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Restroom Politics: Voices in the Stalls

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Abstract

Although mention of graffiti often conjures images of dirty subways or crumbling segments of the Berlin Wall, many people deal with graffiti in a seemingly much more private place every day—that found in the nearest restroom stall. This paper attempts to explore how many of the same techniques used to govern, and often eliminate, graffiti in public spaces have made their way into the privacy of restroom stalls. By labeling graffiti as dirty and subversive, society has found a way to eliminate the graffiti even before it has to be scrubbed off of the stall walls. This paper continues on to examine the consequences of these governing techniques and their implications for our liberal society.

Although mention of graffiti often conjures up images of subways plastered in tags or pictures of the Berlin wall, many people deal with graffiti in a seemingly much more private

space every day—graffiti found in the nearest restroom stall. Alan Dundes (1966) coined the term *latrinalia* to refer to this particular type of graffiti, and many social scientists, photographers, and lovers of pop culture have studied this phenomenon since Dundes's early work (Ferem 2006; Ferem 2007; Stoakes and Dolber 2006). These authors often view *latrinalia* as superior to other forms of graffiti because it can be done in privacy, with far less fear of recrimination; for this reason Ferem (2006) declares the restroom “the last great medium for pure self-expression” and a “sanctuary or bomb shelter” for the individual. This expression takes many forms, from the profane to the nonsensical to the political and philosophical. However, this raises a question as to the type of space the restroom actually is—if a trip to the toilet stall immerses one into a conversation about politics and sexuality, just how private is that trip? This paper attempts to delve into some of the spatial issues surrounding *latrinalia* in an effort to better understand the implications of these practices. I begin by exploring some basic theoretical models of what public space is and then turn to studies of graffiti. I then attempt to fit a study of *latrinalia* at Miami University into this theoretical framework in order to understand what effects this type of graffiti has on the public.

Theories of Public Spaces and Graffiti

To understand what type of space *latrinalia* inhabits I will first develop a theoretical understanding of public and private spaces. Because the term “public space” is such an amorphous and complicated concept, an appropriately nuanced theoretical understanding is necessary for understanding these spaces. Kohn (2004: 11) offers such a theory in her interpretation of public space as a “cluster concept.”

Kohn (2004) includes three different factors in her definition of public space: accessibility, ownership, and intersubjectivity. Each of these factors works on a sliding scale—one side of the scale represents absolute privateness while the other represents absolute publicness, and a space itself can fall anywhere between these poles for each factor. By accessibility Kohn is referring to the ability for anyone to travel into the space (here it is important to look not only at direct access to the space, but also to travel between private spaces and the public space in question). Thus, a space that more people can access is more public than a space that very few people can access. The ownership component is fairly straightforward—it asks whether a private person, a corporation, or the government owns the space. Kohn argues that the spaces owned by the government are the most public, and those owned by private people are the most private. Finally, intersubjectivity refers to how people are positioned inside of the space. A public space is one in which people are positioned intersubjectively (toward each other), while a private spaces does not position people toward each other. This factor is perhaps the most important because a space can only be public if people are in it interacting with each

other, no matter how accessible that space is. However, it is also the hardest factor to assess because it incorporates the blurry realm between space and action—people can act intersubjectively in a space designed to keep people apart, and vice-versa.

In order to analyze where a space falls on each continuum, numerous different aspects of accessibility and intersubjectivity must be examined, from economic to social to legal, even to psychological. For example, Low (2005) demonstrates how poverty can be a restriction against the accessibility of spaces for the poor in her discussion of gated communities. Fraser (1990) argues that gender can be a factor inhibiting intersubjectivity, even within publicly accessible spaces. If one wants to fully understand public space one must look at all of the different factors that go into a space's production.

Where does the toilet stall, our place of inquiry, fit into this model? In this study I examined the men's restrooms of five different buildings on the campus of Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. Of the five buildings two are buildings meant for general public use (King Library and the Shriver Student Center), two house departments (Shideler Hall, home of the geography and geology departments, and Laws Hall, the business school), and one building holds both a department and an auditorium open to the public (Hall Auditorium). These five buildings represented sixteen different restrooms. These buildings were chosen because a wide range of Miami's population passes through them and they are all similar in terms of accessibility, ownership, and intersubjectivity.

As a public university Miami University falls somewhere between government and private institution on the ownership scale. Thus, within the model the restrooms are semi-public in ownership. All of the buildings that I studied are fairly accessible to anyone during regular working hours of the week. Although two of the buildings house departments, and are thus utilized by a more specific population than the others, anyone could easily enter the buildings and use the restrooms. Despite this, accessibility is limited by the location of Miami University. Because Miami University is located in the middle of farming country in southwest Ohio, few people tend to pass through the university unless they already live there, are affiliated with the university in some way, or are considering becoming affiliated with the school. This means that the population that uses restrooms at Miami is strictly Miami's own population. The accessibility of the toilet stalls themselves is more interesting; although anyone can use the stall, they can only use them when they are not occupied.

This accessibility issue affects the intersubjectivity of the stall; the stall is not intersubjective. Only one person is allowed inside of the stall at a time, and many laws enforce the privacy one should have inside of the toilet stall. Even beyond these laws, the men's restroom is governed by an intricate set of informal codes that prohibit interaction: men tend to hold few

conversations in the restroom, try not to use urinals next to each other, and usually keep their eyes averted from one another while in the restroom (Young pers. observed). Overall the severe lack of intersubjectivity seems to make the toilet stall a very private place.

However, precisely because intersubjectivity is such a blurry term, it must be examined further. Intersubjectivity is a term that refers to the people in public spaces, so we now turn to theories about these people. Generally, theorists tend to focus upon two main definitions of the public—one offered by Habermas (1991) and the other by Fraser (1990). Habermas argues that the public sphere is a realm that can be accessed by all citizens and in which public opinion can be formed. Although Fraser uses Habermas's conception of the public sphere as a starting point, she argues that many publics exist within society. The people using the restrooms in Oxford are from a particular demographic, and I am only studying males out of this population. Habermas focuses on the possibility of deliberation and public opinion in the public sphere, while Fraser focuses upon expressions of identity.

Thus, to see if restroom stalls truly are not intersubjective, and thus to see if they are spaces not conducive to the (a) public, we must prove that neither communication of identity (where communication refers to a conversation between two or more identities) nor deliberation occur within toilet stalls. This will be the focus of the next section of this paper.

While examining the possibility that graffiti is intersubjective, we should keep some of the theories offered by Staeheli (1996) in mind. She argues that public actions do not necessarily take place within public spaces, and that private actions do not always occur in the private. In fact, when people perform actions within the spaces that they aren't normally performed, these actions can be transformative. Cresswell (1996) takes this logic to examinations of graffiti and argues that graffiti is powerful precisely because it seems to be out of place. However, hegemonic discourses (such as laws, political speeches, etc.) attempt to put graffiti back into place, and thus attempt to strip the graffiti of its power. Thus, in order to truly examine the transgressive power of graffiti we must allow for the possibility of action being divorced from the spaces in which it should be happening. This means that it is possible that graffiti artists are participating in an intersubjective discourse even within a space designed to curb intersubjectivity.

An Analysis of Restroom Texts

Even though a stall's architecture is designed to prevent intersubjectivity, this does not mean that all actions that take place within the stall need be private actions (Staeheli 1996). Thus, we must look at the graffiti itself to determine whether it is a private or public action; as Cresswell (1996) points out, graffiti can either be an attempt to privatize a public space or an

attempt to inscribe public statements upon a space that is too tightly regulated. To better understand what type of graffiti is present in the latrinalia on Miami's campus, I recorded all of the latrinalia I could read in the restrooms I visited and then performed content analysis on this data (Bell 2001). Following the method of Stocker et al. (1972), I placed the graffiti I recorded into the groupings artwork, fraternity graffiti, heterosexual graffiti, homosexual graffiti, racist graffiti, and nonsexual graffiti. Each instance of graffiti was placed into only one of these groupings; if one instance of latrinalia seemed to fit into two categories then I would choose the category into which I thought it best fit. The nonsexual category was further subdivided into sports, religion, names, politics, traditional restroom graffiti, and miscellaneous. I then marked the graffiti as either involved in a dialogue or as a single instance of graffiti. The graffiti involved in dialogue can be both graffiti responding to another piece of graffiti and the graffiti that is responded to. I performed basic statistics upon these categories to determine the percentages of each type of graffiti, and the results revealed the very public nature of latrinalia.

While the tags that many researchers focus on always have an element of individuality to them, as expressions of identity and as claims upon space, most of the latrinalia I recorded was far more public in nature. Only fifteen percent of the latrinalia was an expression of identity (11% of the graffiti was fraternity letters, 2% was graffiti of someone's name, and 2% was artwork or traditional restroom graffiti), and the other 85% of the graffiti expressed sexual desires, opinions about racial and sexual groups, discussions of sports and politics, and dialogues on other segments of public opinion. Even the fraternity letters in the restrooms were not merely private expressions of identity; they were often contested and wrapped up in heated discussions about the (un)desirability of frats and hatred between different fraternities. This means that nearly all of the latrinalia I studied can easily be understood and responded to by the Miami community at large.

In fact, people have responded to much of the latrinalia—forty percent of the graffiti that I recorded was part of a latrinalia dialogue between multiple graffiti artists. Thus, the latrinalia does, in fact, correspond to some type of public discourse. Much of this discourse fits under the description of the public that Fraser (1996) describes—it is the public expression of private issues like sexuality, race, or the politics of sub-publics like fraternities. However, as Stocker et al. (1972) point out, latrinalia tends to represent the community in which it is found. This is particularly true at Miami University due to the university's location—because Miami is so far away from other large populations, its restrooms tend to only be accessible to those that work at or attend the university. Thus, the restroom stalls also tend to reflect the public opinion that Habermas (1991) believes the public is meant to create. Because the latrinalia is a dialogue about a wide range of public opinions, this graffiti represents exactly what Habermas (1991)

and Fraser (1996) are talking about when they describe the public sphere. The walls of the restrooms at Miami record the male population's feelings on everything from sports, religion, and politics to racism and homophobia.

Ferem (2007) argues that toilet stalls are the perfect places for these types of opinions and expressions. First, toilet stalls are much safer places than the public spaces in which other types of graffiti are produced; it is much less likely for someone to get into trouble for writing on a toilet stall precisely because the stall is so private. For example, the Miami Police Department has only responded to reports of graffiti three times over this academic year, and none of these reports on graffiti were about latrinalia. Yet, I found latrinalia in every single toilet stall that I studied. Second, and closely related to the first argument, toilet stalls are a very safe place to express personal opinions (Ferem 2006). Because the stall is private and latrinalia is usually anonymous, a person can express any type of opinion, even very controversial opinions, without any risk of reprisal. In fact the more private stalls tend to have a lot more latrinalia than other stalls: the stalls farthest from the restroom door have dramatically more graffiti than those closest to the door, and, surprisingly, restrooms in basements tend to have more graffiti than restrooms on first floors.

Third, toilet stalls are much more accessible and less censored than other mediums (Stoakes and Dolber 2006). Anyone that uses a restroom and has a sharp object can be an artist in the realm of latrinalia; it takes no special qualification. Even the censorship becomes part of the discussion—it is obvious when graffiti is painted over and crossing out graffiti just becomes another type of expression. Additionally, Miami does not rigorously pursue censorship of latrinalia—I found graffiti declaring itself from as far back as 1988. Even if this was not an accurate date, it was clear that much of the graffiti had been in the stalls for a long time; there were many layers of latrinalia in most of the stalls, with most of the graffiti so faded that it is unreadable.

Despite these benefits to latrinalia, there are certainly negative aspects to the practice. Precisely because anyone can freely discuss any type of feeling a lot of the latrinalia expresses hatred. Of the graffiti I recorded 9% of it directly discussed homosexuality in a negative way, 4% used a term like “gay” or “fag” to insult another group or person, and another 4% expressed racism. Thus, nearly a fifth of the latrinalia on stalls is meant to be degrading and offensive. Is the freedom of expression worth exposing so many people to this type of hatred?

I argue that the restroom stall is perhaps the best place for a discussion of prejudice. First, censoring this language will do nothing to cure the hatred that drives it. As Butler (1997) argues, censoring hate speech may actually cause people to use even more of this type of language. If people cannot express feelings of homophobia or racism in the stalls they may end

up expressing more of these feelings in places other than the stall, with the possibility of a more violent outcome. However, I recognize that painting over homophobic and racist latrinalia will not result in a large increase in other forms of hate speech; rather, I believe that the real benefit of latrinalia in combating this type of discourse is graffiti's playful and transformative nature. As Baudrillard (? : 287) points out, graffiti is transgressive precisely because "it responds, there, on the spot." The "witticism, which is a transgressive reversal of discourse, does not act on the basis of another code as such; it works through the instantaneous deconstruction of the dominant discursive code." (Baudrillard 2003 [1972]: 287) Thus, "I hate niggers" easily became "I hate niggers KKK" and "Fags are inferior" easily became "Fags haters are inferior." Although graffiti like "Miami = homophobia" was not as prevalent as the homophobic latrinalia, it did exist, and people that wanted to express these types of statements are kept just as safe in the stall as those that want to scrawl messages of hatred. Instead of censoring hate speech in toilet stalls we need to figure out why there is dramatically less progressive latrinalia.

Responses to Latrinalia

In addition to recording latrinalia from restrooms around campus, I sent out a questionnaire to ten graduate students and thirty undergraduate students to get their opinions on latrinalia. Three graduate students and twelve undergraduate students replied to the questionnaire. I also sent questionnaires to the Miami's police department and to the Director of Building Maintenance, and both of these sources replied to the questionnaire. Although this is not a large enough sample size to accurately represent the feelings of the larger Miami population, I do think that it can nonetheless reveal some of the feelings people have toward graffiti, particularly when coupled with Cresswell's (1996) work on reactions to graffiti. The responses were quite interesting and help explain why there is less progressive latrinalia in Miami's restrooms.

First, none of the respondents took the graffiti in restroom stalls seriously—they either thought of latrinalia as a dirty annoyance or as a joke. One respondent said that it was "just bathroom humor," and none of the respondents thought that graffiti was something that should be taken too seriously. Additionally, none of the respondents had ever felt the need to respond to latrinalia with writings of their own. However, despite characterizing latrinalia as a mildly annoying inconvenience or as humorous, every single respondent then went on to describe how she was offended by a particular example of latrinalia provided on the questionnaire. Thus, there seems to be a gap between people's general perceptions of latrinalia and their reactions to particular instances of latrinalia; people respond very strongly to the messages that latrinalia imparts even though they don't feel latrinalia is a serious matter.

I argue that, in order to increase the amount of progressive graffiti in stalls around Miami University, this gap between perception and reality must be closed.

In addition to being considered a joke, many respondents viewed the graffiti as dirty; this would place latrinalia into the same framework that Cresswell (1996) uses to describe the graffiti of New York. It almost seems that people view the ideas expressed by graffiti with the same disdain as they would view the excrement that also passes through the restroom—while people may pass through the stalls with private ideas, the stall itself must remain clean of them once the person leaves the stall. A graduate student put the matter in particularly lucid terms when he compared latrinalia to a mess that people leave behind in a restaurant for other to clean up—the mess, just like the ideas the graffiti express, is only a problem when people other than its creator have to deal with it. This fits perfectly with the discourse the university itself uses to describe the latrinalia—the removal of graffiti is viewed as part of the normal “daily cleaning of campus buildings” and is undertaken with “normal cleaning solutions and materials.” Decisions to replace stalls (which recently occurred in Shideler Hall, after completion of my data collection) or to paint over graffiti are rare and are made on a case-by-case basis.

This rhetoric over the comic and dirty nature of latrinalia is wrapped up in a discourse of tolerance—my respondents were appalled by many examples of latrinalia because they perceived the graffiti to be intolerant, on several levels. A lot of the graffiti did express messages of hatred, which was, in fact, expressing intolerance of certain groups of people. Tolerance preaches that people accept difference, and this often translates into the idea that people should just leave other people alone (Brown 2007). Unfortunately, many people further reinforce this depoliticizing ethical command into the right to be left alone, which means that any form of graffiti in the stall is a form of intolerance. Respondents argue that they shouldn't have to look at the “mess” other people leave behind, that they deserve a clean area in which they aren't bothered, and that graffiti is an infringement of their lives. Thus, the people that oppose the intolerance of hate speech are also the ones that view transgression as something that should not be tolerated because transgression is a form of violence to norms, just like hatred is. The best way to lessen the transgressive power of the graffiti, then, is to make it an immaterial joke or simply a bit of dirt that needs to be wiped away. This discourse attempts to put the latrinalia in its place, as a large piece of crap that somebody forgot to flush but that the individual can easily flush away, so that she can return to the privacy of a sterile stall.

However, the ideas behind latrinalia are not something that the cleaning staff can easily wipe away, and the proliferation of the graffiti itself often presents this staff with a losing battle. No matter how many times they clean the restroom, the latrinalia returns. Censorship is

thus not a viable prevention method, and discourses of putting latrinalia in its place are having the perverse effect of preventing positive instances of graffiti while not impeding hate speech. By trying to force restroom stalls to be private places, they allow private instances of hate to shape every interaction within the restroom. Thus, people need to change their perceptions of latrinalia—instead of viewing it as a private space, one could easily view it as (2007) does, as a place in which to express creativity and playful banter. Hateful graffiti could easily be transgressed and overwhelmed by a multiplicity of other discourses, perhaps even affecting the writers of the hate graffiti in some transformative way. Restrictions on public spaces are often attempts at exclusion—it is no different with latrinalia. By attempting to restrict what could be a beautiful mosaic of personal expression and playfulness, we have created a private realm of oppression.

Conclusion

The restroom stall was designed for privacy, and thus its very architecture is meant to prevent intersubjectivity. However, this architecture was not entirely effective; by leaving behind a bit of themselves on the walls, graffiti artists are able to forge a temporal bond between themselves and others. This graffiti becomes a type of public, in which people can hold discussions, reflect upon public opinion, and display markers of identity to others. And, of course, sometimes the latrinalia is not coherent at all—it could merely be a regurgitation of creativity, in all its glory, for the world to see (Ferem 2007). In fact, the stalls have become a uniquely public arena precisely because they are such private places—the privacy allows people to express their most private feelings to the public, shielded by the anonymity of the exchange. Thus, the most private stalls are often the ones with the most latrinalia.

However, design is not the only way to curb intersubjectivity. Because the public was able to find a way to transgress the private space of the restroom stall, those in power had to find ways to control the public. They did this by creating various discourses to put the public back in its place, outside of the restroom stall, where it could be monitored more easily. These discourses took the form of rhetoric on the comic and dirty nature of latrinalia, as well as the form of an ethics of tolerance. Many people internalized this discourse, so it followed them into the most private of spaces, including the toilet stall itself. Perversely, though, the discourse has not done a good job at curbing graffiti based upon hatred. Not surprisingly, a discourse of exclusion (of graffiti) has caused a proliferation in other logics of exclusion (exclusion based on race, sexuality, etc.).

Rather than continue attempts to keep restroom stalls private, universities and other public institutions must realize the importance of free, public discourse. Restrooms are the perfect places for this type of discourse because they combine the safety of privacy with the possibility

of intersubjectivity. These can be libratory and playful spaces, but only if we want them to be.

About the Author

Jason Young is currently an undergraduate at Miami University, where he is a geography major and economics minor. Originally from Dayton, Ohio, he plans to graduate from Miami in the spring of 2009. Future plans include graduate studies with a focus on mapping marginalized communities.

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