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Taking a Break: Toilets, Gender, and Disgust

The brouhaha over Hillary Clinton's bathroom break during the third Democratic debate in December 2015 brings together two interrelated themes: the obstacles surrounding women's access to bathrooms and the broader cultural discomfort with elimination that makes inequities in access difficult to address. Clinton's delay in returning to the stage after using the toilet was not just a sign of the barriers every woman faces to getting to a public toilet quickly. It also unleashed a torrent of comment and abuse. Mike Huckabee opined that Clinton's "best moment in the entire night was when she was in the restroom"; Republican front-runner Donald Trump said, "I know where she went—it's disgusting, I don't want to talk about it" (quoted in Weiner 2015). Feminist columnists commenting on these comments were barraged by further misogynist remarks as well as angry dismissals of the triviality of the whole subject (Chemaly 2015). And, indeed, the subject is trivial in the sense that someone's using the toilet is an entirely unremarkable, multiple-times-a-day occurrence. So why all the discussion and attention?

Obviously, Clinton's tardy return to the debate touched a couple of nerves in the broader public. For one thing, it dramatized for a national audience the very different situations of women and men in relation to bathroom access and thus, implicitly, the ways social hierarchies are mapped onto public space. From decrepit inner-city schools to new building projects featuring $50 million apartments, the built environment reflects a set of ideas about who has social value, who does what, and who belongs where (Matrix 1984: 1). Because the need for toilets is universal, their availability and distribution provide a particularly revealing map of power relations in US society, an everyday lesson in who merits social recognition and whose time is consid-

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ered to be of value. The profoundly unequal toilet facilities available to "whites" and "coloreds" under segregation, for example, gave the daily lie to the notion of "separate but equal." Black people traveling through the South during the Jim Crow era had to plan carefully where they might be able to stop for toilet breaks or had to relieve themselves between car doors on the side of the road (Cannon 2008). The quest of transgender people for places to "pee in peace" (Transgender Law Center 2005), free from surveillance, hostility, and the risk of violence has been crucial to placing bathroom access on the public policy agenda.[1] As virtually all transgender narratives testify, standing at the door of a standard sex-segregated restroom wondering what awaits on the other side is a powerful daily reminder of one's outsiderness and difference. Similarly, despite the twenty-five years that have passed since the enactment of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), disabled people often confront supposedly ADA-compliant facilities that are up two steps or double as storage rooms for mops and high chairs, in which toilet doors open inward or are not wide enough to admit a wheelchair, and where absolutely no accommodations are made for disabilities other than wheelchair use.

Able-bodied and cisgendered women do not usually face the same obstacles to moving around freely in public space, but it is nonetheless interesting to reflect on how shifts in women's bathroom access closely mirror their changing social status. Until quite recently, the complete absence of women's toilets in certain locations clearly signaled their exclusion from halls of power. Sandra Day O'Connor found when she joined the Supreme Court in 1981 that, unlike her male colleagues, who had their own restroom, she had to walk down a long hall to the public lavatory. Similarly, there were no women's toilets near the Senate floor until 1992. Women in the House of Representatives finally got a bathroom near the House chamber only in 2011. Institutions such as the Princeton Graduate School, Harvard Law School, and Yale Medical School for many years not only had no restrooms for women but also justified women's exclusion on the grounds that there were no available lavatories. Today cisgendered, able-bodied women are more on the civic map. As half of every social group, including elites, they can be fairly certain that there will be some space available in which they can relieve themselves. Yet the placement and (in)adequacy of toilet facilities for women still provide clues to their social subordination. They may not be expunged from public space in the same way as transgender and disabled people, but women's needs are certainly not accorded the same status as those of men.

To begin with, as Clinton's experience indicates, women's bathrooms are generally less conveniently located than supposedly equivalent men's

rooms. Women will often have to walk past the men's room in auditoriums, restaurants, and theaters—in Clinton's case, for one minute and forty-five seconds—to spaces that are just a bit farther from where the main action takes place. Often a woman will arrive at the appropriate bathroom only to find herself confronted with a long line. Every woman who has spent time in restaurants, theaters, museums, sporting events, airports, train stations, or other public venues has had the experience of waiting endlessly to use the toilet while watching men zip in and out of the adjoining men's room. Inequities in location and access can be dismissed as trivial, but they convey a message about whose time is more important; they are repeated daily reminders of whose needs come first and whose second. In learning to stand in bathroom lines and wait patiently from an early age, girl children are also learning to accept their subordination quietly. As Congresswoman Yvette Clarke said, "When we're talking about restroom equity, we're talking about the time it takes each of us to handle our business and get back to business" (quoted in Talev 2006). But whose business is deemed socially significant and whose less so?

The message restrooms convey that women are less important than men and that this lesser significance is simply to be accepted as one of life's many inconveniences is underscored by the role of bathrooms in supporting the gender binary. As one of the last totally gender-divided spaces in US society, bathrooms give concrete daily form to a social system in which men are dominant and women are perceived as other. Sex-segregated lavatories declare that there are two and only two genders, that everyone is either male or female, that gender is fixed and self-evident, and that there is some undefined danger in men and women using toilets in a shared space. These lessons, too, are imbibed early. Gender is one of the central categories children are offered for making sense of the world, and bathrooms are important sites for children learning to perform gender properly. For some people, being directed to the appropriate restroom prompts their first awareness of gender.[2] The point at which a child refuses to go to the toilet with a parent of the other sex is often an important moment in the child's emerging gender identification. Judith Halberstam (1998: 23) calls "the bathroom, as we know it, . . . the crumbling edifice of gender in the twentieth century." And it is indeed striking the ways public toilets perpetuate the subordination of women within a framework in which everyone must identify either as a woman or as a man.

How to address the inequities in women's access to bathrooms in ways that do not further reinforce the gender binary or marginalize transgender

people is something of a conundrum. On the one hand, women deserve lavatories that meet their physical and social needs—needs that are too often left out of account in the creation of public space. Even where men's and women's restrooms have equal square footage—and that is not always the case in older buildings—the fact that urinals take up less floor space than stalls do means that men generally have more toilet fixtures. But for both biological and social reasons, women need *more* fixtures than men, not fewer. Studies have shown that, for many reasons, women take longer than men to go to the toilet: They have to undo their clothing and then rearrange it. A substantial percentage of adult women are menstruating at any given time, which increases both their need for toilets and the time they spend there. Women's urethras are shorter than men's, and women are therefore more prone to urinary tract infections that increase both the frequency and urgency of urination. Pregnant women also need to urinate more frequently. Women are often responsible for escorting children and elders to the toilet. A number of municipalities have passed so-called potty parity laws that attempt to equalize the time men and women spend in public restrooms by requiring that, in new construction, women have two or three times the number of stalls that men have. Such laws enormously enhance women's ready access to toilets. On the other hand, "potty parity" does nothing to address the gender segregation that is another striking aspect of toilet culture in the United States and which renders transgender people invisible.

Sorting through issues of equity and the range of needs around adequate and accessible bathroom space is made difficult, however, by the second way in which Clinton's bathroom break touched a nerve among the public: the topic of toilets leaves people embarrassed and uncomfortable. How else do we explain the combination of fascination, ogling, and distaste about something that, on the face of it, is entirely unremarkable? "I know where she went," said Trump, too repelled to even utter the word. And while he may be particularly misogynist and squeamish about bodily discharges, repugnance at elimination is a much broader cultural phenomenon. The fact of multiple euphemisms for the toilet—bathroom, restroom, cloakroom, washroom, powder room, lavatory, loo, john, WC—itself testifies to a general unwillingness to use the actual word. Then toilets are often hidden away, in the least attractive part of buildings or public areas. In restaurants, they are often found down in the basement; in malls and stores, around corners or in hidden nooks. Toilets are abject spaces—queer spaces, crip spaces, marginalized and disparaged spaces to which people resort to do what is considered unseemly to witness or discuss (Broyer 2015).[3] Perhaps

the ultimate testimony to our cultural discomfort with toilets is the extraordinary absence of public facilities in most cities in the United States. Somehow, if we act as if we do not need toilets to move comfortably through the world, then we can also pretend that our need to urinate and defecate doesn't exist. In the words of one commentator, we are as repulsed by real bodies as medieval saints were but without their religious motivation (Ashenburg 2007: 271).

But despite efforts to deny this inconvenient part of ourselves, adequate toilets are an essential dimension of access to public space because elimination is a fundamental aspect of our embodiment. Without elimination, we could not rid our bodies of waste, remain healthy, take in nourishment, or develop or grow. Yet it seems that urine, and much more especially feces, evokes in many people strong feelings of disgust. Disgust is a universal human emotion, found cross-culturally, that more than other feelings connects to sensory experience in a very visceral way. Disgust is rooted in what it feels like to see, touch, taste, or smell certain things. While objects of disgust are certainly partly socially molded, the things that people find disgusting are not a random sample. Cross-cultural studies of disgust have shown that body waste is at the top of most lists. Disgust is a reaction to stimuli such as feces, menstrual blood, and vomit that remind us of our animal natures. In the words of William Ian Miller (1997: xiv), "The basis for all disgust is *us*—that we live and die and that the process is a messy one emitting substances and odors that make us doubt ourselves and fear our neighbors."[4] Disgust is a response to the awareness that our bodies exceed our conscious control. However much our cognitive capacities and symbol systems might allow us to feel that we are above the natural world, our bodies constantly call attention to our physical limitations. While the ultimate way that bodies escape conscious control is death, on a more immediate and daily level, we are reminded of our creaturely nature by our need to eliminate waste. Even the most brilliant scholar sitting at a desk and writing about the social construction of the body will at some point need to get up and go to the toilet.

Disgust has important political consequences in that the rejection of elimination as part of human embodiment becomes intertwined with a series of social hierarchies as the rejected part of the self is then projected onto multiple others. Marginalized groups are often perceived not simply as socially inferior but also as contaminating or disgusting. As Ruth Barcan (2005: 10) says, "Those who represent a threat to the established gender/sexual (and sometimes racial) order may themselves come to be imagined as a form of cultural waste." As Trump's revulsion at the thought of a woman using the toilet indicates, disgust provides the passion that helps maintain

social orderings. Whites, Christians, people with wealth, have at various historical moments complained about the smell of black people, Jews, workers, homeless people, women, and others (Miller 1997: 245). It is an irony that nonetheless makes perfect sense that those defined as shit are often precisely the people denied adequate toilet access; the socially abject are excluded from toilets as abject space. Insofar as public bathrooms acknowledge the individual's right to a small private preserve in public space, a "small patrimony of sacredness" (Erving Goffman quoted in Cahill et al. 1985: 38–39) to which everyone is entitled, those defined as other are not imagined as part of the human community whose needs must be taken into account in the construction of such space. But the absence of toilet access prevents full participation in public life and forces people into compromises that can reinforce perceptions of their abjection. Homeless people are the paradigmatic instance of this double bind in that they are often forced to relieve themselves in public because they lack any alternatives and are then perceived as all the more disgusting. Meanwhile, those for whom easy access to toilets is entirely a nonissue can more readily disown elimination as an aspect of the self while denying adequate provision to numerous others.

The fuss around Clinton's bathroom break becomes less mysterious, then, when we reflect on how it pulled together the issues of provision and disgust in ways that reveal some uncomfortable truths. Even important people, people whose needs are generally invisibly and seamlessly met, sometimes have to go to the toilet. And when these important people are women, they do not get to go with the same ease and dispatch as powerful men do; thus the profound inequalities in men's and women's access to toilets become publicly visible. Women are then labeled "disgusting" for requiring the facilities that men in power get to take for granted. The discourses of discomfort and disgust—of repugnance at the bodily nature we all share—and of social inequality help construct and reinforce each other. It seems, therefore, that thinking through and implementing adequate toilet provision for all will also entail rethinking attitudes toward elimination as an aspect of our embodiment.

Notes

1 North Carolina HB2, a bill that requires transgender people to use the bathroom corresponding to the sex on their birth certificate, provoked extensive public debate about the issue of bathroom access. It was passed in March 2016, after this article was in press.

2 When I have asked students to write about their first awareness of gender, I have been struck by the number who mentioned bathrooms.

3 This formulation emerged in conversation with Nili Broyer after she presented her paper at a meeting of the Society for Disability Studies.

4 I am dependent on Miller for my description of disgust.

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