, as theorized by Joshua Atkinson and myself, as acts of violence become excusable because they are done out of a sense of entitlement, right, or face saving. We can see seeds of Holmes' possible aggrieved entitlement or insulted narcissism in narratives that frame him as unable to secure an "acceptable" job after college as he was only able to allegedly get hired at McDonalds.

*Over the last few years, more and more I see insulted narcissists performing aggrieved entitlement. These are the students who come from undergraduate and master's programs with inflated grades and egos. Their white masculinity or performance of it (yes, Others do this too), won't allow them to be challenged or seen as anything but brilliant. They blame Others in the academy for all their problems rather than owning their own mistakes and failures. They lash out at Others online on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Everyone else is to blame. I worry that eventually the lashing out will come in the form of bringing a gun to campus. I know the first person who will be targeted will be the fat, spic, queer, professor who sees past their bullshit. No one takes my fears seriously.*

While narratives of Holmes' life in Aurora paint a picture of him living in a poverty stricken, violent, Latina/o neighborhood, the racial markers are largely absent in the discussion of the shooting at Century 16. As a frequent patron of the theater I know from experience how diverse the community it served was, and I would characterize it as a largely Latina/o and African American clientele. However, this difference gets erased in the coverage of the actual shooting, perhaps because those who lost their lives were largely white. Given the statements about Holmes' multiple failures, and his distain for the Otherness Aurora represented, it is plausible to symbolically consider Holmes' alleged attack as a strike against Otherness or even a hate crime. Writing of the absence of discussion of racist attitudes by Klebold and Harris in the media, Willis-Chun argues,

To probe further into the racial motivation of the killings might force a consideration of whiteness, bringing to light a construct that fights to remain unnoticed. Thus, the violence wrought by whiteness hid in plain sight, as the press invoked its own brand of white privilege in side-stepping the issue. In doing so, the press reified the (white/dominant) public's tendency to do likewise, allowing issues of race to remain unexamined and the victims to be rendered fungible. (55)

Consalvo further adds that in discussions of the Columbine shootings, though the wealth of Littleton and the families of the shooters was reported, little was done to explore the structural racism that may have contributed to the 98% white population in the city. Similarly, we have to consider the absence of discussion of race in regards to Holmes' identity, the location of his violence, and his potentially racist attitudes in normalizing whiteness.

Additionally, the framing of Holmes as a brilliant student who failed his doctoral examinations, coupled with the statements of those who worked with him, paint a picture of a young white man who was not used to failure or rejection. The inferential framing of Holmes through the lens of aggrieved

entitlement and insulted narcissism may be inviting or creating spaces of identification for disaffected whites. For example, 2014 saw one white man's call for "White Men's Marches" throughout the country on March 15 (Schilling). Kyle Hunt, the leader/organizer of the march, has sought to motivate other white men through the Internet (Schilling; McCasker), mirroring Kimmel's assertion that angry white men have created virtual social movements. Hunt believes,

"The anti-white 'diversity' agenda involves government-sponsored racism against white people in the form of affirmative action and 'diversity' quotas, which requires employers and colleges to give preference to less qualified non-whites," Hunt said. "With fewer opportunities, white people are able to make less money and are now having much smaller families. The anti-white 'diversity' agenda also stipulates that there can be no all-white countries anywhere, and there can be no all-white areas within the confines of those formerly all-white countries. Massive immigration and forced assimilation, along with persistent race-mixing propaganda, will inevitably lead to the destruction of a racial group. This is genocide." (McCasker)

MPD 2011 → "Movements" such as these have seemed to grow even more since the election of President Barack Obama in 2008 in conjunction with growing discourses that argue that our society is post-racial because the election of Obama, an African American, signals the end of racism. Recent studies also show that whites now believe they are subjected to more racism than African Americans (Daily Mail Reporter "Whites Suffer"). Analyzing user data from Stormfront.org, "America's most popular hate site," *New York Times* columnist Seth Stephens-Davidowitz argues that members of the site "tend to be young, at least according to self-reported birth dates. The most common age at which people join the site is 19. And four times more 19-year-olds sign up than 40-year-olds. Internet and social network users lean young, but not nearly that young." Additionally, the percentage of users who identify their age under 30 is 64% (Stephens-Davidowitz).

It is also important to consider the framings of Holmes as a mentally ill gunman rather than terrorist. Poole, writing of 1980s serial killers and public perceptions of them, argues, "While asserting the inherent monstrosity of the mass murderer almost all popular images simultaneously used the language of sickness and psychosis, tracing the emergence of the murderous impulse to childhood trauma or Oedipal confusion" (Poole 151). The Crunk Feminist Collective further argues, "America breeds terrorists. And they are white not brown." They argue, "These recent tragedies are not random, nor senseless. They are the product of an ethnocentric culture that assumes white and might

are right" (Crunk Feminist Collective). Echoing these sentiments is a popular GIF that circulated across the Internet of a photo of Holmes with words,

I massacred innocent men, women, and children in a movie theater. But the media must like me. If I was Black ... they'd say I was a violent drug addicted gang member. If I was Latino ... they'd say I was a dangerous illegal alien who shouldn't have gotten in the country. If I was Muslim ... they'd say I was a terrorist and there must be others ... and in all three cases I'd be dead. But I'm white ... so they call me a top student who graduated with honors but couldn't find work. I might have been disturbed or bullied or depressed. And I'm only a suspect for now ... And I'm alive. (Fong)

Another GIF of Holmes also featuring his smiling face included the text, "If I were Arab, the shooting would be **Terrorism**. If I were Black, I'd be a **Thug**. But I'm White, so it's **Mental Illness**" (Fong).

Cole echoes similar sentiments as he outlines the differences between the framings of white and non-white suspects. He argues that white terrorists are referred to as gunmen rather than as terrorists, and that they are framed as "troubled loners" whose families are often interviewed "weeping as they wonder where he went wrong. The families of other terrorists are almost never interviewed" (Cole). This strategy "humanizes" these white terrorists and possibly creates points of connections with audiences who can empathize with traumatized family members. Cole also argues that white terrorists are seen as a fringe element, whereas Others are seen as the norm or "mainstream." Likewise, "White terrorists are random events, like tornadoes. Other terrorists are long-running conspiracies" (Cole). These white terrorists are also never defined by their whiteness, as is the case with other groups, then "nobody thinks white terrorists are typical of white people. But other terrorists are considered paragons of their societies" (Cole). Though writing about white womanhood, Shome's argument that "the individual white mother is criticized for her individual personality or background flaws" while these critiques are not leveled against white people as a whole, hold currency in this situation as well (50). Finally, "White terrorists are alcoholics, addicts or mentally ill. Other terrorists are apparently clean-living and perfectly sane" (Cole). White men get framed as mentally ill, while Others are simply terrorists.

Of the growing school shooters, Kimmel notes that the overwhelming number of shooters are white boys from suburban or rural schools, "using rifles or assault weapons, and opening fire seemingly randomly" and wanting to "go out in a blaze of glory, to be remembered, to be 'famous'" (73). Like Cole, he asks, "And should we not pay attention to race, now that virtually every

single rampage school shooter since 1987 was also white?" (Kimmel 73). Noting that if these shootings were committed by

black girls from poor families who lived in Chicago ... [t]here is no doubt we'd be having a debate about inner-city poor black girls. The entire focus would be on race, class, and gender. ... We'd hear about the culture of poverty, about how living in the city breeds crime and violence. We'd hear some pundits proclaim some putative natural tendency among blacks toward violence. Someone would likely even blame feminism for causing girls to become violent in a vain of imitation of boys. (Kimmel 73)

Certainly race and gender performance do matter in this discussion, whether they are named or not. Ingebretsen argues that,

Those who are nominated as monsters may be coded as foreign or outlandish, but rarely are they alien. Despite the protestations of shock and alarm accompanying these narratives, the simple fact is that we *know* the monster intimately. Perhaps worse, the monster is us: bone of our bone, wish of our wish, or even ourselves, slightly out of focus – or maybe frighteningly focused. (203)

Holmes may be constructed as extraordinary, but he is symbolic and representative of white privilege. He is a monster born of white privilege that allows for identification, humanization, and sympathy through his familiarity.

*It is not until August 8<sup>th</sup> that I finally even venture to go near the site. I take a ribbon from the makeshift memorials across the street from the closed theater. When the snow comes what will happen to all of these pictures, flowers, and gifts?*

## Concluding Thoughts

In this chapter I have explored the ways the media framed James Holmes' life in San Diego as an idyllic image of the American Dream, while his life in Aurora became a nightmare of race, violence, and poverty. Unlike previous research that demonstrates how framings of similar mass shootings committed by white youth work to show shooters as anomalies, which then allow the white suburbs and the American Dream to be normalized and sanctified, Holmes' story serves as a cautionary tale about the danger of being infected by a culture of poverty and race. This is further made clear by a larger cultural landscape that positions Holmes in a post-racial era that has now turned the tables on the beneficiaries of white privilege: white men. Thus, through these framings readers are subtly encouraged to identify with Holmes through inferential racism.

*It has been a little over two years since the shooting at the Century 16. In a move that I find tacky and callous, the movie theater has reopened. I will never go there again. As I teach, I see glimpses of James Holmes everywhere. I am scared and cautious, and my colleagues don't understand. The white male student who brashly displays his racism, sexism, privilege, and homophobia terrifies me as I wonder if he will come to campus and shoot me because I fail to recognize his "brilliance." Am I being irrational or are my theories in the flesh, based on history and experiences with racism, rightly telling me to be cautious? James Holmes is one of many white men in recent history and in textbooks who has violated communities of color, I know there will be more. My partner, reflecting on this shooting and Columbine asks, "What is it about Colorado that drives people to do this?" I quietly think to myself, it's not Colorado, as much as white privilege and entitlement. I will continue to be leery of performances of white privilege, entitlement, and narcissism. These are the monsters and ghosts that haunt me, but I will not continue to live in fear.*

Bernadette Marie Calafell

Monstrosity,  
Performance, and Race  
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I dedicate this book to all my haters.

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