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On the Shithouse Wall: The Communicative Value of Latrinalia

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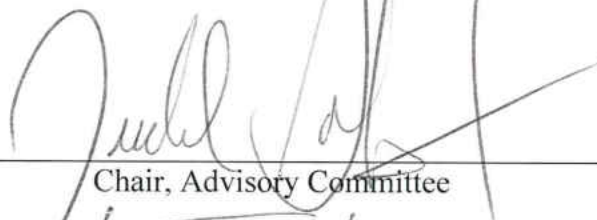
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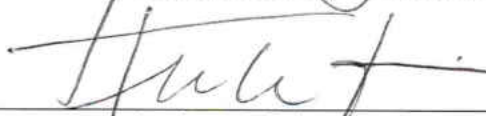
By

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On the Shithouse Wall: The Communicative Value of Latrinalia

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Abstract

Graffiti has communicative value, and it is a medium through which individuals voice their innermost thoughts, concerns, and beliefs. Restroom graffiti or “latrinalia” offers a unique space for graffiti writers to deliver their messages. The sole focus of this paper is to examine the meaning and communicative value of latrinalia as found in the men’s restrooms of a medium-sized university. For this study, restrooms in 17 buildings were visited and a total of 965 instances of graffiti were recorded and codified into 14 different categories. The four most common categories of latrinalia were signature, sexual, artistic, and discriminatory. Latrinalia was found written in a number of locations including doors, stall walls, fire alarms, and toilet paper dispensers with the most significant portion placed inside restroom stalls. Latrinalia was created via a variety of tools from writing instruments to sharp objects. A majority of the latrinalia was etched onto surfaces. Relying on symbolic interactionism as a theoretical framework, this study illustrates how latrinalia has meaning and how people use latrinalia as a communicative medium.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Graffiti has communicative value. For some, it is a means of conveying their innermost thoughts, desires, feelings, fears, etc. Coincidentally, many consider graffiti to be a form of artistic expression in which the graffiti writer communicates a conscious emotion. For instance, an individual might write political graffiti on a public building as a means of protesting oppression. The word graffiti originated from ancient Greek and Italian words. The translation for the Greek word *graphein* is to ‘scratch, draw, or write’ (Bartholome & Snyder, 2004), and the translation for the Italian word *graffiare* is ‘to scratch’ (Abel & Buckley, 1977). Today graffiti is defined as the drawing or etching of something on a surface with the purpose of conveying meaning. The scale of graffiti can range from very minimal to incredibly elaborate. Examples of these two extremes are urban graffiti tags and pieces. Tags are one of the simplest forms of graffiti in which the artist writes his “street name” on a wall (Ferrell, 1993). In contrast, pieces are huge, colorful, elaborate, and illegal murals (Ferrell, 1993).

Individuals have been painting, drawing, and etching on walls for thousands of years. Since prehistoric man and woman began walking upright, they have expressed themselves and depicted their surroundings by drawing on walls. There are numerous examples of cave drawings throughout the world. The Cave of the Hands located in Argentina is quite famous and shows a series of stylized handprints painted on its wall. The paintings date back at least 9,000 years. Another example is the Cave of Altamira located in Northern Spain; images of bison and deer are depicted on its walls. The

paintings in this cave have been dated at 20,000 years. These ancient wall paintings have communicative value and lead one to draw conclusions about the artists and how they lived. An individual looking at wall paintings in the Cave of Altamira might deduce the prehistoric peoples of that era hunted bison and deer. Cave paintings are a precursor to graffiti. The wall is an artistic medium for both cave painters and graffiti artists; it provides a surface to convey that which is meaningful to those creating the images. There is no denying graffiti has been around in some form since prehistoric times.

Unsurprisingly, graffiti was fairly prevalent during the times of the Ancient Greeks and Romans. Several historians and archeologists (D'Avino, 1964; Lindsay, 1960; Tanzer, 1939) have analyzed graffiti found at the ancient city of Pompeii in order to discover what life was like before Mount Vesuvius erupted and destroyed the city. By studying the ancient graffiti, scholars have been able to discern the thoughts and concerns of people who lived in Pompeii. This type of insight into the daily lives of a group of people who were lost in time is invaluable.

Cultural criminologists classify graffiti as 'crime of everyday life' (Ferrell, Hayward, & Young, 2008). Crime of everyday life is defined as common criminality that the average person may encounter on a daily basis. It does not specifically refer to "serious crimes" such as murder, robbery, assault, etc. While these types of crimes are common in some areas and may happen every day, a distinction needs to be made between serious crimes and those less serious in nature. The chances of an individual being a victim or encountering serious crimes on a daily basis are quite slim. Crimes such as murder and robbery don't occur frequently; the probability is high that an individual will go through his or her entire life without being a victim of or witness to

either crime. In contrast, every day criminality may be classified as “lesser crimes” and include offenses such as panhandling, various forms of petty theft, vandalism, disorderly conduct, graffiti, etc. Graffiti is the perfect example of this type of lesser crime, and the average person is much more likely to encounter it on a daily basis. This is especially true when one considers the different types of graffiti. While an individual who lives in a rural area is unlikely to encounter urban graffiti on a daily basis, the chances are extremely likely that he or she will encounter graffiti in restrooms at restaurants, gas stations, grocery stores, etc. Many academics have described graffiti as the most frequent and visible crimes of modern society (Ferrell, Hayward, & Young, 2008). Graffiti is found adorning walls, buildings, bridges, highway overpasses, interstate signs, etc., throughout the United States and many countries over the globe.

Graffiti in itself is unique in that there is often contested meaning associated with the phenomenon. Specifically, there are those who recognize that graffiti has artistic merit due to the complex and intricate nature of some graffiti writing. Graffiti has been shown in numerous art galleries throughout the world (Bicknell, 2014; Young, 2012). Others have associated graffiti with disorder and crime (Edwards, 2009; Kelling & Wilson, 1982; Taylor & Khan, 2012; Taylor, Marais, & Cottman, 2012). The association with graffiti and crime has been linked with anti-graffiti campaigns that have conflated the numerous types of graffiti with gang graffiti (Ferrell, 1993; Geason & Wilson, 1990). Graffiti has hidden meaning within the graffiti subculture. An example of this phenomenon would be the highly stylized hip hop graffiti, a type of graffiti that is often difficult for those outside of the graffiti subculture to read. However, writers within the graffiti subculture understand these writings and use it as a communicative medium.

There are many different categories of graffiti from freight train graffiti to urban graffiti to restroom graffiti. A significant portion of the literature on graffiti has been devoted to urban graffiti (Campos, 2015; Ferrell, 1993; Ferrell, 1995; Ferrell, 2009; Hayworth, Bruce, & Iverson; 2013; Ley & Cybriwsky, 1974; McAuliffe, 2012; Millie, 2008; Nandrea, 1999; Rowe & Hutton, 2012). While several of these categories are intriguing, the sole focus of this ethnographic content analysis will be on restroom graffiti also referred to as latrinalia. Personally, when using a public restroom facility, I always look to see if there is something written or etched upon a wall. By virtue of its purpose and location, restroom graffiti is often lewd, crude, and purposely insensitive to issues of race, gender, and ethnicity. Conversely, restroom graffiti may reflect romantic notions, political ideas, or humorous statements. It is all of these things and more, and this is why latrinalia has communicative value.

The phrase “latrinalia” was first proposed by noted folklorist Alan Dundes (1965), when he suggested a much narrower term be used to describe graffiti written on a restroom wall. Restroom graffiti can be defined as any type of marking made on a restroom wall. Historically speaking, restroom graffiti has been around since ancient times. In fact, it is well documented the Ancient Romans wrote graffiti upon the walls of public latrines. The practice was so prevalent authorities in Ancient Rome took measures to curb it by placing pictures of deities on latrine walls and implying the wrath of the gods would visit those who desecrated the walls with graffiti (Bourke, 1891).

In comparison to other types of graffiti, restroom graffiti is unique in that it is addressed to those who share the writer’s gender (Matthews, Speers, & Ball, 2012). For instance, the audience for latrinalia written by men is other men. Very few women will

see graffiti written on the wall of a men's restroom, and the same holds true for men seeing graffiti written in a women's restroom. There is no type of audience restriction for other forms of graffiti. For instance, men and women have equal access to urban graffiti written on the wall of a public building.

Perhaps the most interesting characteristic of restroom graffiti centers on the writer being cocooned in a private environment that is safe from both intrusion and discovery. While individuals may visit public restrooms any time and any place; the graffiti writer is guaranteed complete anonymity and privacy while in a stall. In this environment, he or she has the luxury of covertly sharing any thoughts, feelings, or statements regardless of how bigoted, sexist, racist, or hateful the rhetoric. Individuals can express any thought or view without fear of recrimination or public backlash.

The primary aim of this project is to examine and analyze male latrinalia on a college campus. This study seeks to use symbolic interactionism as a theoretical tool to examine how graffiti has communicative meaning and how graffiti functions as a medium for social interaction. In addition, this study seeks to answer three basic questions:

1. What types of graffiti are prevalent on the campus of Eastern Kentucky University? Is there a prevalence of sexual, racist, political, or humorous graffiti on campus?
2. Where is the location of the graffiti? Is it written on a wall, inside the stall, outside the stall, on a toilet paper dispenser, on a door or some other location? Previous literature has failed to address this question, and one of

the goals of this study is to see which location has the highest concentration of graffiti.

3. How was the graffiti written? Traditionally, graffiti is written with a pencil, pen, or marker, however, it can also be etched with a sharp object such as a knife. The purpose of this question is to determine which mode of graffiti production is most prevalent; again, previous literature has failed to address this issue.

Chapter II

Literature Review

Restroom graffiti has been studied by academics from several different fields. This is readily observable when one examines the wide variety of academic journals with published articles on latrinalia. The following academic journals include articles on latrinalia: *Electronic Journal of Human Sexuality*, *Eurasian Journal of Educational Research*, *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, *Journal of American Folklore*, *Journal of Social Psychology*, *Journal of Sex Research*, *Women's Studies International Quarterly*, *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, *Journal of American Culture*, *American Journal of Criminal Justice*, *Sexual Behavior*, *The Psychological Record*, *Sex Roles*, and *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*. The study of latrinalia appeals to multiple academic disciplines ranging from folklore to sexology. Although articles on restroom graffiti have been written in a variety of journals, surprisingly, there isn't a significant amount of literature devoted to this phenomenon. In fact, most of the literature on latrinalia was published before the 1990s, and in recent years, research has been sporadically published. Latrinalia seems to be a "niche" object of study. Unlike other subject areas in social science, there are no experts who specialize in latrinalia. Alan Dundes (1965), the scholar who coined the term latrinalia, only published one article on the subject.

Most of the published literature has taken a positivist approach to understanding and explaining this phenomenon. A significant portion of literature has been devoted to categorizing latrinalia and analyzing gender differences (Bartholome & Snyder, 2004; Bruner & Kelso, 1980; Faar & Gordon, 1975; Little & Sheble, 1987; Matthews et al.,

2012; Otta, 1993). In many of these studies, academics often collect graffiti, assign graffiti to a specific category, and run tests to determine if there are significant statistical differences based on gender.

Previously, the volume of literature exclusively examining male latrinalia has been limited. After extensive research and reading, I found only two articles focused solely on male latrinalia. The bulk of published literature has focused on latrinalia and gender. One might suppose there would be more literature devoted to male latrinalia; however, this isn't the case. The first study on male latrinalia examined graffiti from a cross section of educational institutions including trade schools, junior-colleges, four year colleges, and professional schools (Sechrest & Flores, 1969). The second study examined cross-cultural differences in male latrinalia (Sechrest & Olson, 1971). This study specifically looked for differences in male graffiti produced in the United States and the Philippines. Hopefully, this ethnographic content analysis will bring new insight to the literature previously focused on male restroom graffiti.

While a significant bulk of past literature has been quantitative in nature, this paper takes a more qualitative approach to latrinalia. Using symbolic interactionism as a theoretical tool, this paper shows how latrinalia has meaning and communicative value. Ferrell, Hayward & Young (2008) have pointed out that symbolic interactionism examines how people interpret and assign meaning in order to communicate with others. Symbolic interactionism will be expanded upon later in the analysis section.

Chapter III

Methods

This study is an ethnographic content analysis (ECA). ECA is primarily used to analyze documents, and its ultimate purpose is to provide descriptive information which aids in understanding and giving meaning to a subject (Altheide, 1987). Some academics refer to documents as human documents (Plummer 1983). The details in these records are analyzed because the information frequently reveals a great deal about the human experience. Blumer (1939) defined the human document as an “account of individual experience which reveals actions as a human agent and a participant in social life” (p.29). A specific example of this would be an old diary or journal. These personal records often disclose a person’s innermost thoughts and may provide a first-hand account of an important event. In addition, a document such as a journal may contain details on cultural practices, traditions, and aspects of an individual’s daily life or perhaps that of a community. If a document is particularly old, it may highlight differences between the past and present. According to Altheide (1996), one of the primary reasons documents are studied is because it helps us in understanding a civilization’s culture. The word “document” is a rather loose term and it can refer to anything an academic might use to aid in comprehending a given phenomenon. In describing human documents Plummer (1983) explained that:

The world is crammed full of personal documents. People keep diaries, send letters, take photos, write memos, tell biographies, scrawl graffiti, publish their memories, write letters to the papers, leave suicide notes, inscribe memorials on

tombstones, shoot films, paint pictures, make music and try to record their personal dreams. All of these are expressions of personal life hurled out into the world by the millions and can be of interest to anyone who seeks them out. They are all in the broadest sense 'documents of life' (p. 13).

The above quote really illustrates that nearly anything can be analyzed as a document. When analyzing documents an academic must look for reoccurring themes, contexts, patterns, meanings, and concepts (Altheide, 1996). In the past, academics have used ECA to examine a wide variety of topics. For instance, ECA has been used to examine network news coverage (Altheide, 1976; Altheide, 1981; Altheide, 1982; Altheide, 1985). To conduct ECA, a researcher must collect, code, and analyze data; in addition, a heavy emphasis is placed on interpreting and assigning meaning to said data. For the purposes of this study, documents refer to latrinalia found in 17 buildings on the campus of Eastern Kentucky University.

Data was collected by going into the restrooms during regularly scheduled class times. This increased the likelihood the data collection would be uninterrupted by students going to the restroom. There was no human interaction involved during the course of this study. While alone in the restrooms, I diligently inspected all surface areas for graffiti including walls, doors, and toilet paper dispensers. Photographs were taken of all graffiti found in the restrooms. In addition, notations for each photograph were written verbatim in a small notebook. Once collected, the graffiti was divided and sorted into several distinct categories.

A total of 965 individual pieces of graffiti were recorded over the course of this study and sorted into 14 unique categories. These categories emerged from reoccurring

themes as data was collected. There is no set cataloguing method that has been used by past academics when classifying latrinalia. Previous researchers have identified and defined their own distinctive categorical methods. There are, however, several general categories that reoccur in prior studies. For instance, philosophical, sexual, and political categories are common throughout preceding literature (Bartholome & Snyder, 2004; Bates & Martin, 1980; Little & Sheble, 1988; Otta, 1993; Wales & Brewer, 1976). This study included some of the more general categories found in past literature, however, some of the categories found in this study are quite unique. For instance, student organizations and blacked out categories are exclusive to this study. The 14 different categories are as follows:

1. Sexual - latrinalia in this category refers to anything that is sexual in nature from sexual invitations to sexual acts. This category refers to both heterosexual and homosexual latrinalia.
2. Signature/identifying mark - latrinalia that is representative of a personal signature. Specifically, this type of latrinalia includes initials, names, dates, and nicknames.
3. Philosophical - refers to latrinalia that deals with questions about reality; specifically, humans' place in the universe.
4. Discriminatory - latrinalia that attacks people based on race, gender, religious beliefs, and sexual orientation. Additionally, symbols associated with the oppression of certain groups of people were included in this category, specifically drawings of the Rebel Flag and the Swastika.

5. General insults - refers to any type of generalized insult that isn't racial or sexual in nature.
6. Religious - latrinalia that is religious in nature. Religious symbols were included in this category.
7. Scatological - refers to latrinalia relating to waste produced from the body. Urination and defecation were included in this category.
8. Student organizations - latrinalia relating to student organizations, particularly fraternities.
9. Humorous - latrinalia that is humorous in nature. Latrinalia that wasn't insulting, sexual, or racist was included in this group.
10. Political - latrinalia that relates to anything in the political arena. This category includes political parties and elected officials.
11. Romantic - latrinalia that deals with romance or love. This category included statements and declarations of love.
12. Artistic/geometric patterns - latrinalia that features a "complex" artistic component. Etchings of animals, plants, as well as geometric patterns and designs were included in this category.
13. Blacked out - latrinalia that has been blackened or scratched out with a permanent marker or some other instrument.
14. Miscellaneous - latrinalia where no meaning was ascertained.

From the 17 buildings on campus chosen as data collection sites, photographs of latrinalia were collected from over 60 different public restrooms. The buildings ranged in size with some of the smaller buildings having only one restroom per floor, and some of

the larger buildings having two separate restrooms on each floor. For this study, the age of the buildings varied from several decades to a less than a decade old. All of the buildings served either educational, recreational, or administrative purposes.

Chapter IV

Findings and Analysis

The four most prevalent types of latrinalia found on EKU's campus were signature latrinalia, sexual latrinalia, artistic latrinalia, and discriminatory latrinalia. These four together made up a total of 66% of all latrinalia. The other 10 categories combined accounted for the remaining 44% of latrinalia found on campus.

Buildings

Fifteen of the seventeen buildings visited had graffiti in the restrooms. The variation in the number of incidences of graffiti found in the restrooms of these buildings was substantial. For instance, one building had over 200 separate occurrences of graffiti while another building had only 30 occurrences. Surprisingly, the buildings without graffiti in the restrooms were two of the older ones on campus.

The first of the two buildings without graffiti was small, having only two floors. This was an odd building that seemed to be used infrequently by the university. The first floor had a small number of faculty offices and one set of restrooms. The second floor housed 3-4 small classrooms. The building was unique in that it only contained restrooms on the first floor. All the other buildings in the study had restrooms on each of the floors. Despite having a number of small classrooms located within this building, a human presence seemed nonexistent. During the course of the study, it was common to see and hear professors, lecturers, and students. Also, it wasn't unusual to see people roaming the halls while class was in session. However, there was no visible human

presence in this building. I neither saw nor heard professors, students, or staff in the classrooms or hallways. Although this building could be categorized as educational in purpose, its age and size prohibited it from having a high degree of student traffic. The lack of student presence in the building likely accounted for the absence of graffiti.

The second building with no graffiti was a recreational center housing a gymnasium and a basketball court on the first floor. The ground floor contained a locker room and large restroom with showers. It was astonishingly odd that no graffiti was found in the restroom of this building because of the high degree of student traffic. However, after due consideration, it is possible to give a plausible explanation as to why no graffiti was found in this building. The stalls, toilets, and showers are all located within the same room, and any graffiti written in a pen, marker, or pencil would fade over time due to the condensation caused by students, faculty, and staff using the showers. Etchings made with a sharp object would be the only type of graffiti unaffected by condensation.

A significant amount of graffiti was found in older buildings. Most of these buildings were built at least 30 years ago, are large in size, and house primarily classrooms. Most had at least 3-4 floors and two separate restrooms located on each floor. Each contained from 4-6 large classrooms and several faculty offices on each floor. While a significant amount of restroom graffiti was found in older educational buildings, there were three exceptions. The first exception housed art and theatre classes, the second accommodated family sciences and gender studies classes, and the third lodged justice and safety classes. Each of the three buildings contained less than 60 incidences of graffiti even though all three had a high influx of student traffic on a daily

basis. Given the age, size, and the amount of student traffic in each of these buildings, the logical assumption would be that a high incidence of graffiti would be found in the restrooms. Yet, this wasn't the case. Why was there significantly less graffiti in these buildings as compared to the other educational buildings in the study? When comparing the amount of graffiti found in these three buildings to the other educational buildings, one particular difference stands out. In the buildings with a high concentration of graffiti, a wide variety of subjects were taught including but not limited to math, English, history, philosophy, and foreign languages. The majority of these courses are included in the general education requirements for all students enrolled in associate and baccalaureate degree programs. These buildings are woven into the fabric of an undergraduate student's educational experience at the university. In comparison, the three large educational buildings with the least amount of graffiti primarily offer classes for students majoring in degree programs housed within those buildings.

Additionally, there were much fewer incidences of graffiti found in administrative buildings. This wasn't too surprising considering these buildings typically have less student traffic. The buildings primarily house offices for university administrators and support staff. Some of the buildings also house a few classrooms and/or auditoriums. Classrooms in these buildings were almost always located on the first floor, and the majority of the graffiti was found in restrooms on the first floor as well. The amount of graffiti significantly dropped as one moved up to higher floors. A possible explanation for this phenomenon is the location of the classrooms and the increased student traffic on these floors. The restrooms on the higher floors were primarily used by university

administrators and staff. At first glance, this would suggest that students are the primary writers of restroom graffiti.

Location of latrinalia within restroom

During the data collection process, it became apparent that restroom graffiti isn't always easy to find, and at times, one has to really search for it. This is especially true for graffiti written with a marker, pencil, or pen as it is very susceptible to fading through aging as well as cleaning by the janitorial staff. The placement of the graffiti also determined how easy or difficult it was to detect. Some writers found really ingenious locations for their graffiti in unusual and out of the way places. In several instances, graffiti was found written on latches and hinges connecting stalls to the wall. Other unique locations included diaper changing stations, toilet seats, restroom door exits, mirrors, along the width of a stall door, and urinal partitions. Graffiti can be found almost anywhere in a restroom; although, sometimes one has to really look in order to find it.

There were numerous instances where the same graffiti was written several times at different locations. In one instance, a graffiti writer left sexual invitations and a phone number on separate floors in the same building. This graffiti said "BJ 859-312-4065". This incident raises several questions. Why was this particular graffiti written? Was the writer simply looking for casual sex? Did the individual write down the phone number as some sort of prank on a friend or acquaintance leaving his or her phone number on the restroom wall? Or was the prank intended for the individual who accepted the invitation and called the number? Why did the writer feel the need to place identical graffiti on

separate floors? The point is there could be any number of reasons why the individual included a phone number in the graffiti. Similarly, an individual wrote the same sexual invitation in different restrooms across three different buildings. What are the conclusions to be drawn from this occurrence? One might infer the graffiti writer had classes in each of these buildings. Although this seems the most logical explanation, there is really no way of knowing the true rationale behind the graffiti and its placement.

The second reoccurring graffiti shown below in Figure 1 was a sexual invitation which read “BJ Fall 08 BBH8200@aol.com”. This particular graffiti was found written at four different locations in one building. In every instance, the graffiti was written in an easily seen place outside a stall with a permanent marker. In several instances, the graffiti was written on a metallic latch that held the restroom stall onto the wall. The graffiti was also placed on a wall in front of the urinals. What assumptions could be made about this particular graffiti? At face value, one could surmise the graffiti was actually written sometime during the fall of 2008. If this is true, one could also assume the janitorial staff isn’t concerned with removing graffiti from the restrooms. A key point to remember is this graffiti was written with a permanent marker and could have been easily removed with the proper cleaning supplies and some effort. With repeated



Figure 1. Sexual graffiti.

cleanings, even something written with a permanent marker can be removed over time.

What is the communicative value behind this particular graffiti? There are several things

one could assume from reading this message. Is it an invitation for a sexual encounter, is it meant to shock and embarrass the reader, is it a prank, or does it represent malicious intent? One's first assumption might be the writer was placing a personal ad for a sexual tryst on a restroom stall given that a means to make contact was provided. This assumption is supported by the writer's placement of the graffiti in numerous locations in areas readily visible by anyone entering the restrooms. The writer obviously meant to broadcast the graffiti repeatedly in order to reach the greatest number of people, otherwise, he would not have written the message on the outside of a stall in an open area. It should be noted the email address provides a certain level of anonymity to the writer because it uses only three letters and a few numbers. One can assume this isn't the writer's primary email account since most people use their actual names, e.g., Johnsmi87@yahoo.com. Because of the nature of the graffiti, the writer understandably would not want others to know his identity, especially if he was primarily interested in casual, anonymous sex. A second assumption could be the graffiti wasn't intended as a sexual invitation; the writer was simply trying to elicit a response from his readers whether it is shock, embarrassment, or laughter. Additionally, the graffiti could also be a prank on those who replied to the email address or it could be malicious in nature and meant to ridicule and harass readers who respond to the email.

There were also examples of graffiti which for the purpose of this paper have been classified as general insults. The phrase "Eat A Dick" was repeatedly etched on four separate toilet paper dispensers. The only difference in phrasing was that in each successive etching a number was added. For instance, the fourth graffiti as seen in Figure 2 reads "Eat A Dick #4". It should be noted, these graffiti were found written

inside the restroom stalls on different floors in the same building. What is the communicative value of this graffiti, and what assumptions can be made from it? One would assume these graffiti to be insults directed at anyone using the stalls in which the graffiti was located. More than likely, in all four instances the graffiti was etched by the same individual. Another probable



Figure 2. General insult.

assumption is that the writer had a class or classes in the building. Because of the placement of the graffiti, the individual more than likely etched the graffiti while sitting on the toilet. The etchings on the toilet paper dispensers were deeply carved and easily read; the implication being, the writer invested time and effort in creating the etchings.

Regarding location, latrinalia was predominantly written in three places: on walls inside of stalls, on toilet paper dispensers, or surfaces outside the stalls. However, there were several unique locations. For example, one graffiti was found written inside a toilet paper dispenser. It is quite common to find graffiti on the outside of a dispenser, and it is almost always found on the side facing the toilet. Writers can place graffiti on this side of a dispenser with ease while sitting on the toilet. This particular graffiti was found written on a plastic lever separating the two rolls of toilet paper. The graffiti appeared to be the Greek symbols “KΣ” representing the fraternity Kappa Sigma, a Greek organization on campus. These symbols were written with a permanent marker. What is the communicative value of this particular graffiti? One assumes the writer was a member of the Kappa Sigma fraternity. Additionally, placement of the graffiti indicates

the writer squatted in front of the toilet paper dispenser. The question related to this graffito is why place it inside a dispenser where it isn't readily visible to others who enter the stall? This was the most unusual location documented during the study.

Another graffito placed in an uncommon location was found on a recycling flier on a paper towel dispenser. The recycling flier was part of a university initiative encouraging students to recycle waste, and its message was that paper is a recyclable resource from trees. Underneath this message, the writer had penned the word "Really". What does the placement of this particular graffito communicate? One assumes this sarcastic response was directed at the university because it supposes students, faculty, and staff aren't intelligent enough to identify the natural resource used to make paper. Nearly everyone knows paper comes from trees and is a recyclable resource. To suggest otherwise is condescending, and the writer's remark simply drew attention to this fact.

One other surprising location was on the bottom of a fire alarm. The fire alarm was placed just below the ceiling, and one would assume the individual who wrote this particular graffito was rather tall. The graffito "www.reddit.com/r/eku" referenced an actual web forum created by a student. Examination of the forum revealed several threads covering a wide variety of topics ranging voting information to student housing. One of the most recent threads concerned the game Pokémon Go and revealed the location of several Pokémon found on campus.

This study found a significant portion of graffiti, 92%, was written on walls inside restroom stalls. This shouldn't be surprising due to the privacy and anonymity afforded the writer inside a stall. Of the 92%, approximately 77% of graffiti was written on walls inside a stall and the remaining 15% was written on toilet paper dispensers. In

comparison, only 8% of graffiti was written outside the stall. This leads one to conclude the possibility of being caught in the act of writing the graffiti is a compelling deterrent to most writers. In this case, privacy seems to be the primary concern for choosing the location of the latrinalia.

Method of latrinalia production

This study found latrinalia was created using four primary tools including pencils, ink pens, permanent markers, and knives or other sharp objects. Most never think about the effort that goes into creating latrinalia. Some modes of graffiti production are more permanent than others. For instance, latrinalia written in pencil could be easily cleaned; the same could be said for latrinalia written in ink. Latrinalia written with a permanent marker or etched with a knife is more lasting. It takes more concentrated effort and multiple washings to eliminate a graffiti written in permanent marker. A knife etching is probably the most enduring type of durable latrinalia. An etching takes a good deal of effort to produce, and as a result, its removal often proves the most difficult.

This study found etchings to be the most frequent mode of latrinalia production. Specifically, etchings accounted for 47% of all latrinalia. Latrinalia produced by pencil made up approximately 25% of latrinalia. Graffiti produced with an ink pen made up approximately 20% of latrinalia, and graffiti produced by a permanent marker made up the remaining 8% of latrinalia.

Latrinalia content

The most frequent category was signature latrinalia which accounted for approximately 24% of all latrinalia. A significant portion of signature latrinalia took the form of initials; an example of this is featured below in Figure 3. Perhaps the individual who wrote the initials “JWS” was leaving a testament of his presence behind for others to see.

There was only one recorded incident in which an individual wrote his full name on a restroom wall. Why do graffiti writers choose to write their initials rather than their complete names? Initials provide a greater degree of anonymity than a first and last name. Leaving one’s legal name on public property could potentially lead to being held responsible for the resulting damage and fined. Additionally, it was quite common for individuals to write and date their initials. The oldest of these dates is 1974 and the newest is 2016.

A few academics have proposed that one of the main reasons why people write, etch, or carve their initials on a surface is to leave behind a memento of their presence or existence (Dundes, 1965; Read, 1977). There is some merit to this argument; most people want to be remembered, and graffiti provides a medium that enables the writer to reach beyond the present. This is especially true when one examines all of the monuments that have been built throughout history. A specific example of this would be the Great Pyramid of Giza, recognized as one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient



Figure 3. Identifying marker.

World. All of the “great historical monuments” have been commissioned by the rich and powerful; historically, there are no widely known monuments initiated, designed, or created by the poor or the middle class. How does an individual who is poor or with limited resources create something that is recognized as a ‘great monument’? The answer is he or she can’t; the way in which a poor individual with little or no means leaves a testament of his or her presence behind is to carve a name or initials on a surface. Regarding graffiti, a case can be made that a name or initials written or etched on a restroom wall is nothing more than a way for an individual to leave behind some token of his or her presence.

The second most frequent category was sexual latrinalia which accounted for 19% of the graffiti. Heterosexual and homosexual latrinalia were included in this category. All heterosexual and homosexual latrinalia were extremely graphic in nature and often referenced sexual acts. Some of the most common forms of sexual latrinalia were invitations. For example, “for BJ, be here at 10:30 am and say I’m ready for you”, which was written on a toilet paper dispenser. One can’t mistake this graffiti as anything but an invitation for oral sex. Additionally, another prevalent type of sexual latrinalia consisted of graffiti writers leaving phone numbers on the restroom wall. An example of this would be “BJ 859-312-4065”.

The third most frequent category was artistic graffiti. This category accounted for approximately 12% of all latrinalia, and included a wide variety of images. Etchings and drawings of animals were quite common. One graffiti was an incredibly detailed etching of an owl. Another was a drawing of a spider and its web. Additionally,

drawings of geometric patterns and irreverent smiley faces were included in this category.

Discriminatory graffiti was one of the more interesting categories and accounted for approximately 11% of the images collected on the campus. Graffiti in this category was offensive, derogatory, and degrading; it targeted and attacked people based on gender, race, sexual orientation, and religious views. A significant portion of discriminatory graffiti was racist and homophobic.

All of the discriminatory graffiti encountered was written within restroom stalls. This was quite interesting as several academics (Gonos, Mulkern, & Poushinsky, 1976) have argued in our society it has become prohibitive to publicly express certain thoughts, views, and opinions. Publicly expressing racist or sexist thoughts in modern American society is often met with scorn and outrage. Consequently, Gonos et al. (1976) argue that some individuals need to identify a way to covertly express their opinions without facing public ridicule. The authors suggested that public restrooms provide a forum for these individuals to express their viewpoints safely and anonymously. Alone in the dim lighting of a restroom stall, a person is permitted to be as bigoted as he pleases without fear of censure or retaliation. The restroom stall provides anonymity and a feeling of safety for those ignorant, biased individuals who are too cowardly to express their bigoted philosophies or opinions in a public forum. It is highly unlikely an individual will be discovered writing or etching prejudiced remarks in a restroom stall.

Overall, a significant amount of the discriminatory graffiti was racist in nature. Selected examples of bigoted graffiti documented in this study seemed to reaffirm the white power structure. For instance, the graffiti “white power” and other

similar sayings and slogans were repeatedly found written on the inside of stall walls. Also, it is worth noting that in several instances etchings of the hate group, the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) were found etched on walls.

The majority of racial graffiti targeted African Americans taking the form of racial slurs, epithets, and insults. No instances of racist graffiti directed at Latinos and Asian Americans were encountered. This was surprising and causes one to question why African Americans were the only minority group to suffer the hateful, racist rhetoric of discriminatory graffiti. Possible explanations are African Americans are one of the more visible minorities on campus, and historically, as a group have been discriminated against in the region for over two hundred years.

In addition to racial slurs, epithets and insults, some discriminatory graffiti took the form of drawings and etchings of flags and symbols representing the oppression of different peoples based on race and religion. Images of the Confederate flag and the swastika were quite common, and of the two, the Confederate flag was the most prevalent. In all instances, care and deliberation were given in creating the “stars and bars” in its entirety lending an air of reverence for this Confederate symbol. The largest graffiti encountered was a swastika written with a permanent black marker. This particular graffiti was larger than the size of an adult hand and found in a dimly lit restroom in one of the older buildings on campus. The graffiti was faded leading one to believe it had been on the stall for a long period of time.

Homophobic graffiti was also quite common; a considerable proportion was accusatory and derogatory. Most homophobic graffiti was written in response to homosexual graffiti, and in most cases, the response took the form of an insult. An

example would be the following exchange written by two graffiti writers; the original graffiti read “for a BJ meet here in this stall” and the corresponding response answered “you sick queer”. Such exchanges were commonplace and similar in nature.

Bruner & Kelso (1980) theorized one of the main reasons men write graffiti that is derogatory and degrading is to confirm the existing power structure of the white male. In addition, it was theorized that men write graffiti as a means of reaffirming their dominance. There is some merit to this theory as evidenced by this study. All of the discriminatory graffiti found in the fifteen buildings on campus targets others based on race, gender, sexual orientation, and religion. Who creates discriminatory, offensive graffiti? The probable answer is straight, white males who make up a significant portion of the student population. There were no incidences of offensive graffiti directed at white, heterosexual males found in restrooms on campus. The lack of discriminatory rhetoric towards this population is quite telling and would seem to reaffirm Bruner and Kelso’s thesis.

Discriminatory graffiti was interesting in that it tended to illicit chain responses from other graffiti writers. In such circumstances, a bigoted response often elicited condemnation from other writers. Most of this condemnation came in the form of general insults aimed at the writers of the original graffiti. Some of the bigoted graffiti in this study was barely legible as other writers had scratched or marked out the original graffiti.

Reading is an active behavior, and while everyone who reads the graffiti might not be driven to respond outwardly, they probably still feel shocked and dismayed by racist, discriminatory, or offensive remarks. Others may be outraged to the point of

writing responses to rebuke and condemn the offensive, discriminatory graffiti. These responses often lead to intense dialogue and debate between graffiti writers. Racist graffiti often moved other writers to respond with condemnation via countergraffiti. In such circumstances, the wall itself becomes a space for debate and contest between graffiti writers (Peteet, 1996). The wall can be described as a battlefield wherein graffiti writers engage in “printed warfare” amongst themselves. It becomes a contested arena of struggle and conflict between graffiti writers (Peteet, 1996). It should be noted this phenomenon crosses all categories of graffiti. An example of this would be the tactic of “dissin” in urban graffiti. “Dissin” is defined as showing disrespect to another writer’s creation and occurs when a writer vandalizes another’s graffiti (Ferrell, 1993). The most common forms of “dissin” are marking up, blotting out, or writing derogatory comments near the original graffiti. This illustrates how a wall functions as a “combat zone” for graffiti writers. The wall may be located on the side of a building in a major metropolitan center or on a stall wall within the confines of a restroom; the location is irrelevant.

Symbolic interactionism

Graffiti has meaning and communicative value. Symbolic interactionism is a beneficial tool in analyzing and understanding graffiti. It provides a sociological perspective that examines communication, social interaction, and how people assign meaning; it has been used to better understand social issues, human identity, and human interaction (Charon, 1979; Mead, 1934; Reynolds & Herman, 2003). Ferrell, Hayward & Young (2008) have pointed out that symbolic interactionism examines how people interpret and assign meaning in order to communicate with others. The understanding

and interpretation of meaning is essential; an individual who understands and interprets meaning is then able to communicate with others. Two fundamental concepts of this theory are interpretation of meaning and social interaction. According to Blumer (1969), the basic premise of this perspective is people's reaction to an object or thing is based on the meaning they have assigned to said object or thing. He also pointed out that meaning comes from social interaction and is modified through interpretation. Language plays an integral part in this theory, because talking, writing, and interacting with others define objects and give concepts meaning (Mead, 1934).

Symbolic interactionism is an appropriate theoretical tool to make sense of graffiti. Graffiti is a communicative medium; individuals write graffiti in areas where it is clearly seen by others. The importance of this becomes apparent when one looks at chain responses to a single graffiti. Chain responses as shown in Figure 4 represent an ongoing dialog or conversation between different graffiti writers. In regards to symbolic interactionism, chain responses show interpretation of meaning and social interaction. When an individual writes something in response to a previously written graffiti, he is actively interpreting and replying to the message contained in the original graffiti. Figure 4 is illustrative of this type of interaction. It contains several pieces of graffiti each in response to another writer's graffiti. While two pieces of the graffiti refer to homosexual invitations, a third piece is religious in nature and offers prayer on behalf of the previous writers. This is symbolic interactionism in practice, and it effectively illustrates how graffiti has communicative value.

An example of symbolic interactionism would be graffiti that has been scratched or marked up. A specific example is a “Vote Kerry” etching which has several scratch marks through it. One can assume the original writer of this etching was a Democratic supporter of Senator John Kerry’s presidential bid in 2004.

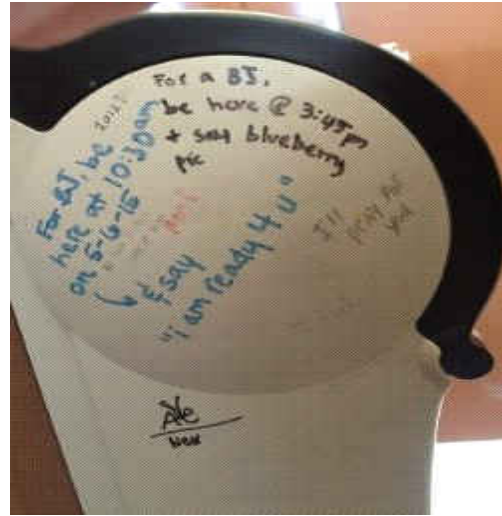


Figure 4. Chain responses.

Using this same logic, one can assume the individual who defaced the original graffiti was a Republican supporter of then President Bush. Recognizing the original graffiti promoted an opposing political viewpoint, the second writer was compelled to scratch through the message. This is another example of symbolic interaction. As a theoretical tool, symbolic interactionism effectively shows graffiti as a communicative medium through which social interaction takes place.

Another point of interest concerned the use of arrows. Usually when arrows were encountered it was on surfaces with a high concentration of restroom graffiti. In such circumstances, the graffiti were often written in close proximity to one another. When graffiti is grouped together like this, it gives the impression each graffiti is unrelated and written by a different person. However, the presence of arrows indicates a dialogue is taking place between graffiti writers. Arrows indicate who and what a graffiti writer is responding to within the context of a conversation (Rodriguez, 2003). Often, it was common to find an arrow drawn through a jumble of graffiti in order to respond to a

specific graffito. In most cases, when an individual writes something on a restroom stall, he is taking into account any previously written graffiti. This seems to be especially true if a surface is covered with a maze of graffiti. In such instances, the writer acknowledges and interprets the graffiti already present before drawing an arrow and choosing a specific graffito to which he responds. This effectively shows the communication and dialogue between two writers on a surface with a high concentration of graffiti.

Symbolic interactionism is an appropriate tool to employ when analyzing latrinalia because the theory recognizes that communication is taking place even when there are no chain responses written on a restroom stall. As a theory, symbolic interactionism recognizes there only needs to be a clearly visible graffito for meaningful communication to take place. Graffiti is a cultural production that always occurs in a social context; this is evidenced by its placement in areas and locations readily noticeable by others. By simply reading and interpreting a single graffito, communication ensues as the reader assigns meaning to drawings and editorial comments written by another individual. For example, an individual who encounters the letters “KKK” etched upon a stall wall will more than likely interpret the letters as representing an infamous white supremacy group. This symbol embodies a dark era in American history in which freed slaves and their descendants were persecuted and murdered for the color of their skin. Coincidentally, the reader might conclude “KKK” was possibly written by an individual whose views mirrored those of the hate group.

Chapter V

Conclusion

From prehistoric times when humanity first began walking upright, individuals have used flat surfaces as a medium of expression. Examples of this are found throughout the historical record from primeval cave paintings to Ancient Egyptians hieroglyphs. It is an indisputable fact that humans have been etching, writing, and painting on surfaces since time immemorial. Historians have learned a great deal about ancient cultures from these writings, etchings, and paintings. These precursors to graffiti have proved invaluable in providing a glimpse into the everyday lives of ancient peoples. For instance, Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs etched inside a pyramid wall shed light on the culture, customs, traditions, laws, beliefs, etc. of a society that lived and died a thousand years ago.

Graffiti is a communicative medium in which individuals write on walls to voice their innermost thoughts, desires, and opinions. The primary purpose of this study was to examine and analyze latrinalia found in men's restrooms on EKU's campus. Seventeen buildings were visited and a total of 965 separate cases of latrinalia were observed in the restrooms. The four most prevalent categories of latrinalia found on campus were signature, sexual, artistic, and discriminatory latrinalia. There was some variance in the location of latrinalia. Previous research has failed to examine issues pertaining to location, specifically, the exact placement of latrinalia. This study is academically significant in that it seeks to address this issue. Latrinalia was located in a wide variety of areas. From within the confines of a stall, latrinalia was found written on the sides and

tops of toilet paper dispensers, on walls, and on metallic latches that connect the stall to the bathroom wall. Outside the stall, latrinalia was found written on doors, walls, urinal partitions, fire alarms, and paper towel dispensers. Overall, this study found that a significant majority of latrinalia was written within restroom stalls. Additionally, previous literature failed to examine the methods used to produce latrinalia. It can be created in a variety of ways; this study found latrinalia written in pen, permanent marker and pencil, and etched with a sharp object. The most common method of production found in this study was etchings.

A significant portion of previous research on latrinalia has been focused on comparing the sexes, and only a handful of studies that have focused on male latrinalia. This study is unique in that it focuses solely on male latrinalia. Previous literature has taken a positivistic approach towards latrinalia; a vast majority of this research has been devoted to comparing and contrasting gendered differences by using analysis that test for significant statistical differences. This study downplays the quantitative approach by taking a more qualitative examination by using symbolic interactionism as a theoretical tool to show how latrinalia has communicative value.

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