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

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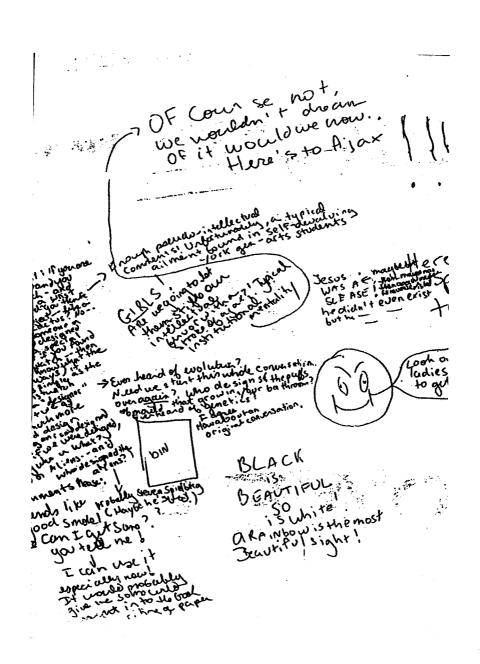
Studies of graffiti tend to focus around two poles: those which identify graffiti as vandalism and analyze it within a legal discourse of discipline and punish, and those which see graffiti as uninhibited communication motivated by unconscious impulses and analyze it within a psychoanalytic discourse 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.



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