

**The Politics of the Public Toilet**

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## Introduction: The Politics of the Public Toilet

This dossier is intended to identify some of the urgent problems and compelling questions posed by the public toilet. From the history of racial segregation in the United States and the ongoing sex segregation of toilets to the desperate dearth of facilities around the world, the provision and governance of the toilet is a politically charged phenomenon. The public toilet serves as a site of the production and regulation of sex, gender, sexuality, class, caste, and disability, and it is today the target of activists demanding justice for many, including women and poor, disabled, queer, and transgender people.

There is clearly much political work to do on all these intersecting fronts. There is also a pressing need for scholarly studies of the public toilet. Despite the excellent academic work that has been produced on the topic,<sup>1</sup> there remains an enormous amount of intellectual labor yet to do—labor that can draw from and contribute to ongoing struggles over facilities and access. There is much we have yet to understand about precisely how the public toilet functions as a bulwark of sex binarism, a tool of gender regulation, an apparatus of class subordination, a site of heteronormative policing, an ableist institution, a place of colonial administration, and a mechanism for the production of subalternity. Rather than simply accommodating pre-existing variations among us, the *dispositif* of the public toilet is coconstitutive of these regimes of inequality. For a particularly instructive example, think about how the standard facility *disables* the bodies that do not conform to the model of its generic user. The public toilet's utility for these systems of social hierarchy is only enhanced to the extent that it remains neglected by our political projects and critical discourses. For years it seems that the many problems of the public toilet had managed to hide more or less in plain sight.

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But times are changing. For example, the stubborn naturalization of sex-segregated public toilets, even when most household toilets are shared, is now, finally, coming under fire in public venues, most notably by trans activists and their allies. The public debates that have been staged across the country over queer and transgender peoples' access to public bathrooms offer some intriguing insights into the current state of the politics of sex and gender, although the controversies require one to dig through several layers of ideological camouflage. Thus, for instance, the vulnerability that some women or girls report feeling in the public toilet and the louder voices of their would-be protectors are best read as displaced symptoms, but perhaps in need of a differential diagnosis. The disingenuous evocation of the specter of violence against women in these debates is particularly galling because of the way it both trivializes what remains a pervasive social problem that obviously occurs more often in households than in public toilets and ignores other instances of violence, including the well-documented instances of violence to which transgender people have been subjected and the violence done to people around the world who, for lack of access, are unable to urinate or defecate when necessary in sanitary conditions.

A wide range of analytical apparatuses and conceptual lenses have been and could be used to study this site. In considering some of the possibilities, an intersectional methodology is critically important. The public toilet is remarkable as a location from which to view the production of multiple social inequalities. Attending to the interaction of multiple axes of difference in such a site can, for example, enable us to disaggregate the experiences of a group like "women" along lines of gender, race, class, sexuality, disability, and nation (see, e.g., Plaskow 2008) and, by the same token, to craft potentially coalitional models of political response (see, e.g., Kafer 2013).

Continuing this review of possible analytics, the public-private distinction, at least when deployed in a nondichotomous fashion, can arguably reveal some interesting aspects of the site. Among other reasons, this is because the contents and boundaries of what is configured as private and public are highly variable and remarkably fluid in the case of the public toilet. Clearly, the 1970s feminist adage that the personal is political is especially applicable to a site that can be imagined as the location of an intensely private experience that is also to some degree publicly exposed. The analysis of what is conceived as private and what is seen as public about the space is made even more complex with the increasing privatization of social services under the conditions of neoliberalism, in this case, when businesses like malls, stores, and restaurants are sometimes expected

to provide facilities—“public” in only the most impoverished sense—that are accessible only to those who can pass as acceptable consumers.

There are a range of different temporal registers that could benefit from further contributions. For instance, historical work on the public toilet faces a number of hurdles. Barbara Penner (2005: 87) describes some of the difficulties she faced in trying to learn exactly how nineteenth-century British women urinated and defecated in public when the standard archives relied on polite abstractions “couched in terms of public health, sanitation, and hygiene.” Speculation about the possibilities of potential futures with alternative facilities is equally hampered by the paucity of the forward-looking social and political imagination.

Consider too some of the various spatial scales through which we can gain further analytical purchase on the site. For example, beginning by mapping the architecture of a facility, we might then, relying on an infrastructural point of entry (see Desai, McFarlane, and Graham 2015; Wilson 2016), trace the networks of pipes to the sewage treatment plant or into the soil or water and, finally, drawing on a transnational methodology, raise questions about the fiscal and environmental sustainability of the continued reliance in the global North on flush-and-discharge systems (see Jewitt 2011).

The affective turn offers a number of generative angles from which to approach the public toilet. It is a location around which a host of powerful affects circulate, including shame, anxiety, revulsion, and disgust. But it can also be, perhaps not coincidentally, the locus for the experience of a variety of poorly understood and often suppressed pleasurable intensities. This too would seem to render the site a particularly fertile ground for psychoanalytic thought (see, e.g., Cavanagh 2010).

Finally, conceived as a biopolitical institution, the public toilet offers a rich object of study for political ecology and posthumanist thought. Urinating and defecating are arguably the ways we most often, and perhaps most profoundly, experience our porousness with the sociobiological ecosystem and our kinship with other forms of life. In this sense, they routinely challenge the disembodied abstractions of both liberal individualism and species humanism. The problems that such bodily events raise for these models of the relentlessly individuated and supposedly sovereign subject are not just a matter of the material leakiness of our bioexistence but are also a matter of the sounds and smells that, in refusing to stay put, violate the tidy boundaries of the sanitized sensorium that we owe in part to these models.

The essays that follow develop a number of these analytical rubrics and lines of inquiry to examine the past, present, and future of the public

toilet. Since they intervene at a nexus of intersecting forces of oppression, theoretical and practical work on this area are necessarily collective and coalitional. The public toilet has been the scene of exclusions, but it is also becoming the site of new possibilities for political theory and practice.

#### Note

- 1 For good introductions to a portion of this work, see the edited volumes by Olga Gershenson and Barbara Penner (2009) and Harvey Molotch and Laura Norén (2010).

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