Chapter 12
Silent Witness:
Tracing Campus Climate at Virginia Tech via Unobtrusive Measures, 2003–2017

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ABSTRACT

The present study traces campus climate at Virginia Tech, site of the deadliest school massacre in modern U.S. history, from 2003 to 2017. Using the unobtrusive method of content analysis as a measure of campus climate, data in the form of desktop graffiti—student-authored graffiti on classroom desktops—is analyzed according to amount and content. A total of 1,443 desks are studied, resulting in 8,172 pieces of intelligible graffiti analyzed. Data collected prior to the massacre is compared to data collected one semester, one year, and one decade following the massacre. From this emerges an unobtrusively painted picture of campus climate at Virginia Tech over the course of 14 years, spanning before and after tragic events. The present study adds to the literature on classroom culture post-campus violence and speaks to the subtler, often obscured, impacts of school shootings.

INTRODUCTION

On April 16, 2007, the deadliest school shooting in modern U.S. history took place on the campus of Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, VA. The lone gunman, Seung-Hui Cho, was an Asian American undergraduate student at Tech at the time. Cho's massacre unfolded at two locations on campus—a residence hall, and an academic building. The massacre, including 14 minutes of active shooting (approximately three minutes in the residence hall, and 11 minutes in the academic building), left 32 people dead and 17 wounded. As police apprehended him, Cho committed suicide (*Virginia Tech Review Panel*, 2007).

When the identity of the Virginia Tech gunman first broke, the public was surprised because Cho's race/ethnicity did not fit the school shooter "profile" with which Americans have become all too familiar: young, *white*, and male. In recent decades, the number of school shootings in the West, and specifically on American soil, has risen (Agnich, 2014; Bockler et al., 2013; Lin et al., 2018; Rowhani-Rahbar & Moe, 2019). The literature indicates that school shooters are typically young (Bonanno & Levenson, 2014; Kimmel & Mahler, 2003), white (Klein, 2012; Kimmel & Mahler, 2003; Triplett et al., 2014), and male (Bonanno & Levenson, 2014; Bowers et al., 2010; Klein, 2012).

In addition to Cho's race/ethnicity running counter to the school shooter profile, it runs counter to the stereotype most often associated with Asian Americans: that they are the "model minority," a monolithic group of intelligent, hardworking conformists (Gee, 2017; Kiang et al., 2017; Lee, 2009; Tang, 2008). That is, the race/ethnicity of the perpetrator of the Virginia Tech massacre runs counter to stereotypes associated with both "school shooters" *and* "model minorities."[1]

The present study is one branch of a larger investigation measuring campus climate for Asian Americans at Virginia Tech before and after the massacre. This project hones in on campus climate for Asian Americans, the largest racial/ethnic minority group on campus, via a longitudinal content analysis of desktop graffiti at Virginia Tech. The present study builds upon findings from a previous endeavor (Ball & Snizek, 2006) in which desktop graffiti at Virginia Tech was analyzed as an indicator of campus climate; while very little racist graffiti was uncovered in that analysis, each piece of racist graffiti that was identified targeted people of Asian descent.

Because the Virginia Tech massacre was perpetrated by an Asian American, I return to desktop graffiti once again as an indicator of campus climate. Data collected for the original study is compared to data collected one semester, one year, and one decade following the massacre. The present study's aim is to ascertain via longitudinal and unobtrusive means whether there has been a change in campus climate at Virginia Tech since the massacre, with an eye towards campus climate

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