

## Feminist Soapboxes: Reading Women's Graffiti as the Production of Political Signs

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Studies of graffiti tend to focus around two poles: those which identify graffiti as vandalism and analyze it within a legal discourse of discipline and punish, and those which see graffiti as uninhibited communication motivated by unconscious impulses and analyze it within a psychoanalytic discourse of neurosis and repression. I adopt a third approach, a semiotic approach to graffiti analyzing them within a system of communication with cultural codes and communicative conventions.

Graffiti are frequently said to present a vivid and unflattering insight into the hidden side of our society. But women's experience is a yet more occluded part of society, because women are thought not to produce graffiti. An analysis of the graffiti in the women's washrooms at York

University, Toronto, 1987-88, reveals that not only do women write graffiti, but that it is different from men's washroom graffiti. Soapboxes is an appropriate label for women's graffiti, linking both context and manifestory function.

The Privy is political, to parody a feminist slogan of the 70s. One of the dominant codes of contemporary feminist discourse is that the political is most present in the private, in those signifying practices and institutions of daily life with their discourses and representations through which individuals are interpellated as subjects into hegemonic formations and/or positions of struggle with respect to power. Sexuality is implicated along with subjectivity in the politics of everyday life. As representation and self-representation, graffiti participate in the process of the construction of gender as a technology of gender, a signifying practice in/by which a subject is positioned within the discourse of sexuality as a gendered subject.

I suggest a semantic and syntactic analysis of the women's washroom graffiti, undertaken within a framework of socio-semiotics that includes in its analysis of meaning-making the interrelated systems of the production and reception of the utterance, contextual as well as cotextual systems. Political signs of a number of different genres may be discerned, including discourses on sexual relations, on the gendered body; debates within feminist discourses such as radical and liberal feminism, heterosexual and lesbian orientations; interventions on "conventional" political issues such as the peace movement, racism, colonialism; a self-reflexive discourse on graffiti writing and the institution, on graffiti writing and the silencing of women's speech. Site specific discourse, this graffiti proliferated in the washrooms located in the library and the central academic building near the women's centre at sites of knowledge production, not in washrooms near eating places on campus, breaking thus the conventional linkage with absorption/defecation. The ultimate "taboo," it would seem, is women's political speech—oppressed in the very place of its production and analysis.



worrying about it seems useless but things like this just happen  
The walls here are so  
Pristine  
You should check out  
the cans one  
floor up!

you're probably

se!  
cup

sorry  
I don't get  
off on reading  
people's immature  
comments on their  
sex life

Then why bother  
commenting about  
them moron!

Pic  
P. \*

(21) your writing  
tells me you  
need a shrink  
100% True

gate just  
fe about

- 1. Have regular sitz baths with salt
- 2. Avoid carbohydrates + eat yogurt
- 3. see your doctor + no sex until you get rid of it or your partner will give it back to you.
- 4. Don't use perfumed pads, douches etc. and be careful of... detergents & softeners in your underwear.

is so  
fxx  
false is new?

How does one get  
rid of a yeast infection?

Creams  
Pills  
it might  
no back

fingering  
themselves  
that's how.

To much or not enough

we v. neque with water  
or you thin cream  
"Constan". Don't sit  
on dirty toilets and  
have only one partner for  
life. or use condoms  
(safety rules)

why is that disgusting  
why should I be so  
inimulated + paranoid  
about such a minor health  
relax  
oh, you are right.