

Dharman Jeyasingham

Closure, Affect, and the Continuing Queer Potential of Public Toilets

Since the mid-1990s, the number of public toilets in Britain that are open and effectively available as sites for sex between men has reduced dramatically. In 2004 Clara Greed (2004) had already noted a drop of 40 percent in the number of public toilets across the country, while a state policy of austerity in Britain since 2010 has meant that many more public toilets have closed. Those toilets that remain are likely to have changed significantly. Several years ago, I explored how public toilets were being materially reorganized to make activities within them more open to view (Jeyasingham 2010). I used several toilets in Manchester, England, as case studies to show how greater acceptance of sexual minorities as citizens with rights to protection from homophobic abuse had developed in tandem with greater expectations about appropriate behavior and policing practices that, more effectively than before, mitigated against homoerotic activity in public toilets. All of those toilets have since closed, and Manchester, which has a population of around five hundred thousand people, now has only one functioning local authority public toilet (George 2011). While restrooms have not necessarily been closing with the same frequency elsewhere, material adaptations and increased surveillance, both “natural” (the opening up of spaces to general view) and technological, now seem to be a feature of public toilets in many locations across the West (Dalton 2008; Braverman 2010). This shift has occurred alongside the increased social and political inclusion of certain forms of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) identities in the same global regions.

The South Atlantic Quarterly 115:4, October 2016
DOI 10.1215/00382876-3656180 © 2016 Duke University Press

The decreases in the number of public toilets and in the privacy and comfort that they offer have potentially disastrous consequences for many older people, disabled people, those caring for young children, and others who are likely to have greater need for such facilities. These shifts also mark a decline in the opportunities that such spaces might provide for queer interactions outside of social networks that feel increasingly normative to many and a consequent decline in the social, erotic, and identificatory potential that such interactions might have provided. Even so, it might be that toilets continue to provide queer potential, as figures that represent certain queer affective experiences and as sites where such experiences resonate and can still be felt. This essay examines two examples of recent engagements with toilets that arguably offer queer possibilities, even as they mark the passing of these toilets as venues for sex between men. The first of these is *Tearoom*, a film (2007) and accompanying book (2008) by William E. Jones, which presents footage that was shot during covert police surveillance of a public toilet in Ohio in 1962 and was subsequently used in criminal prosecutions. The second example is the Edwardian Cloakroom in Bristol, England, a building that was a functioning public toilet until 2001 and, since 2011, has been made available as a gallery space for emerging artists in the city.

The status of both examples as toilets of the past hardly makes them unusual in the critical literature about sex in toilets, which has tended to focus on spaces that no longer exist or are no longer used for sex. This focus on the past is partly because of the significance given to toilets as places of sexual and social interaction for emerging queer communities in the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries (Humphreys 1970; Chauncey 1994; Maynard 1994; Houlbrook 2005). Ethical considerations have also had this effect, in that writing about venues for secluded and stigmatized activities holds the potential to compromise the opportunities for continuing seclusion in those places, so published research has tended to focus on places where sexual activity has already dropped off, even if only recently. More fundamentally, the resonance of past incidents is integral to many experiences of seeking sex in public toilets. Toilets, as spaces of solitude intermittently interrupted, have usually provided more opportunities for thinking about what has happened in the past and what might happen soon than for engaging with other copresent bodies.

Material features of public toilet spaces, as well as providing erotic potential in themselves (Brown 2008), often recall more closeted eras (whether the grandeur of fin de siècle toilet spaces or the utility of postwar modernist ones)—in fact, their erotic appeal might rely in part on their sta-

tus as spaces designed at a time when queer possibilities could present themselves while remaining unspoken. Focusing on the two toilets discussed below allows exploration of the material, temporal, and affective qualities of toilets, which have been so important for their erotic potential in the past and which continue to reverberate after opportunities for sex have disappeared. They allow us to consider how these qualities might continue to be important, even though they are more elusive now than they might have been in the recent past. They provoke other questions, too, about what happens when once secluded and abject spaces and actions within the public toilet are put on show and become either a venue for art or a piece of art themselves. Are these further ways in which toilets become sanitized and homonormativity is imposed? Or is there something more to the public toilet, its spatial arrangements and its atmospheres, its reiteration in these new forms as art, that provides ways of challenging contemporary rules for sexual engagement?

Tearoom

Tearoom (2007) is a fifty-six-minute film by Jones that presents footage filmed by police officers over the course of three weeks in 1962 in Mansfield, Ohio, at an underground public restroom next to the town's Central Park.¹ The film consists mostly of footage from covert surveillance of the restroom from an adjacent service corridor, through a two-way mirror. This footage shows men engaged in cruising each other and having sex as well as doing other more mundane activities such as combing hair and listening to the radio. It was produced as evidence in criminal prosecutions that resulted in at least thirty-eight men being convicted and either imprisoned or detained in psychiatric hospitals, almost exclusively for taking part in consensual sexual acts. What we see in the film, therefore, are images of men whose lives were about to change forever and in quite horrible ways. The toilet itself was demolished once the first trials had begun, with the underground rooms, perhaps symbolically, being filled with earth (Jones 2008). The material filmed by police officers was subsequently used in *Camera Surveillance* (1964), a film produced by the Ohio-based Highway Safety Foundation for use in police training, which Jones reworked in *Tearoom* forty years later. In turning a training film into a piece of cinematic art, Jones made only a few changes, the most significant of which was to remove the disgust-filled commentary that formed *Camera Surveillance*'s sound track and screen the film in silence.

Academic discussions about *Tearoom* and reviews published in film, art, or porn periodicals have largely been concerned with two matters. The first of these is the ethics of re-presenting images of men engaged in private sexual activities that were recorded and used as criminal evidence leading to their incarceration. The second concerns what counts as evidence of erotic pleasure. My purpose here is not to attempt to answer such questions. Instead, I want to explore the film's capacity to complicate them, for instance by presenting images that have, historically, counted as compelling evidence of abject immorality, in ways that refute such judgments but also trouble current homonormative responses to sex in places such as public toilets.

While almost all the reviews of *Tearoom* have noted its importance as a record of historical homophobia and most see it as a powerful artistic work, they take widely different views about whether what the film depicts is sexual pleasure and whether viewing it is an arousing experience. Richard Knight Jr. (2008) describes *Tearoom* as “mesmerizing” and “sexy,” while Dietmar Schwärzler (2009) has said that the film “has some really funny . . . very sexy parts. . . . Sometimes the sex reminds me of a dance.” In contrast, Chris Chang (2008: 17) describes the film as “56 interminable minutes of anonymous, mechanical and utterly joyless acts”; Fred Camper (2008: 78) is full of praise for the *Tearoom* but sees it as a film that “intensifies one’s voyeuristic attention to these taboo but notably unerotic images” and describes participants as “joyless men.” Nicholas Weist (2008: 9) simply sees men who “don’t appear to enjoy themselves (or each other),” while Christy Lange (2008) sees the film as “disturbing and unsatisfying on multiple levels, even more so than the average porn.” This quality of the sex shown in *Tearoom*—as something that, judged by current criteria, fails to count as evidence of pleasure—is discussed by Jones himself. He sees it as “pre-porn sex,” from a time when men had sex without adopting the standard ways of talking and moving found in mainstream porn (Jones quoted in Schwärzler 2009). But some of the same qualities of interaction—little eye contact, no kissing, a resolute focus on genitals or anuses, and few self-conscious attempts to behave sexually—also appear in much more recent accounts of queer sex in toilets (see, e.g., Jeyasingham 2002; Brown 2008; Dalton 2008), so perhaps they reveal something about the social and spatial contexts of public toilets—how people might engage in same-sex encounters outside of private and, in homonormative times, more or less legitimated social contexts. Approaching *Tearoom* in this way involves identifying potential commonalities between different temporal contexts rather than explaining the film, in the first instance, as an example of historical remains. Doing so allows *Tea-*

room to remind us that it is still possible to experience sex outside of the requirements of contemporary homonormativity, where sex counts as such only when it is productive of private timespaces, is personally defining, involves some direct engagement, and apparently occurs without anxiety.

Tearoom is a reworking of material that was initially produced in order to identify perpetrators and provide incriminating evidence. Part of its success as a piece of art lies in how it draws our attention to the beauty of these same images and, in so doing, to the pathos of the men who appear in them. Because of the small amount of film that was available to those carrying out the surveillance, we often see only brief instances of incriminating activity, followed by film of another interaction between the same or different men. A result is that the film feels disjointed and stilted, but also compulsive and intriguing. Of course, many of the reviews of *Tearoom* engage with it as an insight into public sexual relations between closeted men in the 1960s, rather than a piece of film that reveals how such interactions were recorded and rendered as criminal evidence. For me, *Tearoom* succeeds as art because it transforms *Camera Surveillance*, a film that claims to catch deviants unaware, into something that reveals some qualities of public sex in an earlier, more closeted era but that also reveals something enduring about queer sexual experiences. Brevity, the impossibility of identifying queer desire in the faces of strangers, and the constant chance of being apprehended and shamed are revealed as erotically productive qualities in *Tearoom*, rather than further reasons to be appalled by queer sex (as they were presented in *Camera Surveillance*).

Edwardian Cloakroom

The Edwardian Cloakroom is an exhibition space in a building that used to be a public toilet in Bristol. The building offers two distinct spaces, previously the gentlemen's and the ladies' toilets, which still have entrances labeled as such (further details can be found at Bristol City Council 2016). Artists can arrange to use the venue to exhibit their work without a charge, on the condition that they curate the exhibition and cause minimal disruption to the site. The building is listed as having architectural and historical significance, and it retains its original features, to the extent that people occasionally mistake it for a restroom during exhibitions and attempt to use the toilets or urinals.

The architecture of the men's toilet—an entrance set back from the street and sight lines within the building that provide opportunities for both seclusion and display—and its location on the edge of the city center, close to

other, similarly secluded toilets, meant that it was frequently used for cruising prior to its closure in 2001. Now, despite the venue's quaint title, the same space is often used to exhibit works that explore questions of sexuality, liminality, and decay. Many of the exhibitions have drawn meaning from their location in a space that was used for private and intimate acts, while others have focused on the gender segregated nature of the spaces, such as Claudio Ahlers's 2014 exhibition of velvet models of male and female genitals and *Ladies' Room*, a 2016 installation by Catherine Anyango and Julie Hill, which has focused on messages written by women in horror films. Exhibits have frequently returned to questions of observation, stigma, and abjection, such as Rachel Sokal's 2011 piece *Peeping Tom—Camera Obscura*, which explored the use of developments in surveillance technology, and the 2014 exhibition *Smoke and Mirrors*, which referenced the Pendle witch trials. They have also often focused on solitude and reflection—for instance, Caitlin Shepherd's 2015 sound installation *Sanctuary*. My focus here is not so much on whether these pieces are successful or innovative in artistic terms (although many are) but on their shared aim to draw on the continuing resonances of a building that was once the venue for abjected, stigmatized, and often criminalized acts. As Shepherd's introduction to *Sanctuary* states, the site is "an abandoned building, full of other people's histories" (Bristol City Council 2016), and it is the feeling of continued presence of such past events that enables the best of the work to succeed in a exhibition space that appears at first to be rather inflexible and confined.

The Continuing Resonance of Public Toilets

This essay is concerned with the powerful affective resonances of many public toilets, where past experiences of solitude, sanctuary, brief intimacy, and occasional, spectacular violence continue to be felt. These resonances communicate something about the opportunities for imagining and being with unknown others that toilets have provided in the past—whether because of their homoerotic potential, the gender-specific spaces they have offered, or because they have provided the seclusion needed for intimate care in wider public contexts. *Tearoom* and the Edwardian Cloakroom enable those resonances to continue long after the toilets in question have been filled in or closed off. Engaging with these affective experiences and reflecting on them can have a political purpose because, as Caitlin DeSilvey and Tim Edensor (2012) discuss, such spaces can provide points from which to counter dominant ways of ordering both social relations and material spaces. Allowing

the past to intrude into the present can also disrupt those false ideas about a unity between time and event that lead us to discount what has happened in the past and ignore its significance for present times (Trigg 2009). These remains of toilets can be seen as enabling different relationships to the past and communities across time, as well as offering possibilities of alternative erotic and affective engagements with the continuing resonance of long-gone bodies and interactions.

Note

- 1 At least two excerpts of *Tearoom* are, at the time of writing, available to view on YouTube, while a better-quality version of the entire film can be found on the porn network Xvideos.com.

References

- Braverman, Irus. 2010. "Potty Training: Nonhuman Inspection in Public Washrooms." In *Toilet: Public Restrooms and the Politics of Sharing*, edited by Harvey Molotch and Laura Norén, 65–86. New York: New York University Press.
- Bristol City Council. 2016. "The Edwardian Cloakroom." bristolcitycouncilcreativespace.wordpress.com/facilities/edwardian-cloakroom-3 (accessed February 16, 2016).
- Brown, Gavin. 2008. "Ceramics, Clothing and Other Bodies: Affective Geographies of Homoerotic Cruising Encounters." *Social and Cultural Geography* 9, no. 8: 915–32.
- Camera Surveillance*. 1964. Mansfield, OH: Highway Safety Foundation.
- Camper, Fred. 2008. "Critic's Choice: *Tearoom*." *Chicago Reader*, May 15.
- Chang, Chris. 2008. "In Flagrante Delicto: William E. Jones Collaborates with the Police in *Tearoom*." *Film Comment* 44, no. 4: 17.
- Chauncey, George. 1994. *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940*. New York: Basic Books.
- Dalton, Derek. 2008. "Gay Male Resistance in 'Beat' Spaces in Australia: A Study of Out-law Desire." *Australian Feminist Law Journal* 28, no. 1: 97–119.
- DeSilvey, Caitlin, and Tim Edensor. 2012. "Reckoning with Ruins." *Progress in Human Geography* 37, no. 4: 465–85.
- George, Rose. 2011. "Public Toilets Go Down the Pan." *Guardian*, February 18. www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/feb/18/public-toilets-conveniences-councils-loos.
- Greed, Clara. 2004. "Public Toilets: The Need for Compulsory Provision." *Municipal Engineer* 157, no. 2: 77–85.
- Houlbrook, Matt. 2005. *Queer London: Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918–1957*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Humphreys, Laud. 1970. *Tearoom Trade: A Study of Homosexual Encounters in Public Places*. London: Gerald Duckworth.
- Jeyasingham, Dharman. 2002. "'Ladies' and 'Gentlemen': Location, Gender, and the Dynamics of Public Sex." In *In a Queer Place: Sexuality and Belonging in British and European Contexts*, edited by Kate Chedgoy, Emma Francis, and Murray Pratt, 73–88. Aldershot: Ashgate.

- Jeyasingham, Dharman. 2010. "Building Heteronormativity: The Social and Material Reconstruction of Men's Public Toilets as Spaces of Heterosexuality." *Social and Cultural Geography* 11, no. 4: 307–25.
- Jones, William E. 2007. *Tearoom*. 16mm film transferred to video, color, silent, 56 minutes. <http://www.williamejones.com/collections/view/11/>.
- Jones, William E. 2008. *Tearoom*. Los Angeles: 2nd Cannons.
- Knight, Richard, Jr. 2008. "Queercentric: William E. Jones' 'Found Document' Is Mesmerizing." *Windy City Times*, May 14.
- Lange, Christy. 2008. "In the Tearoom . . . Not Really What I Expected." *Editors' Blog, Frieze.com*, October. www.frieze.com/blog/entry/in_the_tearoom_not_really_what_i_expected. Link no longer active. Blog entry quoted at <http://www.williamejones.com/collections/about/11>.
- Maynard, Steven. 1994. "Through a Hole in the Lavatory Wall: Homosexual Subcultures, Police Surveillance, and the Dialectics of Discovery, Toronto, 1890–1930." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 5, no. 2: 207–42.
- Schwärzler, Dietmar. 2009. "More than One Way to Watch a Movie!" In *Smell It! Vienna: Kunsthalle Exnergasse*. www.williamejones.com/collections/about/11.
- Trigg, Dylan. 2009. "The Place of Trauma: Memory, Hauntings, and the Temporality of Ruins." *Memory Studies* 2, no. 1: 87–101.
- Weist, Nicholas. 2008. "From Gulag to Gallery: How William E. Jones Made High Art from a '60s Sex Sting." *Out*, May: 9.