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October 2006

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Recommended Citation

Ames, Melissa R., "Memoirs of a Bathroom Stall: The Women's Lavatory as Crying Room, Confessional, and Sanctuary" (2006). *Faculty Research & Creative Activity*. 13.

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Memoirs of a Bathroom Stall:
The Women's Lavatory as Crying Room, Confessional, & Sanctuary

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The stereotypes concerning bathroom behavior are deeply embedded in our minds and reflected in the products we create, consume, and conform to – the common joke that women always travel in pairs to the bathroom, that men know (and follow without failure) proper urinal etiquette, etc. Plain and simple – the public bathroom is just one among many gendered spaces culturally constructed in our sexually *unrepressed* society. My argument is that our cultural artifacts (popular films, television shows, advertisements, even old fashioned print literature – my focus here) have been writing, reflecting upon, and critiquing these restroom regulations – that our society has actually given us a plethora of performative moments that act as a memoir containing delightful nuggets and societal instructions pertaining to bathroom norms in modern America. The subtitle of this essay (perhaps the result of leftover baggage from being raised a “good” Catholic girl) says it all – that women have been socialized to envision the public restroom as a crying room (a place of amplified affect, of purging, performing, and playing with emotions), a confessional (the ideal location to carry out their “natural” oral tradition or gossip culture), and a sanctuary (a linoleum and tiled escape where the public and private blend together, where the four walls of the individualized stall allow a moment of sometimes anxiety ridden solitude). It is my claim that looking at the ways in which these three facets of women’s bathroom culture interplay, how they are represented, and how women are beginning to talk back at them (women’s art and graffiti within the bathroom stall, for example), we can begin to see that a lot more is going on behind the scenes of bathrooms that we might at first

think – that the women’s restroom is actually an ideal site for the developing of a feminist politics and the housing of oppositional art.

The Women’s Bathroom as Crying Room. In her theory on gender, Judith Butler argues that one becomes a woman (and therefore carries out socially accepted womanly acts) because one is under the “cultural compulsion” to do so (12). Butler defines gender as “the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (43). My thoughts are that these “repeated acts” are often highly wrapped up in the expression of affect. Women are socialized to be expressers of their emotions, talkers of feelings, weepers, huggers, touchy-feely creatures in tune with their inner-sensitivity. The public restroom tends to be an occasional stage for this “cultural compulsion” to express emotion – a female masquerade scripted by society. In fact, the ladies room may be the best locale to see hyperbolic affect performances of all kinds (even those not involving actual tears).

Upon reflection most women can recall situations in which they have observed (or participated in) the ritual of bathroom blubbering. Vanities across the country have been home to women dabbing away mascara streaks from their eyes, re-fixing their face (and facades) to carryout their catwalk back to their companions outside of the bathroom realm. Bathroom dwellers have witnessed not only sob fests but the explosion of other emotions as well: humiliation, anger, betrayal, etc. These mirrored palaces have broadcasted many pep talks, catfights, and soul searching. But why? Because society instructs us that this semi-private zone is the place to do it and our cultural artifacts reinforce this.

The notion of the bathroom as crying room is evident in J.D. Salinger’s novel *Franny and Zooey*. This story of two siblings coming to terms with the consequences of their “freakish upbringing” is told in two sections – one focused on Franny and the onset of her nervous breakdown, and one on her brother, Zooey, and his struggle to

help her conquer it although he suffers from much of the same ailments (Salinger 199). These two were the youngest members of the Glass family, intellectual prodigies educated in religious philosophy by their older brothers, Seymour and Buddy. This enlightened rearing has had a detrimental effect on the brother-sister pair. Toward the end of section one Franny, ridden with feelings of guilt, self-contempt, dissatisfaction with her life path, her current beau, the material fakeness of the world, and her inability to reach her idealistic religious goals, escapes to the ladies' room at Sickler's to temporarily purge herself of these emotions so that she can carry on with her charade of normalcy:

It was unattended and apparently unoccupied when Franny came in. She stood for a moment – rather as though it were a rendezvous point of some kind – in the middle of the tiled floor. Her brow was beaded with perspiration now, her mouth was slackly open, and she was still paler than she had been in the dining room. Abruptly, then, and very quickly, she went into the farthest and most anonymous-looking of the seven or eight enclosures... Without any apparent regard to the suchness of her environment, she sat down. She brought her knees together very firmly, as if to make herself a smaller, more compact unit. Then she placed her hands, vertically, over her eyes and pressed the hells hard, as though to paralyze the optic nerve and drown all images into a voidlike black. Her extended fingers, though trembling, or because they were trembling, looked oddly graceful and pretty. She held that tense, almost fetal position for a suspensory moment – then broke down. She cried for fully five minutes. She cried without trying to suppress any of the noisier manifestations of grief and confusion, with all the convulsive throat sounds that a hysterical child makes when the breath is trying to get up through a partly closed epiglottis. And yet, when finally she stopped, she merely stopped, without the painful, knifelike, intakes of breath that usually follow a violent outburst-inburst. When she

stopped, it was as though some momentous change of polarity had taken place inside her mind, one that had an immediate, pacifying effect on her body... She washed her face with cold water, dried it with a towel from an overhead rack, applied fresh lipstick, combed her hair, and left the room. (Salinger 21-3)

However, despite this cathartic moment of crying/regrouping, minutes later she collapses in the lobby of the bar and sufficiently ends her section of the novel.⁶

Salinger's text simply records one of the normative uses of public restrooms – a place to rid oneself of excess emotion, a place to pull oneself together, a public place (only *somewhat* outside of the public eye) to make sure that one is capable of playing out the feminine role (without unneeded emotional outbursts) outside of the ladies room in the masculine sphere.

The Women's Bathroom as Confessional. As stated earlier, society has instructed women that emotions are highly intertwined in our ability to talk about them – enter the oral tradition or gossip culture. The women's room is frequently cast as the spot for ideal chitchat, bitching, gossip, and a play-by-play on what is occurring outside of its walls. (The emotional intensity and interest level of these conversations often depend on whether the site in which they are located holds a profitable liquor license). For a lover of eavesdropping, the inconspicuous bathroom stall (with feet levitated slightly off the ground) is a fabulous spot for carrying out this particular hobby. Another literary text provides a stellar example of women's oral tradition via the toilet.

Clare Boothe Luce's play, *The Women*, is a satire about New York society women. This all women cast features the fractured universal woman – each of the women within represent one basic feminine stereotype: Sylvia (the bitchy gossip), Peggy (the naïve

⁶ Ironically the second half begins in a bathroom, as well. Zoey is bathing in a steaming tub, reading an old letter from his brother Buddy, and thwarting off the bathroom intrusion (and the corresponding taboo) of his mother's insistence that he counsel her on what do about Franny's breakdown with only a flimsy shower curtain separating them. However, since that deals with a private household bathroom, I will leave that scene for a different discussion (Salinger 50-91).

newly wed), Edith (the eternally pregnant housewife), Mary (the happy, much-envied housewife), Nancy (the unmarried, feminist writer), Crystal (the gold-digging, other woman, cheating with Mary's husband), and the Countess (the flamboyant, rich, habitual bride of boy toys). Being a dramatic work intended for stage, it should not be surprising that entire text is talk, but what makes it exceptional is that it is a text that gives voice only to females. Though there are a few key male figures alluded to in this piece, their words are only recapped through the mouths of their wives, servants, or secretaries. What makes Luce's play fit into this discussion is that its entire interweaving plot climaxes in a final scene set none other than (you guessed it) in a bathroom!

Act II, scene 5 opens in the "Powder Room at the Casino Roof" where a parade of women (or extras) stroll in and out discussing the problems of themselves and others (Luce 82). For example, one woman (2nd Woman) self-proclaims "I'm heartbroken," while another girl (2nd Girl) discusses the audacity of her lover's wife to interfere in their relationship, while a mother-daughter pair argue about socially accepted behavior patterns (Dowager and Debutante), and another (Girl in Distress) races into the restroom cupping her right breast, desperately in search for a safety pin, stating: "I was never so embarrassed!" (Luce 82-86). Next the focus of the scene shifts to the central characters (Mary, Sylvia, Crystal, and The Countess) and the eruption of their layered love triangles. In the beginning of the play, Crystal was the primary cause for the breakup of Mary's happy marriage to her husband, Stephen. Crystal, now his wife, has been cheating with western star, Buck, the youthful husband of the Countess. Mary has discovered the affair and strategically finds a way to weasel a confession out of Crystal (with the help of loose lipped Sylvia) while the Countess (who is within ear shot) can hear it all (Luce 87-90). The play ends with the following dialogue:

SYLVIA. Mary, what a dirty female trick you played!

CRYSTAL. Yes! From the great, noble, little woman! You're just a cat, like all

the rest of us!

MARY. Well, I've had two years to sharpen my claws. (*Waves her hand gaily to Sylvia*) ... Good night, ladies! (*Exits, leaving Crystal and Sylvia alone. As curtain falls, Crystal raises her bag to belt Sylvia, and Sylvia backs fearfully away.*)

CURTAIN FALLS – *Then rises to find Crystal and Sylvia pulling hair.* (Luce 90)

This scene quite obviously showcases the bathroom as confessional in the most dramatic sense. However, it is more regularly a confessional on a smaller scale. (Note: if one stops to ponder the architectural similarities between bathroom stalls and the traditional Catholic confessional booths this will be all the more entertaining).

Bathrooms act as confessional spaces where one woman vocalizes her personal concerns to another woman (or woman group) who responds with the requisite advice giving. In another scene from *The Women* two characters (Edith and Peggy) are discussing the jealous reaction of Flora (The Countess) with the knowledge that her husband has been cheating on her:

PEGGY. (*Goes for her wrap.*) Flora was disgusting!

EDITH. But it was funny. Even the kettle drummer was laughing. (*Sadie gives Edith and Peggy their wraps.*)

EDITH. My dear, who could stand the life we lead without a sense of humor? But Flora is a fool. Always remember, Peggy, it's matrimonial suicide to be jealous when you have a really good reason.

PEGGY. Edith, don't you ever get tired of giving advice?

EDITH. Listen, Peggy, I'm the only happy woman you know. Why? I don't ask Phelps or any man to understand me. How could he? I'm a woman. (*Pulls down her corset.*) And I don't try to understand them. They're just animals. Who am I to quarrel with the way God made them? I've got security. And I say: "What the

hell?" And let nature take its course – it's going to, anyway (*They exit.*) (Luce 85-6)

Edith, the sage of the restroom, clearly dishes out some of society's most regurgitated advice for the female species: laugh it up, remember men are from Mars, women are from Venus, just keep your mouth shut, don't forget you need those men folk for financial reasons, etc.

This play houses another life lesson through the laborious lips of its players. This scene takes place right after Crystal has been tricked into spilling the beans about her affair with Buck, the Countess's husband:

CRYSTAL. (*To Mary, fiercely.*) You're trying to break up my marriage!

SYLVIA. The way you did hers, you floosie!

CRYSTAL. (*Nasty.*) Well, maybe you're welcome to my – leftovers.

MARY. (*Calmly.*) I'll take them, thank you.

SYLVIA. Why, Mary, haven't you any pride?

MARY. That's right. No, no pride; that's a luxury a woman in love can't afford.

(*Enter Countess...*) (Luce 89).

This bathroom moment discloses a harsh life lesson that Mary has learned – the cliché of all is fair in love and war, for certain, but also that many sacrifices must be made in those patriarchal pursuits as well. To be clear, all bathroom escapades are not quite as rambunctious and rowdy, nor are they always social in the traditional communal sense.

The Women's Bathroom as Sanctuary. Prior examples already demonstrated how the bathroom exists as this safe haven for many damsels in distress (Franny crying solo in the stall, the Girl in Distress literally fleeing to it after her inadvertent strip tease at the dinner table). However, the solace provided by the actual enclosed bathroom stall needs to be prodded further. Sure, women often dialogue across the metallic walls of

the stalls (continuing the dispatch of emotion, confession, advice), they handover toilet paper to strangers in need, they battle with the performance anxiety that may result in publicly performing a private act, but overall the solitude of the stall often allows women to escape the obligatory social nature of the ladies' room. In fact, it is within the stall that the most common subversive bathroom acts are often carried out – graffiti (or feminist art/dialogue).

A text that highlights the bathroom stall's ability to turn from sanctuary to politically charged artist enclave is Laurie Halse Anderson's young adult novel, *Speak*. This is the story of Melinda Sordino, told almost completely through the inner-dialogue that runs through her active and observant mind. The summer before her freshman year of high school Melinda was raped by a popular youth at a party and as the result of this experience she has disappeared into her own thoughts virtually mute (with the exception of basic need-driven communication). The need to *speak* her story in some other fashion surfaces again and again throughout this novel. She accomplishes this in a private way through her artwork. However, concern for an old friend who is now dating her attacker, Andy Evans, drives her to a more public forum – the graffiti on a bathroom stall within her local high school. This scene is taken from a portion of the novel entitled "Little Writing on the Wall:"

I reread the graffiti. "I luv Derek." "Mr. Neck bites." "I hate this place."
 "Syracuse rocks." "Syracuse sucks." Lists of hotties, lists of jerks, list of ski resorts in Colorado everyone dreams about. Phone numbers that have been scratched out with keys. Entire conversations scroll down the bathroom stall. It's like a community chat room, a mental newspaper... I hold the cap in my teeth. I start another subject thread on the wall: *Guys to Stay Away From*. The first entry is the Beast himself: *Andy Evans*.
 (Anderson 175, italics in original).

In one of the last sections of the novel entitled "Chat Room," the main character returns weeks later to the stall and sees the results of her impulsive scribble:

GUYS TO STAY AWAY FROM

Andy Evans

He's a creep.

He's a bastard.

Stay away!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

He should be locked up.

He thinks he's all that.

Call the cops.

What's the name of that drug they give perverts so they can't get it up?

Diprosomething.

He should get it every morning in his orange juice. I went out with him to the movies – he tried to get his hands down my pants during the PREVIEWS!!

There's more. Different pens, different handwritings, conversations between some writers, arrows to longer paragraphs. It's better than taking out a billboard.

(Anderson 185-6)

When I first read this portion of the novel I was struck by the unacknowledged power of graffiti. Although the 80s and 90s brought attention to graffiti in urban areas as a form of oppositional art I could not recall any attention the notion of graffiti as writing, as communication, as memoir. So I started to track such chat room-like correspondences in bathrooms on my own college campus. Once a week I would frequent the same stall and see how different threads had built up and altered themselves. There was the normal "I love so and so" and the expected response of "who cares," the "for a good time call..." with various comments corresponding, the religious preachers: "god is great," the grammar police: "then you should capitalize His name," political pitches

fitting the election year, and the amateur sketchers perfecting their erotic art with pen on metal media.

Now I am not advocating the vandalism of public restrooms but I am arguing that what is there is worthy of attention – just as any other text is. The bathroom stall is yet another space where women are able to talk back. (And this, of course, is the case in the men’s room also... only I hear the “conversations” are much livelier). The bathroom stall is an underused spot for feminist dialogue, for politically charged artwork, for objects of thought and reflection. Advertisements for the next sorority bash find themselves plastered on the insides of bathroom stalls, but not contemplative artistic works or women’s discourse.

The benefit of politically motivated public art has long been acknowledged. I will cite just one example of such endeavors. In 1998, Andy Cox, the founder of Together We Can Defeat Capitalism “purchased advertising time on the Commuter Channel screens in two stations of the BART system – the train system connecting the city to Oakland, Berkeley, and outlying suburbs” (McCarthy 231). These pieces functioned as inserted video, simple messages broadcasted silently to passengers awaiting their connections (McCarthy 231). The message was simple, the slogan was purposely designed with graphics that made it look identical to the BART standard announcements that housed passenger travel information, and it read: “Capitalism stops at nothing” (McCarthy 231). As Anna McCarthy notes, the beauty of this political advertisement is that it grasped the viewer’s attention effortlessly in a venue where people might be sick of the cyclical nature of work and commute – capitalism driven forces (232). This, of course, is not the only incident of public art with the purpose of promoting social activism. In “Art and Public Space: Questions of Democracy,” Rosalyn Deutsche looks to various artists, such as Mary Kelly, Cindy Sherman, Silvia Kolbowski, Connie Hatch, and Barbara Kruger who have invaded the public sphere with their politically charged pieces. What would happen if instead of housing such works on billboards and bus

panels, artists developing a feminist politics situated their products in public restrooms across the nation? Imagine sitting enclosed in the safe confines of a public women's room stall and being confronted with a Barbara Kruger image stretched across the door. (I am thinking of "Your Body is a Battleground," "We Have Received Orders Not to Move," "You are Not Yourself," "I Will Not Become What I Mean to You," or "Use Only as Directed"). What reflection could those images bring, what conversations within and outside the bathroom stall could they spark? The powder room could become much more than a space to paint on a fresh face for the public sphere, it could become a covert command center where strategies for battling patriarchy are drawn up, discussed, and acted out. (Ah, to dream.)

Quite obviously the memoirs of a bathroom stall exist in our country today. Our texts are recording, reflecting, and even parodying our practices within these gendered spaces. However, the bathroom is also becoming a site for the crafting of a different written record – the daily diary entries of women in bathrooms across the nation. Scholars would do well by looking to both types of bathroom texts (those that reflect and those that seek to reform restroom and non-restroom regulations) and realizing that these blurry public-private spaces may present us with the most ideal site for feminist dialogue yet.

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