

MODERN MATERIAL CULTURE

The Archaeology of Us

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ful planning. It would appear that ethnoarchaeology's unique perspective, a concern with the behavioral context of material culture, is indispensable for properly managing complex societies.

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Graffiti and Racial Insults: The Archaeology of Ethnic Relations in Hawaii

C. Fred Blake

When asked for his impressions of America after an absence of some 35 years, Professor Fei Xiaotong, a leading anthropologist in the People's Republic of China, replied: "Jogging and writing on subway walls—what do you call it?" Graffiti," I responded. Dr. Fei qualified his remarks by stating that his impressions of America may be superficial since he only had 1 month, and that, he said with a note of frustration, was spent mostly in the company of other professors!

Professor Fei's remarks struck a familiar chord. Only several months before, I had occasion to speak on my impressions of China—I had traveled there for 2 weeks during the summer of 1978. As with professor Fei, I caught only fleeting glimpses of the common people's daily lives. My tour included many public parks and ancient temples. Here I encountered an unexpected phenomenon, one which had a lasting impression on me. It was the *cu ke* (or "graffiti"), especially the poetry scrawled all over the Liu Ho Pagoda in storied Hangchow.

This uncanny coincidence of impressions (I with Chinese *cu ke* and Fei with American graffiti) is possibly explained by the frustration we each felt at not having anthropological access to the common people during our respective tours. To encounter the thoughts of common people on walls was bound to leave vivid and lasting impressions on the minds of two frustrated anthropologists. In fact as I toured China I sometimes felt like an archaeologist barred from the voices of the living and having to rely on such residues of by-gone behaviors as graffiti.

When I returned from China, I could hardly help but notice some of the graffiti which I daily encounter. I gave considerable thought to ways that graffiti might be significant to ethnological research. In the few pages that follow I examine graffiti as a hitherto underexploited source of data, data which is essentially archaeological in nature, for the ethnologist. I focus on a corpus of graffiti which has particular interest to ethnologists working in Hawaii, namely racial or ethnic remarks. I argue that by classifying variations in the content of graffiti and by observing variations in their spatial distribution, we can posit specific rules of ethnic group relationships in Hawaii. In the course of positing these rules we might also posit some general principles which explain the production of graffiti in society.

The Artifacts

Since graffiti are artifacts of anonymous behavior fixed in time and space, I find it useful to treat them as an archaeologist treats potsherds from the shell middens of an archaeological community. The first task is to classify the artifacts (that is the graffiti) that I collected over a period of several months in 1979 from a number of men's rooms around the University of Hawaii. I am not prepared to render a rigorous, much less a complete, taxonomy of graffiti. The taxonomy I derive is based on a set of rough and ready attributes aimed at elucidating the contexts in which ethnic signatures can be apprehended.

There are at least three sets of attributes that may be brought to bear on a collection of graffiti. The first consists of materials and techniques used in the production of the message. These include available writing and etching instruments, surface textures, and color combinations which may facilitate or hinder the production of graffiti. Although these material aspects are intrinsically interesting, a detailed description of them would take us beyond the scope of this paper. In other studies where a comparison of frequencies between two sites constitutes the main variable these material attributes are methodologically significant.

The second set of attributes defines the form of the message. Discursive messages can be classified on the basis of grammatical or poetical structures. A prosodic classification might be relevant to a study of the Liu Ho Pagoda graffiti in Hangchow or to the graffiti which Shakespeare's Orlando carved on every tree as a testament of his love for Rosalind. However, any such classification of my corpus of ethnic graffiti would lend unnecessary elegance to the messages, which as the reader is about to witness possess little or no redeeming literary value. In fact all of the ethnic graffiti in my collection are simple exclamatory statements, interrogatives, comparatives, and superla-

tives. Few involve extended discourse or attempt to rhyme; none are traditional in the sense of what Alan Dundes (1966) means by "latrinalia"; and few are even trite in the sense that they are repeated in time and space.

The third set of attributes defines the content of the message. Here there seems to be several relevant categories. First is what I call the immortalizing "Kilroy was here" variety. It includes names of persons, native places, schools, and dates. They are most prevalent on public monuments and natural objects. Second is the romanticizing "Orlando loves Rosalind" variety. These include testimonies and revelations of romantic love carved in tree trunks and park benches or scrawled all over rear bus seats and bus shelters in Honolulu. Both the "Kilroy" and the "Orlando" varieties contain ethnic signatures. However, ethnic identities are revealed only inadvertently in the names. For instance "Kilroy" reveals the presence of American GIs. Or in the case of "Orlando-n-Rosalind" the names, especially surnames of the lovers may reveal their ethnic identities. Neither of these two types contain overt statements identifying specific ethnic groups.

This brings me to the third variety of message, namely vulgar statements utilizing sexual, scatological, and phenotypical terms. Most of these terms are abusive. They are found in most sites where graffiti are found, although their frequency increases markedly in the vicinity of toilets and schools for reasons to be examined later. It is also within this broad category of vulgarity that ethnic signatures are most apparent. Indeed, ethnic boundaries are consciously phrased in phenotypical, sexual, and scatological idioms. Ethnic graffiti thus constitute a subset of the vulgar graffiti.

The range of vulgarity extends from a few tantalizing fantasies to many grotesquely abusive slurs. A rare example of the first comes from the inside door of a University elevator in a remote corner of the campus:

1. Japanese girls taste very good
nice and salty like *ume*

Ume is the tart red plum Japanese wrap in rice balls for picnic lunches. Unfortunately few graffiti attain even this level of subtlety. The vast majority are explicit:

2. Japanese cunt taste mo betta!

"Mo betta" is local creole for "better." However, most of the explicit graffiti is abrasive or downright hostile:

3. Getting a Jap bitch to come
is like squeezing water out of a rock!!!!

Many graffiti contrast the alleged sexual characteristics of different groups. Among the most invidious comparisons are those which allege sexual and mental inferiority:

4. Japs have small cocks
Hawaiians have small brains

A number of graffiti explain alleged phenotypes by reducing them to scatological habits:

5. Why are the Jap chicks bowlegged?
From squatting to piss in the gutter!

Alleged national characteristics are reduced to sexual traits. In a number of graffiti possession of mental aptitude is inversely related to sexual magnitude:

6. Japs do good in school cause they respond
to authority and have small dicks!! (They
don't know what to do with them.)

In fact the relative excellence of Japanese scholastic achievement in local schools is a point of animosity and sometimes open hostilities among various ethnic groupings (see, e.g., Ong 1978:A-1). Other alleged character traits are reduced to patterns of child rearing:

7. Local boys are latent homosexuals to a great
extent cuddled and coddled by 'mama' and
spoiled fucking rotten

From these examples it appears that Japanese and other local groups are generally depicted in effeminate images.

By contrast, whites tend to be caricaturized as "dumb." The abusive epithet for whites is "dumb" *haole*. *Haole* is a Hawaiian word that means "stranger" but which now applies to whites exclusively. *Haole* is often used by whites to distinguish themselves from other local groups since by itself the term carries no necessary stigmata other than having roots on the U.S. mainland. The epithet "dumb" applied to "*haole*" does not refer to the inability of whites to use their mouths as we can see in the following exchange. The first author, perhaps feeling the loss of white political power during the last 2 decades to local groups, asserts:

8. Haole Power

A second writer responds:

9. All your power stay in your mouth

Local people allege that whites use their mouths too much and for all the wrong things. Whites tend to talk in abstractions—they use words that nobody understands (see Phrase 14, for example). Whites as representatives of the nationally dominant group allegedly sweet talk their way into the hearts of local girls with empty promises; indeed, the white ability to woo local girls is a point of long standing conflict between the two groupings. In this vein one graffiti (presumably written by a white) boasts:

10. I fuck all Jap chicks!

The local response is:

11. Get a haole chick!

On the other hand, among some there is an equally strong rejection of white girls:

12. Fuck what you can
mom, sis, even your hand
Beats fucking haoles

As we see from these examples, most of the ethnic graffiti take forms ranging from provocative to openly hostile remarks. There are others which take the form of requests for the sexual services of certain groups. They are evenly divided among requests for ethnically endogamous and exogamous homosexual and heterosexual services. They range from desperate pleadings to simple advertisements replete with phone numbers. Summarizing thus far, we can say that the graffiti found in Hawaii express fundamental conflicts among Hawaii's various ethnic groupings.

Before proceeding to my analysis I should point out that a number of authors censor the ethnic slurs especially ones presumably written by their ethnic cohorts. In many cases the ethnic label is erased or scratched out leaving the abusive message minus an ethnic identity. Other authors advise the slur-maker to have more Christian tolerance; while still others refer to the slur-maker as a "problem child," "pregidous [sic] asshole," "racist," "fucking naieve," "unhappy," "forlorn of friends." One graffitist comments on a slur against local people by pointing out that:

13. People like him give us haoles a bad name

And another graffittist responding (only as a white would be expected to respond) to an especially reprehensible attack on Japanese says:

14. We must remember that assertion is the hallmark of homo-sapiens [sic] while longanimous placasibility and condonation are the indicia of supermundane aminisciences.

It is signed: "—a dumb haole."

Some graffiti provoke extremely passionate responses. The assertion that "local boys are spoiled by their mothers" (Phrase 7) received the angriest response:

15. I spoil you fucking ass punk

And this provoked yet a third person to advise the second in terse local creole:

16. Cool head bra—cool head main thing!

Analysis of Content

As I stated at the outset, graffiti may provide the ethnologist with an archaeological avenue into a particular social organization. While the prehistorian does not work directly with the expressive content of his artifacts much less with discursive data, still, as an ethnologist I can hardly pass up the opportunity to draw some obvious conclusions, especially those which can be drawn on the basis of simple quantification. In this section I want to examine briefly some of the information which ethnologists may extract from the nominal content of ethnic graffiti. In fact the nominal content of my corpus tells us a great deal about ethnic group relations in Hawaii.

The ethnic signatures in these graffiti, that is the explicit terms which are written on the walls, tell us which ethnic groups in Hawaii are socially salient. The question as to what degree this or that ethnic grouping actually exists is a perennial problem for scholars and administrators in Hawaii and in other societies where ethnic groups do not constitute part of the corporate order. The standard instruments used to identify the ethnic complexion of Hawaiian society are state and federal census categories. However, there is no way to

know if these categories constitute real groups or to what degree they are merely the arbitrary conventions of census makers. Here is where graffiti might prove most relevant. Graffiti may provide a less arbitrary method for determining the socially based ethnic groups in Hawaii. Figure 6.1 illustrates the number of terms I collected in each ethnic category from my sample of sites around the university. The figure provides a visual representation of the viable ethnic groupings. The most viable groupings are obviously the whites in contention with the Japanese. Now, if we look at Table 6.1, we see that the numbers of whites and Japanese represented in the graffiti are roughly proportional to their demographic representation in the population at large as reported in the state census (State of Hawaii 1972:4-5). (I believe that the overrepresentation of white terms in the graffiti is due in part to whites writing about themselves [Phrase 8], censoring themselves [Phrase 13], or signing their remarks [Phrase 14].) On the other hand, there are two significant census categories, namely, the Chinese and the Filipinos, that are significantly

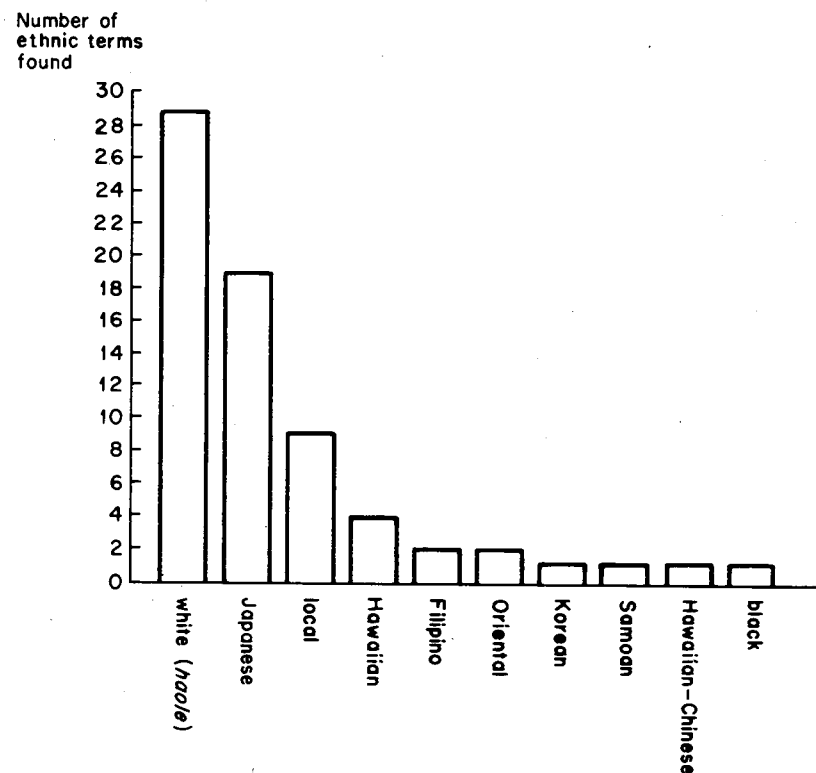


Figure 6.1. Saliency of ethnic categories (from graffiti in the vicinity of the University).

Table 6.1

Number of Ethnic Graffiti Compared to Census Data

Ethnic category	Number of terms found in graffiti	Percentage of terms found in graffiti	Percentage of population by "race" (see State of Hawaii 1972:4-5)
White (<i>haole</i>)	29	42	38.8
Japanese	19	28	28.3
Local	9	13	—
Hawaiian	4	6	9.3
Filipino	2	3	12.2
Oriental	2	3	—
Korean	1	1.25	1.1
Samoan (and others)	1	1.25	2.4
Hawaiian-Chinese	1	1.25	—
Black	1	1.25	1
Chinese	—	—	6.8
American Indian	—	—	.1
Total	69	100.	100.

underrepresented in the graffiti. An even more significant disparity between what the census tells us and what the graffiti tell us is the saliency of the category "local" in the graffiti and its absence as an ethnic category in the census.

I would conclude this discussion with two main points. One is that the groupings represented in the graffiti constitute the socially relevant and politically viable ethnic groupings in Hawaii, and these facts cannot be derived from the census. The groupings derived from graffiti also represent the complexity of ethnic realities in so far as different taxonomic levels of the ethnic order (for example, "Japanese" and "local") are recognized. The second point is that in keeping with the spatial interpretation I am developing, the present results are relative to the university community. However, insofar as the university is an important state institution its graffiti may reflect the larger state of affairs in the State of Hawaii.

There are other questions which my corpus of graffiti raises. The reader may wonder why, for instance, the grossest slurs seem to be aimed at local groups? There is even the more fundamental question: Why are there ethnic graffiti in the first place? I think that answers to these questions can be found in a closer examination of the spatial distribution of graffiti and of the variant nature of social space itself. Let us consider each of these in turn.

Distribution of Sites

My corpus of graffiti reveals many interesting facets in the cultural content of ethnic group relations in Hawaii. However, when we examine their spatial contexts, the graffiti tell us even more about ethnic group relations in Hawaii and something about the nature of graffiti in general. The first thing to note is that the graffiti occur on public properties. Graffiti are part of the public domain; they are private assertions aimed at public consumption; or to put it in the words of one graffitiist: People write on walls "because it seems the best way to really put yourself across in the world!" The vast majority of graffiti is found in bars, theatres, parks, playgrounds, bus shelters, back seats of buses, schools, and similar areas of *diversion*. Indeed, schools ranging from secondary through post-secondary provide the bulk of graffiti in Hawaii. As we move away from the peripheries of diversion toward the centers of commerce and administration, the incidence of graffiti diminishes.

The second thing to note is that within the public domain of diversion, particular types of graffiti tend to exhibit different distribution patterns. Scatological and sexual remarks tend to occur in the direction of increased diversion; while those with ethnic labels attached are increasingly restricted to the walls of toilets, especially school toilets. Finally, let us ask why this is so and what this can lead us to infer about ethnic group relations in Hawaii?

Graffiti Are Products of Liminal Spaces

These spatial patterns suggest that the frequency of graffiti in general, and of certain types in particular, increase as space becomes more diverse, unstructured, or liminal. Space becomes liminal where it is used for transitory and expressive purposes rather than for instrumental, discreet, and specialized purposes. People behaving in liminal spaces do not "put on acts." Rather they tend to "play around." This is distinct from areas where people are constrained to perform roles, put on acts, and standardize their messages as they do in commercial and bureaucratic settings. This distinction between performance and play has been treated variously in the sociological and anthropological literatures (Goffman 1959; Turner 1969). Victor Turner distinguishes liminal behavior settings as transitional areas where social boundaries are blurred and normal rules of conduct and role expectations are held in abeyance or even in opposition. In liminal settings persons shed their roles and statuses and emerge as whole persons, warts and all, behaving in ways that are unusually pleasurable, painful, shameful, nonsensical, or downright

grotesque. As I pointed out, such liminal behavior settings include parks, playgrounds, bus stops, back seats of buses, elevators, restrooms, and schools—these are all places where people *move* through time and space interacting as whole human beings (or for that very reason failing to interact at all) and giving more or less free reign to their impulses.

If we place liminal and normative behavior settings at opposite ends of a continuum, we can see that liminality is a matter of degree. Then if we place the various categories of space along this continuum, we find that the most liminal space in American culture is the public toilet. The toilet stall is designed to maximize the individual's privacy right in the smack of the public glare. It offers individuals a moment of solitude shut away from the public glare. Given certain technological considerations mentioned earlier, the walls around the toilet offer a public forum while they also guarantee the author's anonymity, as one defender of the art points out, by the latch on the door (McGlynn 1972:353).

There is a more profound sense in which the toilet is a liminal, indeed a structurally inverted behavior setting. Defecation is not a social act; it is quite the contrary a crucial *biological movement*—it is a diurnal life crisis, which as all life crises provokes a three stage rite de passage à la Van Gennep (1961) and Turner (1969). In the first phase one experiences increased tension, anxiety, and physical exertion. During the second phase one is secluded and defiled. In the third phase one undergoes purification and reentry into the mundane world of order and discernment. In this particular passage, which we call “going to the toilet” or to which we refer by other polite euphemisms, the period of seclusion involves the release of cloacal residues. There is a concomitant tendency to release mental residues in the form of fantasy every bit as defiling. The normal boundaries which society rigorously maintains between the anus and the brain collapse in the liminal area of the toilet, and for a few brief moments the whole body is mobilized and unified in one of its most vital struggles for survival.

It would seem then, given the degree of spatial restriction observed, that the most defiling mental residues in Hawaii are ethnic slurs. Whereas a person may feel some constraint in writing a scatological or sexual remark on a bus shelter, it seems that one needs the added security and sense of liminal removal provided by the latched door of a public toilet before he attaches an ethnic label to it.

Finally, schools have important liminal properties which are magnified in school restrooms. Schools are where young people undergo traumatic passage from childhood to adulthood. The modern school is every bit as rigorous in teaching survival techniques as is the primitive bush school which we usually associate with painful initiation rites. I suspect the modern school is more traumatic in so far as the modern child's biological passage into adult-

hood is so ridiculously out of phase with his or her cultural passage. Another thing that makes the modern child's passage more traumatic is the extreme emphasis placed on individual success coupled with the ever present prospect of failure. Be that as it may, the passage from secondary through post-secondary school is a long and arduous period during which students lack the constraints that adulthood normally confers. Young people, therefore, behave accordingly. It is precisely in this setting that Hawaii's various ethnic groups gather to compete for grades and mates, and not necessarily in that order of priority. It is hardly surprising then that ethnic labels find their way into the residues of cloacal and sexual fantasy and abuse in this setting.

From the spatial distribution of the different varieties of graffiti we can posit two rules about the role of ethnic remarks in Hawaiian society. The first rule is that ethnic slurs are extremely antithetical to contemporary norms of Hawaiian society. In fact they are even more antithetical than are scatological abuses. The second rule we can infer from the data is that ethnic slurs aimed at local groups are most antithetical of all.

Ethnographic Confirmation

If we observe other forms of behavior relevant to ethnic group interaction we can confirm these rules which have been derived by and large from archaeological data and method. The first observation involves an episode reported in the local newspaper (Woo 1978:A-1). An unidentified man disrupted a legislative hearing by calling state Representative Tony Kunimura a “Jap.” Kunimura followed the man from the House Finance Committee hearing into the attorney general's office where he physically assaulted the man. “I don't care if he calls me a fat little shit,” the stout 5'6" Kunimura said later, “But don't call me a Jap.” Kunimura thus articulates the rule, which we have inferred from archaeological data, that racial slurs are more restrictive, forbidden, or liminal than are scatological abuses.

It is relevant that no charges of assault were filed against Kunimura. Given the political nature of law enforcement it would not, however, be prudent to conclude that the sanction against ethnic slurs is also stronger than the sanction against physical assault. We would need more evidence for such a conclusion. Such evidence may be obtained from a study of additional cases. For instance, in another case (Kato 1979:A-3), several local boys beat and choked a white boy unconscious, tied him with ropes and threw him into a pond where he died. The defendant's attorney pleaded extenuating circumstances on the basis that the victim had become belligerent and had begun “insulting Hawaiians.” The defendants were found guilty only of manslaughter.

This unfortunate case brings me to the second bit of ethnographic evidence, namely, joking behavior. Ethnic joking is ubiquitous in Hawaii. In contexts where local people are grouping themselves they often joke in the most insulting terms about their ethnic differences. They also joke about whites where whites are entering the group. However, whites cannot as a rule joke about locals in ethnic terms. Whites must utilize nonethnic idioms when joking with or teasing locals. Thus with the exception of whites teasing locals in ethnic terms, ethnic joking is often used to relax ethnic boundaries in order to build interethnic group solidarity. Social scientists have long been aware of how joking relationships enhance group solidarity by allowing mutual expressions of hostility (Coser 1964:64; Radcliffe-Brown 1952:94-95). Thus ethnic joking, unlike ethnic graffiti, tends to conform to public norms by raising ethnic consciousness in order to defuse it. The rules for joking complement and confirm some of the basic patterns of space and content we observed in the production of graffiti. One of these patterns is the tendency to abuse local groups in the most extreme terms. This pattern suggests that ethnic graffiti tend to constitute a white medium for asserting illegitimate ethnic messages in this land of racial aloha.

Review and Summary

In recent years a number of humanists and social scientists have attempted to determine the sociocultural significance of graffiti. Most of these studies take graffiti at face value as statements of popular opinion. For example, Alan Dundes (1966) reveals basic cultural themes in traditional latrine graffiti which he calls "latrinalia." Paul McGlynn (1972) defends graffiti as private "fragments of truth" which people do not take as seriously as they do the half-truths of commercial advertisements and political slogans. Stocker, Dutcher, Hargrove, and Cook (1972) hypothesize that graffiti express current community norms. Stocker and associates systematically collected and compared nontraditional graffiti from different communities. However, their hypothesis failed to account for the existence of racist graffiti in a liberal university setting (1972:362). This and other such anomalies led Gonos, Mulken, and Poushinsky (1976) to advance an alternative hypothesis: Since lavatory graffiti are a "distorted" and "anonymous" medium, they express the *inverse* of current community norms, a phenomenon which I have examined in some detail and made use of in my analysis. Finally, according to Reich, Buss, Fein, and Kurtz (1977), this hypothesis applies to expressions of opinion on current controversial issues such as race and male homosexuality but not necessarily to the less controversial opinions about lesbianism found in women's lavatories.

While each of these studies test hypotheses by comparing frequencies of graffiti between alleged "liberal" and "conservative" communities, my study posits several rules of social organization by a microscopic examination of the artifactual associations within a single community. I have tried to show how graffiti are essentially behavioral residues; that is they are archeological in nature insofar as they are anonymous artifacts fixed in space and time, and when recovered they lend themselves to quantitative treatments. The question of their normative status hinges on several variables, one of the most crucial of which is their placement in varying spatial contexts. In other words, by combining the archaeological approach to classifying artifacts and noting their distribution in space with ethnological theory of passages in which space is classified as to its usages, I have attempted to infer some elementary rules of social organization in a particular community. I have further verified these rules by observations of on-going behavior.