

# Introduction: The Private Life of Public Conveniences

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In 2004, when we decided to edit this essay collection, we began by formulating a short “Call For Papers.” It read:

Public toilets are amenities with a functional, even a civic, purpose. Yet they also act as the unconscious of public spaces. They can be a haven: a place to regain composure, to “check one’s face,” or to have a private chat. But they are also sexually charged and transgressive spaces that shelter illicit sexual practices and act as a cultural repository for taboos and fantasies.

This collection will work from the premise that public toilets, far from being banal or simply functional, are highly charged spaces, shaped by notions of propriety, hygiene and the binary gender division. Indeed, public toilets are among the very few openly segregated spaces in contemporary Western culture, and the physical differences between “gentlemen” and “ladies” remains central to (and is further naturalized by) their design. As such, they provide a fertile ground for critical work interrogating how conventional assumptions about the body, sexuality, privacy, and technology can be formed in public space and inscribed through design.

We welcome papers which explore the cultural meanings, histories, and ideologies of the public toilet as a gendered space. Any subject is appropriate: toilet design and signage, toilet humour and euphemisms, personal narratives and legal cases, as well as art sited in public toilets. We also welcome the submissions of design and art projects that expose the gendered nature of the “functional” toilet spaces and objects.

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We circulated the CFP among the usual suspects—a number of academic Listservs and Web bulletin boards. This was a routine academic procedure. However, very soon we discovered that something unusual was happening. We started to find an excessive amount of mail in our in-boxes—and very peculiar mail, not what one expects in response to a CFP. The mail fell in two categories: people either liked our idea (passionately) or disliked it (passionately). Some called our project long overdue and inspiring. Others said that our project was an immoral, even scatological, perversion and a waste of public funds. Our fifteen seconds of fame or, more accurately, notoriety had begun.

Our CFP was featured in the mainstream press and electronic op-ed pages. The *Wall Street Journal* (Taranto 2005) published an opinion column with the amusing if predictable title “How to Earn Your Pee h.D.” The *Boston Globe* soon followed up with the more tediously titled “Academia Goes down the Toilet” (Beam 2005). The next day this piece was reprinted by *International Herald Tribune*, and then the real mud slinging began. Many prominent conservative Web sites or blogs weighed in with indignant responses. The commentators included defenders of high culture such as *The New Criterion* (Kimball 2005), defenders of Reaganesque principles and grass-roots conservatism such as *Human Events Online* (Custer 2005) and *Free Republic* (TFFKAMM 2005), and defenders of traditional family roles such as *Independent Women’s Forum* (Allen 2005). Among other honors, our project was named the *Young America Foundation’s* second-greatest campus outrage of 2004–2005. It even made the satirical *Private Eye’s* Pseuds Corner and is now immortalized on the feature’s Wikipedia site.

Given that both of us had written about political debates surrounding the provision of public toilets, we would have been naïve to think that this book would be totally uncontroversial. Nonetheless, the sheer number of those who rejected the legitimacy of our inquiry was a surprise. Ninety years after Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain* (1917), we found ourselves in the midst of a toilet controversy of our own. Even stranger than the media commentary on the CFP was the fact that we ourselves became the subject of hundreds of sneering, baffling, and sometimes hilarious attacks on blogs and Web sites such as rantburg.com and barking-moonbat.com. Olga Gershenson received a fax at her department that summed up the tenor of these comments. Calling our CFP “a shocking revelation,” our faxer wrote:

It gives one a startling glimpse at where we stand today in higher education. I’d say your invitation for contribution for the edited collection . . . pretty well encapsulates the ridiculous preoccupation with trivia affecting the elite ivory towers of post-modern academia. I was also taken aback by your obvious fascination with the scatological and its association with sexual practices. . . . Has Aristotelian philosophy now given way to scholarly discourses on toilet

bowls, outhouse designs and architecture? . . . Are these places where you now do your best thinking?

Why did our CFP touch a nerve? People managed to project into our 226-word CFP a vast range of disparate if interconnected problems, ranging from the decline of privacy rights to the promiscuous triumph of gender studies and queer theory, the rhetoric of diversity, and equal rights legislation. Whatever their objection, they tended to come from a very particular, conservative group of people, largely within the United States, who were part of the general post-9/11 swing to the Right. Insofar as anything united them, it was the complaint that our project symbolized the degradation of publicly funded higher education, and, like our faxer, they fondly recalled a prefeminist and pre-postmodern era when idealist academic enquiries prevailed.

It is hard to understand how a discussion of a ubiquitous public space would automatically invalidate an inquiry's scholarly status, unless we see it as an issue of control. The outraged attacks on this project must be seen both as an attempt to police the boundaries of what is acceptable and what is unacceptable within both academia and society at large and as an effort to ensure that certain things remain "in their place"—unspeakable—or spoken about only in a certain fashion. Most of those who objected to our project believe that the mere mention of the toilet, with its invocation of the body, gender, and sexuality, contaminates the purity of academia. This belief infuses the gleefully vitriolic piece by the right-wing Townhall.com columnist and college professor Mike Adams, titled—wait for it—"Piled Higher and Deeper." Adams writes:

In Gershenson and Penner's call for papers, the phrase "Any subject is appropriate" really sums it up. "Glory holes" used to facilitate anonymous sex in university restrooms and profane poems on the walls of bathrooms are no longer a source of embarrassment for professors and administrators. There is no longer a need to cover them up with putty and spray paint. Now, they are just another form of diversity to be celebrated. Break out the rainbow flags! (2005)

Despite his gleaming "breastplate of righteousness," Adams is remarkably *au courant* with the lingo and practices of what the British call "cottaging" and North Americans call "cruising." Thanks to the obsessive media coverage of Idaho senator Larry Craig's toe-tapping antics, these terms are much more familiar to the world. But Adams's eagerness to tell his readership about "glory holes" (nowhere mentioned in our CFP) is revealing. In its explicit evocations, Adams's piece follows the prurient logic of sensationalistic journalism that cheerfully exposes "secret" practices even as it condemns them or, in Adams's case, preaches concealment. His commentary draws heavily on metaphors of contamination, cleaning, and covering

up. Graffiti should be covered up. Gay sex in public toilets should be covered up too, though not with spray paint and putty but with denial. Adams concludes cryptically but apocalyptically: “To tolerate filth is one thing, to celebrate it is another. That is where we stand today in higher education. We are knee deep and getting deeper” (2005). The final statement encapsulates the contradictions at the heart of Adams’s piece. It remains unclear why we should not publicly discuss things that, as Adams admits, take place in public places, unless we relate it to the well-worn conservative belief that sex should always be a “private” matter—the “don’t ask, don’t tell” philosophy. More puzzling still: in what way does Adams actually think he is “tolerating filth”—anonymous gay sex, graffiti, diversity, and, astonishingly, blasphemy, all messily lumped together in this article?

We obviously stand on the opposite side of the fence on these matters. But, partisan politics aside, why should public toilets be a focus of an academic inquiry? Many of the contributors to this volume make forceful cases for the need for clean, safe, accessible, and well-designed public toilets, whatever one’s color, sex, age, or status, and reinforce that this should be a priority for governments, school administrators, and design professionals alike. At a time when public provisions are in steep decline in the West and, when provided, often look like defensive fortifications, armored with anti-social deterrents, this message is a crucial one. Yet why is it so difficult to put into practice? Without denying the very real practical concerns surrounding public toilets to do with security, hygiene, and vandalism, we argue that in order to open up discussions in a meaningful way, we must also enter the realm of representation—as many of the contributions to this volume do—and delve into the practical, rhetorical, legal, ideological, and historical reasons why it is uncomfortable for people to talk about toilets. It is only by understanding the private or unconscious life and meanings of the public toilet that we can make sense of why toilets are so consistently controversial; how they are so integrally bound up with other issues, from women’s rights to gay sexual identity, that it is often impossible to invoke one without invoking them all; and why they have been the subject of so many passionate debates, controversies, and design and art interventions throughout the modern era.

## Public Toilets—Public Controversies: Three Stories

We start our discussion with three stories that, taken together, refract the identity issues that emerge from public toilet debates. The first deals with the introduction of public women’s lavatories in Victorian London.<sup>1</sup>

Historically, shared public latrines have been a feature of most communities, and this continues to be true in developing countries such as Ghana, China, and India. Private, sex-segregated lavatories were a modern

and Western European invention, bound up with urbanization, the rise of sanitary reform, the privatization of the bodily functions, and the gendered ideology of the separate spheres. As historian Deborah Brunton explains, in the nineteenth century, public conveniences such as paving, lighting, and fire services were taken over by civic authorities as part of their remit to ensure “the free and safe circulation of goods and people” (2005, 188; see also Laporte 1993). From the 1840s, concerns about public health gave the issue of public toilet provision practical and moral urgency, while their successful installation by George Jennings at the Great Exhibition in 1851 gave them the official seal of approval (Wright 1960, 200). However, the vast majority of public facilities were for men only: whereas large cities in Scotland provided male facilities beginning in the 1820s, for instance, female conveniences were not constructed until the 1860s (Brunton 2005, 191). The lack of “resting places” significantly limited women’s mobility in the city: in the words of a contemporary, “Either ladies didn’t go out or ladies didn’t ‘go’” (quoted in Rappaport 2000, 82). In response, the Ladies’ Sanitary Association and concerned members of the public campaigned for the establishment of women’s conveniences at high-traffic spots. One such spot was the junction of Park Street and Camden High Street in the London Vestry of St. Pancras (Penner 2001).

It was at that junction that the local government decided to build a women’s lavatory. Residents and omnibus proprietors strenuously objected. They did not limit themselves to words—the wooden model of a lavatory built at the site was vandalized under the pretense that it was “obstructing the traffic.” On September 5, 1900, a deputation presented itself to the local government to demand an end to construction. Its members complained that a women’s lavatory would lower their property values and challenged the need for such facility, falsely claiming that the majority of women passing through the intersection lived nearby and could relieve themselves at home. Finally, one of the members admitted he simply “didn’t want such a place under his own window” (Penner 2001, 41). Another called it an “abomination.” As a result, despite the persistence of the lone female member of government and the advocacy of another male member, George Bernard Shaw, the site was abandoned. It was not until December 1905, after five years of stalling, that the decision to build a women’s bathroom at Park Street was made.

What drove the strong opposition to the women’s lavatory? Architectural historian Barbara Penner explains that “the members of the deputation clearly felt that the proposed convenience’s capacity to shock and offend was caused less by its function than by the sex of its future users” (2001, 41). Sanctioning the women’s lavatory effectively sanctioned the female presence in the streets, thus violating middle-class decorum and ideals of women as static and domestic. Moreover, “owing to its provocative corporeal associations, a female lavatory evoked the spectre of sexual-

ity which . . . encompassed a nebulous constellation of issues above and beyond sexual conduct itself” (Penner 2001, 45). By making women’s bodies and their “private” functions publicly visible, the lavatory threatened to transform its users into “public women.” These evocations surfaced in the smirk and ridicule that accompanied the debate in the Vestry, allowing punning slips from lavatory to brothel. Class also played a significant role as fears surfaced that the lavatory might become an arena in which the ladies who shopped promiscuously mixed with factory or flower girls—presuming, of course, that the latter could pay the facility’s prohibitive (and also controversial) penny charge (2001, 45).<sup>2</sup>

The second story takes place about half a century later and deals with the racial desegregation of public bathrooms in the United States. It illustrates the importance of toilets for the construction and presentation of social identities. The setting was the Western Electric Company plant in Baltimore, Maryland, during World War II. The trouble started in February 1942, when, following a change in plumbing code, the company adopted a policy against the segregation of public facilities (Ohly 1946). The union, consisting of white members, demanded segregation. When its requirements were not met, the union went on strike. As the Western Electric produced combat communication equipment, the strike had military consequences. Therefore, by order of the president, the secretary of war took possession and operated the plant. Despite the government’s intervention, employee attendance and the level of production fell (Ohly 1946). Only after the union leader, who would not budge on the segregation issue, and some administrators were relieved of their duties were the War Department representative and the union able to reach a compromise:

The company undertook to construct new and enlarged locker room and toilet facilities. A plan was worked out whereby the lockers would be assigned in blocks. Though there was no formal agreement, the intention to assign lockers to white employees which would adjoin each other and to Negro employees which would also adjoin each other was announced. Though there would be no segregation by rule in the use of toilet facilities, it was apparent that each employee would use that nearest his locker, which would result in a sort of voluntary separation. (Ohly 1946, 2)

While not being racist *de jure*, the compromise reinforced segregation *de facto*. The case is instructive in and of itself: the anxieties surrounding bathroom desegregation led to the strike at the nine-thousand-employee plant, a strike that compromised national interests, required presidential seizure, and was stopped only when the key figures were fired. The threat of being mixed with the Other was so great that people were ready to risk their livelihoods. It is telling that the case of Western Electric was not

unique, as the war up-ended existing social distinctions and led to racial mixing in intimate spaces. Eileen Boris notes that white fears of catching venereal diseases from blacks in newly integrated facilities underpinned many protests (Boris 1998, 93–95).

During the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, locker rooms and bathrooms continued to be the main obstacle to desegregation at many workplaces. Many court cases concerning the segregation of public facilities were decided throughout the 1950s and 1960s and as late as the 1970s (for instance, *James v. Stockham*, 1977). Fears over sexual mixing also drove objections to the Equal Rights Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which was not ratified because, among other reasons, the right wing claimed it would mandate unisex bathrooms (De Hart 1991, 255–56). Observing their role in the ERA's defeat, in fact, Gore Vidal listed ladies' rooms as one of several "tried-and-true hot buttons" in the Right's arsenal—a button that, as our experience has demonstrated, remains hot today (1979/1993, 542).<sup>3</sup>

The third story is contemporary and begins when previously invisible categories of people began successfully to demand public facilities that reflected their needs. First in line were people with disabilities (sometimes with attendants) and parents (with young children of an opposite sex): both groups required access to gender-neutral bathrooms. While single-user unisex bathrooms have always been a feature of airplanes and trains, as a result of the campaigns by disabled persons and parents, at least one such toilet can usually be found in public places such as theaters, gyms, and restaurants today. But when transgender and other gender-variant people joined the queue for toilet provision, anxieties about gender and sexuality immediately surfaced.

College campuses were the stage for these controversies and pitted conservative administrations against more radical student bodies. Campuses are places where many young people are grappling with their identities, sexual and political, and where new social trends emerge and are tested. Practically, too, bathroom provision is more of a concern for students, as they often live on campus and do not have access to other facilities. For some time, transgender students have voiced their reservations about the use of gender-assigned bathrooms, where they risk being insulted, mocked, attacked, and even arrested. However, only a handful of campuses provide unisex bathrooms and gender-blind floors in residence halls, and their introduction is often divisive. One notable dispute started at the University of Massachusetts Amherst (UMass), when a student group called Restroom Revolution suggested establishing several unisex public bathrooms on campus, arguing that transgender or gender-variant students and faculty members should be able to use the facilities in classroom buildings, and especially in the dorms, without fear of verbal or physical harassment.

Restroom Revolution's proposal provoked a poignant debate on campus that lasted over two years. At first, the administration seemed responsive and

promised to establish two unisex bathrooms in the residence halls. But no action resulted. Restroom Revolution then renewed their campaign, researching legal issues around the group's cause, organizing publicity on campus and in the media, and networking with other schools dealing with similar issues. They wrote an open letter to put political pressure on the administration. Simultaneously, they flooded the campus bathrooms with posters bearing mottoes such as "Do you know that you are sitting in a seat of privilege?" Hundreds of students signed a petition in support of the group. The group also secured the support of several important student organizations. This debate went public on the pages of the student papers and even in the *Boston Globe*, which featured a largely sympathetic article (Gedan 2002).

The issue was widely debated off campus too. While the conservative Traditional Value Coalition was, unsurprisingly, outraged ("individuals with mental problems should not be allowed to dictate social policies at a university" [Sheldon 2002]), at the opposite end of the political spectrum, the online Independent Gay Forum also voiced reservations about the campaign, noting that transgendered people faced much greater problems (e.g., assault and murder) than toilet access (Miller 2002). However, the main objection to the unisex bathroom, at least in the media, was on the grounds of public morality. According to the UMass conservative student newspaper, Restroom Revolution was using a frivolous issue to promote their morally unacceptable behavior to a naïve public: "Gender-neutral bathrooms are neither an issue of safety nor comfort for transgender students; they are merely a means for homosexual activists to influence campus with their immoral ideals and to break the traditional gender barriers that normal students hold" ("The Politics of Pee" 2002). In short, the objectors feared that unisex bathrooms might undermine traditional gender divisions. The derision and open hostility with which the request for provision and gender variance itself was met revealed deep-seated fears about sexuality as well as gender. The following quote from an online discussion in the progressive campus newspaper was depressingly typical: "If you want to be a woman, have some backbone and go get Mr. Happy chopped off. Until you feel strong enough to change yourself because of your beliefs, then don't you dare expect everyone else to change to cater to your needs" (Pierce 2002). Still, the Restroom Revolution campaign persisted until the summer of 2003, when two single-stall bathrooms (on a campus of thirty thousand people) were designated as unisex.

Despite the contemporary setting and a different agitating body, the story of the Restroom Revolution strongly echoes the other two we have considered: a change to existing toilet arrangements was proposed; a fierce, sometimes violent response occurred; and an uneasy, ambiguous resolution was imposed. In all cases, the debates turned on what the philosopher Louise Antony calls "weird and interesting 'nerve-hitting' issues . . . that people insist are too trivial to warrant discussion even as they



make clear that they'd rather die than countenance any alteration" (Antony 1998, 3). Changes to existing toilet arrangements are explosive because they recognize, accommodate, and, hence, legitimate the presence of a social group who customarily "make do" and remain invisible at the level of representation.

As these stories remind us, refusing people toilet access remains a remarkably effective form of social exclusion, and in defiance of basic human rights, toilets have become a potent means of further marginalizing social untouchables. Urban theorist Mike Davis observed that public toilets "have become the real frontline of the city's war on the homeless. Los Angeles, as a matter of deliberate policy, has fewer public lavatories than any other major North American city," thereby preventing the homeless and poor—many of whom are recent immigrants—from having clean water for drinking or washing (1992, 233–34). Toilets have also routinely been deployed to deny status. For instance, the first women's bathroom on the U.S. Senate floor was established only in 1992. Before that, female senators, at the risk of missing a vote, had to run downstairs to share a public restroom with tourists, a degrading reminder that the rightful occupant of the Senate was traditionally male (Quindlen 1992). Even more recently, the lack of women's bathrooms was used as an excuse to ban women's access to military academies (Faludi 1994). The use of a bathroom of the "wrong" sex could get one arrested (Belkin 1990). And, as we have seen, transgender and other gender-variant people still face difficulties in their access to sex-segregated public bathrooms because they do not conform to societal expectations of "male" and "female" (Feinberg 1996; Bornstein 1998; Vade 2001). The bathroom emerges as a space of "discipline" in Foucauldian terms, a space that represents "an unintentional cultural strategy for preserving existing social categories" and maintains our most "cherished classifications" (Cooper and Oldenziel 1999, 8). In the disputes arising over access to public bathrooms, then, we glimpse a social script that is normally implicit. But we also glimpse the possibility—the necessity—of imagining a different kind of script.

## Ladies and Gents: Approaches to Public Toilets and Gender

Public toilets are among the last openly sex-segregated spaces that remain in our society and, crucially, among the last spaces that people *expect* to be sex-segregated. Moreover, toilets reflect and shape the binary division between men and women as well as "proper" relations between people of the same sex. As such, public toilets are important and revealing sites for discussions of the construction and maintenance of gender, sexual identity, and power relations in general. Public toilets shape everyday urban experience on both an individual and collective level through their provision, location, and design. For instance, public toilets not only inform a woman's

ability to move comfortably through a city but also define what her “needs” are perceived to be by those in power and how she is expected to conduct herself publicly. These built-in assumptions, in turn, can promote a sense of belonging or of alienation: for instance, Muslim men might find the design of Western men’s urinals excludes them just as surely as steep sets of stairs exclude people in a wheelchair.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, in this volume we argue that toilets are best seen as spaces of representation. They are places where marginalized social groups strive for visibility and where cities strive for credibility. Thinking of public toilets in this way explains why they feature prominently in so many activist struggles and building campaigns. Campaigns by disabled groups for improved access have been very successful, resulting in the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act and the U.K. Disability Discrimination Act 1996 (Greed 2003, 162–72; Kitchin and Law 2001, 287–98). The Chinese investment in public toilet provision, especially in advance of the Beijing Olympics, is another well-known example (Geisler 2000; George 2008, 156–58). Indeed, public conveniences remain an important emblem of civility and progress and provide a focus for reformist efforts throughout Asia and India, for instance, through the World Toilet Organization (Greed 2003, 124–29) and the Sulabh Sanitation Movement (George 2008, 100–21). They also remain a rallying point for activist groups in Europe seeking to improve conditions for women. For instance, since 2004 the Belgian initiative “Do Not Silence My Bladder” has effectively protested the lack of female toilet accommodation in Ghent through high-profile poster campaigns, media coverage, publications, petitions, marches, and the installation of a female urinal at the city’s annual arts festival (de Vos 2005, 16–17).

Yet public toilets do not always represent “authorized” or regulatory discourses about civility, sanitation, and sexuality. The way they are used, experienced, and imagined can be equally transformative and transgressive: public toilets permit private moments away from public surveillance; they provide a space for communication, solidarity, or resistance, especially among women; and they act as repositories of behaviors and fantasies that can destabilize norms or social categories (Morrison 2008; Gordon 2003). They are also sites regularly associated with sexual expression through practices such as graffiti or cottaging (Houlbrook 2001, 2005; Otta 1993). This oscillation between respectability and its opposite explains why authorities and ordinary citizens frequently regard public toilets with suspicion.

In articulating this point of view, we draw on recent multidisciplinary literature about gender, space, and the body that opens up suggestive new perspectives on public toilets. The vast majority of literature specifically on toilets to date, while informative and amusing, is largely anecdotal, documentary, or technical in nature (Reynolds 1946; Wright 1960; Lambton 1995; Horan 1996; Hart-Davis 1997; Muntadas 2001; Gregory and James 2006; Carter 2007). Most architectural studies of toilets, too, emphasize

aesthetic or formal issues over social or environmental ones (Schuster 2005; Wenz-Gahler 2005). However, several pioneering and influential exceptions must be mentioned. The first is Alexander Kira's 1966 *The Bathroom*, one of the few serious twentieth-century studies of the toilet, which attempted completely to rethink bathroom design according to the principles of ergonomics while taking into consideration all aspects of human lavatory requirements, physical and psychological; his revised edition in 1976 includes a substantial section on public toilet design and use that remains pertinent today (Kira 1976, 190–237). Its twenty-first-century equivalent is the planner and campaigner Clara Greed's important *Inclusive Urban Design: Public Toilets* (2003). And journalist Rose George's recent *The Big Necessity* (2008) urgently makes the case that any integrated solution to the global water and sanitation crisis must involve open and frank discussions of toilet use and design, whether flush or biogas.

George is particularly critical of “the absence of academic curiosity” around toilets (2008, 151). In fact, the situation is not as bleak as she believes. Since the 1980s, a critical strand of academic literature has discussed toilets in relation to sex segregation and accessibility and their repercussions for social justice, citizenship, and inclusive urbanism (Banks 1990; Cavanagh and Ware 1990; Greed 1995; Edwards and McKie 1997; Cooper et al. 2000; Daley 2000; Anthony 2001; Case 2001; Cowen, Lehrer, and Winkler 2005; Ings 2007). In the last fifteen years, a small but growing body of work on toilets and sexual identity has also emerged from such disciplines as cultural geography, anthropology, sociology, and queer theory. And toilets have provided a useful focus for the growing body of interdisciplinary work on dirt, filth, and waste (e.g., Cohen 2005; Campkin 2007). Strikingly, however, with the significant exception of Clara Greed and Harvey Molotch, few scholars seem to have a sense of working in a “field” in which others are also active. After our “Call For Papers,” for instance, we received countless e-mails that began: “I had no idea anyone else was doing work on this topic.”

In order to forge connections between these multidisciplinary discussions, we have provided an overview of key literature that precedes this volume. Our aim is not to build an exhaustive list but rather to give readers the contours of the field as it has emerged and developed, especially in recent years. Not all the literature discussed here specifically raises issues of gender, yet it is relevant in that it opens up a discussion of the construction of social categories and sets the stage for the more historically and culturally specific considerations of gender, space, and identity found in this volume.

## Toilets and Equal Rights: From Philosophy to Practical Politics

Since the nineteenth century, feminist campaigners have been well aware of the importance of space to female independence. Questions of spatial orga-

nization and access have long been integral to their thinking, as expressed, for instance, by Virginia Woolf's plea for *A Room of One's Own* (1929). In our own time, African American legal scholar Taunya Lovell Banks calls for feminists to recognize access to public toilets as a feminist issue, stating, "We must realize that continuing inequality at the toilet reflects this male-dominated society's hostility to our presence outside of the home" (1990, 267). Banks implicitly invokes the logic of the 1970s feminist slogan "the personal is political," which recognizes how the distribution of everyday duties and spaces institutionalizes sexism, disadvantages women, and reinforces normative notions of femininity. Considering the question of sex-segregated toilets as part of a larger discussion of patriarchy, philosopher Richard Wasserstrom concluded that they were just "one small part of that scheme of sex-role differentiation which uses the mystery of sexual anatomy . . . to maintain the primacy of heterosexual sexual attraction" central to patriarchal power relations (1977, 594). Believing this structural injustice to be incompatible with a good society, he called for the "eradication of all sex-role differences" (1977, 606). Yet as the feminist philosopher Louise Antony astutely observes, most people, feminists included, continue to believe that an "equitable accommodation to gender," rather than its elimination, is all that liberation requires (1998).

Even efforts to provide equitable accommodation prove tricky where toilets are concerned. Viewing the provision of public toilets—or lack thereof—as a form of sex discrimination, sociologist Harvey Molotch pointed out a paradox: due to female toilet needs and uses, distributing space equally between men's and ladies' rooms actually produces "an unequal result." The queues that result from women's longer visits to the toilet (studies show that women take, on average, twice as long as men) place women under "special burdens of physical discomfort, social disadvantage, psychological anxiety" when in public (Molotch 1988, 129). Working from the principles of affirmative action, Molotch argues that unless the cultural demands of society change—something he clearly hopes for—only "an asymmetric distribution of space" will improve the situation and provide "equality of opportunity" among the genders (1988, 130).

Molotch's argument anticipates the rationale behind "potty parity" legislation passed in various U.S. states in the 1980s and 1990s, whose most prominent champion is lawyer John Banzhaf III (1990). In 2002, in the hope of establishing improved female toilet provision as a federal statutory and constitutional right, Banzhaf filed a complaint against the University of Michigan for providing insufficient facilities for women in its planned renovation of Hill Auditorium. Banzhaf argues that the university's failure to provide restrooms that accommodate the "immutable biological differences" between men and women constitutes "illegal sex discrimination and sexual harassment" (2002, n.p.).<sup>5</sup> He also proposes that inadequate provision for women may constitute a violation of the Equal Protection clause of the U.S.

Constitution, which mandates that “state-owned facilities cannot treat members of two different classes differently” unless to do so serves “important governmental objectives” (Banzhaf n.d.). Banzhaf assumes that the “important governmental objective” served by sex-segregated toilets is maintaining the privacy of the two sexes but rejects this as an adequate defense for making women wait longer to perform the same function as men (n.d.).

Although potty parity can represent real gains for women, some elements of Banzhaf’s case give one pause. By insisting on “immutable biological differences” between the sexes, such decisions act culturally to reinforce patriarchal notions of gender, as Wasserstrom and Antony maintain. Certainly, the complaint does not challenge the underlying logic of sex-segregated toilets and treats existing arrangements as inevitable, even if Banzhaf does consider alternatives to current arrangements elsewhere (1990, n.p.) Nearly two decades after Molotch’s article, it appears that, given existing gender ideologies and notions of privacy, providing *more* toilets is still considered the best remedy for inequities in provision; yet it is clearly not always the best from a rational, gendered, not to mention environmental perspective (as summarized by Greed 2003, 111–29). Why is it so difficult for us collectively and imaginatively to explore other options?

## Toilets, Dirt, and Social Order: Anthropological and Sociological Approaches

Anthropologists and sociologists, most notably Mary Douglas (*Purity and Danger*, 1966), have highlighted the ways in which notions of dirt and its management reflect and inform social arrangements. In works indebted to Douglas’s insights, toilets become windows onto the processes by which cultures define, separate, and manage dirt, and thus they contribute to the maintenance or violation of ideal order. As Ben Campkin and Rosie Cox remark, an especially helpful aspect of Douglas’s work is that it views definitions of dirt as central to the social classificatory systems of *all* cultures, whether scientifically advanced or “primitive,” even though these are manifested very differently (Campkin and Cox 2007, 4). Douglas further argues that ideas about dirt are so naturalized that their regulatory social role is revealed only through cross-cultural comparison (Van der Geest 2002, 197–206) or at moments when they are threatened by transgression (pollution). For instance, the historians Patricia Cooper and Ruth Oldenziel (1999) attribute the visibility of bathroom discourse during World War II to the unsettling of normal gender and racial patterns. They conclude that in this situation of ambiguity, when women of both colors suddenly entered the male workplace, bathrooms were crucial to keeping social categories (black and white, women and men) from mixing with and contaminating each another. Cooper and Oldenziel’s emphasis on social ordering allows them to maintain a critical perspective on what toilets represent: the inclusion sym-

bolized by toilet provision comes at a price, as it quickly imposes familiar patterns of racist and sexist spatial segregation on users (1999, 20).

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "habitus" (1979/2007) has also been used to relate dirt to cultural definition and social order. Notably, sociologist David Inglis (2001) identifies the management of dirt, especially of human waste, as constituting a distinctly Western, bourgeois fecal habitus, crucial to what Bourdieu calls "distinction"—the efforts of modern society to define its various members symbolically. Although the literature on female toilet usage inspired his interest in "defecatory matters," Inglis mainly addresses the issue of class in his own work. Yet he throws down the gauntlet to feminist scholars, asking, among his more provocative questions, "Why is toilet paper pastel?" (2001, 2). Inglis's seemingly idle musing is consistent with an approach held by many feminists and queer theorists, who now regard the process of social formation as embedded in seemingly mundane routines and consumption decisions. He has also inspired research from a "social constructionist" position by sociologists Martin Weinberg and Colin Williams, who consider how the fecal habitus is "mediated by socio-cultural factors" (2005, 324). In interviews with 172 Indiana University students, the authors analyze their differing responses to "bodily betrayal" and fecal sights, sounds, and smells along the axes of gender and sexual identity and the threat these pose to self-presentation. In this, their work relates to sociologist Beverley Skeggs's identification of female toilets as potentially crucial sites for the enactment of femininity and the legitimization of cultural capital necessary for symbolic power (2001). However, based on her research into the English gay bar scene, Skeggs notes that, in reality, the performances often do not function in such an affirmative way but instead highlight tensions between various social actors.

Lastly, the talk of self-presentation invokes the work of sociologist Erving Goffman, most famously *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), which considers our daily interactions as social performances and, following dramaturgical principles, divides spaces into front- and back-stage regions; on the frontstage, we perform, whereas in the back regions, surrounded by props, we remove our social mask and prepare ourselves for the next act. Considering Goffman's definition, it might initially seem as if the bathroom is a classic backstage area. But, as Spencer Cahill points out, the backstage is actually the toilet stalls (Cahill et al. 1985, 33–38). The open area of the bathroom in front of the sinks and urinals is often an area of performance, governed by what Goffman calls "interpersonal rituals," some of which acknowledge other users while others leave them alone. Perhaps the most relevant of these interpersonal rituals is what Goffman calls "civil inattention," where one acknowledges the other but then withdraws one's attention before the other feels like "a target of special curiosity or design" (Goffman 1963, 84; Cahill et. al 1985, 38–42). Goffman's discussion bears an obvious relationship to the later work of queer theorists. In

the context of their studies, however, the performance that takes place in bathrooms is always charged with sexual meanings—and one withdraws one’s attention to avoid being called a queer.

## Toilets, Subjectivity, and Symbolic Order: Psychoanalytical Approaches

Other writers have come to toilets via a psychoanalytical route, drawing from George Bataille’s (1985) notions of abjection, excess, and waste or Julia Kristeva’s (1982; 1997) more openly gendered notion of the abject. Perhaps the most madly energetic engagement with the subject (and closest to Bataille in spirit) is Dominique Laporte’s *History of Shit* (1993). As Rodolphe El-Khoury (1993) notes, in this work Laporte was creating an account of the civilizing process as a devaluation of the senses. In addition to Laporte’s debt to Freud’s *Civilisation and Its Discontents* (1930/1961), this project can be related to that of sociologist Norbert Elias, who, in the groundbreaking *The Civilizing Process* (1939/2000), traced the rise of civility to the increasing control over bodily excreta. Yet Laporte’s analysis privileges smell above other senses, as he sees the containment of olfactory offenses as central to bourgeois subjectivity and to the emergent capitalist economy.<sup>6</sup> He also believes it is the desire for containment that drives domestic design toward greater segregation—the internal partitioning of toilets into stalls is a good example—that extends ever outward to the city at large. But, while tracing these larger (infra)structural changes, Laporte does not lose sight of the role of waste in self-definition: “To touch, even lightly, on the relationship of a subject to his shit, is to modify not only that subject’s relationship to the totality of his body, but also his very relationship to the world and to those representations that he constructs of his situation in society” (1993, 29).

In discussing how shit mediates between individual bodies and the world, Laporte makes little explicit distinction between different bodies. For a more specific account of how such relations define us as gendered beings, we might consider toilet training for girls and boys, which, as Simone de Beauvoir argued in *The Second Sex* (1949/1997), indoctrinates women into a subordinate (crouching) position. Or we might turn to the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. Famously, Lacan illustrated his account of how we enter the symbolic register and become subject to its arbitrary logic with reference to a public toilet, accompanied by a drawing of two identical doors marked “Ladies” and “Gentlemen.” Lacan (1997) states that it is these signs, backed up by the “laws of urinary segregation,” that fix sexual difference, at least in public. Literary theorist Elizabeth Abel also draws on the work of Lacan in analyzing how racially segregated bathrooms and drinking fountains inscribe differences between “Colored” and “White” (1999, 435–39).<sup>7</sup> Lacan—and Kristeva too—under-

scores that any disruption of the symbolic and spatial order creates anxiety and disgust. Through a complex and brilliant analysis, for instance, architectural theorist Lorens Holm notes that the shock one feels when confronted with scatological, racist, sexist toilet graffiti is caused by the fact that it is “matter out of place” (Douglas 1966, 36). Yet Holm makes clear that this is not “matter out of place” in the sense that Douglas defined it; rather, the displacement to which he refers is internal, destabilizing the representational boundary between inside and outside and thus reminding us of “the horror that simmers beneath any symbolic system”—the Real that the Symbolic has repressed (Holm 2007, 430).

### Toilets and Spatial Order: Architectural Approaches

When Marcel Duchamp was asked the question “What is the difference between architecture and sculpture?” his response was reputedly “Plumbing.” Writers on architecture have subsequently found plumbing to be a useful means of probing the boundaries of modernism. Noting that modernism strove to create the appearance of light-filled, transparent, and functional spaces, for instance, the editors of the special “Toilet” issue of *Postcolonial Studies* point out that this, paradoxically, necessitated that other elements of building, its “underbelly,” be hidden away. “At the very moment when the precursors to the internationalist school were pushing the use of glass and promoting the value of transparency in building form,” they observe, “the private bathroom moves into the shadows as the one space/place where transparency does not reign” (Dutton, Seth, and Gandhi 2002a, 138). They ask: “Is the toilet the ‘limit’ of modernity, that which is occluded, repressed, displaced by the onward march of modernity? Or is it rather an essential part of the story of the modern by very virtue of its occlusion?” (2002a, 138). For these scholars, the toilet opens up a different story of the modern: a somatic one that is not dominated by vision. As such, it is related to the work of the historians Alain Corbin (1986) and David S. Barnes (2005), whose discussions of smells, stinks, waste, and sewers reintroduce an experiencing body to discourse—a body that senses, perceives, breathes, eats, smells, hears, sleeps, digests, and defecates.

Significantly in terms of this volume’s aims, unlike the abstracted, ideal (male) body around which modern architecture is built, the body that emerges in these accounts is one differentiated by sex, race, ethnicity, and class. So, too, are the laborious rituals of cleaning upon which the maintenance of modernist purity depends. As the art historian Briony Fer reminds us, “Woman as a servant, or as a mother, is charged (and I mean Charged in both sense of responsibility and impugned guilt) with the management of dirt. Dirt and cleanliness are the women’s prerogative” (quoted in Lahiji



and Friedman 1997, 55; see also Lupton and Miller 1992, 11–15). (And surely, the image of woman as a high priestess of domestic cleansing answers David Inglis’s question about the delicately colored hues of toilet paper?) Toilet studies allow architectural scholars to resurrect what modernism must suppress in order to construct itself: the irrational, the pathological, the psychic, the foreign, the erotic, the decorative, and, most crucial here, the feminine (Morgan 2002, 171–95).

These acts of resurrection and reconnection are driven by the desire to restore wholeness to a discipline, be it history or architecture, that is seen to be lacking in some way. One thinks, for instance, of Jun’ichiro Tanizaki’s eulogy to the “spiritual repose” offered by traditional Japanese toilets in contrast to the sanitized glare of Western ones (1933/1977, 3–6). In such essays, the toilet emerges as a kind of crucial hinge between opposed states: the sacred and the profane, purity and abjection, private and public, moral and immoral (Frascardi 1997, 165). While toilets are seen as the container of the unclean, at the same time they enable the ablutions that are so necessary to modern Western life. These ablutions are moments of what Helen Molesworth, following Deleuze and Guattari, calls “hooking up,” where our bodies interact with machines (Molesworth 1997, 83).

It is worth pausing for a moment to consider Molesworth’s development of “hooking up” in greater depth. Many have spoken of toilets as machines: in fact, toilets, in their gleaming, white, standardized perfection, have become iconic fetish objects not only for architects such as Le Corbusier and Adolf Loos but for historians of modernism. It is not for nothing that Margaret Morgan called the white porcelain of the toilet bowl “that grand signifier of twentieth-century modernism” (1997, 171). One of the best-known books on the subject, Lawrence Wright’s *Clean and Decent* (1960), compiles sections of toilets, removed, as with Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain*, from the context of their use. Floating in the white space of the page, they appear as pieces of equipment defined by bowls and pipes, valves and flushes. Relieved of what Siegfried Giedion saw as the “grotesqueness” and daintiness of their “feminine” ornamentation, their functional, manly simplicity was perfectly in tune with modernist aesthetics (Giedion 1948, 691). The concept of hooking up, however, re-embodies these objects, reminding us of the gendered body who initiates use and of the machine/body relationships that are part of everyday life. Indeed, Molesworth argues that *Fountain* was so unsettling precisely because it made the urinal useless, effectively suspending machine-body interaction, everywhere highlighting “dirty bodies and full bladders” (Molesworth 1997, 83). The urge to restore wholeness is doubtless why exhibited toilets are such a provocation. One thinks of retired seed-merchant Pierre Pinoncelli’s 1993 notorious attack on *Fountain*: prior to striking it with a hammer, he urinated into it in a pungent act of neo-Dadaist protest (Durantaye 2007).

## Toilets and Sexual Identity: Queer Theory

The body is also the focus of queer theorists for whom public toilets resonate not only because they have historically been sites for homosexual encounters but because of their metonymic relationship to the “closet” of gay identity. Michel Foucault’s notion of “disciplining” (1975/1991) is relevant here: as part of the drive to create “docile bodies,” every aspect of the body, including sexual desire, is overseen and regulated. In Foucault’s account, the partitioning of space into individualized cells (we might say, stalls) is key to enabling close and constant supervision. Significantly, Foucault uses the toilets at France’s *École Militaire* as an example of “hierarchical observation,” noting that they were installed with half-doors so that “the supervisor on duty could see the head and legs of the pupils, and also side walls sufficiently high ‘that those inside cannot see one another’” (1991, 171–72). The stall arrangement makes students visible while simultaneously ensuring that they cannot see each other’s genitalia, setting into motion a complex and coercive play of exposure and secrecy, repression and desire, the implications of which queer theorists explore.

Drawing on Judith Butler’s notion of the performativity of gender (1990) and on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s definition of homosociality (1985), a number of scholars discuss the gender performances that take place within bathrooms and that identify one as homosexual or heterosexual (e.g., Edelman 1994, 1996; Halberstam 1998; Munt 1998; Houlbrook 2000; Barcan 2005). Literary theorist Lee Edelman notes that the men’s room is unique in that it can strongly affirm heterosexual identity. However, a straight man can be sheltered only “so long as he performatively shelters the structural flaw that opens his body, by way of its multiple openings (ocular, oral, anal, genital), to the various psychic vicissitudes able to generate illicit desires” (1996, 152). Edelman particularly pays attention to the unwritten but tacitly understood behavioral codes that govern toilet use, termed “urinal etiquette” by the historian Matt Houlbrook (2000, 55). While the genitals are exposed at the urinal, other men should never look at them. Edelman writes, “The law of the men’s room decrees that men’s dicks be available for public contemplation at the urinal precisely to allow a correlative mandate: that such contemplation must never take place” (1996, 153). Equally, lesbians in gay bars speak of averting their gaze when they find themselves queuing with visibly feminine women (Skeggs, 2001, 301).

In these works, the bathroom emerges as a frontstage space where sexual identity, queer and straight, is performed and may be legitimated (e.g., Nilsson 1998). However, this performance is fraught with anxiety and, as the case of Senator Craig (and a long line of men attempting to engage in gay sex) reminds us, subject to rejection, police surveillance, or entrapment (Humphries 1970; Maynard, 1994; Chauncey 1996). Yet, considering the

prosecution of men for cottaging in early-twentieth-century London, Houlbrook observes how the violations of “proper” urinal etiquette that triggered police action were often contested in courts of law. One man who found himself under suspicion on the grounds that he had been seen entering one urinal five times in forty minutes later defended himself on the medical grounds that he had a “weak bladder” (2000, 52–70). The same ambiguous codes that could entrap men could be used to exonerate them. In this reading, homosexual conduct, like homosexual identity itself, is subject to testing and contestation, which, as queer theorists argue, often drives the violence against gay men. Edelman writes, “Where better to discern the full force of aggression implicit in the question—‘Are you looking at *me*?’—that condenses our pervasive male cultural anxiety about the capacities of gay men to transform, or to queer? . . .” (1996, 154).

### Toilets and Representation: Literature, Arts, and Film

It is important to note that academic criticism has discovered the toilet relatively late in the game. The toilet has long been a setting for literary, artistic, and film representations of gendered subjectivity and subjecthood, of abjection and mastery, of secrets and lies. It is not by coincidence that one of the most seminal feminist novels, Marilyn French’s *The Women’s Room* (1977), opens with its protagonist, Mira, hiding in the female toilets. Her traditionalism, alienation, and deepening personal crisis are immediately signaled by her response to graffiti scratching out the word “ladies” and replacing it with “women’s.” Mira, French tells us, called it a ladies’ room “out of thirty-eight years of habit, and until she saw the cross-out on the door, had never thought about it. . . . But here she was at the age of thirty-eight huddled for safety in a toilet booth in the basement of Sever Hall, gazing at, no, studying that word and others of the same genre” (1997, 1). In French’s novel, the crossing-out of “ladies” is meant as a metaphor for the changes Mira will experience after her divorce. Yet its somewhat naïve substitution of one term for another warns readers that a change of circumstances alone may not be enough to permit Mira to escape from the patriarchal system (as indeed proves to be the case).

Public toilets have also been a fertile site and provocation for visual and performance art, as chapters in this collection by Alex Schweder, Kathy Battista, and Robin Lydenberg demonstrate. Toilet doors themselves, with their gender-prescriptive signs, are designed to communicate. Graphic designer Lynne Ciochetto connects the now-ubiquitous signs for women and men to “the internationalism of commerce and culture that occurred in the post war period,” driven by mass tourism in the United States and the rise of global events such as the Olympics (2003, 193–200). In areas that are less touched by mass tourism and multinational business, flourishing local

vernacular traditions for depicting men and women remain on toilet doors (see examples in Ciochetto 2003, 203). Whatever their style, these signs reflect gender and cultural norms; that international pictograms are inherently Western, for instance, is revealed by their reliance on (dated) Western dress codes—the woman wears a skirt, the man, trousers—even in cultures or situations where this does not correspond to the clothing people wear (Munt 1998, 201–2). The 2005 exhibit “Toilet Doors of Melbourne” at the Museum Victoria drove home the point that we typically overlook such biases: “We don’t often stop and think about the signs on toilet doors—we only really take notice of what the signs actually say when we’re confused about which door is for us” (Horvath 2005).

Toilets have also made their mark in popular culture, especially on television: one need only think of *Ally McBeal*’s iconic unisex office bathroom. Whenever the camera zooms in on a stall, we know that we were about to witness confessions, eavesdropping, romantic encounters, or violence. Similarly, toilet spaces are often important settings in motion pictures, as Frances Pheasant-Kelly discusses in her contribution to this volume. Such fictional and mundane representations remind us that, however much we treat toilets as private spaces, they are actually saturated by publicity, as images of private moments, behaviors, embarrassments, and passions are circulated endlessly through various media.

There are also many exemplary documentary films that engage with public toilets and their gendered use, often with the specific aim of stimulating debates over social difference, equal rights, and public space. Given the significance of the bathroom in Peter Greenaway’s *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*, it is appropriate the British auteur directed one of the best films of this type. In *26 Bathrooms* (1985, 26 min.), Greenaway arranges the bathroom in encyclopedic alphabetical order, each bathroom corresponding to a letter: “A is for A Bathroom; B is for Bath,” and so forth. Some categories are factual, some humorous, some ironic, such as “Q is for a Quiet Smoke”—a shot of a man on a toilet smoking and reading. Greenaway’s “subjects” range from opulent, expensively designed, full-size bathrooms to a bleak, cupboard-like cubicle (referred to as “the Samuel Becket [*sic*] Memorial Bathroom”). Similarly, the users range from sybarites advocating bodily pleasures (in which they readily and nakedly indulge on screen), to fully-clothed soliloquists recalling painful youth experiences, to individuals recounting stories of bathroom renovations. These accounts are intercut with an interview with an expert (“X is for an Expert on Bathrooms”) who provides snippets of history of private and public bathrooms, starting from the Victorian era. Bathroom use emerges in the film as a social experience—a place where intimate conversations between couples or cuddling between a mother and a baby takes place.

More recently, a number of documentaries have explored issues arising from bathroom use by transgender people. Perhaps the most influential among

them is *Toilet Training* (2003, 30 min., dir. Tara Mateik), produced by the Sylvia Rivera Law Project, an organization that provides legal services to low-income transgender and gender-variant people. Appropriately, the video and accompanying handbook address the persistent harassment and violence that gender-variant people face in gender-segregated bathrooms. Through the real-life stories, the video raises problems with public bathroom access for a range of people: an African American trans woman who is arrested for using a women's room in the public park; a tomboy who dropped out of school because she was prohibited from using the men's room by staff, and from the women's room by female students; and a disabled man who notes, ironically, that gender segregation is lifted only in the context of disability. These stories are interspersed with interviews with lawyers, social workers, and activists that help explore current law and policy and highlight recent and future policy changes. The filmmakers pay close attention not only to gender and space but also to the ways these intersect with age, race, and class.<sup>8</sup>

A different aspect of gender performance is raised in a short video, *Tea-room Trade* (1994, 12 min. dir. Christopher Johnson). The video features an interview with two young gay men and their playful enactment of a "tearoom" (i.e., public toilet) encounter. These sequences are punctuated by homoerotic imagery from several films (in particular, Jean Genet's *Un chant d'amour*) and scenes from commercial gay pornography. By contrast, *Ferry Tales* (2003, 40 min., dir. Katja Esson) emphasizes the public toilet's homosociality. *Ferry Tales* is filmed in a women's bathroom on the Staten Island Ferry, a place that one of the characters calls "a great equalizer." The ferry's bathroom brings together commuters across races, classes, and ages. For thirty minutes every day, the women on a ferry form an unusual community. Always in a rush, these women use the time on a ferry to gather in front of the mirrors in the bathroom "to put our faces on," as one of the characters states; the diverse group of women—young, old, black, white, working-class, executive—are portrayed huddled together before the mirrors in one big lipstick-holding, hair-curling organism. Unlike the sexually charged, transgressive atmosphere of the men's room in *Tearoom Trade*, the ferry's "powder room" is a space of communion and sisterhood that feels to the women at times "like a family." And as in a family, not everything is smooth: conflicts exist alongside expressions of social and emotional support. What emerges is a conversation about identity: the women peer intensely in the mirrors at themselves and others not just to monitor the application of make-up but also to search for themselves.

The Iranian documentary *The Ladies Room/Zananeh* (2003, 55 min., dir. Mahnaz Afzali) also takes place inside a women's restroom, this time in a public park in Tehran. This bathroom also becomes a sort of a spontaneous social club; it brings together addicts, prostitutes, and homeless girls, as well as women who work nearby or pass through. Many are downtrodden, abused, or abandoned. And yet, the bleak space of the park restroom, with

its yellowed tiles and basic plumbing, becomes a liberating zone for the women. As one of them exclaims on screen: “I go to the Laleh Park restroom. It’s an ultimate pleasure!” In the ladies’ room, these women feel comfortable enough to smoke and talk frankly with each other about marriage, sex, physical abuse and incest, relationships, and religion. They remove their veils—a radical gesture in itself, as women baring their hair on screen is a violation of Iranian cinematic and gender conventions. They create their own space, a place of female camaraderie in between private and public, sometimes a place of last resort. Despite its lack of clarity or commentary (a real disadvantage for cultural outsiders), the film stands as a rare attempt to draw out the invisible and the unrepresentable for cross-cultural audiences.

This also is true of the Indian documentary *Q2P* (2006, 54 min., dir. Paromita Vohra). *Q2P* (pronounced “queue to pee”) tackles the culturally unmentionable subject of public toilets, in particular the shortage of women’s facilities in India. The availability and conditions of public restrooms for women testify to the state of the city, its citizens, and their impressive yet disjointed efforts to move toward greater progress. The film takes us on a sweeping journey from the Westernized city center with its modern sleek bathrooms, though the poorer periphery where community toilets are scarce and scary, to the realities of the homeless, who bathe their newly born children in the street. Looking at the country through the lens of toilets allows the film to raise questions about gender, class, caste, and urban development in India. Even today, the city’s sanitation workers come from the “untouchable” caste, and access to toilets correlates with both class and gender: according to the film, 700 million Indians still do not have toilets at home and rely on public latrines for their needs. Not surprisingly, such facilities are more commonly provided for men than for women. The film brings together different voices: it features interviews with a feminist architect, government officials responsible for public toilets, and staff of the Sulabh International Museum of Toilets. But we also hear voices of teachers at public schools in poor neighborhoods who suffer from health problems because of lack of toilet access; young girls who explain that they have a special “system” so they never have to use a toilet in public; women living in slums who develop strategies for using public toilets safely; even a contractor who builds illegal private toilets without proper drainage. The diverse cast of the film creates a rich and multidimensional picture of a problem and, like many of the other films discussed above, provides a humane and timely reminder of the role toilets have to play in creating a dignified and equitable society.

## The Toilet Papers

*Ladies and Gents* aims to provide a cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural platform for the study of public toilets and gender. Despite coming from a

wide variety of fields and covering many topics, the essays we received in response to our CFP fell under several distinct themes. These are reflected in this book's two-part structure: The first part, "Potty Politics: Toilets, Gender, and Identity," addresses issues of health, safety, and equality, as well as the role of toilets in defining notions of public and private and of cultural difference. The second part, "Toilet Art: Design and Cultural Representations," seeks to draw out more explicitly a discussion of public toilets as designed spaces and as spaces of representation.

The first part opens with a trio of essays that establish the importance of accessible, secure public toilets to the creation of inclusive cities, work, and learning spaces. We begin with planner Clara Greed's essay. Affirming the role of public toilets in making healthy cities, her essay traces a dispiriting picture of the reality of provision in the United Kingdom: over 40 per cent of public toilets have been closed in the last decade, a situation that has a particularly negative impact on the mobility and health of women. Greed makes a powerful case for compulsory legislation, increased funding, and improved management to improve radically the status quo. Following on Greed's U.K.-based analysis, environmental designers Kathryn H. Anthony and Meghan Dufresne provide an overview of the situation in the United States, discussing moves to legislate equal access, especially "potty parity" laws and the backlash against them. They call for an end to what they call "potty privileging"—a systematic spatial discrimination against women. They conclude on a cautiously hopeful note, presenting new developments and technological inventions that speak to an increasing international will to address restroom issues. Then, educator Claudia Mitchell provides a deeply troubling account of the role unsupervised toilets play in enabling sexual violence against girls in sub-Saharan African schools. Analyzing children's drawings of toilets and interviews with teachers and pupils, she concludes that toilets carry the threat of violence and infection by AIDS and, as such, constitute a significant barrier to girls' education. Mitchell ends with a question as to how the situation can be remedied.

The following four essays assess the impact and meanings of campaigns and legal fights over female toilet provision, considering toilets as spaces of social definition or of cross-cultural encounter, and together provide a historical and cultural perspective on the contemporary situation. Historians Andrew Brown-May and Peg Fraser analyze the asymmetrical public toilet provision in Melbourne, Australia, from the 1850s on. Probing the fact that Melbourne's first municipal public toilet for men was erected some fifty years earlier than a toilet for women, they conclude that gender stereotypes and ideas about respectability were at play, shaping official definitions of the "public" citizen. In addition, they introduce the notion of "municipal interchange," the circulation of information and innovation between cities, to explain the simultaneous appearance and acceptance of female toilets in metropolitan centres from the United Kingdom to Austra-

lia at the turn of the century. In the next essay, legal scholar Jami Anderson dissects the 2004 decision *Everson v. Michigan Department of Corrections*, in which the court accepted the Michigan Department of Correction's claim that "the very manhood" of male prison guards both threatens the safety of female inmates and violates the women's "special sense of privacy in their genitals" warranting the complete elimination of all male prison guards. Anderson argues that the *Everson* decision, while claiming to protect women prisoners from the harms of toileting exposure, actually reveals a long—though mostly implicit—custom of defining privacy as the "right to modesty" where women are concerned.

Continuing the theme of citizenship, belonging, and bodily privacy, Alison Moore considers toilets and toilet habits as markers of cultural difference. Drawing on her own experience of traveling through North Africa and India, Moore examines touristic responses to excretion in public spaces and fears of gastrointestinal illness as represented by popular travel manuals such as *Lonely Planet*. Her analysis indicates that anxieties about public excretion and disease remain a crucial part of middle-class Western perceptions of the difference between postcolonizing and postcolonial cultures. The essay also questions what role middle-class anxieties about excretion might play in relation to feelings of guilt about the colonial past and neocolonial present, especially for women tourists. Architectural theorist Naomi Stead's essay also takes up issues of shame and obfuscation. Positioning herself as an amateur etymologist, Stead explores why it is that English speakers, especially women, have historically been so averse to calling a toilet a toilet. Stead argues that the persistent use of euphemisms points to the ongoing links between taboo, gender, and language and suggests toilets will always be a necessary but unspeakable cultural presence.

In the second part, the first two essays specifically focus on aspects of toilet design, noting that they remain deeply, if invisibly, shaped by masculinist conventions. We begin with architect Deborah Gans's essay about designing refugee housing. As the main occupants of refugee camps are women of childbearing age, the camps pose special challenges to designers both in terms of architecture and in terms of human rights—challenges that are often not met by implicitly colonialist and male-centred International Style camps. Consequently, Gans has designed and implemented an alternate camp design and layout that increases the woman's control over the patterning and maintenance of the household, permitting improved privacy, hygiene, and child supervision. In a similar vein, Barbara Penner's essay questions the underlying logic of female public toilet design. Specifically, in the face of unrelenting complaints about women's public toilets—from long queuing times to cramped cubicles—why is it that their design has been so rarely reconsidered over the last century? Penner considers various attempts from the 1890s to the present to introduce female urinals



into public toilets and analyzes how each attempt questions the gendered conventions that govern toilet production and use.

The subsequent four essays focus specifically on toilets as a powerful subject of and site for visual art and site-specific installations. Theorist Robin Lydenberg provides an incisive overview of the legacy of Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*. Using the work of Dorothy Cross and Ilya Kabakov, Lydenberg traces the Duchampian influence to three strands in contemporary art: one takes on his challenge to the isolation of "high art" institutions from everyday life; another aims at social change; and yet another focuses on the body, gender issues, and sexual orientation. Following on Lydenberg's third strand, art historian Kathy Battista considers feminist artists' reinterpretation of the toilet since the 1970s. Analyzing Judy Chicago's groundbreaking *Menstruation Bathroom* (1972) and Catherine Elwes' *Menstruation* performances (1977), Battista discusses how feminist artists have sought to undermine the artistic trope of women at their toilet in order to demystify female experience and the relationship of gender to biology. Her main interest, however, is the toilet-based photographic and sculptural work of British artist Sarah Lucas. Battista argues that in Lucas's pieces toilets challenge gender stereotypes and, through their complex array of connotations, resist any straightforward reading of a woman as a vulnerable or sexual creature.

Artist and architect Alex Schweder's essay mines the psychological potency of the spatial partitioning of public toilets. He presents four recent projects that, by dissolving clear boundaries, intensify anxieties sublimated in public bathrooms and destabilize normal codes of spatial occupation. Bushra Rehman follows with a more personal meditation on the cultural meaning of bathroom practices inspired by sister Sa'dia Rehman's installation *Lotah Stories* in the Queens Museum of Art's bathroom. Lotahs, small vessels that contain water for cleansing oneself after using the toilet, are commonplace throughout South Asia and in many Muslim countries. However, once South Asian and Muslim immigrants come to the United States, the pressure to assimilate forces many to make the transition from lotah to toilet paper, while others carry on using lotahs-in-disguise. Through interviews and anonymous communications, Sa'dia encouraged first-generation and second-generation South Asians to talk publicly about their lotahs. Bushra Rehman's conversation with her sister underscores the way dirt and cleanliness are shaped within culture.

The final three essays delve into the world of representation through film, theater, and popular culture. Taken together, they confirm the notion that, even though toilet practices are on one level private, on another they are only too public. Frances Pheasant-Kelly's essay examines representations of men in toilets in the films *Full Metal Jacket*, *Pulp Fiction*, and *There's Something about Mary*. Pheasant-Kelly argues that, cinematically, toilet spaces in Hollywood movies almost always denote a depleted mascu-

linity and threaten an occasionally fatal loss of control and emotional composure. Yet she observes that this threat is often alleviated in films through the use of comedy, where the instabilities of masculinity are mitigated by laughter or by men dressing as women. Next, urban theorists Johan Andersson and Ben Campkin examine the meanings of “cottage” in mainstream and gay cultures. They show how the British media reinforce a link between male homosexuality and public conveniences: the emphasis on the toilet’s relationship to waste in combination with the real dereliction of many “cottages” confirms gay men as society’s dirty other. Andersson and Campkin draw out the ambivalence toward public toilets in gay culture itself, analyzing two contemporary plays where cottages are variously depicted as romantic, aggressively hygienic, or profoundly dirty. The cottages emerge as spaces of abjection—both oppressive and liberating, frightening and pleasurable, disgusting and fantastical, rather than being decisively one or the other. In his chapter, Nathan Abrams arrives at similar conclusions, but in a different context. Abrams examines the specific function of the toilet in Jewish popular culture, imagination, and memory. After establishing the importance of toilet practices to maintaining purity in the Torah and later Talmudic literature, Abrams moves on to examine how the toilet has functioned in Jewish American literature and film, in the representation and memory of the Holocaust, and in providing a space for Jewish fantasies and ordeals. Abrams concludes that the toilet suggests a range of oppositions: from ritual impurity to potential danger, from an ordeal to relief and fantasy.

The essays in this volume highlight the reality that toilet practices and spaces, like the toilet’s representations, are unstable and inherently contradictory. They emerge as sites where various bodies compete for scarce resources and for recognition—and the stakes are high. It is not the intention of *Ladies and Gents* to try to smooth away these conflicts; and despite the fact that convincing cases are made throughout this book for more innovation in the financing, legislation, design, location, and maintenance of public toilets, its aim is not to prescribe specific remedies. Rather, the book emphasizes that, while there are no simple solutions, much may be gained by talking about toilets in all their material, social, symbolic, and discursive complexity. Such an approach may take readers down diverse paths. It may encourage research that takes into account the psychological, social, and physiological requirements of potential groups of toilet users or it may question the tenets of sex-segregated toilet design. It may enrich discussions surrounding urban theory, tourism, sociology, or anthropology with its demonstrations of how experiences, down to the most banal or natural, are inflected by one’s gendered body. Wherever future directions may lead, the various contributions to *Ladies and Gents* testify to the importance of public toilets to our environment *and* to our scholarship, unspeakable no more.

## Notes

1. A word about terminology: there are many different names for public toilets. A few of the most common include bathrooms, conveniences, facilities, lavatories, loos, resting places, restrooms, and washrooms. As much as possible, we have avoided standardizing our terminology and have retained whatever term would have been used in its original historical and geographical context.

2. It should be noted that fears of contagion along class lines are still in evidence in today's Britain. A recent article in *The Guardian* noted that the citizens of Romsey had to pay £5000 for a new toilet for exclusive use of the queen. She also has her own specially designed and never used "throne" in Government House in Hong Kong (Hoggart 2007, 25).

3. In his brilliant 1979 article "Sex Is Politics," Vidal also singles out Hilton Kramer—the founder of *The New Criterion*, which led the academic assault on our project—as one of those who have whipped up the country into a "state of terminal hysteria on the subject of sex in general and homosexuality in particular" (550–51).

4. In contrast to the West, where it is assumed that men urinate standing up, in Muslim cultures the practice is to sit down or squat. The justification for squatting is religious: when a man stands, urine might splash on one's body or clothes, thus rendering him ritually unclean. For the same reason, water ablution is used instead of toilet paper. Moreover, in Muslim etiquette, people relieve themselves in seclusion, or at least keep silent and avoid social contact in the bathroom.

5. Court decisions concerning female toilet provision in the United States have been made on various grounds, from anatomical differences (which take into account special female conditions such as menstruation and pregnancy) to the theory of "disparate impact," where it is accepted that inadequate toilet provision places a heavier burden on women and, hence, constitutes a form of sexual harassment (for a full account of relevant legal decisions and precedents, see Banzaf n.d. and Banzhaf 2002). In an e-mail communication with the editors dated January 16, 2008, Banzhaf informed us that his fight goes on: he most recently filed a potty parity complaint against the speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, for failing to provide adequate toilet provision for the House's seventy female members.

6. It is also worth pointing out that Laporte sets out to foul language or, as El-Khoury writes, "to reverse the deodorization of language by means of a reeking syntax" (El-Khoury 1993, ix). Although his efforts follow a noble tradition in literature, beginning with Francois Rabelais and Jonathan Swift, Laporte's strategy is particularly noteworthy in an academic context as it highlights the extent to which scholarly discourse itself is usually sanitized and policed by protocols and conventions.

7. Interestingly, Abel argues that Lacan's discussion of sexual difference is already informed by race through his choice of the phrase "laws of urinary segregation"—a deliberate reference, she believes, to American Jim Crow laws.

8. While *Toilet Training* is the only documentary to focus exclusively on bathroom access for transgender people, several other documentaries discuss the issue of public bathrooms in the larger context of the performance of gender. Among them are *Outlaw* (1994, 26 min., dir. Alisa Lebow) and *You Don't Know Dick* (1997, 58 min., dir. Candace Schermerhorn and Bestor Cram). *Outlaw* is a cinematic profile of transgender activist, writer, and performer Leslie Feinberg, who presents the bathroom as a key test of gender performance. *You Don't Know Dick* is a collective portrait of several female-to-male transsexuals. In part of the latter film titled "Men's Room," the main characters talk about experiences of transgender men in the men's bathrooms, their strategies of access, and their behavior adjustments.

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