

## Walls that Talk: Thematic Variation in University Library Graffiti

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### Abstract

The use of graffiti as a source of data has spread beyond studies of human sexuality and urban youth to include linguistic studies of discourse patterns and grammar, explorations of cultural production in disputed areas, and modeling gender differences. While many of these studies focus on latrinalia,<sup>1, 2, 3</sup> graffiti written in bathrooms, two recent papers<sup>4, 5</sup> have documented and classified graffiti in a defined subset of public areas at a single university. This work builds upon those studies by documenting and classifying graffiti in the main library of four universities in the United States: the University of Chicago, Brown University, the University of Colorado at Boulder, and Arizona State University. A quantitative analysis suggests that insults and remarks about advice, classes, love, the surroundings, school, and oneself should be considered common in graffiti found in university libraries, in addition to sex. A qualitative analysis explores the trends in writing style and approach to the various topics in each corpus.

### 1. Introduction

In the fall of 2007, a meandering trip through the bookstacks at the University of Chicago's Regenstein Library yielded the discovery of numerous graffiti-based conversations on and around the study desks embedded in the walls surrounding the bookshelves. Sometimes articulate and witty, and often bemoaning the difficulty of the undergraduate experience, these long conversations—written over a period of months, as students struggled through multiple quarters of midterms, finals, and paper writing, seemed to capture the essence of the student culture at the university.

After documenting graffiti in the Regenstein Library for over two years, generally on a weekly basis, I expanded the study to include material from the University of California at Berkeley's Doe/Moffitt Libraries in February 2010. Other sizable corpora were added from Hayden Library at Arizona State University (June 2010), Rockefeller Library at Brown University (June 2010), and Norlin Library at the University of Colorado at Boulder (July 2010).<sup>6</sup> The material at each of these libraries was very different in its tone; particularly striking was the difference between graffiti from private schools (Chicago and Brown) and public schools. Beyond these obvious differences, one can find

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<sup>1</sup> Alfred C. Kinsey et al., *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (Philadelphia: Saunders, 1953).

<sup>2</sup> John A. Bates and Michael Martin, "The Thematic Content of Graffiti as a Nonreactive Indicator of Male and Female Attitudes," *The Journal of Sex Research* 16, vol. 4 (1980): 300-315.

<sup>3</sup> Caroline M. Cole, "Oh Wise Women of the Stalls...," *Discourse Society* 2 (1991): 401.

<sup>4</sup> Javier Muñoz-Basols, "Los grafiti *in tabula* como método de comunicación: Autoría, espacio y destinatario," *Revista de Dialectología y Tradiciones Populares* 115, no. 2 (2010): 389-426.

<sup>5</sup> T. Agboola, "Graffiti as Feedback Tool in Library Management: A Nigerian Case Study," *African Journal of Library, Archives and Information Science* 11, no. 1 (2002): 17-24.

<sup>6</sup> Also in 2010, I explored libraries at Northwestern University, Wheaton College in Massachusetts, and the University of Puget Sound, but none of these had more than a handful of pieces of graffiti.

commonalities in subject matter, regardless of how it is expressed. This study quantifies the frequency with which twenty two topics are discussed across various corpora, in order to draw conclusions about what topics are common across all corpora. This is followed by a qualitative analysis that illustrates the differences in writing style and approach to the topic matter.

### 1.1. Previous Research

Kinsey's analysis of latrinalia, graffiti written in bathrooms, in his landmark 1953 study *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*,<sup>7</sup> had a profound impact on graffiti research over the next 50 years.<sup>8</sup> Both Kinsey's focus on the sexual content of bathroom graffiti and the differences between male and female graffiti have been repeated in numerous subsequent studies, including Farr and Gordon,<sup>9</sup> Reich et al.,<sup>10</sup> Bates and Martin,<sup>11</sup> Loewenstine et al.,<sup>12</sup> and Cole.<sup>13</sup> Thanks to the ease with which researchers can monitor bathroom graffiti at their institution, university latrinalia plays a disproportionate role in the literature. Bathroom stalls at the University of Chicago were among the locations sampled in Sechrest and Flores.<sup>14</sup>

Because of its less sexualized nature and the impossibility of controlling for gender, scholarship addressing university graffiti outside of bathrooms has emerged relatively recently. While Rodriguez and Clair<sup>15</sup> focus on bathroom graffiti, their study also makes note of "graffiti standards" (e.g. an expectation of correct orthography and grammar), the public discussion of taboo topics, and oppressed groups' use of graffiti to challenge the dominant narrative. Muñoz-Basols<sup>16</sup> provides a description and classification for graffiti *in tabula*, his term for all graffiti written on a table, from eight multiple-use classrooms in the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters at the University of Zaragoza. An examination of graffiti in the library of the University of Agriculture in Abeokuta,

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<sup>7</sup> Kinsey et al., *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*.

<sup>8</sup> Kinsey notes that research on latrinalia dates to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, with works including C. Reiskel, "Skatologische Inscriften," *Anthropophyteia* 3 (1906): 244-246; G. H. Luquet, "Sur la survivance des caractères du dessin enfantin dans des graffiti à indications sexuelles," *Anthropophyteia* 7 (1910): 196-202; and Magnus Hirschfeld, "Homosexuelle Pissoirinschriften aus Paris," *Anthropophyteia* 8 (1911): 410-422.

<sup>9</sup> Jo-Ann H. Farr and Carol Gordon, "A Partial Replication of Kinsey's Graffiti Study," *The Journal of Sex Research* 11, no. 2 (1975): 158-162.

<sup>10</sup> Wendy Reich et. al, "Notes on Women's Graffiti," *The Journal of American Folklore* 90, no. 356 (1977): 188-191.

<sup>11</sup> Bates et al., "The Thematic Content of Graffiti."

<sup>12</sup> Harold V. Loewenstine, "Sex differences in graffiti as a communication style," *Journal of Social Psychology* 117, no. 2 (1982): 307-308.

<sup>13</sup> Cole, "Oh Wise Women of the Stalls...,"

<sup>14</sup> Les Sechrest and Luis Flores, "Homosexuality in the Philippines and the United States: The Handwriting on the Wall," *The Journal of Social Psychology* 79 (1969): 3-12.

<sup>15</sup> Amardo Rodriguez and Robin Patric Clair, "Graffiti as communication: Exploring the discursive tensions of anonymous texts," *Southern Communication Journal* 65, vol. 1 (1999): 1-15.

<sup>16</sup> Muñoz-Basols, "Los graffiti."

Nigeria<sup>17</sup> finds a corpus split almost 60/40 between social, political and religious statements, and opinions about the library and its services.

The material collected in these three studies suggests that public graffiti is less homogenous in its subject matter than latrinalia. This comparative study of university public graffiti is a first step towards establishing the topical scope of that expressive medium, as well as expanding the topics that should be considered common across corpora of university graffiti to include insults and remarks about advice, classes, love, the surroundings, school, and oneself in addition to sex.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Sampling

During my first trip to the Regenstein library stacks, I only photographed the pieces of graffiti I deemed interesting. Over the next month, I standardized both the frequency with which I visited the stacks (weekly), and the sampling method (everything, except graffiti that only consisted of problem sets). Due to the slow recovery of the graffiti after being painted over, and waning interest in the project overall, I did not record any data in the stacks during winter quarter 2009. At the beginning of June 2009, I expanded the University of Chicago corpus dramatically by documenting graffiti on the reading room study carrels. Graffiti on the study carrels evolves more slowly, and I have documented it approximately once a quarter, towards the end of the quarter.

I collected the material from other institutions on a single day,<sup>18</sup> gaining access to the library as early in the day as possible to minimize the extent to which students were occupying study carrels that potentially featured graffiti. When students were present, I did not disturb them. While the ongoing nature of the graffiti documentation at the University of Chicago made it easy to identify when the graffiti was at its peak (i.e. when a significant amount of time had elapsed since the most recent cleaning), this was not possible for the other corpora.

Ranked by corpus size, the University of Chicago corpus is unsurprisingly the largest at 1346 pieces, followed by Brown at 927, Arizona State at 507, the University of Colorado at Boulder at 261, and the University of California at Berkeley at 142. It is difficult to state definitively what the minimum corpus size is for results of a topical analysis to be significant, but the extent to which the data from Berkeley was skewed by a single, extended conversation (whereas this was not an issue with the data from Boulder) suggests that 150 pieces is insufficient, and perhaps a reasonable cut-off would be approximately 250 pieces. For that reason, the data from Berkeley was not included in the analysis. External circumstances motivated the choice of institutions, rather than any deliberate attempt to select institutions representative of different geographic regions and/or socioeconomic groups; while this is a shortcoming of the study, financial and work constraints prohibited a more even sampling method.

Only graffiti written in English was included in the analysis, in order to avoid privileging non-English material written in languages I knew or had access to a translator for.

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<sup>17</sup> Agboola, "Graffiti as Feedback Tool in Library Management."

<sup>18</sup> Brown University is an exception—there was enough material that limitations on time and camera battery life necessitated two days of documentation.

## 2.2. Documentation Method

All pieces of graffiti found in the libraries were photographed and posted to the photo sharing website flickr.com.<sup>19</sup> Prior to the publication of a book featuring highlights from the University of Chicago collection,<sup>20</sup> I collected all the graffiti in a single photo set.<sup>21</sup> Subsequently, I re-organized the University of Chicago graffiti by category<sup>22</sup> with the aim of making the large corpus more accessible; the corpora from the University of California at Berkeley,<sup>23</sup> Arizona State University,<sup>24</sup> Brown University<sup>25</sup> and the University of Colorado<sup>26</sup> were each placed in a single set.

After photographing the graffiti, I transcribed it into a public Google Doc spreadsheet, one cell per photograph. Recognizing that the scope of each photograph was essentially arbitrary, as part of conducting this analysis I compared each photograph to the transcription and normalized the data to include only one piece of graffiti per cell.<sup>27</sup> The pieces that formed “conversations”, to the extent they could be identified, were linked together in the spreadsheet using a unique identifier.

## 2.3. Classification

Each piece of graffiti was assigned one or more of the following categories, which had been determined in advance through an impressionistic survey of the data. When I was deciding on categories, the data from Chicago was disproportionately influential; neither Orthography nor Time proved to be particularly prevalent across all corpora, despite their clear presence in the Chicago corpus.

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<sup>19</sup> I applied a Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike license to all the photographs, which opened up the option of recontextualizing the material in unexpected ways, including advice about post-academic careers (“Your career options are NOT limited by your dissertation topic,” *Leaving Academia*, May 6, 2009, <http://www.leavingacademia.com/?p=375>), an announcement about credit cards being accepted in coffee shops (“Credit Cards in Coffee Shops,” *UChicago Student Government*, September 2009, <http://sg.uchicago.edu/agenda/credit-cards-in-coffee-shops/>), and a blog post about measuring the effectiveness of PR (Shonali Burke, “Of Cabbages and Kings and Measuring PR,” February 3, 2010, <http://www.waxingunlyrical.com/2010/02/03/of-cabbages-and-kings-and-measuring-pr/>).

<sup>20</sup> Quinn Dombrowski, *Crescat Graffiti, Vita Excolatur: Confessions of the University of Chicago* (Chicago: Lulu, 2009).

<sup>21</sup> Quinn Dombrowski, “Graffiti of the Regenstein Library,” *flickr.com*, accessed June 12, 2011, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/quinnanya/sets/72157602179427698/>.

<sup>22</sup> Dombrowski, “Crescat Graffiti.”

<sup>23</sup> Quinn Dombrowski, “Berkeley: Graffiti of Doe Memorial Library,” *flickr.com*, February 6, 2010, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/quinnanya/sets/72157623258224557/>.

<sup>24</sup> Quinn Dombrowski, “Arizona State University graffiti,” *flickr.com*, June 11, 2010, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/quinnanya/sets/72157624188675687/>.

<sup>25</sup> Quinn Dombrowski, “Brown’s “Rock” Graffiti,” *flickr.com*, June 15-16, 2010, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/quinnanya/sets/72157624284869346/>.

<sup>26</sup> Quinn Dombrowski, “Univ. of Colorado Graffiti,” *flickr.com*, June 15-16, 2010, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/quinnanya/sets/72157625036355736/>.

<sup>27</sup> In almost all cases, identifying individual pieces of graffiti was quite clear, based on handwriting, writing implement, and coherence of thought.

- Advice
- Classes
- (Intellectual) commentary
- Despair
- Drugs
- Greek (fraternity/sorority)
- Insults
- Love
- Meta (about graffiti, the surface being written on, etc.)
- Misc
- Orthography and/or grammar
- Politics
- Presence (variations on “X was here”)
- Quotes (direct quotes from other sources)
- Reference (making reference to another source without quoting from it)
- Religion
- Reply (in the context of a conversation)
- School
- Self
- Sex
- Social issues
- Time (most often, not having enough of it)

The only points of overlap between these relatively granular categories and the broader categorization used in Muñoz-Basols is the treatment of sexual statements as an independent group, and the inclusion of a “miscellaneous” group. While Muñoz-Basols’s classification groups humorous statements together, the subjectivity of humor—and the challenges of determining whether the writer intended to make a joke, if assessing humor from the writer’s point of view—makes it a suboptimal means of classifying graffiti. Muñoz-Basols also groups affectionate and romantic graffiti together with philosophical graffiti, a questionable choice given the wide variety of situations (schoolwork-related stress, apprehension about the future, self-doubt, etc.) that can provoke philosophical responses. While Muñoz-Basols’ corpus contained enough soccer references to merit their status as an independent category, all sports are treated here like any other object of reference. On the basis of the Arizona State and Colorado data, perhaps one could argue that there enough sports references to merit an independent category—2.8% of the Arizona graffiti and 1.9% of the Colorado graffiti are sports references, whereas each of those contains a lower percentage of graffiti for certain other categories that were included. At Brown and Chicago, sports references make up 0.1% and 0.3%, respectively.

To differentiate quotes from original creations, I Googled the text of every piece of graffiti that was more than three words long. If that phrase, or a nearly-identical phrase (to allow for imperfect reproduction) appeared either on many sites (in the case of poetry or music lyrics) or in the OCR of a book in the Google books corpus (e.g. for a quote from *War in European History* by Michael Howard), I classified it as a quote and made note of the source work and author. In the case of music lyrics, I searched for the band on Wikipedia, and used the genre classification provided there. For references, the process was similar. Anything that appeared to be a proper name (except decontextualized typical American given names, which were categorized as “presence”), or a phrase I didn’t recognize, I Googled (e.g. “415 Thizz in peace”, Colorado; “Austin 3:16”, Arizona) and made

note of the source. This method has the shortcoming of not capturing private references, or quotes that have not been published online, but these are not possible to determine by any practical means.

Some of the pieces of graffiti could be placed in multiple categories (e.g. a reply that introduces sexual content, or a piece of advice about classes.) Among the analyses not included in this paper was an “interestingness” score, where each piece of graffiti was scored between 1 and 3, where 1 indicates that text was written (a decontextualized word, an obvious reply, initials, a simple formulaic statement), 2 indicates a piece with more substance (a complete thought, a non-obvious reply, non-formulaic phrasing), and 3 indicates a significant contribution (clever use of language, thought-provoking content, or content that elicits and emotional reaction). When determining which category to use for a given piece of graffiti in a listing that includes only a single category, I chose the category in which the piece of graffiti received a higher score. If a piece received the same score in both categories, I assigned it to the less common category.

### 3. Analysis

#### 3.1. Quantitative Analysis

The following table shows the results for each category, in each institution, by percent:

	<b>Chicago</b>	<b>Brown</b>	<b>Colorado</b>	<b>Arizona</b>
<b>Advice</b>	3.4	3.1	3.4	1.4
<b>Classes</b>	3.5	2.8	1.9	1
<b>Commentary</b>	2.5	0.8	2.3	0.2
<b>Despair</b>	4.6	2.6		1
<b>Drugs</b>	0.7	1	2.3	1.6
<b>Greek</b>	0.3	0.2	1.5	1123
<b>Insults</b>	1.6	4	4.6	2.4
<b>Love</b>	3.4	5.3	1.9	4.7
<b>Meta</b>	3.9	3	2.7	1.4
<b>Misc</b>	17.8	14	16.1	19.5
<b>Orthography</b>	1	0.2		0.4
<b>Politics</b>	0.7		1.9	2
<b>Presence</b>	1	1	2.7	6.7
<b>Quotes</b>	11.1	7.3	5.4	1
<b>Reference</b>	5.2	3.6	9.6	8.1
<b>Religion</b>	0.4	1.3	1.5	3.2
<b>Reply</b>	28.5	35	30.3	21.9
<b>School</b>	2.7	1.3	1.5	2.6
<b>Self</b>	1.9	2.3	1.9	1
<b>Sex</b>	4.2	9.2	7.7	8.9
<b>Social</b>	0.1	1.1	0.4	0.2
<b>Time</b>	1.6	0.9	0.4	

**Table 1.** Category frequency by institution (%)

A number of categories were poorly represented in one or more schools. Despair was not found at Arizona, and the rates for Brown, and particularly Chicago, are much higher than Colorado. Drugs and Religion are less well-represented at Chicago, as is Greek, which also has a minimal presence at Brown. Orthographic pedantry, to any sizable extent, seemed to be an almost uniquely Chicago phenomenon among these institutions. Graffiti focusing on time is significant at Chicago, and almost so at Brown, but is minimal to absent at the other institutions. Politics are a relatively common topic at Arizona and Colorado, but not Chicago and Brown. Similarly, graffiti indicating presence is much more common at Arizona and Colorado, though its presence at Brown and Chicago (1% for both) is still non-trivial. Social issues are only significant at Brown.

Particularly striking is the distribution of quotes and references. Chicago and Brown have more than twice as many quotes as references (5.2% and 11.1% at Chicago and 7% and 3% at Brown), whereas the distribution is the opposite at Colorado and Arizona, where references outnumber quotes almost 2:1 at Colorado and 8:1 at Arizona.<sup>28</sup>

### 3.2. Qualitative analysis

Graffiti from different institutions varies dramatically in writing style<sup>29</sup> and how the topic is addressed. The following qualitative analysis examines salient trends in the graffiti for each topical category (i.e. excluding “misc” and “reply”). Only institutions with a sizable amount of graffiti in that category are discussed.

#### 3.2.1. Advice

A large amount of the advice from Chicago took the form of encouragement, with examples such as “YOU CAN DO IT!” More practical advice, given that the graffiti is written in an environment where students often go to study, include such examples as “Get Back to Work Fool!”. Advice from Brown and Colorado is more likely to be philosophical, “It never gets easier as long as you want it to get better” (Brown) and “It’s alright to feel good it’s alright for nothing to be wrong” (Colorado); such examples also exist from Chicago (“let your passions incinerate themselves and in their ashes you may find silence”) but are less common. The advice graffiti from Arizona is limited, but largely contains practical inspirational advice such as “FOCUS!”, “RELAX” and “Don’t give up”. This is offset by a few discouraging pieces: “If you strive for perfection... you will only be disappointed” and “Beat your kids”.

#### 3.2.2. Classes

In all the corpora, almost all the graffiti relating to classes takes the form of some kind of generic complaint about a class, though “finals week” is also a frequent object of hatred. Math and chemistry—particularly organic chemistry—are the most hated classes at Chicago and Brown, and the intensity of that shared hatred contributes to the high rates of graffiti about classes.

#### 3.2.3. Commentary

Chicago’s intellectual commentary graffiti deals with a wide range of topics, from robots (“Robots: technical advancement is only a moment in the dialectic between the forces of production and the relationships of production, and not some third thing, demonically self-sufficient.”) to wordplay (“Irony: the word meaningless has meaning”) to assessments of well-respected intellectual figures (“Tolstoy is stupid. He failed miserably.”) and entire fields of study (“Most art doesn’t deserve the name.”) Colorado’s commentary tends to be less detailed, though it shares some of the same trends in its content (“Fuck Thomas Jefferson,” “This is art.”)

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<sup>28</sup> The Colorado corpus is 9.5% references and 5.1% quotes; the Arizona corpus is 7.9% references and 1% quotes.

<sup>29</sup> Quantifying writing style by applying metrics designed to measure reading level is a potential area of further study, though such metrics may be unsuitable for such short texts.

### 3.2.4. Despair

The impact of the academic rigor of both Brown and Chicago can be seen in the graffiti from both of those institutions, though the rate is noticeably higher at Chicago. Examples include “I haven’t slept in 30 hours and this paper fucking sucks” (Chicago), “Oh no, I go to UChicago, I’m doomed ... all I need is an A ... I’m drowning” (Chicago), “I have soc papers due too. hate it. My life sucks! So much work! Where is life?” (Chicago), “I don’t know why I was accepted to Brown” (Brown), “Will I ever get my PhD?” (Brown). There are a few examples of despair caused by something other than academics (“Guys, I’m sad and it’s like, cause of society, and ... and stuff,” Brown; “Do you still come here and think of our wistful memories?,” Chicago), but these are rare.

### 3.2.5. Drugs

Almost all the drug references at all the institutions make reference to marijuana. There are a few solicitations (“WANNA GET High? Leave your number and i’ll call you up!”, Chicago) but many more are decontextualized references (“Mary 4:20,” Arizona) or refer to a desire to be smoking marijuana (“I’d rather be burning a fatty,” Colorado).

### 3.2.6. Greek

Almost all fraternity graffiti in the corpora is either the name of a fraternity, or a simply-phrased insult directed towards a fraternity (“ $\Delta\Sigma\Phi$  is gay,” Arizona.) At Arizona State, where the corpus contained the greatest number of pieces of fraternity graffiti, only 18% of the fraternity graffiti was insulting.

### 3.2.7. Insults

Insults range from single words (“dork,” Brown; “loser,” Chicago; “dumbass,” Colorado; “retards,” Arizona) to constructions directing the insult at an individual (“Nicole is a Bastard,” Brown; “This girl is a whore,” Colorado) to more elaborate and expressive vitriol (“Fucking imbecile. With this bullshit, it’s no surprise you’re a liberal arts major. Enjoy living in poverty after college, asshole,” Chicago).

### 3.2.8. Love

The most common form of expressing love is through the construction “I love X”, where X is a person or, occasionally, a thing. A word or name with a heart around it is also frequently found across corpora. The students at Chicago and Brown go well beyond these constructions in a number of cases, complete with short autobiographies (“I’m 18 and I’ve never been kissed. No one asked me to high school prom but they all wanted my help with homework. I’m smart and friendly and I think for myself I believe in true love... Does it believe in me?”, Brown) and a graph with good/ill fortune on one axis, time on another, and a graph of “boy meets girl” (Chicago).

### 3.2.9 Meta

Most of the places the graffiti was collected are intended to be quiet work spaces, and graffiti writers take note when students violate accepted practice (“The Physics major says: Shut off your dumbass music,” Chicago.) Graffiti remarks graffiti are common (“Brown graffiti sucks,” Brown; “I hate ppl

who write on walls,” Arizona), as are remarks about nearby objects and the furniture (“Who ever left the orange peel here is so lazy to put it nicely,” Colorado; “This desk is distracting and it’s depressing,” Brown). Graffiti is also used to indicate ownership, particularly at Chicago, where there are no official means of reserving a cubicle (“Cubicle RESERVED - Translation: Fuck off!”, Chicago; “Amy’s desk,” Brown).

### 3.2.10. Orthography

There is a small but visible sub-group of graffiti writers at the University of Chicago who care very much about their peers’ use of proper spelling, grammar and punctuation. Failing to live up to their expectations inevitably results in criticism (“would benefit this school by removing stick from ass and also maybe learning to spell.”) Aware of this practice, students with weak spelling skills have implemented defensive measures: “My favorite cubicle graffiti (grafitti)? Sp ...”

### 3.2.11. Politics

Those exposed to university graffiti from the turbulent 1960’s and 1970’s may expect that today’s graffiti shares the same highly politicized qualities found during that era. In fact, none of the corpora had a large amount of graffiti with political content. At Chicago, most of the (minimal) political graffiti stems from the 2008 election, with expressions of people’s pro- or anti-Obama sentiments. While it cannot be dated, the graffiti from Colorado is strongly anti-Obama. The graffiti from Arizona has a wider range of political topics, including “Bush knocked down the towers,” “Nobama,” “Fuck America” and “God Bless America,” and “Palin 2012”.

### 3.2.12. Presence

Writing a first name is the most common way to mark presence across all corpora, though occasionally initials are used instead. A few pieces of graffiti do include some form of “was here.” Further information is quite rare, though one example can be found at Chicago: “I was here. Paint it over, but I still was. I drank a beer! (Paid for by English dept.—shhh... don’t tell)”

### 3.2.13. Quotes

As noted earlier, Chicago and Brown graffiti include more quotes than references, with the opposite trend at Colorado and Arizona. A plurality of quotes across all corpora comes from music; literature/poetry, movies, TV, and intellectuals are also significant sources of quotes. At both Chicago and Brown, most of the quoted lyrics come from rock songs, with rock music overall covering about 50% of song lyrics quoted at both Chicago and Brown, though the rock sub-genres differ.<sup>30</sup>

### 3.2.14. References

References exhibit a pattern similar to quotes, with band names prominent among the sources of references—50% at Colorado, and 22% at Arizona. The distribution of music genres at Arizona is split between rap and rock (each at 33%), metal (22%) and pop (11%). At Colorado, pop plays a

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<sup>30</sup> At Chicago, the overall percent of “rock” quotes is a combination of rock, alternative rock, punk rock, and other rock; Brown’s corpus of rock quotes can be divided into rock, indie rock, and other rock.

more prominent role with 38% of references, followed by rock at 23%, rap and electronica each at 15%, and metal at 7%. Sports provide the biggest source of references at Arizona, with 34%, and they are fairly well-represented at Colorado as well, at 19%.

### 3.2.15. Religion

None of the corpora exhibit high rates of religiously-themed graffiti. At Chicago, all but one of the five examples are written from the perspective of a non-believer (“Jesus was only a man”), and all make reference to Christianity. Rastafarianism (“Jah Rastafan”), paganism (“SC does paganism. Long live the goddess! go Duffy!”), and Hinduism (“Om sai ram” all appear in the Brown corpus alongside Christianity (“I heart Jesus”) although the sincerity is difficult to assess. The religious graffiti at Colorado and Arizona is almost entirely Christian, and seems to be written by believers (“Jesus is Lord,” Colorado; “Christ is trooth,” Arizona).

### 3.2.16. School

Each corpus reliably includes students’ feelings about the institution, and/or school in general. The high amount of complaining in the Chicago corpus indicates that there may be above-average discontent among the student body at Chicago, but the phrasing of some of the pieces of graffiti suggest an affectionate undertone (“Uchicago = where low temperature and high pressure defies Van der Waal’s laws”, “The U O’ C A giant refrigerator for nerd storage”). In the Colorado corpus, the complaints are about school in general (“School sucks”) or the location (“I hate Boulder”). Many of the pieces of school graffiti at Arizona are simply the abbreviation for the institution, but given the presence of pieces such as “ASU sucks”, these abbreviations can probably be treated positively. The Arizona corpus also includes examples of graffiti promoting a rival school (“UofA rulez”).

### 3.2.17. Self

Personal statements can be found in all corpora. These pieces of graffiti reference character traits (“Why am I so lazy?”, Chicago), motivations (“This is for six figures & a hot wife.”, Chicago), confessions (“I nap more than I study”, Brown), and physical states (“I have to shit”, Arizona).

### 3.2.18. Sex

While these corpora of public graffiti do not show the same high levels of sexual content found in previous studies of latrinalia, sex is the only category to place among the five most common categories at all institutions. The high frequency with which sexual graffiti appears mirrors the results from a previous study of graffiti at University of Zaragoza, where the author notes the high prevalence of sexual graffiti.<sup>31</sup>

The sexual graffiti in these corpora ranged from solicitations (“Suck my cock??”, Chicago), surveys (“Who wants to suck off the Easter Bunny”, Brown), decontextualized naming of genitalia (“penis lulz”, Chicago), suggestions for sexual acts (“Hit up the stacks for a good time”, Colorado), general statements (“Sex is overrated”, Arizona) and declarations of sexual preferences (“I love MILF”, Arizona).

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<sup>31</sup> Muñoz-Basols, “Los grafiti *in tabula*,” 400.

### 3.2.19. Social Issues

Graffiti pertaining to social issues is poorly represented in all four corpora, suggesting its usefulness as a category is limited.<sup>32</sup> The one example from Chicago is “What have you done today to STOP the genocide in Darfur!”; at Brown, they are interested in sexuality (“In the general sexual confusion that reigns among us it is a miracle to belong to your own sex”), at Colorado, someone sarcastically remarks, “that’s not racist at ALL!” and one piece of graffiti at Arizona notes that “Money is subversion”.

### 3.2.20. Time

Both at Chicago and Brown, there are multiple pieces of graffiti that comment on, or somehow mark, the passage of time. While this sometimes takes the form of hours and dates (“1:58 AM - I understand integration by parts - 2:29 AM - Leave - need sleepz. - 11:05 AM - arrive back @ cubicle - 12:37 PM - Start studying math again - 2:56 PM - Math genius status achieved,” Chicago; “4/20 7:10 Will return in 10-20 min. SERIOUSLY GUYS.”, Chicago), pages and assignments can serve the same purpose (“Just 10 more pages,” Brown; “2 finals + 1 paper till XMas Break,” Chicago.)

## 4. Conclusion

The results of this analysis of four corpora suggest that, while sex is a reliable topic of discussion in university graffiti, insults and comments about advice, classes, love, the surroundings, school, and oneself should also be considered “typical” topics in university graffiti, though their frequency with which each category appears varies by institution. Expanding the number of corpora under consideration could improve the confidence with which one can identify topics universal to graffiti in higher education environments. Additional corpora would also contribute to a clearer picture about whether and how one can predict the relative frequency of quotes and references in a corpus, based on available statistics about the source institution. Offers of help with data collection during the presentation of this study at the 2010 Chicago Colloquium on Digital Humanities and Computer Science suggest that a crowdsourcing approach to acquiring and sharing those corpora may make further inquiry feasible.

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<sup>32</sup> Social issues were better represented in the Berkeley corpus than in any other. Eight pieces of Berkeley graffiti referred to social issues—5.4% of the total corpus—making it the fourth most common category at Berkeley.

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