

## “To My Fellow Sisters” : Discourse on the Washroom Walls

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Article abstract

This report on an investigation of washroom graffiti at York University maintains that significant differences are to be found in the latrinalia of men and women. The graffiti are broken down by subject matter and linguistic register as well as by gender of writers. The author found that women’s graffiti tended to be more dialogic in nature and, she asserts, were more expressive of solidarity and mutual aid. She relates her findings to the broader context of culturally shaped notions of gender identity.

# “TO MY FELLOW SISTERS”<sup>1</sup>: DISCOURSE ON THE WASHROOM WALLS

Jane M. GADSBY

*York University*

*The words of the prophets are  
written on the subway walls,  
and tenement halls,  
And whispered in the sound of silence*

Paul Simon, *Sounds of Silence*

On April 14th, 1995 with notebook and camera in hand, I braved the depths of the restrooms in York Lanes, the campus shopping mall at York University. My goal on that day was to record as accurately as possible all of the latrinalia<sup>2</sup> in the men’s and women’s washrooms near the Company’s Coming coffee shop. This “snapshot” of York graffiti encompassed 274 pieces of graffiti (2,932 words). The entire process took about six hours of squatting near toilets and contorting myself enough to read what was scrawled.

So why would I perform such an odious task in such distasteful surroundings? Up until this date, my random samplings of male and female graffiti only hinted at the differences in discourse. I wanted to accumulate two comparable sample groups that would represent the men and women who write graffiti at York University. Then, using this “snapshot” and previously accumulated data, I found patterns in women’s graffiti styles emerging. In this paper, I will be comparing the latrinalia of men and women, and then focus on the discourse of women, the wit and wisdom passed between women on the walls of York University.

## **An Overview of the Texts on Graffiti**

Much of the early research on latrinalia (in the 1960s and 70s) has only included graffiti in men’s washrooms, including Alan Dundes’ 1966 article where the term *latrinalia* was first coined. Some articles give no excuse for this omission (Collins and Batzle 1970; Sechrest and Olsen 1971; Hougan 1972; Rhyne and Ullmann 1972; and Nwoye 1993). Other articles state some rather interesting reasons for leaving out women’s graffiti, the most popular of which

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<sup>1</sup> Quote comes from graffiti found in the York Lanes women’s room, April 14th, 1995.

<sup>2</sup> This term was first used by Alan Dundes in his article “Here I Sit—A Study of American Latrinalia” and refers to anything written on washroom walls.

was that women don't write much graffiti (Bess, Horowitz, Morgenstein and Silverstein 1976; and Jorgenson and Lange 1975). Robert Reisner quotes an unidentified, uncited "analyst" regarding the authors of graffiti in women's washrooms—"A lot of the writings in women's toilets are done by men who sneak into them. Some were found to be the work of janitors and custodians" (1968:6). Harvey Lomas doesn't include women's graffiti because it was, in Lomas' opinion, "sparse and unimaginative" (1973:76). There has been an absence of women's graffiti in the study of graffiti because it was devalued, credited to really being the work of men or just plain overlooked, attitudes that effect women's speech as a whole, according to Cheris Kramarae:

Women's speech is devalued. Women's words are, in general, ignored by historians, linguistics, anthropologists, compilers of important speeches, news reporters, and businessmen, among others. [1981:XIII]

Even in studies where both men and women are represented, there are significant problems. In the *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*, Alfred Kinsey (*et al.*) took a brief look at latrinalia as an indicator of "the most basic sexual differences between male and female psychology" (1953:87). Their comparison only took into account those "inscriptions" they considered to be "sexual," and they found that 86% of men's graffiti and 25% of women's fell into this category. The purported reasons for these differences range from women having a "greater regard for the moral codes and social conventions" to the inscriptions meaning "little or nothing to her erotically" (674). But were these conclusions fair? Consider the following chart of the data used for this study:

*Figure 1 : Incidences of Sexual Inscription*

	FEMALE	MALE
	%	%
places with any sexual inscription	50	58
% of inscriptions which were erotic	25	86
Number of places surveyed	94	259
Number of sexual inscriptions	331	1048

[Kinsey *et al.* 1953:674]

While Kinsey *et al.* based their conclusions on percentages of the overall collection of graffiti, they only surveyed 94 women's washrooms as opposed to 259 men's. It is possible that the differences in the graffiti written result from differences in the locations studied. Without looking at the same number of men's and women's washrooms from the same locations, the data could vary and significantly effect the conclusions. For example, graffiti in bars differs from

graffiti in restaurants or schools. So while both male and female graffiti were reviewed in this text, women's graffiti was vastly under-represented.<sup>3</sup>

Another problem with some of the past research has been subjective and arbitrary conclusions. Landy and Steele's article "Graffiti as a Function of Building Utilization" is a good example of this. These researchers review their quantitative findings and conclude that specialised graffiti were found more often in specialised buildings rather than buildings with a more general use. This is quite logical based on their research. However, they don't stop there; they add the following statement:

The absence of graffiti and the greater evidence of smoking in female toilet rooms might reflect the need for phallic expression (Landy 1967). Whereas males act out this need by creating graffiti, females smoke it out! [1967:712]

This conclusion has no support from the data they gathered and is, quite frankly, just the opinion of the researchers. With no other data to draw on, they make a completely arbitrary link between females leaving cigarette butts in their restrooms and women "needing" phallic expression.<sup>4</sup>

Moira Smith really nails down the problem with much of the past research—the lack of contextualisation. "Scholarly studies of graffiti can be divided into two camps: those which treat the material completely but indirectly and those which look at the texts directly but selectively" (1986:100). The contextual approach entails taking a linguistic event (such as the writing of a graffiti) and then working outwards to incorporate other graffiti events, cultural facts, local customs, and anything that would have influenced the writer of that graffiti. It is only in this way that researchers can really come close to getting a complete picture.

I know of one graffiti incident that occurred on the York University campus that shows the importance of the contextual approach. A Women's Studies course met weekly in a classroom in Vanier College. During a class, one of the women looked up and noticed that written in chalk on light fixture were the words "cunt blood." They pointed this out to the professor who, at the end of the class while many of the students were watching, climbed up on a desk and changed this graffiti to read "cunt blood is sacred," presenting her class with a

<sup>3</sup> Jo-Ann H. Farr and Carol Gordon (1975) did a partial replication of Kinsey's graffiti study using an equal number of washrooms and their study resulted in a reversal of the Kinsey numbers—60% of the women's and 30% of the men's graffiti were considered sexual.

<sup>4</sup> Rudin and Harless (1970) adeptly dispute these conclusions in their article. They found that the presence of smoking paraphernalia in women's restrooms was due to the fact that the women's rooms had ashtrays, matches and lounge furniture. The presence of these items encouraged smoking and since the men's room didn't have them, there was less chance for the men to be smoking in the restroom than women. They also found that the lack of graffiti in women's washrooms was connected to the fact that women view the washroom as more than a toilet; they see it as a place to meet and talk and smoke, etc. Neither of these functions have anything to do with the "phallic expression" mentioned by Landy and Steele.

visual demonstration of reclamation.

Let's just surmise that long after this class has left the room, a graffiti researcher (like myself) was to happen upon this phrase without any of the story behind it. I would start by looking carefully at this graffiti to ascertain that, by the different handwriting, it was written by two different people. While I wouldn't know that a professor had added the ending, I would be able to determine that there were two different motivations at work here. The language used is quite significant as words like "sacred" are not thrown around easily by the majority of the York population. By checking the schedule for that particular classroom, I would find that at least one Women's Studies class met there and might be able to piece together much more of the possibilities concerning this graffiti. It would also be important to look at the timing of this writing. If this appeared close to December 6, it is possible that the second writer was influenced by the recollection of the Montreal Massacre, the commemoration of which is observed on campus. There are many, many more aspects that could be connected to this particular linguistic event but I think the point is made—it is impossible to look at the event in isolation without any contextual information as that would lead to the subjective conclusions and omissions such as were made in some of the past texts.

While there are few articles presently available that incorporate the contextual approach, the good news is that positive changes are happening. Catherine Davies (1985) got the ball rolling with her article on women's advice-giving graffiti. She graphically represented the graffiti in two ways—first, with a map of where the graffiti was situated on the wall and, second, she laid out the material to illustrate the conversational nature of this exchange. Elke Hentschel (1987) and Caroline M. Cole (1991) have picked up on this method of analysing and stressed the value of understanding the events surrounding the linguistic event. Birch Moonwomon (1992) takes this approach even further, focusing on a specific local event (four campus football players accused of raping an 18-year-old woman) and examining how this event was dealt with in collective graffiti conversations. Her examination of the material explores this linguistic event as a form of discourse, illustrating that there is much to be learned from the bathroom walls.<sup>5</sup>

### **A Tale of Two Washrooms**

My approach to the study of graffiti has been to combine the mass data collection methods of much of the early graffiti research with the contextual approach used by scholars such as Moonwomon and Davies. I began studying the graffiti at York in January of 1991. Since then I have amassed over a thousand

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<sup>5</sup> Another exciting development in the study of graffiti is the World Wide Web site—[http://www.gatech.edu/desoto/graf/Index.Art\\_Crimes.html](http://www.gatech.edu/desoto/graf/Index.Art_Crimes.html)—that is devoted entirely to the subject of graffiti.

individual pieces of graffiti from construction barricades, desks, carrels, walls, stalls and even ceilings (with approximately 500 accompanying photographs).<sup>6</sup> Much of the graffiti has been gathered in random searches of the campus. In reporting my data, I have slightly modified Birch Moonwomon's methods for outlining the flow of the graffiti conversation and for mapping the graffiti as it appears on the wall.

The two washrooms I will be referring to in this paper are located in a hallway just off a very high traffic area. Nearby are four food establishments. Neither washroom is wheelchair-accessible so a certain portion of the campus community would not be able to use them. Both washrooms have similar facilities (hand dryer, two sinks, mirror, etc.) though the men's has two stalls and a urinal while the women's has three stalls. Both of them are in a decent state of repair with no obvious damages and both look like they regularly cleaned. They are located side-by-side in the hallway and are easy to find as there are signs posted pointing out their location.

I found 190 individual graffiti in the women's washroom divided over a total of seven different walls (an average of 27.1 graffiti per wall or 63.3 per stall). In the men's washroom I found 84 pieces of graffiti divided over five walls (an average of 16.8 graffiti per wall or 43 per stall). The women's washroom had a total of 2037 words (an average of 290.9 graffiti per wall or 678.7 per stall) while the men's had 895 words (an average of 179 graffiti per wall or 447.5 per stall). The average amount of words per graffiti was 10.72 for women and 10.65 for men.

The bottom line is that the women wrote more than the men in the York Lanes washrooms—an average of 19% more graffiti per stall and 21% more words per stall. This difference in volume may be accounted for quite simply—men don't use the stalls as often as women because of the presence of a urinal. Therefore, while it is important to note this volume difference, I will be dealing less with the number of responses and more with percentages in the various comparisons to follow. There are, of course, two other possible explanations for this difference but I can not prove them through this one study. It could be that men might just write less graffiti than women or it is possible that different locations attract more graffiti from one gender than another. Only further studies such as this could show any patterns of this nature.

## Interaction Levels

To discuss the interaction levels within graffiti, I will have to begin with definitions. First, there appears to be two basic types of graffiti—those that attract a response and those that don't. I will refer to the graffiti that don't attract responses as “solo” graffiti since they stand on their own. The term “thread” has

<sup>6</sup> Most of this material will be used as part of my Master's thesis, which is still under construction.

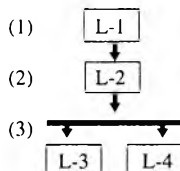
commonly been used to describe the chain reaction of responses to a single posting in internet discussions. I will use the term “thread” to describe any series of connected graffiti. Catherine Davies has labelled interactive graffiti as “collective conversation” (1985:108), a term I will use to refer to the more complex threads. All graffiti threads begin with a single graffiti. That graffiti can spark a single reaction or many reactions. I will refer to any graffiti that initiates a thread as the “inaugural” graffiti.

As mentioned earlier, I have modified the method used by Birch Moonwomon (1992:422-424) and used a flow chart to demonstrate the connections between the graffiti in a conversation. Each graffiti has been labelled with letter designation. Solo graffiti will have just the letter designation since it sparks no response. Connected graffiti have been labelled with the same letter designation and are numbered starting at “1” for the inaugural graffiti. I have tried to link the graffiti in order but some threads are so complicated that I cannot state that the numbers represent the exact order in which they were written, especially since I didn’t witness the writing personally.

Let’s chart a simple example, the “L” thread from the east stall of the women’s room (Figure 2 on the next page). The L-1 graffiti sparks a single response which I have labelled L-2. Two people have responded to this graffiti and their writings are labelled L-3 and L-4. The numbers to the left indicate the length of the thread. In this example, the “L” thread is three levels in length and contains four graffiti. I can tell from the contents of the graffiti that L-1 came first and L-2 responds to it. Following the flow from level to level is usually logical based on the graffiti content or connecting arrows or by placement of the graffiti on the wall. While I can also determine that L-3 and L-4 both respond to L-2, but I can not tell which was written first. Though I attempt to number the graffiti in order, the numbers mostly are used to differentiate one graffiti from another and not to denote chronology.

I label this “L” interaction is a “simple” one since the graffiti average per level is only 1.6. Any interaction that averages less than two graffiti per level is basically a series of connected or threaded comments. Threads that average greater than two graffiti per level are more complex, usually containing changes in topic as well as varied opinions—they are collective conversations. (Graffiti content will be discussed later in this article.) I consider only those threads with

Figure 2



at least five graffiti in a thread as significant as far as interaction levels. Figures 3 and 4 below list the different threads in each washroom and their interaction levels.

*Figure 3: Women's Graffiti Threads Containing Five or More Graffiti*

Location	Thread	# Graffiti	# Levels	Average
West Stall	A	19	6	3.2
West Stall	B	5	4	1.25
West Stall	D	39	15	2.6
West Stall	E	9	4	2.25
West Stall	F	5	4	1.25
West Stall	G	10	6	1.7
West Stall	T	12	6	2
West Stall	U	6	3	23
West Stall	V	6	4	1.5
East Stall	A	5	3	1.7
East Stall	I	6	5	1.2
East Stall	T	10	6	1.7

*Figure 4: Men's Graffiti Threads Containing Five or More Graffiti*

Location	Thread	# Graffiti	# Levels	Average
North Stall	B	7	6	1.2
North Stall	G	6	4	1.5
North Stall	I	11	6	1.8
South Stall	B	13	8	1.6
South Stall	F	5	3	1.7

The most complicated thread I examined is the "D" thread from the west stall of the women's washroom. The "D" thread is extremely complex, containing 39 graffiti and 15 levels with an average of 2.6 graffiti per level. It is over twice as long as any other women's threads and three times longer than any of the men's threads. (The next longest thread from the women's washroom is the "A" thread from the west stall which contains 19 graffiti and 6 levels for an average of 3.2 graffiti per level.) Compare the "D" thread to the "B" thread from the men's south stall. It contained 13 graffiti and 8 levels with an average of 1.6 graffiti per level. By comparing these two threads (in Figures 5 and 6), many differences can be seen.



At first glance it would appear that this difference in complexity could be accounted simply since the comparison is between threads of disparate lengths (39 versus 13). However, only five of the threads in the men's room contained five or more graffiti as compared to twelve in the women's. Of the twelve threads in the women's room, five were complex as they contained an average of two or more graffiti per level. Even when comparing threads containing similitat number of graffiti, the interaction in the women's graffiti showed a much greater level of complexity then the men's. Three of the complex threads found in the women's room contained less than 13 graffiti so are comparable to the men's room threads, yet none of the men's threads averaged more than two graffiti per level.

This examination indicates that men and women interact differently when using graffiti. But to create a broader picture of the interaction difference, we need to look at the contents of graffiti.

Figure 5: "B" Thread, Men's Room

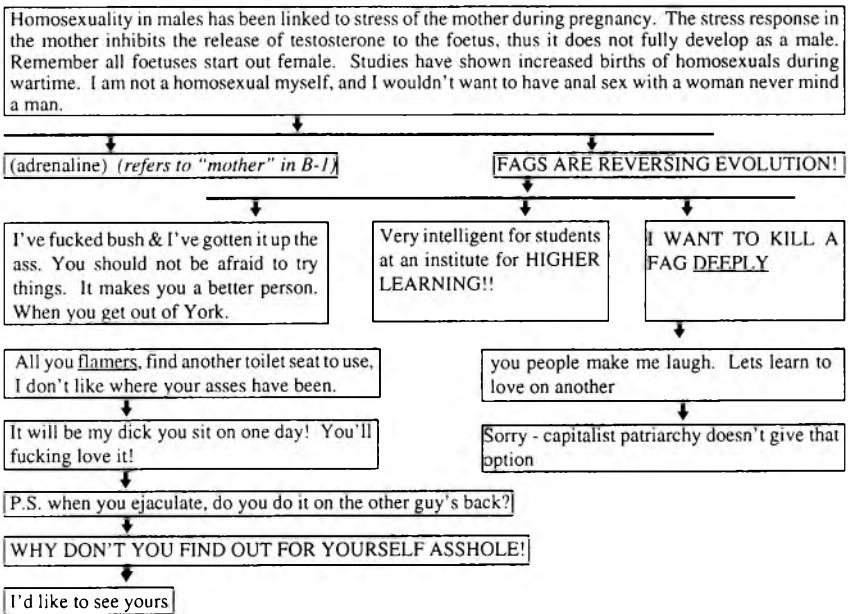
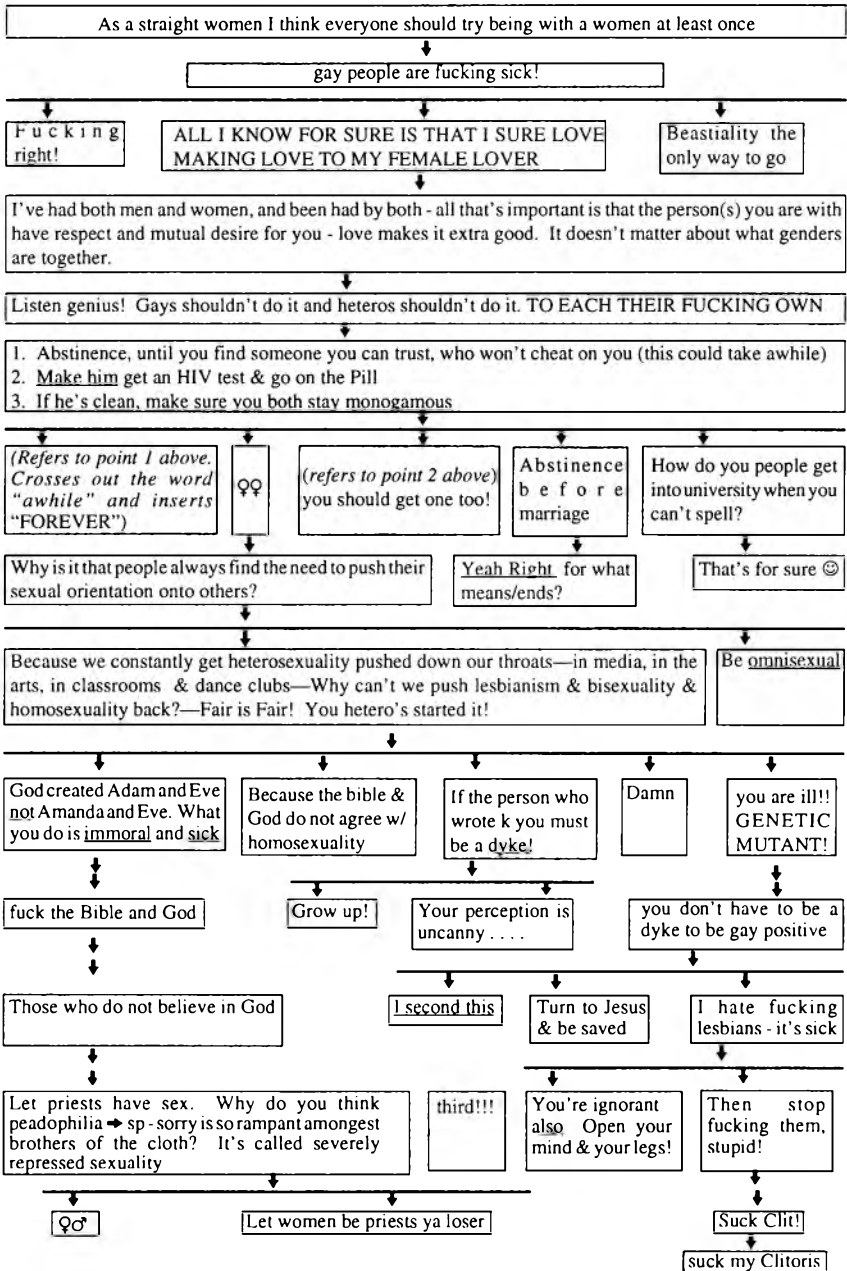


Figure 6: "D" Thread, Women's Washroom



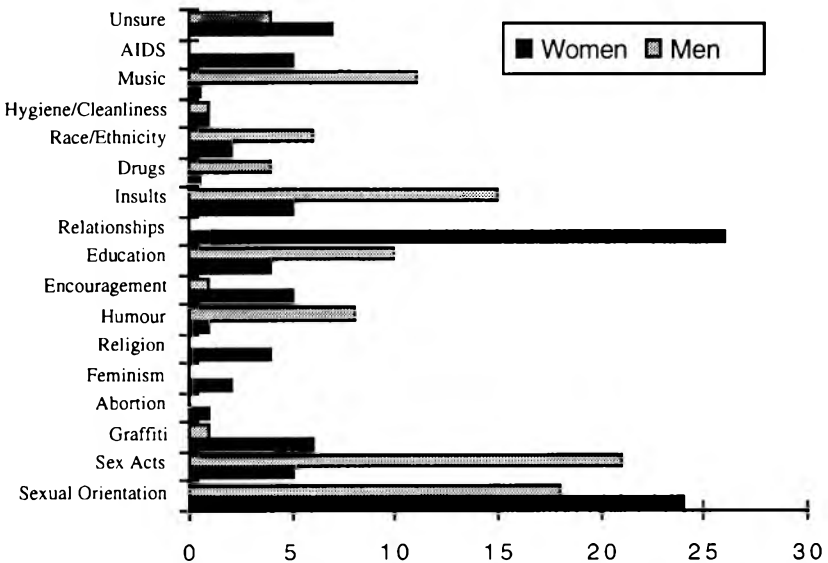
## Subjects

The men and women discussed quite a variety of topics in their graffiti. The subjects ranged from sexual orientation to music to education—16 different topics in all:

Sex Acts	Feminism/Support between Women	Encouragement
AIDS	Insults/Discouragement	Relationships
Abortion	Hygiene/Cleanliness	Race/Ethnicity
Religion	Graffiti/Vandalism	Music
Education	Sexual Orientation	Humour
Drugs		

There is one additional category that I've labelled "unsure" since for some graffiti I cannot understand what the subject is. For example, one particular graffiti has been repeated in many different places at York and I have no idea what it means. It consists of one word written in stylised letters—Sulk. In this study, I found it in two places—the middle stall ("K") and the east stall ("Q") of the women's washroom (I have also seen it in men's rooms and other places on campus)—and it would seem that other people on campus do not know what it means as there are never any responses to it. I categorised the 274 pieces of graffiti used in this study (outlined in Figure 7 below) based on what I perceived to be the main point of the writer.

Figure 7: Breakdown of Graffiti Subjects by Percentage



The variety in subjects was not surprising considering the volume of people that use the York Lanes washrooms. But what men and women focus on can be quite different. The men’s favourite subject was sex acts (21%) and second was sexual orientation (18%). Women also discussed sex acts but only 6% of the time. Mostly the women were interested in relationships (26%) and their second favourite topic was sexual orientation (24%). The men never discussed relationships at all.

I started to notice a pattern in the statistics. I divided the subjects into broader-based groupings, as outlined in Figures 8 and 9. Women were more interested in topics regarding human interaction then any other topic (59%). Men were almost evenly split between human interaction (35%) and physical sensations (36%). But physical sensations were not a particularly interesting topic to women (6%).

Figure 8: Graph of Percentages of Graffiti Subjects by Grouping

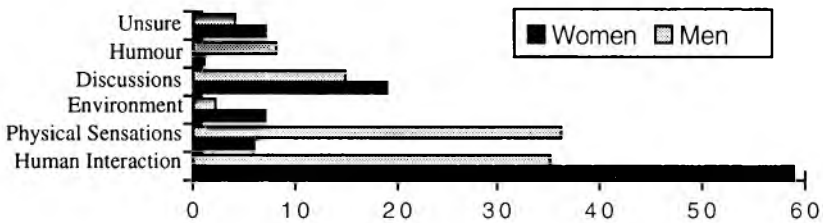


Figure 9: Percentages of Graffiti Subjects by Grouping

Group	Graffiti Subjects Included	# of ♀ Graffiti	% of Graffiti (190)	# of ♂ Graffiti	% of Graffiti (84)
Human Interaction	Relationship; Encouragement; Sexual Orientation; Insults/Discouragement	113	59%	29	35%
Physical Sensations	Sex Acts; Music; Drugs	12	6%	30	36%
Environment	Graffiti/Vandalism; Hygiene/Cleanliness	13	7%	2	2%
Discussions	Abortion; Feminism; Religion Education; Aids; Race/Ethnicity	36	19%	13	15%
Humour		2	1%	7	8%
Unsure		14	7%	3	4%

If we add to this discussion of subjects the interaction levels mentioned earlier, a fuller picture develops. In Figure 9, we can see that the more popular topics for graffiti also have the highest number of inaugural graffiti (see Figures 10 and 11 below). For the men, inaugural graffiti written on topics other than Human Interaction and Physical Sensation did not evolve beyond four graffiti in length. For the women, inaugural graffiti needed to be written on topics from the groupings of Human Interaction, Environment or Discussions or the thread would not develop beyond four graffiti.

Figure 10: Women's Inaugural Graffiti

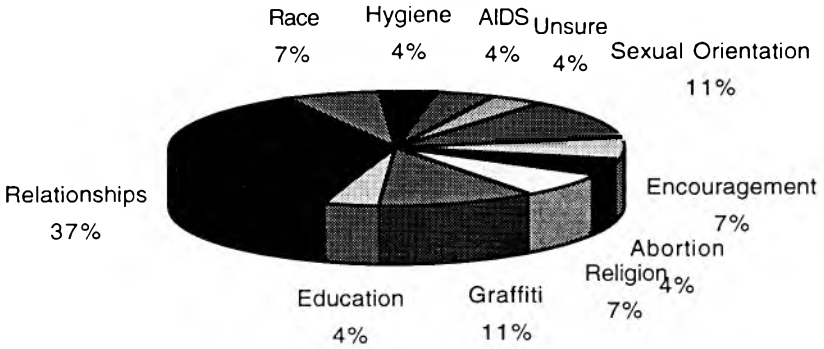
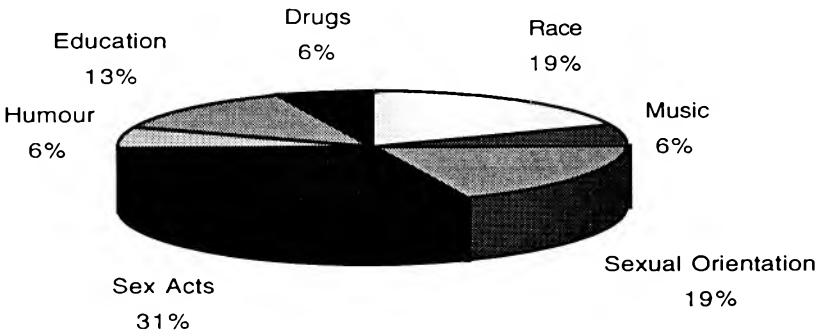


Figure 11: Men's Inaugural Graffiti



Let's focus on, for example, the subject of sexual orientation since it was the second most popular topic for both men and women. In the women's room, three threads (11%) started with inaugural graffiti on sexual orientation. These three threads generated 60 pieces of graffiti or 32% of the total graffiti. The men's room also had three threads (19%) concerning sexual orientation. These three threads generated 21 graffiti or 25% of the total graffiti. There is a direct connection between the topic of the inaugural graffiti and whether the thread will grow in length.

Of all the solo graffiti (42 graffiti), only two pieces were concerned with sexual orientation (one in each washroom). The solo graffiti in the men's room states simply that "lesbian love will never die" while the women's solo graffiti is someone looking to have a lesbian experience and asking for advice on how to go about this. There are three possible reasons why any graffiti does not generate responses. First, the readers could be uninterested, which seems unlikely in the two above-mentioned cases based on interest in other threads regarding sexual orientation. Secondly, some graffiti is hard to understand (either linguistically or by illegible handwriting). If a reader doesn't know what the writer is talking about then the reader is unlikely to respond. The "Sulk" graffiti mentioned earlier is a good example of this. In the above examples this, too, would seem unlikely as both were clear in meaning and handwriting. Thirdly, and most probably, these graffiti could be in a pre-thread state. Perhaps I read them before other writers had a chance to reply and begin the threading process.

It should be noted that to code a particular graffiti as dealing with, for example, sexual orientation, this does not mean that subsequent graffiti on the same topic are necessarily in agreement. On the contrary, graffiti is a medium that allows for full expression of many different views on a particular topic since it is an anonymous forum and there is much disagreement. Anonymity allows writers to express ideas they might otherwise be uncomfortable in expressing. I found a great deal of homophobic graffiti in the graffiti written on sexual orientation, sometimes violently homophobic. There was a marked difference in the number of homophobic graffiti—out of the 45 graffiti written in the women's washroom on sexual orientation, 12 (27%) were homophobic while in the men's room, 9 (60%) out of 15 were homophobic.

There are even differences in attitudes within the homophobic graffiti. I have found graffiti in the women's room that says "gay people are fucking sick" or "what you do is immoral and sick." The women would state opinions—quite vehemently at times—but rarely do you see direct threats. However, there are many threats in the men's room—"Jewish fags must die" or "I want to kill a fag deeply." These are the differences in communication that I will be continuing to study.

The bottom line for this discussion of subject is that if a writer of graffiti wishes to get a response, he or she must choose their topic wisely. If the graffiti

does not appeal to the washroom patrons, there is a good chance it will remain solo. And a topic that is interesting in one washroom will be not necessarily be interesting in the other.

## The Language of Graffiti

With the exception of one graffito, all of the graffiti was written in English. This commonality of language does not mean that the writers used the words in the same way or with the same frequency. I will be looking at three different aspects of the language—gender specificity, pronouns and general terminology. Since I am dealing with two different sample sizes for the groups in question (women wrote 2037 words versus the men's 895), I will refer mainly to the percentage comparisons.

There were 28 different gender-specific words used, ranging from the usual pronouns to words like *womyn*, *guy*, *bitch*, *sister*, *brother*, etc. The women used gender-specific language twice as often as men—women used 25 different words 117 times (6% of their total words used) while men, on the other hand, used only 16 different words 25 times (3% of their total words used). Even more interesting is the type of gender-specific language used. Of the 117 gender-specific words used by women, 61% referred to males and 39% referred to females. Of the 25 words used by men, 44% referred to females and 56% referred to males. So not only do women use more gender-specific language, they use it mostly to refer to men while the men refer mostly to themselves.

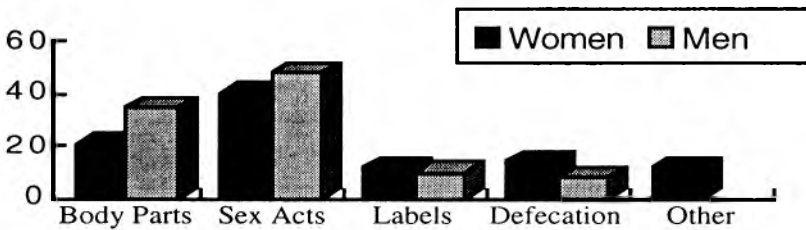
The men and women in this study used pronouns in graffiti at almost exactly the same rate—12% or (1.27 per graffito) for women and 11% (or 1.23 per graffito) for men. While there isn't a huge variance in pronoun use, there were subtle differences. Men used words referring to themselves alone (i.e., *me* or *my*) at an average of .39 per graffito while women used them .43 per graffito. Women used pronouns that include the self with others (i.e., *we* or *us*) at an average of .11 per graffito while men used .02 per graffito. Pronouns referring to others only (i.e., *they* or *your*) were used by men and women at an almost identical rate—.77 per graffito by men and .78 by women.

The only major differences I found in pronoun use was in gendered pronouns and the use of direct versus indirect pronouns. With gendered pronouns (i.e., *he* or *she*), women used 40 (an average .21 per graffito) while men used only 3 gendered pronouns (an average of .04 per graffito). This is consistent with the overall usage of gendered language mentioned previously. Men and women used direct and indirect pronouns (*you* versus *they*) in reference to other people in quite different proportions. Women used 66% direct versus 34% indirect (out of a total of 148 words) while men used 85% direct versus 15% indirect (out of a total of 65 words). The men often used a more confrontational approach in the writing of graffiti, preferring to aim comments directly at the reader (or previous writer)

in the majority of the graffiti. Women, on the other hand, do this part of the time but balance it more with generalised comments.

I analysed the graffiti further by counting the words used that dealt with religion, race and ethnicity, violence, insult, parts of the body, relationships and taboo language. Men were more inclined than women to use words concerning race and ethnicity, violence, insult, parts of the body and taboo language. Women were more inclined than men to use words concerning religion and relationships. The taboo words can be broken down into five different types. Both men and women used taboo words concerning sex acts, though men used them slightly more often than women (48% versus 40%). The men used far more taboo language concerning parts of the body than did the women (35% versus 21%). However, the women used more taboo words than the men in the areas of labels for people (12% versus 10%) and defecation (14% versus 8%). The graph in Figure 12 illustrates this different use of taboo words.

Figure 12: Use of Taboo Words in Graffiti



### Graphic Paralanguage and Punctuation

While a definition of punctuation is not needed, I should define what I am referring to by the term “paralanguage.” Birch Moonwomon writes that paralanguage “functions to emphasize conflict; the expression of disagreement itself is part of the import of the comments” (1992:421). I would like to amend this definition slightly. Paralanguage is used to emphasize words or comments but not necessarily to just express conflict. When speaking, we use more than just words to communicate. We stress certain words and syllables, use hand gestures, etc., to make ourselves understood. However, since graffiti is the process of making oneself heard in a *written* public forum, the style and form of that writing takes on an almost oral tone in order to emulate speech. The term “collective conversation” is quite appropriate; in reading these writings I felt like I was eavesdropping on people talking. But this is still a written medium. So the writers have adopted ways of making their voices stand out from the other voices or to emphasize certain words within the graffiti, in the same way we can place emphasis on specific words in our speech.



Graphic paralinguage, according to Moonwomon, includes “word-circling, multiple underlining, multiple punctuation marks, and emphatic use of capital letters” (1992:421). I think that’s only part of the picture. The writers in this case have also used drawings, symbols and word substitutes, all of which are designed to make the graffito noticed in a sea of graffiti. Many of the items of paralinguage were fairly equally used, such as word/phrase circling, multiple exclamation marks, emphatic use of capital letters, etc. Women used more word substitutes (i.e., <sup>TM</sup>, ¢ or &) than men (19% versus 6%) while men used more arrows (30% versus 21%). The women averaged .86 incidents of paralinguage per graffito while the men averaged .76 per graffito.

As for punctuation, while men and women used exactly same ratio of punctuation per graffito (1.33), what they used and the way they used it was quite different. Men used significantly more periods and apostrophes while women used significantly more exclamation marks and question marks. Even within the study of the question marks I found differences. In the men’s case, 67% of the question marks (6 of 9) were used to ask rhetorical questions as opposed to interrogative questions. The reverse is true of the women’s, where 57% of the question marks (20 of 35) were used on interrogative questions.

### **The Discourse of Women in Graffiti**

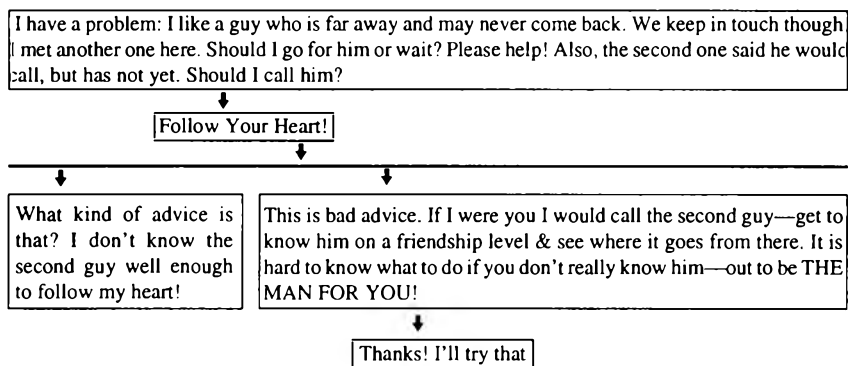
There are many types of discourse in graffiti that are used by both men and women—position statements, discussion, preaching, etc. But there are three types that I have encountered that are unique to the women’s washroom—*Advice Column*, *Warning* and *Solidarity*.

#### *Advice Column*

This type of discourse has been well-documented by scholars like Birch Moonwomon (1992), Caroline M. Cole (1991), Kym Sheehy-Toole (1992), and others. Catherine Davies first wrote about it as a “communicative phenomenon” and noted that this anonymous forum for obtaining advice was used since “certain communicative acts are inherently face-threatening” (1985:112). I would take this one step further. Cheris Kramarae points out the most public discourse is controlled by men (1981:2). But the women’s room is one place where the discourse cannot be controlled by men. It is a safe place. Questions can be asked and the reader can be reasonably assured of receiving some informative feedback. For example, in Figure 13 we see that a woman has asked for advice on a relationship problem. A second woman responds. The first woman returns to state that she didn’t like the advice. A third woman also disagrees with the advice given by the second woman and adds her own opinion. The first woman returns yet again to accept this advice and thank the writer. This is extremely interesting

since the writer of the inaugural graffiti was obviously returning to that particular stall in that particular washroom just to get feedback. This was not a trivial or random event for her, but one where she had a vested interest in the discourse.

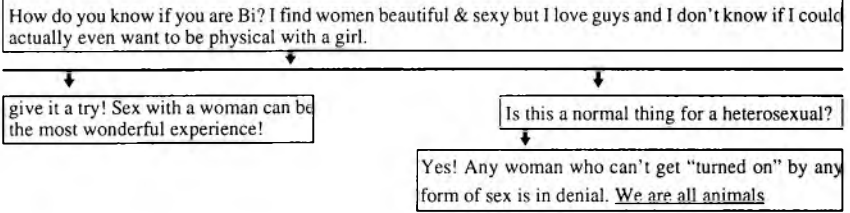
*Figure 13: York Lanes Women's Room, 95-04-14*



The vast majority of women's advice-column graffiti that I have found is written about relationships, with the occasional one on sexual orientation. All of them start with the writer explaining a scenario and asking an interrogative question. In the York Lanes washroom snapshot, 20 women's graffiti contained interrogative questions. Those 20 elicited 30 direct responses to the questions (a ratio of 1.5 responses per question asked). This was not the case for the men's graffiti. There were only two interrogative questions and neither received any direct answers to their questions. This may be why men do not write advice-column graffiti—they don't get any answers and they certainly don't get any support. Of the interrogative questions asked by men, one had to do with obtaining drugs (it received no answer at all) and one had to do with a sex act (see Figure 6). The man in this case asked what appeared to me to be a sincere question—"when you ejaculate, do you do it on the other guy's back?" The only response to this question was an insult—"why don't you find out for yourself asshole."<sup>7</sup> Compare that reaction to one from the women's room in Figure 14 below. Here a woman asks a question about sexual orientation and her question is met with information and support. According to Kramarae "females are likely to find ways to express themselves outside the systems used by males" and advice-column latrinalia provides a unique forum for this discourse (1981:12).

7. A comparable question regarding a sex act was asked in the women's washroom when one woman inquired "how do you suck it?" (referring to a previous graffiti). The response was informative and not at all insulting—"First, 'it' is the clit! Part the lips, fit your lips around the clit and suck!"

Figure 14: Central Square Women's Room, 94-10-16



### Warning

There are several uses and forms of warning graffiti, ranging from the writer warning others so the others can protect themselves from making mistakes to issuing an ultimatum, as in Figure 15 below.



Figure 15: Construction wall, York's Harry S. Crowe Co-op, March 1993

I can remember being told stories as a child that were designed to teach me not to do certain things (like the "Little Boy Who Cried Wolf" and other such stories). Much of the warning graffiti takes on similar characteristics to these warning stories of my youth, such as the example in Figure 16 on the next page.

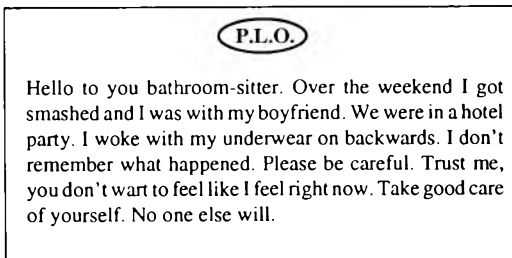
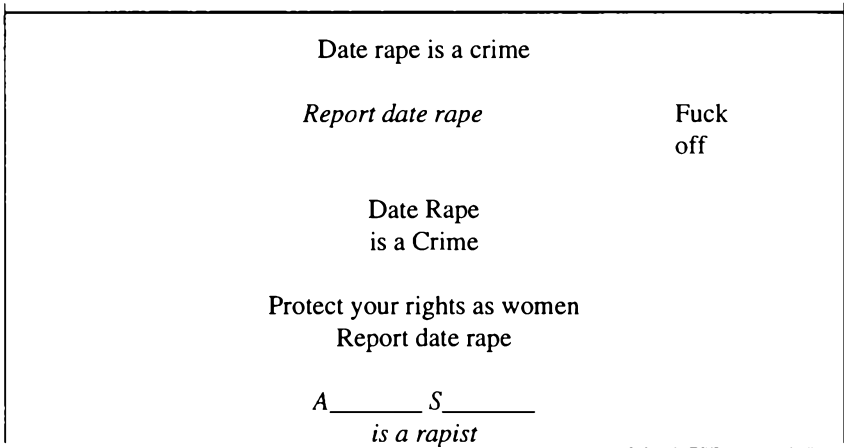


Figure 16: Scott Library Women's room, 95-04-02

Another discursive strategy in warning graffiti is the naming of rapists. Figure 17 depicts an exchange between several people concerning date rape. I watched this conversation grow over the course of a couple of weeks until in tiny letters at the bottom of it, someone named a man as a rapist. Another warning

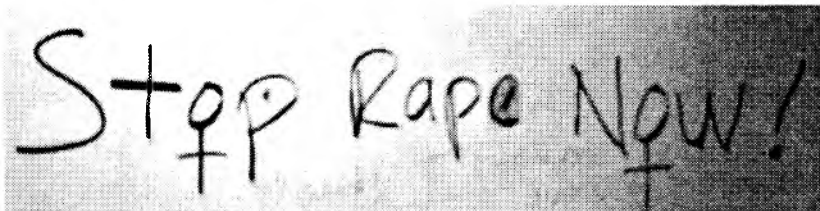
graffito from the Central Square Women's Room (94-10-16) named another rapist—"Beware of this man! D\_\_\_ J\_\_\_\_\_ who teaches \_\_\_\_\_ is a rapist! Do not take or support his classes." Graffiti such as this has become a fairly common occurrence.

*Figure 17: Desk in a Founders College classroom, January 16, 1991*



According to Cheri Kramarae "Women are a 'muted group' in that some of their perceptions cannot be stated, or at least easily expressed, in the idiom of the dominant structure" (1981:2). Perhaps this is one reason for turning to graffiti as a method of warning, especially where it concerns rape or assault. The anonymous forum of graffiti allows for the message to be passed without stigmatisation that comes with being identified as a victim, with the added bonus of (hopefully) making the world a safer place for other women.

*Figure 18: Student Centre stairwell, 95-04-14*



## Solidarity

In my snapshot of York latrinalia, I found that there were no instances where men used words that denote a connection to another human being—words like “sister,” “brother,” “boyfriend,” etc. (words which were used by the women). They didn’t speak of “men” as a cohesive group and only used inclusive pronouns (i.e., us, our and we) only 2% of the time compared to 10% for women. It became apparent that for women the latrinalia served to reinforce the need to view other women as part of the same collective group, as illustrated in the graffito I used in the title of this article—“To my fellow sisters.”

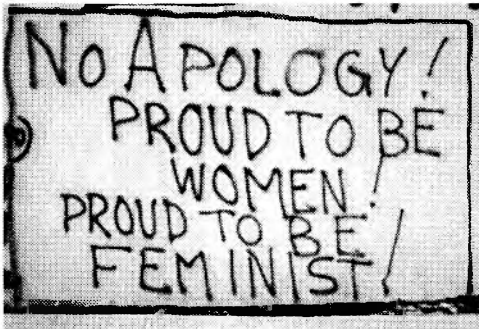
The writer in Figure 19 has definitely identified herself and other women as being in a unified group that is separate from men. She has also identified herself as not being part of the dominant group. She is “muted” and her life experiences are not valued by the dominant group (Kramarae 1981:1).

*Figure 19: York Lanes Women’s Room, 95-04-14*

Women educate yourselves! Don't let men and male dominated institutions ie, gov't tell you who you are supposed to be, what it means to be “feminine”—“female”

Many of the graffiti contained affirming messages, like “RAGE + WOMYN = POWER” or “Commit random acts of kindness.” Negative messages are usually responded to by other women reminding the writer that women should be working together, as in this example—“Men & society have held us down for so long, why are you trying to help? Sisters in the struggle!” Graffiti such as this creates an atmosphere of support, an attitude which is evidenced in the types of positive responses that women get to their graffiti. The women are creating a speech community on the walls that surround them and using this discourse to draw each other together and to stress the commonality of being a woman.

*Figure 20: Construction Wall, January 1991*



Solidarity graffiti is used to foster change, declare support and empower. "Increasingly, women in the movement have become dissatisfied with having to write and speak through what they call a male language structure" (Kramarae 1981:22). I would suggest that latrinalia has become a forum that is uniquely personalised by women, free from the influences of men. On the washroom walls, women's speech is not devalued, condemned or silenced; in fact, it's encouraged.

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