An Analysis of Graffiti at Washington and Lee University

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"Graffiti are artifacts of anonymous behavior fixed in time and space" (Blake 1981:88). In this paper I will examine this particular artifact type in order to gain insight as to the intent of the individual producing the material under study and to the meaning of the message thusly conveyed. I will also examine: 1) the range of examples encountered according to a general subject based classification; 2) the probable meaning of various classified graffiti as I interpret it being a participant and member of the same "sub-culture" group (i.e., the shared cultural values, beliefs and standards allow me to assign meaning to and interpret these artifacts); and 3) the degree to which these artifacts and their interpreted meaning reflect the beliefs of the community or university sub-culture in which they are being produced.

The chosen area of study includes those loci, which regularly attract graffiti, within the structures associated with the campus of Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Virginia. Washington and Lee holds the reputation of a conservative institution with strong traditional foundations. The institution was one of the last four all-male universities in the country, until its decision to admit women to the freshman class of 1985 (this is significant because of its impact on the graffiti produced).

Before I discuss the classification and content of the graffiti indigenous to this community, I must first raise several preliminary questions pertinent to the artifact's existence. Who are the producers of the graffiti? Why are the artifacts found
only in specific places? And, most importantly, why is the graffiti being produced?

While some graffiti are found on the desktops in classrooms about campus, the majority of graffiti on the W&L campus is located in the men's bathrooms. More specifically, the surfaces most often found to contain graffiti are the walls of the men's bathroom stalls in the University Library. The female restrooms were checked, however, not a single graffito was discovered in these areas. It is my belief that the absence of graffiti in the women's restrooms is due firstly to the more conservative nature of the females in general. A great many documented studies reveal that the difference between male and female behavior is a result of different childhood socialization practices (Horton 1978). Women, in fact, produce less graffiti and those which they do produce are not of a sexual content (Kinsey 1953). The fact that co-education has just recently become a reality at W&L has also, I believe, kept the women from the walls. I will speculate, however, that within a couple of years, graffiti will be present in the women's restrooms. I base this speculation on the development of sororities at W&L and on the potential for personal biases to be aired.

Why do graffitists choose toilet stalls as their primary target?

The most liminal space in American culture is the public toilet. The toilet stall is designed to maximize the individuals privacy smack in the middle of the public domain. It offers individuals a moment of solitude, shut away from the public glare. The walls around the toilet offer a public forum while they also
guarantee the authors anonymity. In liminal settings, persons shed their roles and statuses and emerge as whole persons, warts and all, behaving in ways that are unusually pleasureful, painful, shameful, nonsensical, or downright grotesque (McGlynn 1972: 353).

As we will see, people have many different reasons for expressing their opinions. Although they may not do it vocally, the anonymity of the bathroom wall provides a convenient scapegoat for one's feelings.

The first task I had was that of identifying and gathering the artifacts which would provide the basis for my study. The artifacts were collected over a period of several weeks from a number of men's rooms and desktops around the campus of Washington and Lee. The next task I had, was the classification of those artifacts collected. The five following categories of statements and remarks were created: the first category consisted of those graffiti which dealt with the issue of co-education at W&L, second were those which referred to Greek affiliations, third were those which carried sexual connotations, fourth included those statements directed specifically at a particular individual, and the fifth category includes a wide variety of miscellaneous statements. Others who have analyzed graffiti have often placed vulgar statements into a category of their own. I did not, however, find it necessary to create a separate category for statements of this nature, for each of the previously developed categories was found to include statements of vulgarity incorporated in their body. In other words, each of the categories described above includes a number of vulgar statements
that are associated with them but which do not convey their primary meaning.

Even before its inception at Washington and Lee four years ago, co-education has been the victim of slanderous remarks. The decision to admit women after 150 years did not sit well in the stomachs of many, and today we find reminders of this controversial decision in fresh ink on the bathroom stalls. The range of statements extend from the common resentments to grotesquely abusive slurs; the former are found with some regularity.

1. Repeal Co-Education
2. Co-Education sucks.

Some individuals direct their statements at the girls themselves:
3. What are these girls thinkin'?
4. W&L girls suck
5. Co-Ed's are cunts

One individual was bold enough to express his opinion on a desktop in the DuPont Auditorium, only to be questioned by another student (probably a female), whose interaction on the issue was not at all appreciated by yet a third author:
6. Co-Ed Sux

(second writer) What are you...a fag?
(third writer) Fuck-off co-ed cunt!

From these examples, one can see that some tension does exist in the minds of some male students, and some have chosen to express their feelings through the device of graffiti. Graffiti
concerning the co-education issue may be interpreted by the outsider (that is, an individual who does not attend the institution) as representative of the beliefs of a larger body of individuals; this may in fact be true. Others will argue however, that the persons creating the graffiti today knew very well that females would make up a percentage of the student population and therefore have no grounds on which to base their complaints. It is my belief that individuals making such statements would simply prefer the male/female scenario as it existed prior to the inclusion of women at Washington and Lee. Perhaps they just can't find anything better to bitch about.

The graffiti referring to the interaction with a particular Greek organization, like those associated with co-education, may be interpreted as the beliefs held by the members of that particular group or, as more commonly seen, as the beliefs of a group of individuals not associated with the organization under fire. The most commonly found graffiti associated with Greeks involves the supposed ease with which an individual can gain a bid (an invitation) to a particular house. Here are two examples:

7. S A E
   o n y e
   b o y
   y d y

The first graffito is implying that the S.A.E. house will extend
a bid to anyone who walks in the front door. The second example implies that the nKA's are so desperate for members that they will extend an invitation to an individual without even coming down to the house. Graffiti of this nature is most probably produced by individuals who either dislike the members of a house for one reason or another or simply feel that the house under slander is less superior than that house of which the author is a member. Some writers are more direct about their feelings regarding a certain fraternity:

9. 'tis the SPEason to be faggots
10. KA's are pussies

One individual with a sick sense of humor, elaborated his feelings a bit more:

11. Figi's are dumb, Northern, greasebags of dirtrolling or Italian origins, go home to N.Y. and N.J. or we'll burn your house down.

Example #11 was most probably written by a southerner whose bias for the south is fairly clear. Graffiti has been found condemning virtually every established Greek organization on campus.

The next classification of artifacts to be examined includes those graffiti which carry sexual connotations. This variety of graffiti is probably the most widely recognized in public restrooms and the research area under study in this paper is no exception. The first type of artifact under this classification are those in which the author has apparently had a personal