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Kristen Hoerl

Butler University, [khoerl@butler.edu](mailto:khoerl@butler.edu)

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# **MONSTROUS YOUTH IN SUBURBIA: Disruption and Recovery of the American Dream**

**Kristen Hoerl**

*Although the American Dream myth idealizes youth who grow up in suburbia as culturetypes of imminent success, the Columbine High School shootings demonstrated that all not suburban youth will grow up to succeed. The extensive news media coverage of the tragedy reflects broader anxieties about the declining status of the suburbs in American society. In the wake of the shootings, the news media created a myth of monstrous youth in suburbia that functioned to repair suburbanites' waning faith in the myth of the American Dream.*

On April 20, 1999, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold marched into Columbine High School in Jefferson County, Colorado, and opened fire on hundreds of classmates. By the end of the day, twelve students and one teacher were killed. Dozens of others were severely injured. Adding to these traumatic events, the two shooters shot each other in the library. Journalists flooded mass media audiences with details and images of the shooting and the suburban high school. The *Denver Post* provided 750 articles referring to Columbine High School in the first six months following the tragedy. Hundreds of articles have appeared in this newspaper since then.

For communication scholars who believe that news media influence social interpretations of reality, the extensive coverage of the Columbine High School shootings lends itself to several questions. Academics interested in the relationship between mass media and adolescent violence might wonder how news media coverage of school shootings reflects society's interpretation of the causes of high school violence. Because a staggering number of violent tragedies occur daily in the United States and around the world, broader questions emerge. What brought these particular images of incivility to the forefront of American public consciousness? How has coverage of the shootings reestablished a sense of civil control within American society following the Columbine High School tragedy?

To address these questions, this article provides a close textual analysis of 22 newspaper articles from the *Denver Post*. This newspaper won a Pulitzer Prize in 1999 for its coverage of the tragedy and shaped national coverage of the shootings in the years following the event. As late as April 17, 2001, the national broadcast news media cited the *Denver Post* for its coverage of new information about the tragedy. This essay evaluates articles within the *Denver Post* that explored Harris's and Klebold's motives for the shootings and the public's responses to the tragedy. To understand the role of news media coverage of the Columbine High School shootings within a broader context, this essay also explores popular and news media references to suburban neighborhoods similar to the neighborhood surrounding Columbine High School. By looking at news media descriptions of suburbia alongside news media coverage of the shootings, this essay places the tragedy within the socio-historical context of the United States at the end of the millennium. This analysis indicates that news media descriptions of the shooting reflect broader

anxieties about the declining status of the American Dream myth in American society. Although the tragedy disrupted the American Dream myth, news media coverage of the shooters repaired people's waning faith in the myth in the wake of the tragedy.

## MYTHS OF SOCIAL LIFE

Scholars have approached mythic criticism from varied perspectives within the communication discipline. In 1990, a special issue of *Communication Studies* focused on the tradition of mythic criticism within the field. Robert Rowland (1990) argued for a narrow definition that characterizes myths as stories about heroic characters that occur outside historical time and outside of the normal world (pp. 103-104). In response to Rowland's definition, Martha Solomon, Janice Rushing, Michael Osborn, and Barry Brummett defended other, more inclusive frameworks for understanding myth. These scholars suggest that alternative definitions of myth allow critics to describe how myths convey social attitudes that are not readily apparent to consumers of popular media. Although communication scholars do not agree on exactly what constitutes an appropriate definition of myth, scholarship has continued to explore the relationship between myths inscribed within the mass media and prevailing social relations and institutions.

An ideological interpretation of myth constitutes one form of media criticism. Rushing and Frenzt (1991) suggest that ideological discourse is situated within myth and provide a case study of the movie "Jaws" (Frenzt and Rushing, 1993) to describe how such myths appear within popular culture. Additional studies of myths as forms of ideological discourse include those explored by Lee and Lee (1998), O'Brien (1996), and Proctor (1992). These scholars describe how myths guide social life by making make structural solutions to social problems seem natural and inevitable. Scholarship outside of the communication studies discipline also theorizes that myths naturalize our beliefs about social life. Roland Barthes (1957) suggests that myths validate and maintain "some specific social order, authorizing its moral code as a construct beyond criticism or human emendation" (p. 140). Myths depoliticize human relations, thereby fitting the needs of people who have a stake in maintaining contemporary social institutions and hierarchies (p. 143). The tragedy at Columbine High School challenged prevailing myths about achievement and success in the United States, disrupting the myth's ability to organize social life. Consequently, new myths about suburban youth emerged in the news media coverage of the shootings and transformed the traditional myth of the American Dream.

## THE SUBURBS AND YOUTH AS CULTURETYPES WITHIN THE AMERICAN DREAM MYTH

References to the American Dream myth have appeared in U.S. popular culture for the past forty years. According to Walter Fisher (1973), the American Dream once consisted of two myths: the "rags to riches, materialistic myth of individual success" and the "egalitarian moralistic myth of brotherhood" (p. 161). Fisher feared that expressions of concern for shared human interests would decline following the 1973 presidential election campaign (pp. 166-167). Recent references to the American Dream in popular books and magazines suggest that the myth has lost its egalitarian edge. The prevailing myth is "grounded on the puritan work ethic and relates to the values of effort, persistence, playing the game, initiative, self-reliance, achievement, and success" (Fisher, 1973, p. 161). As J. Emmett Winn notes in his analysis of the movie *Working Girl*, the

American Dream myth reframes social problems as individual problems that require individual solutions. By focusing exclusively on individual morality and character, the myth encourages people to improve their economic status while it denies their need for social action or structural change.

Over the last half century, the American Dream of financial success through individual effort has revolved around youth as figures central to suburban life. These images of youth and suburbia represent "culturetypes" or "culture-specific symbols that resonate important values" within mythic narratives (Osborn, 1990, p. 123). Many scholars and journalists suggest that adolescents represent a culturetype of the American Dream because they are "connected to Utopian images of the future" (Grossberg, 1992, p. 198). Because we see the future of society in youth, we look to adolescents "for an evaluation of current society and the probable social future" (Ianni, 1989, p. 1). In her analysis of a string of adolescent suicides that took place in Bergenfield, New Jersey, in 1986, journalist Donna Gaines (1990) notes that people seek to realize their class aspirations and visions of a better life on earth through their children. "Faith in the child, in the next generation, helps us get through this life" (pp. 250-251). Gaines's emphasis on class aspirations demonstrates that financial success has become a primary marker of achievement for American culture. Through their descriptions of social "faith" in childhood, these authors suggest that society expects its living standards to improve as children reach adulthood.

References to youth within the American Dream appear concomitantly with the culturetype of the suburbs. Grossberg (1992) explains that social assumptions about youth emerged following the increase in children born immediately after World War II. During this time, the middle-class flocked to suburbia because the "suburbs were imagined as a 'better place' to bring up the kids" (p. 173). As they appear together within the American Dream myth, the culturetypes of youth and suburbia allow people to imagine that by working hard within the suburbs, everyone may achieve financial success.

The American Dream myth identifies suburbia with economic growth and inclusive social relations. Kenneth T. Jackson (1985) writes that, among other characteristics, suburbia is a manifestation of upward mobility and a "tendency toward racial and economic inclusiveness" (p. 4). Over fifteen years later, writers still refer to suburbia as a reflection of "the American Dream." In a special edition of the New York Times magazine (2000) that explored the meaning of suburbia in American culture, novelist A. M. Homes states, "suburbia used to mean that you'd taken your family to a place where there was going to be more room and more space and it was going to be safer. You'd made it when you got to the suburbs" (Saunders, p. 84). Filmmaker Tamara Jenkins concurs: "there's a myth that nobody ever fails in the suburbs" (Saunders, 2000, p. 84). These writers indicate that the culturetype of suburbia within the myth of the American Dream continues to hold sway within U.S. culture.

## MYTHS IN CRISIS

### *Suburban Diversification*

Despite the prevalence of ideas associating suburbia with prosperity, social critics have suggested that the myth of the American Dream does not reflect people's experiences in suburbia. Public approbation of the suburbs is almost as old as the myth of suburban peace and security. As early as 1956, William Whyte's *The Organization Man* complained of the tedium and isolation associated with the suburbs. In the 1960s, folk music also critiqued the life-styles that emerged in suburbia, including Malvina Reynold's famous song that stated people in the suburbs "lived in little boxes" and "all came out just the same."

The last decade has witnessed a resurgence of concern for social anomie and isolation in the suburbs. A recent edition of the New York Times magazine has indicated increasing disbelief in the viability of the American Dream of suburbia. Reflecting on her memories of suburbia, Tamara Jenkins remembers stories that contradicted the myth. "There were all these stories I remember growing up where people just failed. Where people who had been executives became shoe salesmen" (Saunders, 2000, p. 83). While Jenkins challenges the cultural myth of suburbia as a place where one can find stability and achievement, other writers have critiqued the lack of community involvement and material excess of contemporary suburban culture. Nicholas Lemann (1989) laments the emphasis on economic wealth that sacrificed group bonding and childhood happiness for "individual happiness and achievement" (p. 37). In 1990, the U.S. News and World Report noted that a "neotraditional movement" was striving to "recreate the small town of the past" to compensate for the lack of community fostered by the "social and economic isolation" of the suburbs (Saltzman, 2000, pp. 75-77).

This resurgence in public critique of the suburbs may be explained by recent demographic shifts in suburbia. Recent news magazine articles have suggested that the suburbs have become racially and economically diverse since the early 1990s. Lawrence Osborne (2000) argues that immigrant families are increasingly starting their American lives in the suburbs. Although the suburban neighborhood of Rolling Terrace "looks like classic suburbia," the appearance is deceptive. "Many of the older units . . . are now low-rent homes crowded with extended immigrant families. Drugs are repeatedly sold on the local basketball court... and nocturnal gunfire is a fact of life" (p. 97). Osborne correlates growing racial diversity in the suburbs with increasing economic privation for many people living within the suburbs. Thus, the growing diversity of the suburbs has not correlated with greater economic prosperity.

Wealthy urbanites who have moved to the suburbs also challenge the myth that Americans will achieve greater financial prosperity in the suburbs. David Brooks (2000) reports that these "savvy cosmopolites" disapprove of the mass conformity of suburban neighborhoods; nevertheless, they find themselves living there "because of the kids, or the need for space, or out of sheer exhaustion" (p. 64). Brooks implies that many traditionally wealthy families are moving to the suburbs because they can no longer afford to live in the cities. The suburbs provide larger homes and better schools (for those who can't afford private education) for less money compared with homes and schools located in the cities. According to the standards of the very wealthy, suburbia represents a place where the emerging middle class strove to attain a lifestyle that wealthier classes took for granted.

Recent articles describing the consequences of demographic shifts within the suburbs suggest that people traditionally conceive suburbia as a realm for the middle-class to escape poverty. These articles also indicate that conventional conceptions no longer mirror social reality. Studies conducted in the last decade have demonstrated that the middle-class has been shrinking due to growing economic disparities between affluent and wealthy suburban neighborhoods. Between 1979 and 1989, 35% of American suburbs saw real declines in median household income while 33% saw incomes rise more than 10% during the same period (Glastris & Friedman, 1992, p. 32). The gap between the wealthiest and the poorest Americans continued into the 1990s. Between 1983 and 1997, real incomes of the bottom eighty percent of Americans dropped by seven percent while more than one hundred percent of the nation's economic growth reached the incomes of the top twenty percent (Zuckerman, 1999, p. 108). As a consequence of this widening income gap, the suburbs are increasingly inhabited by people whose financial fortunes are in decline. As the suburbs continue to increase in size and in diversity, journalists have suggested that many suburbanites worry that their claims to privilege and high status may be threatened or never realized at all.

### *Suburban Liberalization*

In addition to expressing concern for changes in racial and economic status, some writers have suggested that suburbia's growing diversity threatens conservative values. Over twenty popular journals in the last decade have begun to describe the growth of liberal perspectives in the suburbs. A 1997 *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report* notes that "suburban votes are now more racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse. They are still fiscally conservative, but have begun to reject the Republican Party's swing to the right on social issues" (Cook, 1997, pp. 1209-1218).

In response to these demographic changes favoring liberal perspectives, conservative writers have voiced concern for the declining moral state of suburbia. Tracing the liberal political shift of the suburbs in the late 1990s, G. Scott Thomas (1998) laments the growing support for welfare programs and a "live and let live" perspective that supports abortions and gay marriage (pp. 157-190). Anxieties about the liberalism of suburbia frequently revolve around the future of youth raised in families in which both parents work. Lemann notes "the feeling that American children can coast to a prosperous adulthood has been lost; and the entry of mothers into the work force has made child care a constant worry for parents" (p. 37). Among other concerns, many conservatives fear that suburban youth are not growing up to become productive members of society; their mothers are too busy working to take care of them and have left them to be raised by the mass media. Thus, conservative journalists blamed the social isolation of American youth on parents, rather than looking at the social and economic conditions that influence women to seek employment outside of their homes.

Dana Cloud (1998) argues that U.S. leaders have frequently blamed families who fail to conform to the nuclear family model to explain crises of racism, poverty, and violence. She explains the emphasis on family values frequently occurs during periods of economic or social crisis. By vilifying feminists, gays, and lesbians for disrupting "traditional" family forms, political leaders shift the responsibility for social problems toward individuals. Consequently, the rhetoric of family values distracts audiences from considering the structural features of capitalist society that perpetuate social crises (pp. 393-395). Just as the rhetoric of family values obscures structural

features of society that perpetuate moral crises, the American Dream myth masks social structures that prevent some people from attaining financial success in the suburbs. Even though the Columbine High School shootings demonstrated that the myth was not applicable to everyone living in the suburbs, news media descriptions of the suburbs continued to acknowledge the normative hold of the American Dream myth on public thought in America. Almost a year following the shootings, Dana Pollan noted that "the facade [of the American Dream] remains the organizing principle, in spite of everything we know" (2000, p. 55). The following analysis of journalists' explanations for the Columbine High School shootings suggests that news media coverage of the tragedy restored legitimacy to the American Dream by framing adolescent youth as inherently evil monsters.

## MEDIA EXPLANATIONS FOR THE SHOOTINGS

Descriptions of monstrous youth emerged in the Denver Post in the months following the tragedy. This newspaper was a dominant source of print news media coverage of the shooting. Because local reporters were always close to the scene of the shooting, Denver Post reporters were most likely to receive information before national media reporters. In April 2000, the Denver Post won a Pulitzer Prize for its groundbreaking news reports in response to the shooting. Because the Denver Post often determined national coverage of the tragedy, a study of this newspaper reflects content of national news media coverage of the shootings.

The Denver Post's coverage of Harris and Klebold frequently focused on the transformability of youth in the suburbs. Much of the language in the Denver Post described children as products created by parents. On April 25, one article stated, "Laurie Swetnam thinks of her kids, the ones she raised at home and the hundreds she sees every day as a counselor at Overland High School, as works of art in progress. No matter how flawed, no matter how sloppy, the work can be perfected" (Booth, Lofholm, & Curtin, 1999, p. AA1). The concept of children as artistic creations suggests that they are raw material to be molded by adult hands. Adults transform youth from a natural state into cultivated products. The newspaper similarly described Dylan Klebold as a work constructed by his parents. According to Reverend Don Markhusen, "Tom Klebold [Dylan's father] . . . thought he had a good finished product" (Culver, April 28, 1999, p. A15).

### *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*

Two different types of media accounts of the shootings emerged to indicate why Harris and Klebold did not turn out to be "good products." By one account, the media suggested that it was unlikely that adults could transform Harris and Klebold into normal citizens. I call this narrative the "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" explanation for its resonance with the popular story of a man who had the double life of an honorable doctor by day and a monster by night. The *Denver Post* frequently suggested that Harris and Klebold had the resources necessary to become good finished products. For instance, the paper frequently described the successful backgrounds of the killers' parents. Several articles noted that Klebold came from a liberal, affluent, well-educated

family. Klebold's parents ran a real estate mortgage company "from their home, a large, modern, cedar-and-glass structure with a matching guest house, both wedged between two huge sandstone slabs" (Hughes & Blevins, 1999, p. A14). The *Denver Post* also noted that Klebold's mother is the granddaughter of a "prominent philanthropist in Columbus' Jewish Community . . . [who] made his fortune and left his mark on the area . . ." (Simpson & Blevins, 1999, p. A16). On May 2, the newspaper summarized Klebold's family history: "Klebold . . . grew up amid white-bread suburbia in normalcy and affluence that went relatively unreflected outside the family's \$400,000 Deer Creek Canyon home" (Simpson, Callahan, & Lowe, 1999, p. A19). Thus, the focus on affluence and liberalism stood as major features of Klebold's childhood.

Although Harris's family only had a "two story home" valued at \$184,000 (Hughes & Blevins, 1999, p. A14), the *Denver Post* similarly described his family's success.

Wayne Harris [Eric's father] already was an officer and heavily decorated pilot lauded for a cool hand during airborne refueling missions.... Kevin Harris [Eric's older brother] enrolled at Columbine as a freshman. Two years later, the older brother would blossom on the football team as a kicker and reserve tight end. (Briggs & Blevins, 1999, p. A18)

In addition to describing the killers' successful family backgrounds, the media spent considerable time explaining how these boys appeared to be successful students before the shootings. The *Denver Post* frequently noted that these boys were intelligent students. "[Klebold] was a whiz at all of his classes," said his former classmate, Jennifer Harmon, "He didn't even have to try. He just knew everything" (Simpson et al., 1999, p. A19). Similarly, Harris was known in school as "an inspired student and writer, hurling his hand in the air to offer his take on Shakespeare" (Briggs & Blevins, 1999, p. A18). Through quotes such as this, the newspaper highlighted these adolescents' affluent social environment and intelligence before they attacked their school.

Conversely, adjectives within these and other articles frequently compared these boys to monsters or to other pejorative figures from history. Students recalled that the killers wrote "creepy poems" (Emery, Lipsher, & Young, 1999, p. A10), and were "wicked smart" (Lowe, 1999a, p. A1). One reporter remarked that "monstrous" Klebold "smiled ghoulishly" into the camera for a video he made days before the shootings (Lowe, 1999b, p. A11). In addition, reporters frequently described the shooters as Nazis because it was rumored that they worshipped Adolph Hitler. The *Denver Post* noted that they "listened to German bands, had German bumper stickers on their cars and wore swastikas" (Emery et al., 1999, p. A10). University of Denver Professor Carl Raschke explained that the shooters likened themselves to "young stormtroopers.... They want to honor the memory of the master and these kids seriously look to Hitler the same way that young blacks look to Martin Luther King and the way many Christians look to Jesus" (Greene & Briggs, 1999, p. A17).

As they contrasted the boys' images as intelligent students with images as monstrous Nazis, the *Denver Post* suggested that Harris and Klebold had a dark side few were able to detect before the shooting. While Harris was remembered in his first hometown in Plattsburg, New York, as a "normal" 12 year old, the paper wrote that by 1996 "signs of strangeness were already creeping in" (Briggs & Blevins, 1999, p. A18). Another *Denver Post* article stated that Klebold's parents "knew a different kid than the monster in the school" (Simpson et al., 1999, p. A19). "I liked him,"

recalled student Tim Kastle, "He was really a pretty normal and a pretty nice guy. We're all thinking it was some kind of double life." Klebold's neighbor, Vicki De Hoff, similarly noted that Klebold was "the kid next door.... [I]f it could have been the kids next door, it could have been your kid too" (Simpson et al., 1999, p. A19). This notion of the boys behaving as both smart students and as dangerous monsters provided a sense of widespread panic about youth in general. This fear wasn't related only to these two particular students shooting their classmates; the anxiety was rooted in conservative fears that a liberal influence (which encouraged women to work outside the home) would undermine adolescent progress in suburbia. Without parental surveillance, all youth might be monsters, living undetected beneath the roofs of normal, affluent suburban homes.

Journalist Christopher Caldwell (1999) wrote for the *National Review* that the secluded atmosphere of the suburbs "causes a breakdown in normal socialization for children, and leads to a loneliness that some say contributes to incidents such as the Columbine High School shootings" (p. 30). Thus, as mothers go off to work, their children become isolated and, therefore, dangerous to others in the neighborhood. Caldwell concludes, "In Littleton, you get kids building the wildest fantasies in their interminable solitude, with the help of their computers" (p. 30). As Caldwell suggests, fear of an unseen, dangerous adolescent population within the suburbs reflects anxiety about the future of adolescents growing up in an increasingly liberal suburbia.

Two explanations emerged in the media to account for why adolescents might be living "double lives" in the suburbs. One explanation rooted the problem in a genetic predisposition for violence. Reporters noted that Harris had been taking the prescription drug Luvox, often used to treat obsessive-compulsive disorder and depression (Briggs & Blevins, 1999, p. A18). The fact that Harris was taking medication for mental anxiety disorders might suggest that Harris committed acts of violence because he was mentally unstable; therefore, he was inherently predisposed toward violence. Other articles explicitly suggested that some children have naturally violent tendencies. The newspaper quoted psychologist Neil Sorokin who suggested that, for some parents, efforts to correct their children's violent behavior is fruitless. "Some people . . . see others—us—as their prey. There are predators out there who stalk us and kill us. They don't value human life" (Martin, 1999, p. A18). Perhaps the explanation of uncontrollable, unpredictable teenage violence is best summarized in a parallel story reported by the *Denver Post* in which a teen-age boy constantly exhibited violent tendencies and attempted to stab his father to death. The boy's father concluded that his son was "'genetically predisposed' to violence" and that he ultimately "wasn't able to help him" (Green, 1999d, p. A9). By attributing violent behavior to genetic, natural tendencies within some youth, parents, school officials, and health care workers are exonerated from blame when adolescents suddenly commit acts of violence against others.

Another explanation for Harris's and Klebold's similarities to "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" suggested that although all youth were dangerously close to becoming monsters, a Christian upbringing could steer them back into normal society. This offshoot suggests that parents' failure to instill a sense of Christian morality and faith in their children is to blame for the failure to transform youth into good products for society. This explanation for youth violence was most poignantly told through the news media's coverage of Cassie Bernall, one of the students Klebold and Harris killed. In contrast to the descriptions of Harris and Klebold's upbringing and behavior, Bernall's story was one in which her parents transformed her outwardly deviant behavior into expressions of kindness.

According to the *Denver Post*, in 1966 Bernall "fell in with the wrong crowd" (Wallace, 1999, p. A1). When her parents, Brad and Misty Bernall found "grisly" drawings of the family, occult symbols, and praise for Marilyn Manson's music in her room, they decided to take action (Wallace, 1999, p. A1). Misty Bernall stopped working and moved Cassie to a different school. Then, her parents sent her to an Evangelical Presbyterian congregation. "Under protest, Bernall joined the church's youth group, where her anger gradually subsided. About two years ago, she returned from a retreat as a converted Christian" (Shore, 1999). Following her conversion, the *Denver Post* notes that Cassie Bernall became more engaged in artwork and planned to attend college in Britain (Wallace, 1999, p. A1). In contrast to the creeping strangeness Harris exhibited between 1996 and 1999, the successful transformation of Cassie Bernall between those years indicates that youth may not be inherently evil; they need religion and increased parental surveillance to direct them toward positive ideals and values.

What unites both of these accounts is the presumption that youth require transformation to move them away from a natural predisposition toward violence. Although it is not certain whether all youth may be successfully produced as "normal" members of society, these articles suggest a sense that adults have a primary role in shaping the lives of adolescents. Coverage that describes youth as predisposed to violence deflected attention from growing public uncertainty about the potential for economic progress within the suburbs. Rather than acknowledging social conditions that provoke adolescents to engage in violent behaviors, this explanation suggests that violence may be an inevitable condition of adolescence.

#### *Dr. Frankenstein's Monsters*

A less frequent media account for the shootings told a much different story. In a few cases, the media noted that Harris and Klebold constantly endured direats and beatings from more popular, athletic students. This story indicated that more than just an inherent predisposition toward violence motivated Harris and Klebold to attack their classmates and kill each other. These news stories implied that a specific social context influenced them.

Although the media's acknowledgment of bullying behavior did not include a direct indictment against the school system itself, reporters noted that the athletes' violence and threats toward students occurred continually with few reprimands from school authorities. One student who asked to remain anonymous told *Denver Post* reporter Susan Greene that his life has been "pure hell" due to the taunts and terrorizing behavior of a "handful of bullies." This student added that these bullies "held so much power that most of the school emulated them, or at least were too afraid to voice dissent." The student noted that these "jocks" "called him 'faggot,'" and "bashed him into lockers and threw rocks at him from their cars while he rode his bike home from school" (Greene, 1999c, p. A1). In early 1998, the student reported that a jock labeled him and his friends the Trench Coat Mafia. According to the article, "the group accepted the moniker, hoping the symbolism would scare their tormentors and that... would finally give them some peace. 'And it worked,' the teen said, 'They did start leaving us alone.'" This student also said that he knew Klebold and Harris were similarly tormented.

"I'm not saying what they did was OK," he said of Harris and Klebold. "But I know what it's like to be cornered, pushed day after day. Tell people that we were harassed and that sometimes it was impossible to take.... Tell people

that... eventually, someone was going to snap." (Greene, 1999c, p. A1)

This student suggests that Harris and Klebold's rampage was motivated by similar experiences of abuse that led others to form the Trench Coat Mafia. The clique formed as a defense against taunts and harassment while the shootings represented a form of retaliation for previous abuses the boys suffered at the hands of other more athletic students. By noting that athletes physically threatened Harris and Klebold, this student indicates that the shooters' behavior extended and exaggerated the abuse that the shooters experienced themselves.

Further evidence suggests that the shootings not only reflected an extreme form of the treatment Harris and Klebold faced, but they also represent the only form of retaliation that the shooters perceived was available to them. Another media account suggests that Columbine High School administrators supported athletes who physically threatened other students. *Denver Post* editorialist Chuck Green reported an egregious case of violence committed by a Columbine High School athlete. In a string of editorials published during the last week of May 1999, Green exposed the case of Landon Jones, the captain of Columbine's football team. The editorial writer noted that this "handsome and smooth-talking junior" was already being "courted by college recruiters from Stanford, Harvard, and Colorado"; however, he was also accused of "harassing, threatening, grabbing, and throwing things" at his ex-girlfriend. Although the courts granted Jones' ex-girlfriend a restraining order against him, the Columbine High School administration asked her to leave school early (Green, 1999a, p. B1). Jones was allowed to remain at Columbine High School. Green presented information that demonstrated that the abusive behavior of athletes was "tolerated by administrators that favored major-sport athletes over common students." After further investigation, Green argued that violence in high school athletic departments represents a "systemic problem" (Green, 1999b, p. B1). Green's position was extraordinary. Although news reports of high school shootings suggest that schools have become increasingly violent, few media accounts explicitly argue that high schools perpetuate violence. Consequently, public responses to the crime barely focused on problems inherent in suburban high schools.

On the first year anniversary of the shootings, *Good Morning America* news anchor Charles Gibson interviewed Judy Brown, whose son befriended Klebold. Brown noted that people who knew Dylan knew the attack was his response to the harassment he experienced at school. She also suggested that the reason the media did not focus on this problem was that "people don't want to know that society can do this to your son" (Roth, 2000). Similarly, Brooks Brown complained to reporters for the CBS nightly news that no one has yet explained Harris and Klebold: "Society created them. It's Frankenstein and his monster. We need to analyze the doctor" (Murphy, 2000).

This account of violence challenges the notion that Harris and Klebold are inherently dangerous, but it was overshadowed by media reports that emphasized personal factors that led Harris and Klebold to attack their school. Consequently, news media audiences were distracted from considering structural and cultural explanations for the shootings. The media's description of Harris and Klebold as monsters echoed previous terms, such as "freaks," that athletes applied to the shooters before the tragedy. The media's general support for athletes who harassed and beat other students points to news media biases. News media constructed Harris and Klebold as deviants while they supported institutions also known for violence and brutality. Although the acts of brutality that athletes engaged in were minor compared to the injuries and deaths that resulted

from the shootings, the effects of continual abuse and harassment in high school may have devastating effects on students. By virtually ignoring extreme bullying behavior at Columbine High School, newspaper reports hindered audiences from considering whether the brutal treatment Harris and Klebold received from athletes may have influenced the shooters' rampage. Athletes who intimidated "outsiders" including Harris and Klebold encouraged these "outsiders" to reciprocate. In the absence of physical strength, Harris and Klebold retaliated through guns and explosives. Public responses to the tragedy resonated with the portrayal of Harris and Klebold as inherently dangerous monsters while physical bullying throughout Jefferson County high schools continue unchallenged and unabated.

### *Reasserting Civil Control over Suburbia's Monster*

The notion that Harris and Klebold were inherently dangerous suggested that there was no way adults in good standing in suburbia could detect which students would emerge as monsters and destroy the "normal" residents of suburbia. Thus, school officials and parents predominantly responded to the crime by magnifying the perception that gun-toting adolescents prevailed in suburban high schools and calling for increased surveillance and control of potentially deviant students. School officials installed cameras in classrooms and metal detectors at school entrances, and on April 20, the Jefferson County school board banned black trench coats and combat boots from schools (Lowe & Dreyer, 1999, p. A1).

In addition to enforcing tighter security measures in suburban high schools, many public officials and parents across Colorado and the nation rallied to promote gun control legislation. One particular gun control organization, Sane Alternatives to the Firearms Epidemic (SAFE) came to the forefront of the movement after the tragedy. Several political leaders, including former state Governor Dick Lamm and Democratic State Senator Diana DeGette, threw their support toward the movement's activities. Interest in gun control legislation expanded beyond Colorado as well. Regina Lawrence (2001), who argues that news media coverage of tragic events constructs these events, determined that "24% of the articles mentioning the Columbine shootings in the *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* were focused on the topic of gun control—more than any other type of story focus" (p. 106). Surveillance and gun control in high schools magnified the perception that students throughout the nation were armed and ready to kill their classmates. This response was not only an exaggeration of the threat of gun violence in high schools: it also provided an inadequate response to the structural and social conditions that perpetuate violence in high schools. By enacting measures to control adolescents' behavior and access to firearms, people seemed to respond most positively to the *Denver Post's* warning that "what this shattered world needs is more childproofing" (Booth et al., 1999, p. AA7). This response to youth violence contributed to public discourse about the uncontrollable nature of adolescence. It also provides the basis for a new myth of monstrous youth lurking within suburbia that resonates with conservative anxieties about the liberal influence of suburban life and its effects on adolescents. By suggesting that such youth prevent others from attaining prosperity in the suburbs, this new myth maintains the viability of the previous myth of the American Dream. Monstrous youth, rather than the structural conditions of suburbia, hinder the achievement that people are bound to experience in the absence of these adolescents.

The news media's indication that Mr. Hyde could be permanently transformed into Dr. Jekyll through Christianity also influenced concerned parents and students. In the six months following the shootings, local churches witnessed a rise of adolescents attending services and religious retreats. Furthermore, the story of Cassie Bernall's transformation resonated with morally conservative values. According to writers for the *Denver Post*, the book *She Said Yes: The Unlikely Martyrdom of Cassie Bernall* supported the notion that suburban youth require religious upbringing. News media coverage of the book described Misty Bernall's influence on her daughter; Cassie's transformation entailed Misty's decision to quit working and devote full attention to her children. Within days of the book's release, it reached the number 3 spot on the *Denver Post's* best sellers' list. In addition, it hit the number 40 spot on the Amazon.com on-line list of top 100 selling books across the country (DeFalco, 1999, p. B2). Sales of Misty Bernall's book about Cassie's transformation through Christianity suggested that concerned parents found religion and non-employed mothers an appealing response to their own anxieties regarding youth deviance.

In contrast to the upsurge of public support for transforming and controlling the behavior of deviant adolescents, little evidence appeared in the media to suggest that hierarchical social structures also motivated Harris and Klebold. Although the media noted that public officials and residents of Colorado had taken measures to reduce school violence by increasing school security and promoting gun control legislation, the media did not suggest that many people had considered preventing school violence committed by athletes. On the contrary, the local media celebrated Columbine High's successful football team. On November 20, the *Rocky Mountain News* reported the victory of Columbine High School's football team with Landon Jones scoring the final touchdown (Stocker, 1999, p. C16). As football fan, Aaron Brown, said of Columbine High School's football victory, "We've showed them that we can prevail" (Lowe & Dreyer, 1999, p. A1). Although this quote reflects the ability for Columbine students to progress after the tragedy, it also reflects predominance of athletics after the shootings. In instances such as this, the media celebrated the perspectives of athletes.

The news media also reported that violent athletes continued to receive support from school officials despite their continual abuse toward less athletic students. On December 1999, the *Denver Post* quoted student Amanda Stair, who noted that the attention athletics received at Columbine High School remained "pretty much the same" as it existed before the shootings occurred (Lowe & Dreyer, 1999, p. A1). Other newspapers also indicated the unequal social relations between students at the school. On February 20, 1999, the *Austin American Statesman* noted that, for many students, social relations at Columbine High School had not altered: "I kind of expected things to change between people, that they would be more respectful and not make fun of people," [student Sara] Blackford said. 'But that didn't happen" (Kowal, 2000, p. A2). Tragically, public responses for the tragedy that strove to contain "monstrous" youth perpetuated such violence by maintaining hierarchical social structures that provoke students to respond to one another with aggression.

## CULTURETYPES IN CRISIS

### *The Moral Panic over Suburban Youth*

Broader cultural explanations for the shooting remained in the background of media and public responses to the shooting because the tragedy challenged the myth of the American Dream.

The shootings at Columbine High School indicate that suburban youth are not necessarily safe nor do they necessarily feel happy living in the suburbs.<sup>1</sup> More recent school shootings, such as Charles Williams's attack on students at Santana High School in Santee, California, and Elizabeth Bush's shooting of a fellow student in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, further attest to adolescents' violent reactions to the denigration and abuse they experienced in suburban high schools across the country. According to their friends and own statements, both students experienced repeated abuse from bullies who were highly regarded among students in their respective high schools (McCarthy, 2001, pp. 24-28; Morse, 2001, p. 28). Although several popular authors suggest that dissatisfaction with the viability of the American Dream lay simmering beneath the freshly mowed lawns and carpeted interiors of America's suburbs, these shootings illuminate the fact that adolescents in the suburbs may not inevitably reach prosperity or achievement in their adult lives.

Combined with emerging concerns about the changing demographics of suburbia, the Columbine High School shootings provoked a crisis over the hegemony of suburbia. According to Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, and Roberts (1978), a crisis of hegemony occurs when people who support the present social order experience anxiety about the possibility of social change (p. 217). Consequently, the "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" explanation for Harris and Klebold's attack provoked a moral panic. Hall et al. (1978) suggest that moral panics ensue when youth cultures become defined as a threat to societal values and interests. In their explanation of media descriptions of the "mugging crisis" in the United States and England during the 1970s, these authors note that the term, "mugging" came to stand as a referential symbol for the "whole complex of attitudes and anxieties about the general drift of American society" (p. 20). As a result, "the scale and intensity of this reaction [was] quite at odds with scale of the threat to which it was a response" (p. 17). In this sense, moral panics exaggerate the threat of criminal violence to reinstate predominant social relations.

Although the public had good reason to express alarm over the massive deaths at Columbine High School, public and media efforts to control monstrous youth indicate that a moral crisis followed the tragedy. The public's response to the Columbine High School shootings focused on controlling and monitoring the activities of adolescents. Consequently, such responses failed to address bullying behaviors and brutal competition endemic to high school life. In this instance, the public's efforts to reduce conditions that provoke violent crime actually perpetuated these conditions. The moral panic did not ensue following an exaggerated threat of criminal activity, but emerged following an inadequate explanation for violence that scapegoated adolescents for broader social dilemmas. Thus, the moral panic emerged as a response to the emerging myth of monstrous youth in suburbia. As the myth of monstrous youth within news media coverage of the shootings distracted audiences from challenging the social hierarchy of suburbia, the policies that sought to control and survey youth constituted a moral panic that maintained suburbia's social hierarchies.

### *Producing Winners through Incivility*

By responding to images of monstrous youth, the moral panic over suburban adolescents ignored the role of high school athletics in establishing social hierarchies and competition. Athletic competition serves an important function for people living within the suburbs who have faith in the myth of the American Dream. The violence perpetuated by athletes is a crucial element of the

transformation process that must occur in affluent, suburban high schools in order for the dream to remain viable for some individuals. Although academics is a key component of high school education, athletics is vital for producing successful adults for the job market. In the race for employment, recent reports suggest that employment after college is largely predicated on where students live. A recent U.S. News and World Report indicates that children from affluent suburbs were twice as likely to go college and get decent jobs as their peers from working class suburbs (Zuckerman, 1999, p. 108). Thus, students living in affluent communities are trained to compete for the best jobs. Not only do they need the skills required for the job market, they must learn to feel comfortable competing against equally qualified applicants. In United States public high schools, athletic competitions train student athletes to struggle against others for positions of status. Figuratively speaking, athletics teaches students it is okay to beat others. Sometimes that is literally the case as well.

In addition to data supplied by media accounts, this article is also informed by conversations with my brother, who is a student in a high school neighboring Columbine during the shootings at Columbine High School and the writing of this essay. He frequently told me about his own football coach's approach to competition. Before one particularly daunting game against a tough team from a less affluent school, his coach instructed the team not to shake their opponent's hands; competition must be ruthless. By encouraging athletes to appear increasingly uncivil toward one another, coaches encourage athletes to dehumanize their opponents. Consequently, beating the other team becomes a primary goal for high school athletes who are taught to win at all costs.

Just as some coaches teach athletes to dehumanize their opponents to beat them during competitions, high school administrators ignore the humanity of "outsiders" when they allow athletes to attack these underdogs. Although other teams are good outlets for competition and aggression, students spend most of their time interacting with students within their own schools. While most students are not necessarily outsiders or athletes, the presence of "outsiders" within the same high school as successful athletes produces hierarchies within these schools. Indeed, my brother and his friends frequently mention that the football coach "looks the other way" when some of the senior members of the football team gang up on and beat smaller sophomores and freshman trying to make it on the team. High school coaches who reinforce physical brutality as a means to attain status sustain an endless hierarchy determined by strength and callousness.

The emphasis athletics places on physical competition suggests that deviants described in the myth of monstrous suburban youth are not just inevitable components of life in suburbia; they are necessary for other students to attain measures of success valued within the myth of the American Dream. Socially peripheral students who suffer from the violence of popular students are central for the successful transformation and progress of other students. The competing images of youth in these myths suggests that culturetypes are powerful symbols that may be used to guide human behavior. Harris and Klebold represent negative culturetypes within the myth of monstrous youth in suburbia. Rather than representing all that adolescents *ought* to become, they represent what youth should *avoid* becoming. The culturetype of deviants within the myth of monstrous youth may guide human action because it exists in contrast to the culturetype of successful youth idealized in the American Dream myth.

The shootings suggest that labeling deviants has become increasingly dangerous as competition for economic status has stiffened. As the gap between the rich and poor has widened and middle class incomes have declined, physical competition in high schools has become increasingly brutal. It is little wonder that students who cannot compete with their own physical strength have turned to firearms instead. The violence at Columbine High School and the media's fascination with the tragedy may be an outcome of growing social awareness that cutthroat competition has become increasingly necessary to attain economic prosperity.<sup>2</sup>

The fact that little news coverage addressed the role athletes played in the shootings attests to the continual force of the American Dream in directing social life, despite its failures to account for the lives of many individuals who live within the suburbs. Emphasis upon the brutality and competition within the suburbs would suggest that high schools require fundamental restructuring to prevent future aggression on school grounds. By focusing on the personality flaws of Harris and Klebold, the news media safeguarded the hierarchical order of suburban high schools that valorize competition for the realization of the American Dream.

### *Producing Monsters in Late Capitalist Society*

Although "outsiders" serve an important function for other students in high schools, there are no guarantees that more popular students will, in fact, become prosperous adults. The hierarchical nature of high schools suggests that almost everyone is forced to compete with other students; thus, no student is immune from the pressures of competition and failure. Athletic high school students living in the suburbs do not necessarily benefit from the media's depiction of Harris and Klebold as monsters. On the other hand, the idea of athletic students as successful members of suburbia does serve an important function for the general population of suburbia because athletes are important culturetypes for the myth of the American Dream.

As icons of suburban prosperity, high school athletes reinforce social norms for interacting with different individuals and groups whereby some must lose for others to succeed. These ideas support research that suggests that deviance is essential to the maintenance of social order. As Kenneth Burke (1969) notes, every hierarchy in society depends on a killing. Literally, or symbolically, groups come to identify themselves as "consubstantial" (or joined together with a common sense of purpose and belief) by sacrificing those whom they identify as non-essential to the group. Thus, Burke states, "consubstantiality is established by common involvement in a killing" (p. 265).

These authors indicate that within our hierarchically ordered society, everyone may not become economically prosperous or feel fulfilled by their lives in the suburbs. Indeed, some people become scapegoats who are treated as less than human and are consequently cast out of the symbolic order. Not only is affluence contingent upon "winning" material resources from others, fulfillment is often based upon the belief that one has more resources than his or her neighbors. Although most people are taught that the dream can become reality, the competition inherent to capitalism requires that some people will not be a part of the myth. "Losers" must be sacrificed for others to achieve the American Dream. The Columbine High School shootings reflect the tendency to cast "others" out of the symbolic order in a remarkably vivid way, for it points to extremity to which we sacrifice others to maintain the social order. Brooks Brown and other students who

testified to the bullying Harris and Klebold faced suggest that the shooters were physically cast out of the suburban social order by athletes who consistently bullied them. Harris and Klebold's rampage exaggerated the effects of hierarchy in late capitalism as they literally killed those who represented the social order that excluded them.

The shooters' relationship to their suburban high school both before and after the shootings (as targets for bullies and as extremely dangerous bullies themselves) suggests that there is another way we can understand the emergence of moral panics following youth crime. News media coverage of Harris and Klebold did not create their deviant status to restore the American Dream; rather hierarchies in high schools encourage students to label one another to perpetuate the social order. The continual harassment "deviants" endure encourages outcast students to respond with increased aggression. These "deviant" responses allow those who benefit from competitive social relations in suburbia to justify the prevailing social hierarchy. Rather than arguing that threats to the social order may be squelched through the creation of moral panics, hegemony is established through the continual positing of youth as deviant elements within normal society. As Charles Acland (1995) concludes, "youth is increasingly symbolically central as that internal Other denned as a threat to the stability of the social order but central in the composition of that order" (p. 41). When deviants emerge from the shadows, moral panics direct them back into obscurity. In the absence of sunlight, they remain difficult to discern; nevertheless, their ghostly presence continues to affirm the desirability of the status quo for "normal" members of society.

#### SUBURBIA'S FUTURE: ALTERNATIVES TO THE AMERICAN DREAM

The shooting at Columbine High School disrupted the myth that the suburbs are where youth may develop into upstanding citizens. By committing suicide, these upper middle class, white students suggested that they had nothing to live for. By attacking their classmates, these boys also indicated that people who feel like failures might literally level those who represented the hierarchical ordering of the suburbs. These shootings resonated with media audiences because they stood as a metonymy for the recent crisis over the viability and legitimacy of the American Dream located in suburbia. Thus, the shooters created an ideological as well as a physical threat to the hierarchical social order of suburban society.

News media coverage restored the legitimacy of the myth by creating a new myth of monstrous youth in suburbia. By framing the shooters as monsters produced by liberalism, the media suggested that conservative values must be reestablished in suburbia. By framing Harris and Klebold as genetic monsters, the media suggested that some people are, literally, born to lose. The media not only told audiences what they should not be, they also constituted audiences in terms of what they could not be. Suburbanites were assured that they were not monsters themselves. People could continue to work toward attaining prosperity as long as they are able to protect themselves against the monsters living among them.

In addition to their emphasis on the inherent dangerousness of the shooters, the news media resolved the crisis over the American Dream with few structural changes to suburbia's social order by ignoring the possibility that competition and failure is an inevitable component of suburban life in late capitalism. The media's framing of the tragedy as a result of individual and liberal monsters maintained competitive ideals within suburban high schools that encourage some students literally to beat others. The moral panic generated by the shootings at Columbine High School diverted our

attention from the fact that competitive, capitalist values cause real and consistent harm to many individuals struggling to survive in the suburbs.

What might have happened if the public acknowledged that the competitive emphasis inherent to suburbia also played a role in these boys' decision to murder their classmates? Had the media and public officials focused upon the fact that the values of athletic competition contributed to the shooting, society would be encouraged to critique the role of athletics in suburbia. Likewise, had the public noted that monstrous youth were produced by a suburban social order that valued cutthroat competition, the capitalist structure of society might have lost some of its appeal. Finally, if people recognized that suburbia produced adolescents who believed that their best option for attaining success entailed killing others and committing suicide, they might begin to wonder what conditions made their own lives in the suburbs any different. The entire organization and effort of individuals working to attain economic prosperity in the suburbs would seem futile if people living in suburbia thought that their chances for success were largely beyond their control. By recognizing that competition and the hierarchical ordering of society prevents everyone from achieving personal satisfaction and economic security, we might seek alternative economic policies that would enable everyone to attain those goals. Such policies would reflect a commitment to economic equality and the inherent value of all members in society.

Despite journalistic attention to the gap between peoples' beliefs about suburbia and their experiences within it, the American Dream remains a consistent part of our national ideology. As Pollan (2000) insinuates in his examination of contemporary suburban life, the stereotypes of the Cleavers, Ozzie and Harriet, and Donna Reed still "exert a kind of normative hold on us" (p. 54). The preeminence of the American Dream explains why the news media repeatedly suggested that mass murders couldn't happen in affluent suburban neighborhoods. This idea appeared in coverage of President Clinton's statements about the shooting (Sobieray, 1999, p. A16), school officials' responses to the tragedy (Ulescas, 1999, p. A4), and in special reports about the crime (Gibbs, 1999, p. 20). Thus, the Columbine High School shootings garnered extensive coverage because it was conducted by adolescents in an affluent neighborhood where such tragedies "just don't happen."

This rift between the myth of the American Dream and the economic and physical threats people experience within suburbia poses the question, "Why is the American Dream so firmly entrenched within America's social consciousness?" This article provides one answer to this question by describing the role of the news media in creating new myths to sustain older ones. The new myth of monstrous youth lurking in the shadows of suburbia explains the contradictions between the American Dream and people's experiences of failure in the suburbs. By framing violence as the response of uncontrollable individuals, media and public officials maintained that the dream was not out of reach for those of us outside of the monsters' grasp. Consequently, society remains committed to a capitalist economy that is at odds with the values of equal opportunity and prosperity that the dream is based on. Due to the news media's role in restoring legitimacy to the American Dream by producing new narratives to explain social life, we continue to subscribe to mythic narratives that scapegoat individuals for the violence that this older myth perpetuates.

#### NOTES

1The Columbine High School shootings garnered the most extensive coverage among a string of school shootings that have attracted media attention over the past five years (Lawrence, 2001, p.

100). Although journalists reported school shootings with increasing regularity between 1996 and 2001, homicides committed by youth declined by 68% between 1993 and 1999 (Dorfman et al., 2001, p. M2). The increased media coverage of school shootings in affluent neighborhoods suggests that affluent, suburban adolescents' attraction to gun violence is disproportionate with the rest of the nation's high school population.

2This article has focused on the kind of physical violence in high schools that receives the most media attention. Although such events are most often engaged by and associated with adolescent boys, adolescent girls are not immune to violence or the pressures of competition in high school. Girls may suffer from physical abuse by their boyfriends, compete through behaviors such as self-starvation and compulsive exercise, and physically harm or threaten others.

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