

# Public Thea/ologies from the Inner Sanctum

## A Queer Look at Public Restroom Graffiti<sup>1</sup>

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*Hugo Córdova Quero and Justin K. Waters*

*Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, California*

*Waters is a third-year Starr King M.Div. student and Córdova Quero is a Starr King-affiliated Graduate Theological Union doctoral candidate. Waters presented this paper at the November 2006 American Academy of Religion annual meeting in Washington, D.C.*

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“Graffiti tells us something about ourselves”

*Robert Reisner<sup>2</sup>*

“Discourse... is so complex a reality that we not only can, but should, approach it at different levels and with different methods”

*Michel Foucault<sup>3</sup>*

“The quality of our society will ultimately be judged by the quality of the graffiti on the John walls”

*Graffiti on a wall in Berkeley, CA, circa 1970<sup>4</sup>*

### 1. “Just Do It,” or, Introduction

We often find in public restrooms crudely scrawled messages about body parts, sex acts and God among other topics. Although many of these statements could simply bother us, they are critical messages, socially produced under the cover of anonymity. Not a rare phenomenon in human history, in our own time, there are multiple

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<sup>1</sup> This paper presents initial conclusions on an ongoing research in collaboration with Hugo Córdova Quero, doctoral candidate at Department of Interdisciplinary Studies of the Graduate Theological Union, in Berkeley, California. This presentation was written in collaboration with Mr. Córdova Quero. Due to cost of travel from Japan and visa issues, he is not able to be with us today.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Reisner and Lorraine Wechsler, *Encyclopedia of Graffiti* (New York: MacMillan Publishing, 1974), vi.

<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Tavistock, 1970), xiv.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Ernest L. Abel and Barbara E. Buckley, *The Handwriting on the Wall: Towards a Sociology and Psychology of Graffiti* (Wesport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977), 20.

testimonies of graffiti used for a variety of purposes across a myriad of spaces, redrawing and drawing upon existing boundaries. These boundaries are those that define textual and ethical, physical and social demarcations. Taking this fact and context into account, this paper seeks to deal with the particular performance of graffiti in public restrooms, which describe issues of gender, sexuality, and religion.<sup>5</sup> Throughout this paper, we will understand the term “public” within the context of U.S. capitalist society. In order for a “public” library, bookstore, or classroom building to be understood as “public,” one has to concede that “public space” has been commodified – demarcating according to class, sexuality, race, ability and disability in the guise of service or social progress. Those spaces have been narrowed to those who can access the new commodity. Therefore, “the public” in our study only applies to whomever is able to fulfill – or seems to fulfill – the requirements the genderist/white-supremecist/capitalist order has established for the surroundings.

We have limited our analysis to graffiti in areas within the University of California – Berkeley and the Graduate Theological Union campuses – the academic centers of which we (Mr. Cordova Quero and I) are a part. We do not wish to make this particular performance of graffiti paradigmatic to similar experiences in other locales. But, we would like to open conversation on how the multiple performances of graffiti in different contexts can offer technologies of resistance to hegemonic ideologies within their own contexts. Therefore, throughout this paper, we will take the performing features of (as well as specific instances of) graffiti as our text to deconstruct with the tools provided by

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<sup>5</sup> While graffiti carries a connection with many fields – art, semiotics, cooption/control, “pop” culture, dissent, profanity, social/political history, and tagging (“Kilroy was here,” or the work of banksy), etc., the focus of this study is to look specifically at the dialogues that arise within public toilets around sexuality and gender expression, individuality and hegemony, and notions of God. While graffiti “tagging” has been studied as complex response to the demarcation of property or a break-down of what it means to be moving through private or public space, toilet graffiti text contains a discussion that speaks to issues beyond a breaking from “ownership” norms. On the issue of tagging, see Nancy MacDonald, *The Graffiti Subculture: Youth, Masculinity and Identity in London and New York* (New York, NY: Palgrave, 2001), 63-93.

Ricouer's textual criticism, Bakhtinian philosophy, queer theory, and Indecent liberation theology.

## **2. “Fag-Peep-Hole,” or, Methods for Looking Through to the Stall**

Graffiti – messages and artwork written over a (usually public facing) artifact – is a phenomenon that appears in multiple moments throughout human history. Due to the ephemeral character of graffiti, and because it has often been seen as a subversive or destructive act, very few *witnesses* survive the *deterioration* of time and censorship. While some instances have survived and famously provide different access to ancient Egypt, Rome,<sup>6</sup> and medieval Europe through scrawlings now found in pyramids, Pompeii and monasteries;<sup>7</sup> more importantly the practice remains.<sup>8</sup>

Although graffiti is a private expression of individual/s, recording it in the public space of a bathroom makes that private expression public. When comments are adopted or responded to by other/s, this public record creates a space for open and multiple dialogues people join unbounded by the dictums of the original author/s. Every contributor to the unfolding “text” is anonymous – private, with hir identity secure – while at the same time, public. The result is a text that can be read as a novel script or a

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<sup>6</sup> See J. Lindsay, *The Writing on the Wall: The Account of Pompeii in its Last Days* (London: Mueller Company, 1960); H. Helen Tanzer, *The Common People of Pompeii* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1939); and M. D'Avino, *The Women of Pompeii* (Naples: Loffredo Press, 1964).

<sup>7</sup> See V. Pritchard, *English Medieval Graffiti* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1967).

<sup>8</sup> Robert Reisner, *Selected Scrawls from Bathroom Walls* (New York: Paralax, 1967). See also Lee Sechrest and A. Kenneth Olson, “Graffiti in Four Types of Institutions of Higher Education”, *Journal of Sex Research* 1 (1971), 62-71. Nonetheless, an important website that displays graffiti as *art* can be found at: [www.graffiti.org](http://www.graffiti.org).

dialogue constructed by multiple voices disconnected from the author/s of that becoming text.<sup>9</sup>

Reconnecting the text/s to its/their author/s is unnecessary to the decodification of the graffiti text.<sup>10</sup> According to Paul Ricoeur, once a text is produced, it becomes independent from its creator and carries multiple levels of meaning to be unpacked when entering in a dialogue with the transient reader. The process of understanding a text has multiple consequences that depend on which way the reader has “entered” the many layers. So, on the one hand, there is no single, justified way for reading instance of graffiti. There are many interpretive modes that depend on the graffiti’s relationality with the reader. On the other hand, the instance of graffiti has a limited surplus of meaning, which cannot be forced without assaulting the integrity of the text. The performance of public restroom graffiti, therefore, has a contextuality that can be discovered absent the referent from the author/s. This same graffiti can suggest multiple and diverse messages to different readers, which would depend on their graffiti’s assumed authorship,<sup>11</sup> its vocabulary, their personal history, etc.

The etching of a female’s nude body without face and feet may evoke reminders of a Greco-style artist’s study of the human form, but its location next to two stuffed holes may raise questions to another of what is an acceptable “object” of beauty to gaze

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<sup>9</sup> To put it simply, Ricoeur understands “text” not only as printed materials but also each cultural production, and even the world itself can be seen as a text, as Ricoeur questions the common notion that only *written* materials can be *read*. Ricoeur makes the distinction between “language” and “discourse”, being discourse, whether written or spoken where language is performed. For the purpose of our topic, we will refer to graffiti also by using the term “text”. [On this issue, see Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Science: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*, ed. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 197].

<sup>10</sup> The issue of the “death” of the author, very important among post-structuralists is also present in Ricoeur’s notion of “ditchment” of the text from the author. In the issue, the contribution of Roland Barthes [“The Death of the Author”, in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 142-148]; as well as Ferdinand Saussure’s theory of communication are important.

<sup>11</sup> This is not assumed author but assumed identities of the author; that is, the group to which the author belongs.

upon in the bathroom. One cannot ignore questions of whether this image reflects legitimate art, nor whether its presence reinforces hetero-misogyny where some nudes, curves, and styles are “naturally” art and *others* are pornography for consumption.

The text, then, stands in our way on a restroom wall as an interlocutor itself, and we deal with the object in itself and its surrounding world. In Ricoeur’s terms this would be called “the world of the text.” When we inter/act with graffiti, we transform into interpreters who enable the message/s to “come out.” Ricoeur described this transformation through explaining the “world of the text”,

To speak of the world of the text is to stress the feature belonging to every literary work opening before it, a horizon of possible experience, a world in which it would be possible to live...To appropriate a work through reading is to unfold the world horizon implicit in it which includes the actions, the characters and the events of the story told. As a result, the reader belongs at once to the work’s horizon of experience in imagination[,] and to that of his or her own real action. The horizon of expectation and the horizon of experience continually confront one another and fuse together...<sup>12</sup>

Ricoeur argued text and interpreter belong to each other in the dialogue, in a sense text and interpreter here, are que(e)r(y)ing one another.<sup>13</sup> But about what kind of text do we mean to de- and re-constructing? Are the texts that declare Fag-Peep-Hole for gays to gaze upon the brutality of a homophobic society and assert sexual presence,

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<sup>12</sup> Ricoeur, “Life in Quest”, 26.

<sup>13</sup> On this Ricoeur explains, “My thesis here is that the process of composition, of configuration, is not completed in the text but in the reader and, under this condition, makes possible the reconfiguration of life by narrative. I should say, more precisely: the sense or the significance of a narrative stems from the intersection of the world of the text and the world of the reader. The act of reading thus becomes the critical moment of the entire analysis. On it rests the narrative’s capacity to transfigure the experience of the reader.” [Paul Ricoeur, “Life in Quest of Narrative”, in *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation*, ed. David Wood (London: Routledge, 1991), 26.]

or for “heteros” to express private desires and fears? Whose holes are those that are exploited and explored during the ensuing indecent conversation about their use?<sup>14</sup>

### **3. “So What if People Can Hear?” or Is Censorship Gay?**

At first glance, these contentions seem, not surprisingly, incredibly profane and “childish.” We could even label this as “potty humor” in its most literal and unadulterated state. What surprised us more in our research was that these profane conversations occurred within and around a nexus for intellectual inquiry, liberal critique, and theological struggle... So...“why?” Some of the messages scribbled onto the interiors of stall walls expressed disdain for the extant political reality and prompted a tennis-match political discussion. Quick quips and inane poetics ranged from crude reminders of the grotesque purpose (and sexual possibilities) of the stalls, to vilifications of what goes on when one assumes privacy.

In some cases we found there is new graffiti to categorize the former as disgust for the intimate, and in others we see a reiteration of the same desire.

Here, the privacy and publicity of the restroom is made glaringly clear. A space that exposes “same-sex” bodies for the allowable purpose of relieving a bodily need also provides a private, gendered space for sexual release as well. The confused definition of this space (of whether it is hetero or queer) provides the confused context for the positing of “disgusting” questions not fit for formal consideration. (So what if people

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<sup>14</sup> Regarding this, in their research over toilets in the United States and the Philippines – where homosexuality is less uncommon – Sechrest and Flores suggest that (North)Americans, compare to other cultures “experience a great deal of psychological conflict over homosexuality” and, in most cases, “these graffiti probably represent wish fulfillment on the part of the writers”. [See Abel and Buckley, 96] For a complete record of the findings of that research, see Lee Sechrest and Luis Flores, “Homosexuality in the Philippines and the United States: The Handwriting on the Wall”, *Journal of Social Psychology* 79 (1969), 3-12.

can hear?) The audacity, profanity, perversion, and the erotic carried by the graffiti offer insight into how cultures that have such a high regard for inquiry in public speeches and/or publication/s behave behind the doors of anonymity. Certainly, the contrast itself suggests many issues, especially when considering the enforcement of “politically correct speech” and intellectual rigor that blur the sentiments exposed by the graffiti’s deployments of bare discourse: “If you wipe this off this, you are gay.”

It would be fair to state that major academic centers are known for their position on social, political, and cultural views; and while within the “liberal” or “conservative” universities, there exists certain toleration for a diversity of thinking, publicity or publication can only be achieved through accreditation and acceptance in accordance to the hegemonic tone of the institution’s discourse. Messages considered to be so disgusting, indecent, or defiant – such as those that stray too far from straight questions with straight answers – are forced out...this dissidence is condemned to the closet of silence *or* the closet of anonymity.

In taking the lead from Foucauldian queer theory, we suggest three key-points to understand this graffiti. First, we believe that these expressions belong to attempts to resist dominant ideologies within the academic context. In other words, when not judged in a positive/negative binary, the graffiti offers possibility to subjects under the cover of anonymity to contest assumed normativities – to create a space to release views that would be publicly discredited or ignored within the discursive hegemony bound by their location (in this case the liberal academic context of the Cal-Berkeley and the liberal religious GTU).

In a culture where veiled insults or the consistent marginalization of Islam or black culture pass, displaying a swastika is unacceptable; whereas the latter is viewed

crass, the former is simply “high class” Islamaphobia and racism. So, these performativities of resistance (such as Fag-Peep-Hole) can count both toward the release of derogative ideologies as well as of pluralistic values. The announcement of a peep-hole or the ironically suggested possibility of queer- censorship offer criticisms to the linguistic hegemony that can simultaneously expose its white- hetero-normativity and foster its racism and homophobia.

Lastly, this phenomenon participates in broader dynamics of closeting what is different in society, confining to the cubicle what in public speech is censored and, therefore, outcast. While the stall provides an outlet for dissident discourses and queer performance, it acts as a cloister or quarantine, allowing the conversations outside it to remain pure. Outlawing the act of participating in the performance, regardless of its motivations, reinforces the immorality of indecency.

#### **4. “Fuck these Fags/Where Are All the Dudes Who Don’t Get Enough Head From Their Girlfriends/Wives, Free BJ Here 2-5 M-F,” or, Indecent Thea/ologies from the Porcelain Thrones**

Understanding that the graffiti participates in and comes out of mixed dynamics of closeting and subverting – and that the texts themselves contain multiple meanings – reveals the intrinsic connections that the grotesque (or heteroglossic) nature of the graffiti has to the grotesque nature of queered space. This graffiti – whose unfolding meaning is generated by the actual interplay of interpretations – reflects the mixity of experiences and identities in the restroom itself. The graffiti’s narratives cannot be reduced, defined, or completed in isolation from its interpreters and editors; that is, there can be no claim to singular authority nor can graffiti canonize a certain body to be normative within the body of the text.



It could be said in general terms that graffiti appears to us in a revelatory way: they confront us with unthinkable messages in the unexpected place. Even their author/s, who are critics and sympathizers of societal trends, are prophetically making public their privately held beliefs in an unsavory and subversive manner. As their messages would not be heard in public forums, these performativities are transgressive to the broader society. Even the author/s who seem to write hate inspired threats reflect a sensed opposition to the hegemonic systems that reinforce normativities. But this reveals a paradox: it is through co-opting indecency, that some messages can publicly punish the private, i.e., the calls for decency coexist with their own indecency. For example, the verbalization of the fear to be penetrated is deployed by asserting a dominance that overpowers the fear: “if you try to fuck me, I will kick your ass or I will fuck you first.” Sometimes this can constitute a hidden fantasy for personal “salvation,” as suggested in the advertisement of glory holes. The public restroom, and the graffiti that enables it, then, exposes a disruption of both the hetero-patriarchal, macho identity *and* the roles that people assume in fictions of power and fictions of disempowerment. In other words, it is a leak discharged outside the conventional matrix that reveals the limits of the rigidity of the system that conflates heterosexuality with power, homosexuality with deviance, and the mutual exclusivity of those experiences.<sup>15</sup>

In this way, the graffiti pushes for a disruption of the binary system (good/bad, decent/indecency, me/other, public/private) by removing its own individuality (asserted subjectivity and christening) as constructed *by* the binary system. Understood within the

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<sup>15</sup> On the issue of leaking/spilling out connected to socio-psychological dynamics and assumed heteronormativities for containment of deviancy, Žižek argues that “ideology’s ultimate problem is how to ‘contain’ the threatening inside from ‘spilling out’ and overwhelming us. [...] Is the concern with how to dispose of shit (which, according to Lacan, is one of the crucial features differentiating man from animals) also not a case of how to get read of the inside that ceaselessly emerges?” [Slovo Žižek, “Love They Neighbor? No, Thanks!”, in *The Psychoanalysis of Race*, ed. Christopher Lane (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 167.

dualistic, either/or paradigm, the production of the graffiti is simply incoherent. However, it opens a third space that is neither an either/or binary. In que(e)r(y)ing the bathroom graffiti we start to gaze on it as a reflection of a complex system of power, co-optation, coercion, and deep fear of the other.<sup>16</sup>

Put another way, *acts* invisible inside a restroom, have no good/bad label to which they are attached, but once those acts, “come out,” they are labeled bad. In terms from classical Western theology, that which is natural *is* what is good, and usually related to God. What is not deemed natural, is bad, and, consequently, removed from its proximity to God or godliness. However, if Foucault is right, to the censoring power of public discourse, graffiti as well as other sub/versive discourses always oppose a resistance to that performativity of hegemonic power.<sup>17</sup>

The role of public-restroom graffiti is to continue subverting the dominant discourse that divides bodies and normalizes experience.

The sub/version of graffiti can also be a theological and prophetic act. In *Indecent Theologies*, Marcella Althaus-Reid draws upon instances of graffiti in Argentina during the military dictatorship in the mid-seventies, Althaus-Reid states that this graffiti contested the “simulacra” of hegemonic ideologies and offered a resistance that destroyed the “fantasy-land” ideology constructed by the hegemonic “reality .” When the military dictatorship was disappearing 14 year-old children for protesting the price of a bus ticket, accusing them as “communists”, the graffiti of the silhouettes of those children painted by the Mothers of May Square would destroy that “fantasy-land” ideology. If the hegemonic ideology was to announce “death,” the graffiti was to resist that

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<sup>16</sup> The issue of the Other/s or Otherness has been worked enough by many philosophers and (post)colonial thinkers.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Kritzman, Lawrence D. (ed.) *Michel Foucault: Politics, Philosophy, Culture. Interviews and Other Writings 1977-1984* (London: Routledge, 1988), 122-123.

construction, and proclaim “life”. Althaus-Reid, in following Ricoeur, considers this sub/version of the instances of graffiti as “rupture”. Therefore, the graffiti’s reimagination of the meaning of the disappearings was a prophetic voice, especially to the families of those who were abducted and killed.<sup>18</sup>

Althaus-Reid situates graffiti as a theological act that can subvert the simulacra obscuring experience. In this way, graffiti *here* sub/vert the simulacra of hetero- and gender-normativities imposed on us as “normal” and “natural,” and the simulacra of the decency of a society that reduces to the closet everything that is against its (white-washed) “fantasy-land” vision of humanity.

## **5. “Copyrighted Wall-Wisdom,” or, In/Conclusion?**

In juxtaposing records of graffiti with a discussion of their interactions, we argue these expressions can be read as *embodied* theologies struggling to open different spaces within our own culture. As texts that subvert hetero-normativities that confine the “deviance” while reiterating hetero-superiority, some of this graffiti points to a broader dynamic of power that colonizes and ostracizes difference when not possible to co-opt it. Other graffiti systematically resist the performativities of heterosexuality that assert male impenetrability and naturalness of certain experiences.

Furthermore, free from the rigidity of the academic context that surrounds the graffiti’s production, the graffiti (and by extension, its inter/actors) are free to explore and exploit the exposed leaks of the dominant discourse. As this discourse also holds the means by which we understand our bodies, the public restroom (as a space) and the

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<sup>18</sup> Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2000), 96-99.

walls (as a canvas) allow for the reproduction of interpretations of bodies that are as diverse, perverse, indecent, and fluid – that is, as queer – as we may be.

Finally, I ask *you* where the message of this paper may lie: Are public restrooms inner sanctums (as porcelain thrones) from which pluralistic theologies can arise? Or is it that we, as thea/ologians with privileged access to liberal centers of higher thought (our ivory towers), need to reframe our participation in the public thea/ological dialogue in order to develop queerying public theologies?