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Dirty Spaces: Communication and Contamination in Men's Public Toilets¹

By Ruth Barcan²

Abstract

This paper examines the spatiality of men's public toilets in Australia. It considers public toilets as cultural sites whose work involves not only the literal elimination of waste but also a form of cultural purification. Men's public toilets are read as sites where heteronormative masculinity is defined, tested and policed. The essay draws on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's concept of homosociality and on Mary Douglas's conception of dirt as a destabilizing category. It treats the "dirtiness" of public toilets as a submerged metaphor within struggles over masculinity. The essay considers a range of data sources, including interviews, pop culture, the Internet and a novella.

Keywords: public toilets, masculinity, space, homosociality

"Where there is dirt there is system."

--Mary Douglas, Purity and Danger 35

This essay examines a form of public space that is at once mundane and complex: men's public toilets. Public toilets have a particularly fraught and complex spatiality--in part, because they are remarkably *gendered* spaces. While they are ostensibly places where functionality reigns--places where you simply "relieve yourself"--in practice they are semiotically intricate spaces, filled with anxiety and unspoken rules. These rules are worth examining, for as Susan Bordo argues, there are many intellectual, ethical and political gains made when we take the complexities of masculinity seriously, including its vulnerabilities: "Far fresher insights can be gained by reading the male body through the window of its vulnerabilities rather than the dense armor of its power--from the 'point of view' of the mutable, plural penis rather than the majestic, unitary phallus" (697). This paper is a study of some of the spatial rules governing men's public toilets and their potential effects on men.

To consider the spatiality of men's public toilets in Australia, I draw on two key concepts--Mary Douglas's anthropological conception of "dirt" and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's concept of homosociality--and on a small set of interviews with men. It considers men's toilets³ as a space where masculinity is defined, policed and struggled

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³ When I use the word "toilets," I am using it in the Australian sense, referring to the whole space--both urinals and stalls.

over. Male public toilets are, I argue, “dirty” spaces designed to regulate not only the bodily functions of elimination, but also the modes of interchange and communication between men that take place there. They aim to keep at bay not only literal contamination but the *cultural* contagion for which literal dirt so often serves as a metaphor. Traditionally, contagion is a key mechanism by which moral values and social rules are held in place (Douglas 3), and men’s toilets help create and uphold ideas and values about masculinity.

The design of the men’s room, says Lee Edelman, “has palpable designs on men; it aspires, that is, to design them” (152). As a gendered “social technology” (152), men’s toilets make it clear that masculinity is something to be struggled over, and that men have unequal access to its more socially favored forms. As perhaps the “most culturally visible form” of sexual spatial segregation (Sanders 17), public toilets are a prime, yet often ignored, site for a gendered cultural analysis.

In 1998 in Sydney, Australia, I carried out a series of interviews about urinal use with a small number of randomly chosen men. The interviews were few (eight) but detailed, as they were carried out as a small segment of a much broader study of the cultural meanings of nudity, published as *Nudity: A Cultural Anatomy*. My approach, then, is clearly not an exhaustive ethnography with claims to comprehensiveness, but rather a form of cultural research that treats public toilets as a cultural site worthy of serious examination. The ethnographic data is considered as part of a broader field of cultural knowledge, including films, Internet sites, literature, and popular discourse.

One might wonder why a woman should choose to write about male toilets and what impact her gender has on her analysis. I chose to consider male toilets because of their under-representation in cultural studies literature despite their obvious importance for any cultural study of gender, space and the body. What I discovered was that my almost total lack of physical encounters with this cultural site sat in stark contradiction to its *cultural* familiarity. The fact, for example, that I did well at the “urinal etiquette” quizzes that abound on the Internet,⁴ without ever having entered male public toilets while they were actually in use, suggests that the spatial rules of a given society make deep sense to its members and that they resonate right across the cultural field. It is this resonance, and its impact on gender and sexuality, that this essay proposes to explore.

Dirt and Contagion

Architecture is “an art which directly engages the body” (Fausch 39). As an architectural form, public toilets speak to modern concerns about hygiene, comfort, decency, privacy and modesty. They aim to minimize literal pollution (to provide for the hygienic and functional disposal of urine and excrement), but inevitably they do greater psychological and cultural work than this.

One of their cultural functions is to mitigate disgust and shame, and to bring dirt into a form of order acceptable to the modern hygienic imagination. In his classic study *The Civilizing Process*, Norbert Elias argued that scientific or rational arguments, in particular those focusing on the question of “hygiene,” provide a seemingly irrefutable

⁴ See, for example, <www.intap.net/~drw/restroom.html>. Sites such as this consist of a diagrammatic series of urinal configurations. A cross indicates which urinal(s) are in use, and one’s task is to choose the “correct” urinal to be used by someone entering into the room.

rationale for newly emerging cultural distastes. The hygienic explanation, he says, always antedates the “undefined fears and anxieties” that it claims to explain (95). This doesn’t mean that scientific arguments about the spread of disease are unfounded; it means that the question of contamination is always far greater than a set of objective biological facts. The “dirtiness” of public toilets, for example, is a received cultural fact whose microbiological accuracy remains the province of specialists.

Modern westerners avidly consume the *signs* of cleanliness, which may or may not have much to do with actual cleanliness or health. For example, chemical air-fresheners do not cleanse or purify the air but mask the smells we associate with dirtiness using a blend of (arguably) toxic chemicals. (One of the men in my study said there were “two schools of thought” about whether or not so-called “trough lollies” [urinal deodorizers] actually improve the smell of urinals. “It’s the kind of debate men have at pubs,” he said.)

Eric Michaels refers to “tidiness,” the modern fetish for the appearance of hygiene, which is quite different from cleanliness. Tidiness, he says:

does not assure the cleanliness it promises. Instead, it merely obscures dirt; indeed, all natural (and finally, historical) processes. Tidiness . . . in fact is only interested in obscuring all traces of history, of process, of past users, of the conditions of manufacture (the high high-gloss). . . .The tidy moment does not recognise process, and so resists deterioration, disease, aging, putrefaction. (42, 40)

For Michaels, modern society’s obsession with (pseudo) cleanliness masks cultural fears about dirt.

The increasingly avid consumption of signs of cleanliness is made possible by the experiential and conceptual distancing from nature brought about by modernity. Modernity is characterized by ambivalence about nature, sometimes manifested as disgust. Disgust is a visceral experience with ideational foundations; one has to be *trained* into it, by having interiorized a set of cultural codes that establish a clean and proper norm (Miller 12). Disgust “depends on fairly complex ideational notions about contagion, contamination, and similarity” (Miller 12, summarising Rozin *et al.*). Thus, visceral responses of disgust can become a vehicle for the experience and/or expression of more abstract cultural fears.

Public toilets mitigate more than just a generalized modern shame about bodily functions. After all, as Joel Sanders points out, you only have to contrast their design with that of the domestic bathrooms and toilets so frequently shared by men and women to realize that male public toilets “answer to the requirements of culture, not nature” (17). Specifically, public toilets both express and attempt to manage fears and anxieties about sexuality and sexual pollution.

One of the most compelling explications of the cultural work carried out by the creation of polluting categories comes from Mary Douglas, who uses the term “dirt” for anything that threatens established cultural categories, such as the division between male and female, human and animal, public and private. Dirt is an offence against order (2), against the categories that help promote social stability. Disturbance to such categories can be deeply challenging, and much cultural energy occurs at their borders: “all margins

are dangerous” (121). People or objects that cross boundaries or that threaten the purity of categories can function like cultural pollutants to be expelled or purified in ritual form. At the heart of Douglas’s study of pollution is the claim that the body is “a symbol of society” (115) and thus a prime site for the ordering of social hierarchies:

The body is a model which can stand in for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious. The body is a complex structure. The functions of its different parts and their relation afford a source of symbols for other complex structures. (115)

After all, the body is, as Elizabeth Shove puts it, “a reliably constant source of pollution” (148).

Architecture can make cultural separations concrete, literally: “Through the erection of partitions that divide space, architecture colludes in creating and upholding prevailing social hierarchies and distinctions” (Sanders 17). Public toilets uphold gender laws in a quite literal way, by telling us who is or isn’t allowed inside, a process of inclusion/exclusion that can provide the template for a whole host of other binary oppositions. Public toilets concretize a compelling overlap between one of the deepest ordering principles of any society--gender/sexuality--and the literal problem of the elimination of human waste. In so doing, they enable a kind of subtle cultural homology whereby 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.

Toilets are technologies of concealment.⁵ They make waste “disappear” and they “provide a literal and moral escape from the unacceptable” (Hawkins 34). Men’s toilets in particular aim to conceal and eliminate forms of pollution both literal and moral, and they do so by a series of insistent divisions and separations. The classic arrangement of many male public toilets--open urinal and closed stalls--is a binary one. This internal division between public and private maps onto bodily divisions—such as that between liquid (urine) and solid (faeces), or between penis and buttocks. This arrangement also recalls, dramatizes, and ultimately calls into question a division imagined for the penis itself--that between its urinary and sexual functions. There has often been considerable cultural pressure to keep these functions separate and “pure.” Leonardo da Vinci’s otherwise accurate anatomical drawings of the penis, for example, include one showing two separate tubes—one for urine and the other for semen (Friedman 58). This “odd blunder,” writes Friedman,

shows how Church dogma was still trumping science in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Medieval anatomists felt the need to establish a boundary between urine, thought by the Church to be entirely polluting, and semen which, although the carrier of original sin, was still

⁵ I owe this idea to Gay Hawkins’s reading of drains and sewers.

viewed by Rome as the source of a new human soul, however tainted that soul might be. (58)

Much psychological and cultural weight still reposes on the imagined separation of these two functions, either of which is capable of being a cause of disgust singly, but which are deemed particularly abhorrent in combination.⁶ Sexual practices that bring the two into conjunction are common and yet they are also widely held to be unclean and disgusting, a disgust likely to be displaced as well onto those who practice them. This is of great significance for men's toilets, one of whose functions is to test for, then disavow, the presence of a contaminating homosexuality. The architectural separation between urinal and stalls is one of the ways in which homosexuality is disavowed within the space of the public toilet. By banishing the specter of the sexualized buttocks while nonetheless promoting the (veiled) display of the penis, the design of public toilets hopes to effect a banishment of the specter of homosexuality itself. But as we will see, that specter continues to haunt the space.

Men's toilets are, then, places of dirt and distinctions. But since such distinctions are never fixed and final, toilets are, inevitably, *ambiguous* places--ambiguously public and private (open to all, but a place for intimate acts); places of both shame and decency; places of anonymity and separateness but also of interchange; places with special rules about visibility and invisibility; places that aim to minimize dirt but which are often themselves considered dirty. They aim to keep excretion, defecation and sexuality apart, and to regulate the kind of interchange that goes on between people using the space. They also tacitly divide *people* into categories—most notably into men and women, but also along other lines, such as sexuality and race. (In the US, public bathrooms were racially segregated until the 1950s and 60s [Cooper and Oldenziel 16]). They mark people out as “normal” or deviant, law-abiding or criminal, safe or threatening. As technologies of separation they implicitly divide people into such categories, and as technologies of concealment their design aims to make some of those categories, notably that of homosexuality, disappears.

But no purifying device can ever fully or finally keep categories distinct, for cultural categories are always dynamic--put under pressure, permeable at their boundaries, subject to reversals and transgressions, held in place by structures (legal, social, psychological) that inevitably prove permeable. Boundaries are always transgressed. As a physical-psychical space, the men's toilet is too culturally laden, too uncontrollable, too ambiguous, to keep categories watertight. It is, rather, a precarious space that aims to keep bodies, and social, cultural and psychological categories, clean and decent. It is a space pregnant with fears and fantasies, for the spectres it aims to dispel, like all phantasms, cannot be kept in their place.

Spectres are mobile, traveling, it seems, on the breeze. Think of the popular assumption that male toilets are smellier than female toilets. While it's possible that this reflects a literal truth (urinals being undoubtedly less effective than individual toilets at eliminating smells), the belief that men's toilets are smellier than women's is also a

⁶ Most serious cultural discussions of the penis (rare as they are) focus on its sexual rather than urinary function. Mark Strage's *The Durable Fig Leaf* makes no mention of the latter and David Friedman's *A Mind of its Own* contains only a single one-page index entry for urine.

culturally resonant *idea*, a descendant, perhaps, of the persistent historical belief in the contaminating powers of smell, epitomized in the miasma theory of disease. Smell, linked irretrievably not only to excretion but also to sex (Miller 69ff), “ranks low in the hierarchy of the senses” (75). Most men in my study commented on the unpleasant smelliness of many urinals, which makes them targets of greater disgust than that commonly felt towards “the ladies’ room.” Is there, perhaps, an unconscious cultural belief that the men’s room is a place of greater potential contamination than the women’s room?

Certainly, whatever it is that is meant to be kept clean, decent and in its proper place, it seems more precariously held in place in the men’s room. Metaphors for contagion insistently surface in popular lore. Televised news magazines do surveys of communal bowls of peanuts in public bars and find that they contain traces of urine (apparently, men go to the toilet, don’t wash their hands, go back into the bar, grab some peanuts, and contaminate the rest.) The dirt of the men’s room can’t, it seems, be kept in its place, but comes out into the public sphere, transferred unknowingly from man to man.

The fear of contagion is a (seemingly) rational explanation for a deeper anxiety--that of too intimate contact (even by proxy) with the bodies of strangers. As Elias noted, modern sensibilities are increasingly distasteful of bodies intermingling, touching and overspilling their boundaries except in circumscribed situations. In the toilets, disposable paper seats may offer us “protection,” but from what--disease or uncomfortable proximity with others? Novelist Nicholson Baker captures well this modern distaste in his novella *The Mezzanine*, one chapter of which describes in minute detail the protagonist Howie’s self-conscious but ultimately successful attempt to urinate in the corporate washroom of his workplace. In a footnote, Howie states: “I used the stalls as little as possible, never really at ease reading the sports section left there by an earlier occupant, not happy about the prewarmed seat” (83). The warmth is not so much a sign of disease as a physical trace of the body of a stranger, an unwanted meeting of men’s intimate parts by proxy, via the mediating object of the toilet seat.

In the case of men’s toilets, behind the vague fears of proximity and contamination lie not just the modern hygiene fetish, but also fears about gender, sex and sexuality. Men’s toilets put men in uncomfortable proximity not simply with strangers but, specifically, with other *men*. As such, they have often functioned as both literal and imagined sites for male sexual contact. As a potentially sexual site, they have been imagined as exciting, dirty, violent or dangerous places. In a society that tends to demarcate sexual proclivities as more or less distinct identities (heterosexual and homosexual, with bisexual as a destabilising third category), public toilets try--but ultimately fail--to keep men in their socially sanctioned places.

The Men’s Room as a Homosocial Space

According to Eve Sedgwick, Western cultures are marked by a fundamental asymmetry in the nature and style of permissible bonding between members of the same sex. In a patriarchal society, she argues, the spectrum of male-male relations works differently from the equivalent continuum of female desire. Different kinds of female-female relations are not absolutely separable, but rather, form a “relatively continuous” spectrum, whereas the equivalent continuum for men is “radically discontinuous” (5).

Sedgwick uses the term “homosociality” to describe this “radically disrupted” continuum of male-male relations (1-2).

Male homosocial relations are characterized by both bonding and competition, an insight Sedgwick draws from Heidi Hartmann’s definition of patriarchy: “[R]elations between men, which have a material base, and which, though hierarchical, establish or create interdependence and solidarity among men that enable them to dominate women” (qtd. in Sedgwick: 3). For Hartmann, a patriarchal structure involves, firstly, unequal access to material resources, and also three related complexes of identification and power: the subjection of women, and both hierarchical competition and bonding between males.

Men’s toilets are one site where the complexities of male-male relations are brought forcefully and corporeally into play. At the urinal, gender and sexuality are organized and policed, and individual men experience corporeally the paradoxical structure of a competitive, hierarchical brotherhood, underpinned in the final instance by the possibility of violence--against women, the transgendered, and non-hegemonic forms of masculinity.

In the next section, I will take each of the key elements of Hartmann’s definition in turn and consider them in relation to men’s toilets.

i) Exclusion of Women

First and foremost, public toilets reaffirm sexual difference. Entering a public toilet is not only a mundane embodied experience, it is also a public and often unconscious reaffirmation of one’s gender identity and of the rigid cultural demarcation between two polar sexes. Judith Butler describes how she used to think of toilet doors as forcing one to “choose” one’s gender: “I almost always read the signs on bathroom doors marked ‘men’ and ‘women’ as offering normative and anxiety-producing choices, delivering a demand to conform to the gender they indicate” (10). She goes on to describe Linda Singer’s response to this claim: “After the talk, Linda rose from the audience, hand on hip, and explained to me that what I had figured as a choice was not one at all, that “one,” she said, “is always already inside the door.” What Singer meant is that there is no human “one” “prior to its marking by sex”; rather, sex, thought of as a set of discursive relations, “produces the very possibility of a viable ‘one’” (Butler 10). In other words, the structures that make up sex and gender pre-exist the social subjects who “enter” into them. As Jacques Lacan put it (in a discussion in which he, too, considers “Western Man’s” public life to be “subjected to the laws of urinary segregation” [151]), “language and its structure exist prior to the moment at which each subject in a certain point in his mental development makes his entry into it” (148). One of the people I interviewed told a story that I find quite touching in its evocation of a moment before full entry into the gender order, a time before cultural precepts had hardened into iron-clad laws. He described a vivid memory of being punished at infants’ school for going into the girls’ toilets: “The girls’ ones just smelled so much better so I thought I’d use them. I thought I had a choice.”

The idea of loosening up gender divisions does not, however, appeal to everyone. As Douglas’s work makes clear, it is a proposition that is profoundly destabilizing, both culturally and psychologically. Patricia Cooper and Ruth Oldenziel report that a proposed Equal Rights Amendment to the US Constitution was defeated in part by the argument

that it would mandate unisex bathrooms. As they say, the spectre of shared bathrooms “tapped deep fears about sexual mixing, transgressing social boundaries, and ending recognition of gender differences” (17).

Men’s toilets, then, define and police masculinity because they exclude women (just as women’s toilets define femininity by excluding men).⁷ As with all exclusions, there are moments of rupture or transgression. Women do in fact occasionally use men’s toilets. A number of men in my study found it sensible and even admirable that a woman should use the (cubicle) toilet if there were long queues at the ladies’. But to do so is to flaunt a still deeply enforced convention. Moreover, women rarely use the urinal.⁸ In the popular 1997 film *The Full Monty*, a scene depicts a group of women using the men’s toilets during a ladies-only performance by male strippers. The husband of one of them, symbolically emasculated by the loss of his job, peeps in through the window as one of the women laughingly uses the urinal. To this victim of the decline of British industrial modernity, the women’s occupation of this most masculine of spaces is the ultimate emblem of women’s “victory” in another set of social changes--the “war” between the sexes.

A more complex example of female entry into this most masculine of spaces concerns the provision and use of toilets when women join traditionally all-male workplaces or institutions. In this context, debates about women’s right to be included in a particular workplace can easily crystallize around the question of separate versus shared toilets. This is both a practical problem (should employers be compelled to provide separate toilets for, say, a single female employee?) and a philosophical one--a replay of the longstanding feminist tussle between difference and equality. Women themselves argue about these matters. Women entering the military, for example, may or may not want to be treated “the same” as men, and they do not necessarily appreciate feminist intervention on their behalf. In 1990, for example, a female naval cadet was hand-cuffed to a urinal by some male classmates in what was described as “a spirited prank gone awry” (Leff). The men in question were given various forms of reprimand; the female cadet resigned. But when around thirty members of the National Organization for Women picketed outside the gates of the US Naval Academy in Annapolis on the evening of a formal function, many of the midshipmen, including some women, were not happy. On the one hand, then, the urinal could function as a sign of sexual difference (which was what enabled it to be used as a “joke” in the first place); on the other, women’s struggle for equality sometimes involves the suppression of the idea of sexual difference—as when some women interpreted the incident as just one example of the mental and physical demands of military training (Leff).

⁷ The transgendered (and/or cross-dressers) provide a particular challenge to this binary division. Public toilets represent a practical obstacle or challenge for the transgendered, who negotiate this binary with especial intensity (and who are potentially more at physical risk as a result of transgressing such a deeply concretized division).

⁸ One of the interviewees described seeing a woman do so at a B&S (“Bachelors and Spinsters”) ball. These balls are big country dances for young people; they are renowned for being occasions at which people let their hair down, and at which alcohol plays an important role. He thought this was “fabulous” and “fairly adventurous.” The other men were likewise impressed by the novelty of it.

ii) Hierarchy/Competitiveness

Hartman's definition of patriarchy highlights the competitive and hierarchical nature of male-male relations. This aspect of masculine relations is encouraged by the layout of male toilets, which forces men to work out territory and take their place in it within a matter of seconds.

On the one hand, male toilets are democratic places, bodily functions being great levellers. As William Ian Miller points out, whereas the ingestion of food is highly marked by class and status (how much food, what type, the circumstances in which one ingests it), the end of the process, the expulsion of waste matter, is far less subject to the "sublime illusions" produced by class and rank (99). The anus is, he claims "a democratizer" (99). To some extent, then, public toilets are levellers that remind us of our shared corporeality. Even while access to any given toilet is filtered through class structures (because of such matters as where the toilet is located and who is allowed in), the *idea* of elimination as a democratizing reminder of our shared humanity is culturally powerful.

Perhaps for that reason, the hierarchies they force men to negotiate are often worked out in playful ways. Many interviewees described moments of playful competitiveness at the urinal, especially memories from when they were young. Without prompting from the interviewer, most men told stories of "sword fights" with mates, of competitions to pee the highest or to hit flies. Such playfulness might be one way of dispelling unease, providing avenues for a successful social charting of the tricky psychosocial space. It's also a socially palatable way of sorting out hierarchies. It is tempting to see the rituals of male urination, ethologically speaking, as a form of territorial behavior. Some respondents described how they used to try and "write" their names in the sand as children. Like the "sword fights" and the peeing competitions, urination can be one of the ways in which the child (especially the male child) makes his mark or sees his impact on the world.⁹

But the men's room is not always a playful space. Most men described the pressure experienced at large events (such as sporting matches or concerts) where queues of heckling and often drunk men stand behind you and urge you to hurry up:

Sydney's a little bit more aggressive about it all. In Melbourne they're content to frown. Which is fair enough, 'cos your back's turned and you don't really notice that. But I think it's just an unspoken rule. It's an unspoken pressure. You've been there before and you know what it's like to wait.

⁹ The extension of self through urination has been used as a metaphor for a mode of writing, or even of art. According to art curator Chris Chapman, some contemporary male artists have explicitly used the penis as a metaphor for a tool or the paintbrush, while artists like Jackson Pollock have been interpreted as unconsciously using the paintbrush in ways that resemble acts of urinary territorialization. Some artists, Andy Warhol for example, actually use physical acts of urination to produce artworks. We are used to thinking of this form of "writing" as being unavailable to women (though some women do have tales of pissing competitions); however, some female artists have begun to explore the possibilities of females making their mark in space by urinating. For more on urination in and as art, see Chapman.

Alcohol was mentioned frequently by the respondents as increasing men's aggression but also their likelihood of striking up conversations at the urinal. (It was also mentioned as decreasing men's accuracy and thus contributing to smelliness!)

Workplaces bring particular complexities and awkward hierarchies. Sometimes status distinctions are overt--as when managers and workers have separate toilets, or when toilets become "flash points of struggle between workers and management" (Cooper and Oldenziel 15). Where there are not separate toilets for managers and workers, the stratification of the work environment and the pseudo-democracy of toilets may sit uneasily together, producing strained or awkward interactions. Whereas men often chat at the urinal in pubs, at work people may not talk much: "You become focused on that wall." Sharing facilities with one's co-workers brings one into a proximity that is more intimate and more corporeal than the relations that usually prevail outside that room, as Baker's protagonist Howie relates:

In the sudden quiet you could hear a wide variety of sounds coming from the stalls; long, dejected, exhausted sighs; manipulations of toilet paper; newspapers folded and batted into place; and of course the utterly carefree noise of the main activity: mind-boggling pressurized splatters followed by sudden urgent farts that sounded like air blown over the mouth of a beer bottle. (83)

At work, the private space of the men's room is really far more public than can be politely acknowledged, and many men recount the debilitating pressure to *perform* in such a context. All the men in my study described the experience of "stage fright" (being unable to urinate in front of others). They told of friends or relatives who cannot urinate in front of others and have to use the cubicles, or who cannot urinate in public toilets at all. Sometimes these stories were the source of humor:

Usually it's the person who can't go will start making apologetic little mutterings themselves. [laughing] "I usually stand here doing nothing, holding my dick in my hand, next to you with your dick out too. I do it all the time, you know. Sometimes I go to the toilet." [laughing].

The inability to urinate is often seen as an emasculating impotence, as in Baker's novella:

The problem for me, a familiar problem, was that in this relative silence Don Vanci would hear the exact moment I began to urinate. More important, the fact that I *had not yet begun* to urinate was known to him as well....What was my problem? Was I so timid that I was unable to take a simple piss two urinals down from another person?...Though we knew each other well, we said nothing. And then, just as I knew would happen, I heard Don Vanci begin to urinate forcefully. (83-84)

The force of one's emissions is connected with symbolic potency, in subliminal homology with sexual prowess, which is also often described in terms of "performance" and "stage fright."

The trope of urination as a masculinity contest occurs widely in popular culture. A column in an online men's magazine called Bully Magazine, for example, described a number of competitive behaviors at the urinal, including one called "Blast Off"--when a man "starts peeing with the utmost force" as his way of "letting you know his stream is more powerful than yours, and hence, he is the superior male" (Wohlrob). Similarly, a short Australian film called I Can't Get Started is "a symphonic treatment of a duel involving two men at a urinal and inexhaustible flows of competing wee pushing around a cigarette butt" ("Twelve Month"). According to one reviewer, "urine quantity is presented as a defining icon of masculinity, with the 'Suit' [i.e. manager] winning over the 'Singlet' [i.e. laborer]" ("Twelve Month").¹⁰ Baker's Howie eventually finds a dramatically competitive solution to the problem of "stage fright"--he imagines urinating forcefully but dispassionately right onto the head of the man standing beside him. When flanked on *both* sides by colleagues, he imagines urinating "directly into one of their shock-widened eyeballs" (185).

Although this episode is presented comically, its observations about the rigors of a masculinity that combines collegiality and hierarchy are accurate and serious. The design of the urinal throws down a gauntlet to its users; "are you man enough?" it seems to ask. This can make urinals intimidating places for young boys, who may not yet feel man enough to hold their own. Although John tells the following tale with humor, it is clear that the original event, which took place at a large sporting venue, was painful:

I remember when I was about six and *very* much needed to go to the toilet after having thirty-eight glasses of cordial [a sweet children's drink] that morning and just getting up and being overawed by the big men who were there, and thinking "aagh"...[I had] performance fright and I couldn't go, so I went back and didn't go to the toilet at [that stadium] for about three years. Mum's saying, "Don't you need to go?" "No I don't." I was very embarrassed. I made all the requisite moves and pretended to shake, and tucked it, and walked away, but I knew I hadn't entirely got away with it. I was shamed deep inside.

Clearly, the democracy of the men's room is at best uneasy, for the superficial egalitarianism of the space is always potentially undermined by the hierarchies of masculinity, which are held in place not only by bonding, but also by competition, aggression and by violence--literal, imagined or symbolic.

The most obvious example of such violence is evident in the way the urinal is a technology for "identifying" and punishing homosexuality. Lee Edelman describes the workings of the gaze in the men's room and the ways in which it works to police and punish homosexuality and other proscribed forms of male bonding. Toilets may remind us of our shared corporeality, and the buttocks may be great levellers, but their close

¹⁰ The film was screened in 2002 at Tropfest, an annual Australian competition for short films, winning the Best Director award for Charles Williams. I have been unable to view it, and so am relying on a short write-up ("Twelve Month Journey"). Note that the singlet (a sleeveless undergarment) is a stereotypical icon of male working-class attire. (White singlets are worn as warm undergarments; blue ones are worn by laborers on building sites.)

colleague, the anus, is a more culturally fraught bodily site. The anus is associated with more than defecation; it is also a potential site of sexual activity, and hence it may provoke anxiety about sexuality. This is, according to Edelman, why it has to be closeted away, so to speak, in the cubicle, while the penis remains relatively more exposed. This architectural arrangement is an inversion of the rules that obtain in the outside world, where genitals are private and buttocks more public (Edelman 153). This inversion is not simply an odd by-product of the functionality of the men's room (of the "need for speed")--it also betrays this deeper cultural logic.

Male toilets are, to continue the performance metaphor, "a theater of heterosexual anxiety" (Sanders 18, paraphrasing Edelman). They are criss-crossed with tacit anxieties. One gay man I interviewed said that he did not use the toilets throughout his entire stay at high school. Another participant recalled the following incident:

At college there was one poor little boy. I was in fourth year, so I was a senior, but he was definitely a fresher. And the urinal was all occupied so he was at a cubicle, and he was having a wee. So I spotted him at the bowl and I thought, well here comes a trust game. So I just wee-ed between his legs and he was very frightened to see this stream coming between his legs and he's going "No, stop, stop. Don't!" "Just relax. Just relax and all will be fine." And towards the end I got a bit playful and sort of wiggled it from side to side and up and down. He took it all as a joke in the end, I hope. Poor boy.

The teller of this story understands with hindsight that one man's joke might be another's trauma. It is unclear whether or not he reads this story as a tale of veiled homoerotic desire or anxiety. But his story shows how hegemonic masculinity involves fraternal jocularity, hierarchical relations, potentially brutal ones, and the disavowal of homoeroticism.

Most of the interviewees (both gay and heterosexual) reported the discomfort they feel when they are aware (or believe) that men are soliciting them, via looks and glances. Several (again, both gay and heterosexual) described with discomfort incidents where as a young boy they were fondled, or as an adult, explicitly solicited. For men actively seeking sex, the dynamic of desire and fear works differently. Fear may be of violence, discovery, or arrest. Public toilets are sites where the complexities of homosociality are unpredictably dramatized, where, despite the overt rules that prescribe the space as a place for urination and defecation, other, localized, rules may obtain, and where it is evident that sexual activity, sexual preference, and identity do not map seamlessly onto each other.

As sites of intense gender/sexuality regulation, public toilets are thus often places of anxiety for men, women and the transgendered. Fear of attack, disease, scrutiny, sex or the body itself has to be held in check, even while one is supposed to be "relieving" oneself. For many men, the rest room may be anything but restful, and relief may come not just from emptying the bladder but from successfully negotiating the semiotic complexities of the room.

iii) Interdependence and Bonding

Yet for all that, toilets may also be places of retreat, communality or jocularity. The revelation of private parts, coupled with the public management of bodily functions we learn to control in childhood, might be one reason for the occasional emergence of childish glee in the toilets. Edelman argues that public toilets are spaces that put us in a kind of resonance with early childhood--with the moment when one's subjectivity-information begins to congeal into a rigidly sexed identity, when authority of many kinds comes to define (and limit) our bodily being. They are spaces that unconsciously recall the pre-Oedipal world of the infant and the child, spaces that, in Edelman's words, "plunge us all, deep in a mental echo chamber vibrating still to the sound of words such as 'pee-pee,' 'wee-wee,' and 'poop'" (160). A number of the men interviewed recounted making zigzags or other patterns with their urine, or trying to move the "toilet lollies" around in the trough, both as a child and as an adult. Such playfulness is common. Like the interviewees, the Bully Magazine column described a number of games: Urinal Soccer (which involves knocking a cigarette butt around the porcelain) and Bathroom Karate (where, for fear of contracting a disease from a dirty restroom, you pull down seats, flush toilets and turn on taps and hand dryers with your foot rather than your hand). The "network[s] of an antidisziplin" (de Certeau xv) cut across the mundane constraints of everyday life and occasionally erupt in even more striking fashion. One interviewee recounted being at a pub, when all of a sudden:

the guy next to me started dancing with no hands...yelling and carrying on, and of course there was just like streams of urine going every which way, so there's all these blokes, backing away with their hands on their dicks, sort of backing away from the urinal to try and get away from this wildly flailing member [laughing]. And then everyone realized, we're not at the urinal any more, but we're standing here with our dicks out. [laughing]

I found that many men were happy or even keen to talk about urinal experiences or what one laughingly called "urinal culture." Unsurprisingly, given the conjunction of humor and scatology, there was a great deal of laughter during the interviews, and many comments were made ironically or knowingly, or with a deal of enjoyment in phraseology. Clearly, some of the laughter was nervous, as when men recounted memories from their youth or adolescence, but there is no need to think that it was all defensive.

Public toilets are, it emerged from my interviews, places of communication as well as of contagion, though the degree of required or permitted communication is an area of social uncertainty. A number of interviewees raised the question of whether or not one should talk to the strangers with whom one was sharing the urinal. The frequency and type of conversation that occurs depends on contexts. When alcohol is involved, conversation flows more freely:

Hell, you'd be amazed. The drunker people are, the more they feel compelled to actually say something when they're standing, especially if it's quite close, if it's like a concert or something and everyone's shoulder

to shoulder. Of course someone says, "How's it going?" "Blah blah blah." It's all quite inane stuff.

At country pubs, or the races, or the cricket, "it's a fairly matey environment." One respondent described the "matey" atmosphere of a pub toilet during a major racing carnival:

Everyone was matey in the pub--giving tips, saying how much money they'd lost. People adding up how much each wee was worth. "That's \$32 worth of beer going down the drain."

Conversations at urinals mean that strangers may actually discuss the body together, albeit in a strictly circumscribed way. According to one interviewee, "a lot of the chit chat that does happen at urinals isn't general chit chat. It's often actually about urinating itself."

But not all men were comfortable with social rules from the "outside" being brought into the men's toilets; the intermingling of the private and public dimensions of the space caused discomfort. One participant felt that there was often a perceived imperative to converse, a discomforting obligation to render the awkwardness of the space more familiar. James recounted having seen two young men who met at the urinal and began chatting, finally parting with a "Yeah, nice to meet you mate" and a handshake. He found this funny and a little unnerving. Both silence and conversation can be awkward, he found. He reported having seen people who know each other enter toilets at the same time and not make any distinction between the mode of sociality inside and outside the room:

If there's two that know each other and are getting involved in a familiar sort of conversation where they're both sort of relaxed with each other and just talking socially, you feel uncomf.... You feel out of place; you feel quite sort of...I don't know. You feel like you're somewhere you're not meant to be or something. Yeah, it's something you'd rather do in privacy quite often.

Men reported that conversations are more likely to occur in the toilets at pubs or sporting events rather than in the workplace, where people are more likely to mutter a greeting than to strike up a conversation (unless it is a good friend who comes in).

In the workplace described in Baker's *The Mezzanine*, there is a comic twist on the idea of the discomforting communication in the men's room. The protagonist Howie describes the way a tune whistled by an invisible occupant of the toilet stalls will bounce from one person to the next: "tunes sometimes lived all day in the men's room, sustained by successive users, or remembered by a previous user as soon as he re-entered the tiled liveness of the room" (81). The idea is a comic play on the notion of contagion--a tune whistled with "*infectious* cheerfulness" (81, my emphasis) is transmitted invisibly from one man to another until by the end of the day it has worked its way around the office.

Conclusion

Today, when many forms of sexual segregation are under challenge, it is remarkable that there can be spaces that remain to such a large degree inviolable; many women and men have never entered the “wrong” toilets. Public toilets remain a complex and resonant cultural site with deeply embedded spatial rules. These rules reflect and amplify a much broader set of cultural conditions. They remind us of the complexity of contemporary masculinity. During my research, I heard of gay men affronted by men offering sex; heterosexual men being sized up and solicited by other men; men uncomfortable about displaying their penis; men unable to use a public toilet at all; heterosexual men made even more self-conscious by the occasional presence of women; boys groped by older men; gay men who didn’t use toilets for fear of being detected as gay...and so on. I also heard plenty of laughter, and stories of games, playfulness, moments of solidarity and community, and momentary friendships struck up over urinals. The concept of homosociality allows us to understand, though, how one price of this fraternity is, ultimately, the alienation of men from men.

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