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## **“Man, I Will Miss This Place”: An Ethnographic Account of Place-Making on Dickson Street Through Men’s Bathroom Graffiti**

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**“Man, I Will Miss This Place”: An Ethnographic Account of Place-Making on Dickson  
Street Through Men’s Bathroom Graffiti**

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of Honors Studies in  
Anthropology

By

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J. William Fulbright College of Arts and Sciences

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## **Acknowledgments**

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## Introduction

Stereotyped and crude, our lavatory inscriptions are the measure of our social fixations: and that enterprising anthropologist who is said to be collecting photographs of them in all parts of the world should reveal more of the truth than all of the bombastic historians who will so soon be clothing our grotesque society with dignified phrases and political stercorations, representing its present antics as studied movements, to be explained in terms of high principles and rational conduct. (Reynolds 1943: 171-172)

I have encountered bathroom graffiti countless times in my life. We all have. It is an aspect of our culture that has become, often, invisible in its mundanity or its systematic erasure. It wasn't until one day, as I began embarking on this project, that I looked at the writings on the stall and saw what it has always been: culturally situated inscriptions, written by the people in a specific space, that have the potential to reveal collective meanings and understandings of a community. With this shift in perspective, I began to see these inscriptions as an act of creation that displays not just words or feelings of the unknown author, but individuals' connections to space and place.

Dickson Street is a hub of nightlife in and identity of Fayetteville, a college town in Arkansas. As a space where people from all walks of life converge to meet, drink, and celebrate, it is vital to the cultural identity of the Northwest Arkansas region, particularly, those attending the University of Arkansas. For these young people in their twenties, Dickson Street exists as the origin of countless memories and moments, as they are able to interact with a new, previously inaccessible space that is populated by tantalizing masses of new people and experiences, all saturated with alcoholic drinks, the consumption of which, until one's twenty-first birthday, has been attractively taboo. And with college graduation, the start of a career, and the settling down for a family, all creeping in the unknowns of the future, Dickson is a space to forget the fears of the future and to create memories of the present. When one's time in college is over, many will move away, physically separating themselves from spaces of great importance, including Dickson Street. As college exists as a liminal space between the realms of the past and the future, so much

of one's time is spent on the making of a life, knowing that one day it will be all memory. Dickson is a place for those moving ceaselessly forward into the future. I, and many others whom I have spoken to, have felt this feeling of helplessness when looking toward the future, knowing that the lives we have built for ourselves at this university will soon be fantastical memory. Dickson Street can act as a remedy to these feelings of foreboding loss, as the gathering of so many young individuals acts as a crucible for the manufacturing of more memory tied to the built environment of the street.

In this thesis I will explore the ways in which latrinalia (the academic term for “bathroom graffiti”) in Dickson Street bar bathrooms demarcates space and, through one's creation of enduring statements about their spatial presence and their personal memories, can grasp hold of a transformative space that, for many, will soon be out of their reach. I argue that these (mostly) male-identifying patrons are inscribing themselves onto the walls of local establishments' bathrooms by utilizing personal and cultural memory, folklore, physical space, and understandings of the local community.<sup>1</sup> In this process, they are emboldening physical space with their memories and experiences and utilizing the bathroom walls as a keeper of life. They are, as will be discussed, transforming an impersonal “space” into personal “place.” And in the context of the impermanence of college life, the bathroom walls serve in the preservation of personal and cultural memories that are anchored in place in a way that the author might not be. Through this reconfiguration of space, these Dickson Street bathroom inscriptions exist as both acts of human creation and sites of cultural genesis and encourage a more personal engagement with space and place.

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<sup>1</sup> The use of the qualifier “mostly” in reference to the gender of my subjects will be touched on later.

## Methodology

My data was collected over a six-month period, between September 2022 and February 2023, during which, around every two weeks, I photographed (all photographs included in this work are my own) and categorized different latrinalia inscriptions seen in three male bar bathrooms on Dickson Street: Dickson Street Pub, Ryleigh's, and Roger's Rec. These were particularly relevant venues because of their popularity and frequent use among the Dickson Street patrons, as well as their distinct characters that allowed me access to different sup-groups in the street's space. As I will later discuss, patrons at each of these bars interacted with latrinalia in different ways, and the study of the three chosen sites gave me a more robust understanding of the people who use and write in these spaces.

Since I identify as male, and thus can only comfortably (for myself and other occupants) enter male restrooms, I have limited my research to men's bathrooms. I would go to each of my field sites, usually at quiet times to prevent awkward encounters, and photograph the bathroom walls, seeking to highlight changes in latrinalia throughout time. On days when the bars were empty, I would enlist my good friend, Caroline, in my research. Together, we would analyze the writings on the wall, and having that different perspective, as she identifies as a woman and has a different background from me, helped to contextualize these writings in the space. When we stumbled across inscriptions that were unknowable, highlighting personal experiences of authors or inside jokes of one or more individuals, I would make my best guess. Utilizing web databases and local, insider knowledge gained through lived experiences and participant-observation, I was able to piece together inscriptions in a degree that makes sense to me. This is important as this is the way that one is meant to engage with latrinalia. To *know* authorial intent breaks the anonymity and privacy aspects that are central to latrinalia and its cultural functions. I made assumptions, just like everyone else who engaged with those spaces.

In some instances, however, I needed to know the stories behind the writings. In these cases, I relied on my “interpreters”: the bartenders who work in the venues I chose to explore. Talking with bartenders to uncover the context of the latrinalia that I was studying allowed me to gain critical insight into the stories behind the inscriptions, the lives of some of the authors, and the politics and power dynamics involved with the bathroom spaces themselves. These individuals have all been given pseudonyms, and some defining characteristics, such as physical features or occupations, have been altered to retain anonymity for my research partners.

## **Literature**

At the core of my work is the distinction between “space” and “place.” To this end, I conceive of space as a pre-existing, impersonal form, with place being more culturally and individually constructed. I advance my understanding from such scholars as Keith Basso (1996), who studied conceptions of place among the Western Apache people and the ways that their cultural selves are constantly refigured by and refiguring place; Tim Ingold (2010), writing on the ways that movement invokes place and how human dwelling in space creates place; and Setha Low (2014), talking about the embodiment of space and how this embodiment creates place. Thus, everything is space, existing along the lines of material, political, and social realities. Place, however, arises from the bestowing of meaning, social depth, or particular understandings onto a space. Place holds our lives; everything that one is and knows is their place. Place is space expanded beyond its physical bounds, into the minds, cultures, and stories of the people who encounter it.

Bathroom spaces are endowed with significant cultural and individual meanings. They are cultural spaces that create “epistemologies...[and] knowledge of how people ought to conceptualize and use them” (Schottmiller 2013: 38). Often, using the restroom is accompanied



by embarrassment or feelings of disgust, which are then socially lessened by the adoption of codes to signify bodily waste expulsion without the need to expose oneself as committing a defiling act (Dundes 1966). Children in grade school are asked to “excuse themselves” and natural bodily functions are reduced to agreeable little phrases like “to tinkle” or “to go number two.” Our culture, fueled by Western notions of bodily purity and polite manners, has demonized the bathroom to such a degree that even discussing the true nature of the space breaks social codes of group ethics. The epistemologies of bathroom use convert the space into a place ripe with cultural meaning.

Despite their incessant policing, bathrooms are incredibly interesting for their ability to carve out private space among the public. Right at the entrance of the bathroom, in fact, the door “prevents the sights, sounds, and smells of the lower bodily realm from escaping,” signaling a division of space between the “clean,” public space outside the door, and the “unclean,” “private” space inside (Schottmiller 2013: 46). However, this public/private division is not cleanly split. In conventional public-use bathrooms, occupants could be one of many users at any given time, separated only by thin metal walls hovering a foot off the ground. Space is partitioned into neat parcels in these bathrooms, lulling one into a sense of privacy amongst the public, whilst retaining a porous boundary that can jolt one out of the safety of privacy at a moment’s notice. This public/private duality of bathrooms is also vital to the development of bathroom graffiti, or latrinalia.

Graffiti, in a general sense, has a unique aptitude for constructing place. In nearly every space, some sort of graffiti surrounds us. Graffiti texts are thrown up, reflecting rage, disgust, joy, laughter, or sorrow from authors, and invoking the same in passing readers. In throwing up graffiti, writers contest the space on which they inscribe, thereby making “sites where conflicts in the form of opposition, confrontation, subversion, and resistance engage actors,” often in ways not intended

by those in power (Low and Lawrence-Zuñiga 2003: 18). Graffiti hijacks space and claims it for its author, carving out a place for them amongst the surrounding space. The power of place-making is seized from its owners in the form of writings and art. Graffiti makes individual places out of immediate spaces, and it encourages this commandeering of space to all who witness.

Critical to graffiti inscription is an individual's breaking of cultural rules regarding the "psychological dimension of space" and spatial ownership (McCormick 2010: 50). Carlo McCormick (2010), in *Trespass: A History of Uncommissioned Urban Art* writes that "because in the human geography and mental geometry of space, *I was here*" (52). Graffiti situates authors in space, claiming it under the inherent anonymity of their chosen moniker. Ella Chmielewska (2007), analyzing graffiti in Montréal and Warsaw, concluded that "graffiti is an act of pointing to itself, an act of calling attention to self while designating specific place as well as indexing its environ and authority of the writer" (151). In Montréal, she found that there exists a lively linguistic debate between English-speaking individuals, engaging with Hip-hop culture and creating graffiti, and a French-speaking "well-mannered" public, who see the English language and its use in graffiti as invading their space (Chmielewska 2007). In Warsaw, the graffiti instead interrogates the wartime history of its locale, reflecting anti-Nazi sentiments and political messaging against the elite (Chmielewska 2007). In both cities, the graffiti reflects and references "the discourse that surrounds it," creating unique and specific arrangements with space and culture through the varying inscriptions (Chmielewska 2017: 163). Graffiti is a product of the space around it. Space gives the text a form, shaped by the authorial intent, which allows for writings to occupy "cultural, historical, [and] political space" (Dobrin 2011: 56).

However, graffiti is not just a part of space; it is also a producer of it. Charles N. Lesh (2022) in *The Writing of Where: Graffiti and the Production of Writing Space*, ethnographically

focuses on the ways in which a graffiti tag is stylized as an individual's signature to create a dual public and private persona. In doing so, one's lived identity is preserved while creating a new, anonymous character of social deviance that can be recognized. Space is claimed through the anonymous mark of a tag. Further, Lesh states that graffiti is a way "that communities of writers tactically make alternative spaces by writing" (2022: 12). The space that graffiti envelopes is "a dynamic, malleable production through which groups of people develop histories, cultures, and identities" (Lesh 2022: 14). Working in Boston, Lesh gives a voice to the authors of the city, who create a "*New New Boston*," where "people can assert themselves, and...[graffiti] writers can show the way" (2022: 72). Graffiti challenges notions of established and "owned" space, and carves out new engagements with space and place, creating new "logics, principles, rules, etiquettes, and histories" (Lesh 2022: 87). Furthermore, Rebio Diaz Cardona (2016) states that "every act of writing...creates 'more' social space, just as conversely, less social space results when texts are deleted or destroyed" (2016: 649). Seeing past inscriptions on walls encourages further engagement with the alternative space, carving out more sites of human intention. Graffiti gives power to the individual to "conquer, tame, ritualize, familiarize, or personalize space," carving out areas of environments that belong to the folk, even when they may be owned by the elite (McCormick 2010: 50). All this synthesizing of new space eventually leads to the production of place, and this place-making by graffiti extends into the bathroom space.

By existing as private spaces amongst interloping publics, bathrooms are a perfect space for written expression. Psychologist Nick Haslam writes of the unique publicity of bathroom stalls in their relation to inscription, stating that they are "more private...allowing more time and leisure to compose their messages," while also offering writers "a confined and captive audience with whom to communicate (2012: 114-115). Part of the "epistemology" of modern-day bathroom use

is that, while I may occupy the space at this moment in time, you may come along shortly after and lay claim to the same space that was once mine. In this capacity, the bathroom cuts through time and connects a “potentially limitless array of different people” through a shared space, with latrinalia acting as a bridge between echoes of the past and shouts into the future (Trahan 2016: 94).

The anonymity afforded by the privacy of bathrooms is also a critical element of the space and the inscriptions that arise in them. While privacy exists as the freedom from observation by others, anonymity gives bathroom users a sense of freedom from potential identification (Sawka 2012). This is vital for latrinalia’s creation, as it leads to the dismantling of those ethical codes that discourage or prohibit certain kinds of speech or engagements with public space. When authors feel they have privacy and anonymity, latrinalia can exist as “open discourse...that organizations cannot sanction” (Rodriguez and Clair 1999: 3). The privacy and anonymity afforded by the bathroom creates the perfect environment for free inscription.

In the first half of the twentieth century, the peculiarities of latrinalia began to be critically examined. In 1935, Allen Walker Read suggested in his, *Lexical evidence from folk epigraphy in western North America*, that latrinalia, although arising from a variety of human reasoning, derived its “principal reason [from] the well-known human yearning to leave a record of one’s presence of one’s existence” (17). Later, in 1953 Alfred Kinsey was the first to catalog and analyze bathroom inscriptions, hoping that the “uninhibited expressions of sexual desires” that “may be found in the anonymous inscriptions scratched in out-of-the-way places” could shed light on the “most basic differences between male and female psychology” (1953: 87). They found that men produce more bathroom graffiti, with that graffiti being more sexual in nature. Kinsey’s bridged this difference by stating that the masculine writings were “obviously intended to provide erotic stimulation for

the inscribers as well as for the persons who may subsequently observe them” (Kinsey et al 1953: 673).<sup>2</sup> All graffiti, both male and female, was designed to expose an author’s “unsatisfied desires” that could not be aired out in public, identifiable spheres (Kinsey et al 1953: 675). Kinsey’s work, while no longer relevant, did highlight the importance of both author and viewer in the life of a latrine inscription. To Kinsey, writings were thrown up with the promise of future observation by an imagined public, and masculine sexual authorship provided an erotic satisfaction to the author because of the voyeurism of another engaging with their sexual desires.

Perhaps the seminal work on latrinalia studies, in fact, the paper that coined the term “latrinalia,” is folklorist Alan Dundes’, *Here I Sit—A Study of American Latrinalia* (1966). Coopting Freudian psychoanalysis with his folklore expertise, Dundes begins the discussion of his ethnographic findings by describing American relations with “dirt.” For Americans, Dundes writes “anything which leaves the body from one of its various apertures is by definition dirty,” and the bathroom is “one of the few places where dirt may be displayed and discussed” in both public and private manners (1966: 93). Working off psychoanalyst Ernest Jones, Dundes discusses the “primitive smearing impulse,” that leads young children to physically play and manipulate with their feces (Jones 1961: 432). Dundes expands on Jones’ ideas, writing of the infantile “impulse to smear feces or dirt on walls” (1966: 101). Bathroom graffiti, Dundes writes, is born of this impulse to smear dirt on the walls, as bathrooms are already culturally “unclean” spaces, and the writings that authors create are often “dirty” and would not be appropriate beyond the bathroom space.

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<sup>2</sup> The erotic nature of writings was defined as a fascination with genitalia or sexual action imposed up genital, oral, or anal spaces, or “vernacular vocabularies,” which prove, “erotically significant for most males” (Kinsey et al 1953: 673).

Dundes goes on to write that “men the world over suffer from pregnancy envy,” causing men to covet a woman’s natural capability for bodily creation through bearing children (Dundes 1966: 102). To mitigate this envy, men find remedies through other acts of creation. In the bathroom “when a man defecates, he is a creator, a prime mover” (Dundes 1966: 102). The act of pushing out waste, of *making* something through their bodies and bodily actions, Dundes believes, acts as a substitute for the act of physically producing and expelling children. Taking the “primitive smearing impulse” and the “pregnancy envy theory” in synthesis, Dundes states that latrinalia is a vestige of the desire of men to “achieve notice and immortality by producing dirt” (1966: 103). While women can leave their legacy in their bodily borne children, men must leave their legacy in other manners, and perhaps then writings on the bathroom stalls could be seen as an elaborate dance of smearing dirt while also “competing with females who can ‘make’ children as their form of immortality” (Dundes 1966: 104). It’s absurd, yes, but it’s also one of the first attempts to contextualize latrinalia amongst the (masculine) authors themselves, and for that fact alone it is worthy of recognition.

With the floodgates to the study of latrinalia open, Eugene Landy and John Steele (1967) found a hole in previous studies of bathroom inscription: the spatial context on which they appear was not taken into serious consideration. To correct this error, they collected latrinalia from six buildings on the University of Oklahoma’s campus. Three buildings were what they deemed “general use” buildings, spaces where a diverse segment of the student body would converge and use the same space, and three “specific use” buildings, consisting of the law school, art, and computer science buildings (Landy and Steele 1967). Utilizing statistical analysis, they found that, indeed, the use of buildings did affect the types of latrinalia found in these spaces. For example, they found the latrinalia in the art building, with the assumption being that art students were the

authors in these spaces, consisted of more political commentary and poetic expressions than the general use buildings across campus (Landy and Steele 1967). This study found a connection between space and writing. Authorship changed depending on the specific use and contexts of the spaces they were created. As previously discussed through Chmielewska's (2007) and Lesh's (2022) writings, latrinalia, like other forms of graffiti, was a product of the spatial and cultural contexts from which they arise.

Multiple other studies on latrinalia found came to these same conclusions. Lee Sechrest and Luis Flores (1969) argued that "tendencies which are strong in a culture" leave traces that scholars can use to better understand cultural attitudes. Using latrinalia and the prevalence of "homosexual" versus "heterosexual" inscriptions, they tested whether these writings could reflect on wider cultural understandings regarding sexual expression. They found that, in the United States, where there was a greater level of discrimination and conflict regarding non-heteronormative sexual identities, 42% of latrine inscriptions invoke homosexuality (Sechrest and Flores 1969: 7). In the Philippines, these issues were not of high concern, and only 2% of bathroom inscriptions discussed homosexuality (Sechrest and Flores 1969: 8). From the cultural suppression of queer sexual identity in the United States, authors have utilized the private and anonymous space to express themselves and their desires (or their prejudices) more freely. The Filipino people did not require this space for cultural expression. Again, latrinalia became situated in both physical and cultural space. The inscriptions were culturally curated and, in the case of the United States, populated by expressions and ideals that challenged the hegemony of thought plaguing one's expression of sexual identity.

Lee Sechrest's interrogation of latrinalia continued with Kenneth Olson (1971), where they turned their gaze toward the differences in inscriptions between trade schools, junior colleges,

four-year colleges, and professional institutions. These institutions were used as markers of socio-economic class and, upon analysis of the latrinalia, the researchers found that in institutions consisting of a higher population of individuals from lower economic classes (the trade schools and junior colleges), there were fewer inscriptions expressing homosexual desires or interests (Sechrest and Olson 1971: 63). From this collected data, Sechrest and Olson concluded that latrine inscriptions “develop out of the fascinations of the inscriber and his judgment on what others will find fascinating” (1971: 69). The attitudes of the imagined public of the bathroom that authors write for are considered alongside authorial intent, creating a grand web of connectivity between inscriber, audience, space, and inscription.

Building off previous scholarship, Terrance Stocker, Linda Dutcher, Stephen Hargrove, and Edwin Cook (1972) sought to utilize “graffiti, as an aspect of culture [that could] be used as an unobtrusive measure to reveal patterns of customs and attitudes of a society” (356). By collecting latrinalia from three higher education institutions, differing in general political leanings of the student body as a whole (Western Kentucky University—conservative, University of Missouri—moderate, and Southern Illinois University—liberal) they found that the use of insults based on queerness was much higher at WKU than it was at SIU (11% of total graffiti to 2.3%) reflecting broader social attitudes revolving homosexuality as a point of identity contention (Stocker et al. 1972: 360). Racist graffiti, however, was more prevalent in the more liberal institution, which was explained as arising from the higher population of black students at SIU, which led to “frequent encounters between [black individuals] and law enforcement” and promoted more social strife and contestation in the public arena on race and racial justice (Stocker et al. 1972: 362). “Thus,” the researchers conclude “this study supports the idea that graffiti are an accurate indicator of the social attitude of a community” (Stocker et al. 1972: 364).



Through a majority of latrinalia studies, the primary focus was on the measurable differences in bathroom inscription that existed between genders. For example, Jo-Ann Farr and Carol Gordon (1975), reevaluated Alfred Kinsey's (1953) initial latrinalia study and found that it was women, not men, who were the primary authors of latrinalia (1975). Other studies by Wales and Brewer (1976) and Bates and Martin (1980) came to the same conclusions, stating that women were now creating more latrinalia than men. Most interesting for my work, Farr and Gordon found that "since the bars were the greatest source of graffiti, perhaps alcohol (1) decreases inhibitions about inscribing graffiti; and (2) promotes reaction to other people's graffiti and modeling of other people's graffiti writing" (1975: 162).

Edward Bruner and Jane Paige Kelso (1980) took a different approach to latrinalia, looking at the writings from a semiotic perspective and focusing on them as texts rather than contexts. Bruner and Kelso take great issue with the approaches used in latrinalia, citing the arbitrary nature of the taxonomies used in the analysis (the understanding of eroticism, for example, is entirely subjective), as well as the notion that "gender differences are reduced to a statistical counting which slices up and destroys whatever structure may be present" (Bruner and Kelso 1980: 240). To correct these errors, Bruner and Kelso begin their research "with the recognition that restroom graffiti are communication, a silent conversation among anonymous partners" (1980: 240-241). These inscriptions cannot exist alone, and one cannot write their own inscriptions without the influence of others, as authors must "take account of what has previously been written, even in the minimal sense of choosing an appropriate location on the wall" (Bruner and Kelso 1980: 241). Bathroom inscription is a social act and represents not individual instances of writing, but instead a grand ballet of authors, moving in and out of a shared space, taking and leaving aspects of their

personal identities and the broad cultural narratives that they inscribe onto themselves and their minds.

Bruner and Kelso determined that, based on language differences “men and women experience graffiti in different ways and that the messages conveyed and the meaning of graffiti are different” (1980: 245). Citing Kalčil (1975), they say that one explanation for these differences is the ways that men and women engage in storytelling. While women “collaborate in storytelling,” leading to conversational narratives, men exhibit patterns of storytelling that “is more individualistic in the style of a performer before an audience” (Bruner and Kelso 1980: 246). They go on to state that the “underlying meaning of male restroom inscription is” to “reaffirm male dominance and perpetuate the power structure,” based on the “pornographic” (rather than “erotic”) nature of most sexual graffiti, and the instance of racist, antisemitic, or homophobic language patterns (Bruner and Kelso 1980: 248). They believed that, as the challenges to the white male’s status at the social apex crescendos, latrinalia provides these threatened men a stage to air their grievances and attempt to grasp the power they feel slipping from their reach. As Bruner and Kelso write, “men write graffiti to tell themselves and other men that they have maintained their superior position and are still in control” (1980: 249). It is a physical and bodily way to assert power that is guaranteed to be seen by others, while still hiding under the promise of anonymity that protects from social retribution. Bruner and Kelso’s ideas fed into my work by providing a theoretical framework that considers these writings as texts that connect and commune between different, unknowing individuals, as well as situating latrinalia as acts of creation that grasp onto an idealized understanding of the past when faced by the unknown challenges of the future.

More recently, Carl Schottmiller (2013) focused on bathroom inscription’s power “to understand how gender continues to be produced and understood,” by utilizing the idea of “Gender

Destabilized” restrooms, which incorporates queer and transgender individuals into the discussion of gendered spaces, to say that the modern restroom “offer[s] folklorists a productive window into how individuals and communities create and understand gender,” a critical aspect of culture (2013: 108). A 2004 study by Lynn Bartholome and Philip Snyder seems to suggest that gender differences in latrinalia have stabilized, showing no significant difference in style, substance, or frequency. Their study, interestingly, was conducted at a bar in Rochester, New York where the graffiti inscription was encouraged. Adam Trahan wrote how latrinalia, through its promise of anonymity promised an intellectual medium where “identity is formed and reframed throughout” (2011: 1).

Through all these works, latrinalia has been used incorrectly. I have seen a methodological problem laced in the study of bathroom graffiti: it is used to explain too much. They are using localized bathroom inscriptions to extrapolate back onto grand cultural narratives. Small, contained studies of limited scope are used to make sweeping generalizations on the likes of gender [(Kinsey et al. 1953), (Dundes 1966), (Sechrest and Flores 1969), (Stocker et al. 1972), (Farr and Gordon 1975), (Wales and Brewer 1976), (Bates and Martin 1980)], liberal versus conservatives values (Stocker et al. 1972), and cultural receptiveness of homosexuality (Sechrest and Flores 1969). Not surprisingly, the conclusions of these studies vary widely in what they supposedly say about humanity. To apply research findings to the whole of a culture based on a specific location’s bathroom inscriptions is not academically viable. Latrinalia can be written by people passing through a specific location, perhaps carrying widely different cultural values. Gender barriers can be violated, rendering any conclusions on gender invalid. And to a point not addressed: not very many individuals write on the walls. To make any broad claims based on such a small and specific

(perhaps people who do write on walls have fundamentally different values than those who do not) sampling of culture cannot lead to viable scholarship.

What latrinalia can tell scholars about is people and their unique engagement with local space and its contained stories and folklore. Alan Dundes, the pioneer of latrinalia studies, was a folklorist, and even though his Freudian “pregnancy envy” ideas may have fallen out of favor, there is value in his understanding of latrinalia as a tool for understanding the written stories and generated custom of a culture. For Dundes, folklore is “autobiographical ethnography—that is...a people’s own description of themselves” (1969: 471). Folklore is the understanding of a people, by the people. It is a “mirror of culture” (Dundes 1969: 482). In positing latrinalia as a source of folklore, I am highlighting the latter’s great ability at creating place out of space. Assigning a space with certain folk legends or lessons endows it with meaning and thus carves out new places. Latrinalia studies have thus been incorrectly barricaded inside the houses of the psychologist and the statistician. In focusing on what latrinalia can tell us about sweeping cultural arcs of gender or class or political whimsies, scholars have missed what it can tell us about: people.

In approaching latrinalia from an anthropological and ethnographic frame of mind, one can use these writings to understand and study the people who are writing upon and utilizing the bathroom space and its immediate surroundings. Latrinalia, through its unique aspects of anonymity and privacy, provides a window into the lives of individuals who engage with a specific, localized culture.-Through these methods of study, I illustrate the ways in which individuals are utilizing bathroom graffiti to create new places that can anchor their presence and their memories in the physical space and culture of Dickson Street.

**Field Site #1: Dickson Street Pub**

If one watches Dickson Street close enough, a certain rhythm emerges among the patrons. The curve upon which the street lies coaxes the masses to follow a comfortable downward slope, encouraging individuals to start their night eastward and funnel down the hill as the night grows old and the effects of alcohol accumulate against the senses and the body. If one chooses to follow this nocturnal migration, a natural place to begin would be the Dickson Street Pub, whose name is often affectionately shortened to DSP.

DSP lies nestled tightly against the quiet and cozy Dickson Street Inn, with bright green ivy cascading down its rust-red, brick façade. It exudes a sense of warmth before one even steps in through the French doors enclaving it from the outside street, with the soft yellow lights emanating out of the smudged windows and fighting against the dark of night. It feels as if the built environment invites me in. While most days are quiet at the Pub, showing up on a Saturday night would mean stepping in to meet a writhing mass of patrons (nearly all being college-aged) while being embraced by the familiar and comfortable heat of so many youthful bodies existing at once in such an intimate space.

Upon my entrance to DSP, the tightness of the space exposes itself. The signature drink of the bar—the famed pickle shots—lends a hint of brine to the lingering scent of humanity. The low ceilings and the smallness of the floor plan create a feeling akin to an embrace of space. Treading onto the sticky floor, the bar runs along the right side of the room. Small tables with wooden chairs are scattered across the floor, and the walls are covered with memorabilia from Fayetteville and University of Arkansas history, including vintage football posters, photographs, and plaques. To my left, vanishing into a hallway in the back of the bar, are the bathrooms, whose walls are scarred

by hundreds of inscriptions, containing in each scratch or stroke the memories, moments, and impulses of thousands of authors and observers alike.

The bathrooms at DSP are single-person, gendered rooms. A large “M” or “W,” splashed across the chipped door in faded white paint, designates which space my culturally gendered body belongs to. Walking into the “M” room, I am faced with a very standard male restroom: a sink lies in the right-hand corner closest to the entrance, a lone urinal stands further along the same side, and a white porcelain toilet faces said urinal from against the opposing wall. Despite the conventions of single-person bathrooms, on many busy nights at DSP I have witnessed the space’s solitary nature melt away. Men will enter the small space in groups (I have seen up to six at once) instead of waiting in the aggravatingly lengthy lines to relieve themselves. A few times, I have observed men and women both defy the established gender binary and enter an oppositely-gendered space. Most pertinent to my purposes, however, is the defiance of conventional notions of public bathroom practices through the intentional inscription of one’s whims, thoughts, and identity onto the bathroom walls.



*Figure 1: Segment of DSP Bathroom.*

A brief scanning of the totality of the authorship shows a great preference of DSP patrons for carving. Along the wooden paneling running in a single strip along the perimeter of the walls, knives or other sharp objects have been used to inscribe the material. Some inscriptions are thin, clearly done by running the cutting edge down the wood in single strokes. Other inscriptions are carved more violently, with large chunks of wooden paneling having been removed with

seemingly little care to aesthetic quality, highlighting a more emotive form of inscription than other, more carefully sketched carvings. In spaces between the lacerations along the wood, there are also a few—though not particularly many—sharpie writings, boldly sticking out against the light-brown carvings that are so popular in this space. A few colored inscriptions do appear, breaking up the monotony and enticing further viewership toward these different writings.

There is an assumption commonly made with latrinalia that it is an inherently anti-establishment “bottom-up” form of human expression. This is not so at DSP. My main interpreter for the Pub was Paul, a bearded young man of short stature, with a beaming smile, and a knack for storytelling. Paul and I talked in the quiet hours of the Pub when patrons weren’t pulling him in every direction, and when that small space, accustomed to bursting at its seams with occupants, seemed to sag inward in relief. When I first approached Paul, I found myself prefacing my research with an ominous warning: “This is going to sound weird, but...”, worried my probing of a space held up with a revered understanding of privacy would invoke judgment or perhaps even hostility.

However, Paul reveled in my quest. I learned, right off the bat, that the latrinalia was not opposed by the establishment. While inscription material or direct permission is not bestowed upon patrons to inscribe the space, Paul said that the graffiti was embraced by the ownership as it contributed to the “dive bar feel” of DSP. Even so, the bathroom still gets a remodel every six months to a year, Paul said, so the space cannot get overrun by individuals’ engravings. Paul also personally believed that bathroom graffiti was important for its ability in allowing individuals to “leave their mark” on a space that is important to them. With strong attachments to a physical space, Paul seemed to suggest that latrinalia inscription gave patrons a stake of ownership in DSP. It embedded the individual into the physical world of a place loved by so many.

Given the more permanent nature of carvings versus simple marker inscriptions, and the semi-infrequency of bathroom remodels, I asked Paul about the Pub's policies regarding writings that could be found offensive, such as slurs or hostile musings, which scholars have noted as constituting large proportions of latrinalia. His answer surprised me. He said that the bar trusted the patrons to remove harmful writings themselves. His words invoked an unspoken agreement between bar and patron that ensured the space was kept safe, an agreement of which I saw evidence along the walls. Some places showed seemingly aimless scratching that tore out whole sections of wood; other spots had carvings superimposing or editing underlying writings. In fact, the only instance of visual social hostility that I witnessed was a small inscription of "KKK," which blended in amongst the other, similarly styled fraternity "letters." There were other instances of hostility, but this was the only DSP instance of true social violence. To this end, the bar exhibited a state of a quiet compromise with the drunken masses: you may write here, but you must police it all the same.

So, what did DSP patrons write? A great majority of the inscriptions were identity-based. Writings that declared the personhood of the patrons were very common. Names, initials, or graffiti tags were scrawled all along the wooden panel, often competing with one another for space and attention. Declarations of fraternal organizations were also quite common, and they were clearly in competition with each other. Fraternities like Sigma Nu ( $\Sigma N$ ) and Phi Kappa Alpha ( $\Pi K A$ ) each had grand spatial representation, with their fraternal letters being large, easy to read, and uncontested. Other frats, such as Alpha Gamma Rho ( $A \Gamma R$ ), were present but were seen through



smaller inscriptions, easily missed through all the noise. When a member of the fraternity Kappa Sigma (KΣ) inscribed their organization—complete with a concluding exclamation mark—another author had ferociously contested their claim to space. Quick but deep cuts sought to remove “KΣ!” from the DSP bathroom, and a response, pointing directly to the defeated house, read “SUCKS!” (Fig. 2). Another piece of writing, this time in Sharpie, stated that “Kappa Cig is Gay.” Both instances, by



Figure 2: "KΣ! Sucks"

utilizing specific rhetorical strategies, either through general disdain, homophobia, or anti-smoking sentiments, showed multiple authors seeking to strip Kappa Sigma of their social capital.

*Greek Rank*, a popular website compiling hundreds of self-reported reviews of all the University of Arkansas’ fraternal organizations, provides a basic understanding of the hierarchical organization of Greek life at the University of Arkansas. Based upon the prevalence of inscribed violence toward KΣ, it is not hard to guess where the fraternity ranks. From the number one position (based on the *Greek Rank* metric), KΣ exists as the organization with the most social power.<sup>3</sup> Thus, these hostile latrine writings push back against the fraternity sitting, seemingly, on the throne of the University’s social scene. These fraternal inscriptions are entirely political, exhibiting acts of “written warfare”: fighting against each other, accumulating space on the wall, and lobbying insults and propaganda against those perceived as enemies. The DSP bathroom, in its absorption of users’ identities, is a contested space, allowing the proclamation of personal or group identity, and simultaneously the assault on the identities of others.

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<sup>3</sup> Based on conversations with friends and peers over the four years of my time at the University of Arkansas, I feel comfortable confirming this statistic, given the biased nature of the *Greek Rank* system.

Some inscriptions in DSP also suggest the bathroom walls as guardians of memories. Situated to the left side of the small toilet annex, one Sharpie writing reads “I will miss this place.” This simple phrase, written freshly atop older carvings, clearly contains more than black letters; it holds nights filled with memories, drinks, friends, and laughter. It holds life, one that will be missed enough to declare its importance to an imagined, unknowing public. It also implies an impending loss and a movement away from this space. This small inscription pulses with a glorious rhythm that will soon grow silent. Many other writings achieve this same purpose of keeping memories safe, however without the same sense of foreboding nostalgia. One author wrote of a time that “Houston peed on the floor,” suggesting bouts of laughter and perhaps embarrassment between friends; another spot saw the initials “G” and “N” placed into a black Sharpie heart, while a carver elsewhere tells me that “Tim ♡’s Hannah.” These declarations of love inscribe relationships, whether romantic or platonic, into the DSP bathroom, solidifying love in a physical space.

One memory that has been kept in the DSP “M” bathroom’s keep, scratched in blue pen into the yellow drywall above the wood, states “Roll tide Bitch!” next to a drawing of a deceased pig (Fig. 3). This quip, using the rallying cry of the University of Alabama, was photographed a week after the Arkansas versus Alabama football game on October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2022, where the Razorbacks lost, 49-26. This Alabama fan, elated at the resounding victory, made the intentional choice to write this here, at DSP,



Figure 3: "Roll Tide Bitch!" Inscription and Hostile Responses

contributing his excitement to the wall—even going so far as to break established tradition and stray beyond the wooden paneling, something no other author has done. Defeated Arkansas fans, upset at this excitement, responded in kind. One author feverously scratched out the first two words of the inscription, while another squeezed into the space between writing and drawing and scribbled “Roll your sister over and fuck her from behind!” utilizing a popular stereotype of Alabama having a high prevalence of incest. Inside the drawing of the dead pig is an inscription of “Boomer!” cutting off the author from the generation occupying the weekends at DSP. There also seems to be another, much more violent response to this pro-Alabama stance. Splitting the word “Bitch!” in half is a hole in the drywall, clearly made from a fist. One author’s declaration of memory in the DSP walls was seen as a hijacking of place by many locals, invoking a barrage of attacks against the foreign invader.

There are also other “invaders” in this space that marked themselves onto the bathroom walls. As I mentioned before, I have witnessed on numerous occasions women entering the male space. While there is a gendered binary imposed upon the bathroom spaces that determines both the structural layout and, for the most part, the occupants, there does exist an aspect of “gender destabilization” in the DSP bathrooms. Carl Schottmiller writes that in gender-destabilized bathrooms, one “will not be able to assume that only men or women inhabit the space,” continuing by saying “the nature of the space will shift because occupants will confront differently gendered bodies” (2013: 107). While the DSP bathroom is not an entirely destabilized space (the “M” and “W” markers on the door prevent this), the willingness of women (and men) to defy this explicit gendering of space presents an interesting facet in my research.

In limiting my study to only male bathrooms, I had hoped to analyze writings done by men only. However, the DSP bathroom challenged that preconceived expectation of my research. With

women and differently gendered individuals coming into the space, I had to alter my approach to studying these writings, as the authors could no longer be presumed to be male. On my empty night, my friend and “co-researcher,” Caroline, and I went into the men’s restroom and attempted to “gender” the writings. Some were easy, for example, an inscription of the name “Bailee” seemed to suggest female authorship. Another, in line with the carved form of fraternity letters, sees the inscription of  $\Delta\Delta\Delta$ , the letters of a sorority on campus. Others were more difficult. In one corner of the bathroom, atop an area that had been sanded off, rested multiple writings of the phrase “Love you!” in various handwritings. After examining it for a few seconds, both of us looked at each other and gendered the author as female. We had both independently concluded that a woman had come into the male space and inscribed herself upon the bathroom walls. Even if I knew that each author was male, there still exists the complication of women viewing and receiving the inscriptions. Latrinalia is not just the action of writing, but of seeing and experiencing as well, and the gender trouble present in the DSP bathrooms (and not witnessed at any other field site), presents an intriguing facet of my analysis of male spaces on Dickson Street.

### **Field Site #2: Ryleigh’s/Wasabi**

Leaving DSP and walking a block down the gentle slope of Dickson Street, an opening in the continuous building façades lining the sidewalk appears. In this enclave of space lies a two-story building, home to Ryleigh’s, a popular bar, and Wasabi, a chain Japanese restaurant. Instead of the two entities neatly resting beside each other, as most city structures do, these two buildings were inextricably intertwined. Ryleigh’s, whose lower entrance is pushed to the right, is wrapped up and over the entirety of Wasabi, with a staircase leading up the left side of the restaurant to an

upper entrance to the bar. Wasabi is wrapped in a stranglehold from the surrounding built environment. The spatial structure set the stage for conflict, and this extended beyond the exterior.

Walking into the small, lower entrance to Ryleigh's, the openness of the space is surprising. Hiking further into the space toward the bar, I pass two table tennis tables and one red pool table, all to my right, and a row of vinyl-covered booths to my left. A staircase, adorned on its underside with a plethora of stickers, leads to the upper part of the bar, cutting a portion of the space over the pool table off at a diagonal. I reach the back of the establishment, and stand in front of the bar, resting against the left



*Figure 4: Walking into Ryleigh's*

wall of the room. A large mirror behind the bar reflects my face and the space around me and reveals two more pool tables resting in front of the bar. On the opposite wall, I see in the mirror two large chalkboards, filled with writings and musing of patrons. Upon inspection, the lack of privacy in this space, with the bar and patrons standing in constant surveillance of the writings, as opposed to the bathrooms, seems to have led to more mundane inscriptions. Without the promise of anonymity, writings change.

The air of Ryleigh's itself, with its cigarette vending machine, gay pride flags fastened to the walls, and digital jukebox spinning patron-requested songs from Radiohead, Interpol, and Bowie, is thick with the reflections of a very different Dickson crowd than the masses. Queer and trans individuals, women, and the social outcasts all have a great presence at Ryleigh's. The patrons have carved out a space on Dickson Street for themselves, one where they can feel safe and where their interests can guide the tide of the bar. Amongst the perfume of cigarette smoke

and the stickers and chalk writings adorning the walls, Ryleigh's stands as a bar of and by the people who seek refuge here, and that claim to space extends to the bathroom.

The story of the Ryleigh's bathroom and its held writing is more complicated than my other field sites. Continuing past the bar, there lies a doorway leading to a hallway that veers off to the left. Following the directed path, I find myself at the bathrooms. Walking into the men's restroom, I see that this bathroom is very standard, with two stalls and two urinals, all separated by thin metal barriers. The walls are painted black, with a few partially tiled with white ceramic plates. Around the edges of the room, blue paint underlying the black peaks through, hinting at a story I will soon uncover. Latrinalia has invaded the entirety of the space. The black paint is splashed with blue, pink, and green marker; the white tiles are scribed with saying; even the urinals and hand dryer could not escape the ink. Whereas DSP had mostly carvings, the inscriptions at Ryleigh's were an explosion of color, standing stark against the white and black interior of the bathroom. Walking into one of the stalls, the picture is different. Colored markings give way to carvings, scratched into the thin black boundaries of the stalls.

The latrinalia here reflects a space of the outcast. More so than any other site, political markings were inscribed into the fabric of the space. Slogans such as "Fuck the government" and "ACAB" were prevalent, as was anger toward a particular former president. On the hand dryer, right above the blower, an author wrote "Trump speech." It was only after talking with a Ryleigh's bartender and my primary informant, Hugh, that I realized what the author was calling Donald Trump's speech: hot air. Another, more jarring political take at Ryleigh's read "Kill a cop" followed by a clumsy "A" wrapped in a circle: an anarchist claiming this call for violence. Social issues were also taken up by these writers. "Fentinol dealers suck DK" derides the current fentanyl epidemic, which has seen the poisoning of recreational drugs and opioids and caused the deaths of

over 110,000 individuals in 2022 (Mann 2022). Brandishing colloquial homophobic rhetoric, the author seeks to emasculate dealers contributing to this wave of death. Writings of politics and social issues, particularly fueled by feelings of anger and violence, reflect Ryleigh's as a space of discourse for people tossed aside and angry in the current political and social climate.

Like the battle for “territory” on the walls of DSP by members of fraternal organizations, graffiti tags compete with one another for prominence in the Ryleigh's bathroom. The most obvious evidence for this exists on the door leading out of the bathroom. On this canvas, at least sixteen individual taggers have inscribed themselves onto the space (Fig. 5). Tags, in grand stylizations and swooping letterings, toe the line between art and writing in some of the intricate



Figure 5: Tags on Ryleigh's Bathroom Door

and recognizable forms. They cover the back of the door, with some, such as “SCAB” or “HASU” written in large, sweeping hands, and others scratched in the margins left empty by other taggers. Some tags have been rendered unrecognizable by hostile authors overtaking the occupied space with their own markers, or simply by the scrubbing or blacking out of the unwanted tagger. Some tags are carved into the mirror, while others are written on the walls. One tagger, “SABOT(EUR),” is featured carved into the mirror and in large green lettering on the wall

behind one of the toilets, immediately confronting individuals who walk into the stall.<sup>4</sup> These taggers use these “publicly anonymous” names to invade space, able to inscribe themselves in a tangible capacity under the concealment of the tag, yet with a declaration to onlookers, in clear, colorful, stylized fashion, whom it was that has laid claim to the space. In tagging this space, graffiti writers can create “alternative spatial epistemology, collectively remaking the meaning of the everyday urban environment” (Ferrell and Weide 2010: 60). They exemplify Lesh’s (2022) understanding of writings producing space and place, as these taggers are engaging with not only a different set of social rules of engagement but also with new “urban narratives” of Ryleigh’s immediate environment (86).

Obscenities were significantly featured in the Ryleigh’s bathroom as well. Expletives were commonly utilized, seen in the writings of “Fuck your job, get paid for your passion,” and “Fuck y’all”; so were insults (“Evan has AIDS”). Between my November and December documentation, an individual had written, on the top of the urinal “Cum and see me sometime” utilizing homophones to suggest sexual exploits and visitations. A few authors took it upon themselves to add an air of observation, attempting to shatter the privacy bathrooms are designed for by writing “Say hello! You’re on camera! 😊 (I hope 😊)” and “BOOP [a tag] Always watching.” These are unsettling sights that disrupt the space. In any other institution’s bathroom, these writings wouldn’t be anything particularly offensive. However, the Ryleigh’s bathroom has a complicating catch: it is shared with Wasabi, a business that, unlike Ryleigh’s, caters to a more “respectable” audience.

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<sup>4</sup> I have witnessed tags of both “SABOTEUR” and “SABOT,” which my Roger’s Rec interpreter, Tommy, confirmed are the same person.





*Figure 6: Ryleigh's Bathroom Door After Painting*

When I first learned of the shared bathroom situation, I was curious to know the politics behind the space, existing between two very different worlds. My first clue of the degree of contestation surrounding the space came when, in early January, I walked into the bathroom, only to discover a fresh coat of black paint, so desperate in its intention to wipe out the offending writings that it did not even match the already established shade of black (Fig. 6). Every instance of latrinalia, even the tags on the brown, wooden door, had been drowned in a splash of black. It was spatial warfare. Suddenly, the blue paint peeking at

the corners and edges of the room made sense. At my other field sites, the latrinalia existed as a space-sharing agreement between management and patron, but here there was no such agreement. Latrinalia was a nuisance, an unsightly force to be obscured. I knew immediately who the painters were, and a trip to Wasabi for dinner with a friend confirmed my suspicions. On the door leading to the hallway containing the bathroom, was a taped sheet of paper, reading: “WASABI SHARES THE RESTROOM WITH THE BAR NEXT DOOR. WE ARE TRYING OUR BEST TO COVER UP THEIR PATRON’S CONSTANT GRAFFITI. WE APOLOGIZE FOR UNSIGHTLY VANDALISM.” After this, it had been signed “MANAGEMENT.”

Lesh (2022) states that, in the minds of the public authorities “graffiti revises, and eventually, obliterates” space (49). No longer did latrinalia have a space-actualizing effect, adding to the feel of the business, or creating “new narratives of place,” as argued by Lesh (2022: 65). To Wasabi, it was a ravaging force to their bathrooms. Latrinalia was a case of “their patrons” soiling the space for Wasabi’s own. I asked my waiter at Wasabi about the conflict. He told me that the management of the restaurant was furious with the graffiti and with Ryleigh’s lack of action on the curbing of the authorship. Wasabi then took it upon themselves to paint over the walls (for the third time). Laughing, the waiter told me that, a day after the paint dried, someone had come along



*Figure 7: Interruption of Establishment  
Censorship*

and carved “Fuck the paint.” In subsequent visits since the January painting, I have witnessed more rebel graffiti come up, then quickly be covered by another layer of poorly applied, unsightly black paint. Some authors have even used the black paint as a writing surface itself, with one carving a phallic symbol into the paint that had been used to cover another writing on the chrome wall in front of the urinals (Fig. 7). These writings, in the face of opposition, find a way.

When I talked to Hugh about this, amongst a small group of middle-aged, male regulars, a collective groan, along with some choice expletives, escaped everyone. Hugh, taking a diplomatic approach, translated the exclamations into a more fair-minded sentiment. He understood where Wasabi was coming from. He was a single father himself, and he recognized that much of the latrinalia was inappropriate for young children to see. Hugh’s issues stemmed from the blaming of Ryleigh’s and its patrons for the obscenities. He was confident that some of the graffiti, such as

some gang symbols, were placed there by Wasabi patrons, and he stated that the ongoing conflict between the two parties made it difficult to discuss.

Not wanting to pry on a sensitive subject, I asked him and the group at large what their opinion was of the latrinalia. Hugh said he didn't mind it, that the "aesthetic" of the inscriptions led to interesting trips to the bathroom and added something to the bar environment. A man who previously worked at Wasabi, Ben, said that he loved the graffiti, saying that he felt "seen" by some of the inscriptions, citing the "Trump speech" writing on the hand dryer as evidence. The political discourse of the space gave him a reprieve in the red state of Arkansas. He also liked the ambiguity of many of the inscriptions, of the never knowing the context of their writings, which allowed him to comically fill in the gaps left in that absence. Despite the personal affinity to the writings, they still agreed that the inclusion of children into the space created a need to censor some of the writings.

The Ryleigh's/Wasabi bathroom shows a space in a heightened state of contestation and conflict. Insults, volleyed at the bar and its patrons by Wasabi, were directed back to the restaurant through verbal aggression, softened by the mutual necessity for control of the space. Shared sentiments were pushed to the side in the face of affronts to the character of Ryleigh's, and the warfare seizing the bathroom continues to rage on, with patrons continuing to claim the space as their own through inscriptions, Wasabi annihilating the claims through sloppily thrown black paint, and Ryleigh's standing as a scapegoat for any offense taken.

### Field Site #3: Roger's Rec

Leaving Ryleigh's, and the warfare of their shared bathrooms, I am spit out into a small parking lot, smelling of cigarettes and sweat. I cross the street and, after passing a few bars, I stop in front of 21<sup>st</sup> Amendment. The cleverly named bar exudes a sense of class not commonly seen on Dickson. The dark wood, amber lights, and towering bar filled with expensive liquor lend to this "classy" aesthetic. I walk in, past the groups of people standing around small tables, beer bottles and plastic cups stacked high, or lounging on the leather couch pressed against the wall, and I make my way to the left of the bar, where directly ahead lies a door marked "Employees Only." Knowing the secret, I push through the door and enter Roger's Recreation Hall.

Roger's Rec, as everyone calls it, has been open since 1947, making it the oldest continuous bar on Dickson Street (Letchworth 2009). It was designed as a haven for blue-collar men, where friendships could form and beer could flow; the architectural arrangement of the space was so masculine that a women's restroom wasn't instituted until 1980 (Letchworth 2009). The bar is



*Figure 8: Roger's Rec*

fueled by a community of regulars. On weekdays, it is their space: older men, smoking cigarettes over pints of cheap beer, laughing and reminiscing on what was. On the weekends, these regulars drown in a sea of youth, seeking the cheaper prices, free pool, and classic American bar feel.

As the door swings open, creating a breach in the barrier between two worlds, the burning smell of cigarettes and the musk of a space nearly eighty years old fills my lungs. The light haze of smoke dulls the bar as the eye moves backward, giving a feeling of depth to the small, crowded room. I see the bar resting directly to my right, and in front of it lies a few wobbly, sticky tables. The bar is usually occupied by older individuals, seemingly an oasis from the invasion of twenty-somethings into their space. A large refrigerator filled with the “cheapest beer in town” stands next to a series of shelves holding packs of Marlboros. Two pool tables stand further back, right in the center of the space, and are constantly buzzing with playing patrons. The tables and their characters are a spectacle, pulling the attention toward them as the sounds of the crashing balls cuts through the air and the players dip their bodies to fulfill the calculus of the perfect shot. The glow of the various neon signs (the most prominent being a large Razorback hog) hanging on the walls cuts through the smoke, coloring the bar and its inhabitants in a soft red hue. Photographs and newspaper clippings documenting the passing decades of Roger’s Rec and its loyal (majority male)



*Figure 9: Roger's Rec Bathroom*

patrons adorn the spaces between the neon. These bear testament to the age of both the bar and its usual crowd and give a sense of gravity to the clear volumes of memories locked inside this space.

Behind the pool tables, distant in the red cigarette-smoke haze, lies the entrance to the men’s restroom. Pushing through the door, I am confronted with a cramped space, almost prison-cell-like in its design (Fig. 9). The bathroom is not a typical square room. Instead, the floor plan takes up a near-hourglass figure. In the first

“section”, there lies a sink to my right, and a urinal trough to my left.<sup>5</sup> Stepping into the second “section” of this bathroom, one can reach three more individual and partitioned urinals. This back half of the bathroom is partitioned by two walls, one on each side, jutting into the middle of the bathroom floor plan and creating a disruption of open space and a new dimension of private space. The toilet, to continue the prison-cell metaphor (which is echoed by an instance of latrinalia right in front of the toilet reading “Like a jail toilet”), is nearly completely exposed. A small wall, around four feet in height, separates the porcelain bowl from the three, single urinals, and the leftmost jutting half-wall loosely divorces the toilet from view of the first section of the bathroom. The cinderblock walls are painted a bright, angry red, matching the vibe of the neon signs outside. Scrawled all over this red paint were latrine inscriptions.

The diversity of writings in Roger’s Rec is completely unique in all the bars that I have seen on Dickson Street. Truly, the small physical space of the bathroom expands when reading the inscriptions on the walls (Fig. 10). There is life in the writings with inscriptions ranging from small chippings of initials to great splashes of ink across multiple feet of space. They were also written in different mediums. Most were made using black Sharpies, but there were also many pencil, ink pen, and marker writings in a range of colors. Carvings were found here as well, where authors took to chipping away the red paint covering



*Figure 10: Enclaved Corner of Roger's Rec Bathroom, Dubbed "Cocaine Corner"*

<sup>5</sup> For those unaware of the peculiarity of male urinary apparatuses, this urinal is a long metal trough, creating an open space for men to urinate.

the concrete walls, revealing the layers of different colored paint underneath, and exposing a lost age of past latrinalia inscriptions.

Talking with my Roger's Rec interpreter, bartender Tommy, I was able to glean wonderful information on these red walls. Tommy, a large man with a thick mustache and tattoos inked across the skin of his arms, had been working at Roger's Rec for nearly thirty years. From him, I learned that this latrinalia was indeed sanctioned. Roger's Rec, he said, benefited (as a working-class haven) from these writings as it contributed, just as said by Paul about DSP, to the classic, grimy, and free feeling of a dive bar. The only thing that Tommy asks of authors was that they bring their own writing equipment. He always knows the purpose when someone asks for a Sharpie, and he refuses, stating that writing on the walls "fucks up my markers." Here, it is not space that is polluted by these inscriptions, but the writing equipment.

Tommy, when I asked him what he thought the purpose of the writings was, told me he believed authors inscribed because they needed to vent, to express themselves through poetic verse, or simply to relieve feelings of boredom whilst being trapped by bathroom use. These feelings of boredom also contributed to the bar's interaction with the space. During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, Roger's Rec staff decided to paint over the previous beige paint with the vivid Razorback red, for the express purpose of laying out a fresh canvas for patrons to inscribe themselves upon. Tommy said they had become bored with the previous graffiti and wished to remove the old for a space for the new. The latrine space at Roger's Rec offered not only the authors a space to write freely, but a marketplace of ideas, phrases, and gossip that everyone, even the management, could gaze upon and enjoy.

It would be difficult to become bored of the inscriptions at Roger's Rec, as they varied wildly in composition, prose, and subject matter. Some inscriptions are tied directly to the space

in question. Writings such as “I have to shit but [what] the fuck is this toilet,” harken back to the exposed nature of the bathroom throne. One author, in the darkened corner in the back section of the room, partitioned from unwanted examination, designated the spot as “Cocaine corner,” with another author asking a few feet below “Where is the coke?”. A different writing, scratched above the door frame, wrote “Quit pissing in the coke room.” Rhetorical advocations of drug use, whether ironically posed or actual, are shown to be integrated into the physical realm. Elsewhere, a small “No drugs” stands comparatively pitiful in contest. Another more lighthearted example states “This place is haunted,” adding a supernatural element to the growing lore around this red, cinderblock room. The space is also shown to be contested. One inscription, posed right in the sights of entering persons, plainly states “Fuck college kids.” Given the history associated with this space, and its cooptation (perhaps infestation) with college students, regulars to the Rec would understandably be angered at this breach of their space and the privacy of the bathroom allows this anger to be witnessed.

Inscriptions in Roger’s Rec exhibited a great range of emotional states. Anger, as I have discussed, was present (“Tim is a fucking shit bag poser”); so was love (“I’ll love you forever”); and joy (“This is a damn good sharpie”). Other writings were clearly endowed with comedic intent. Inscriptions such as “The naked man fears no pickpocket,” and “The first slut is the cheapest” show authorship that invites feelings of laughter and dirt, and that leans into the social seclusion allowed in the bathroom space. However, there were many instances at Roger’s Rec, much more so than the previous sites, where authors were not aimlessly writing vulgarities along the walls. There were Shakespeare quotes (“We the few, we the happy few, we band of brothers”), a line from a letter by poet Charles Bukowski (“Find what you love and let it kill you”), and even an inscription from the Greek philosopher Epicurus (“Drink and be merry...for tomorrow we may



die!”). Some authors were engaging with this space in a way that was, dare I say, academic in nature. However, none of these writings, even the most vulgar ones, can be discounted as insignificant, as each tells stories that are richer and more sprawling in nature than anyone could ever fully know.

Some stories, however, I needed to know, which is where Tommy came in. Acting as my interpreter to some of the otherwise unknowable writings on the walls, I was able to piece together the narratives of a select few of Roger’s Rec patrons. The three I investigated were the stories of Sergio, Big Hands, and James.

I encountered Sergio through a variety of inscriptions in the bathroom. A total of six inscriptions mentioned him, and all but one of these inscriptions follow the same structure: Fuck Sergio. As I began to log and analyze the latrinalia at Roger’s Rec, I kept asking myself what Sergio could have possibly done to deserve such a public flogging; so, I asked Tommy.



*Figure 11: "Serrgio" Condemnation*

Immediately after I asked the question— “Who is Sergio?”—Tommy let out a sigh. Sergio, he told me, was a regular at the Rec. He was a chef in town (which the latrinalia confirmed, based on one inscription that had “chef” tacked on in front of Sergio’s name). I asked if Sergio had done anything to deserve the latrine treatment, and Tommy had no clue. He told me that he thought Sergio was a good guy, and he had always been confused by the writings. After talking with Tommy, I looked closer at the inscriptions, and I noticed some

interesting aspects of the writings that called into question the authors' relationships with Sergio, the man, leading me to believe they are actually engaging with "Serrgio," the myth (Fig. 11).

For one, all but one inscription gets his name wrong. They spelled "Serrgio" instead of the correct spelling of "Sergio"; one author even wrote "Fuck Sargio," altering the name completely. There are also interpolations tied to the inscriptions from other patrons. The word "me" is seen to be injected between "Fuck" and "Serrgio" in a spot. One author took a different approach to the opening word of the phrase, writing "Serrgio is a generous lover". A rogue inscription, reading "Fuck Sangria" seems to be a play off the popular saying, with a written response to this even challenging it with a "Seriously?". The conclusion I have drawn, based on Tommy's endorsement of Sergio, as well as the great presence and variation of Sergio's condemnation, is that this series of inscriptions is an example of a bandwagon effect. Perhaps one individual truly did clash with Sergio (presumably the lone author to spell his name correctly), and subsequent individuals, whether seeking to empower the original author or simply trying to curse out an unnamed figure, continued in this writing style. The "Sangria" inscription then is perhaps just a case of poor reading comprehension, or a localized joke, building upon the established "lore" of this "Serrgio" character and bending it beyond recognition.

James, another character in the Roger's Rec Bathroom Pantheon, appeared through two inscriptions in the bathroom. One simply stated, "James is the best." The other, in a much more heartwarming endorsement, wrote "Congrats on the baby James and Whitney - The Rec loves y'all," insinuating a collective identity of "The Rec." I learned from Tommy that James is another bartender at Roger's Rec who works the night shifts, and from the latrinalia, I was able to learn something deeply personal about James: that he had recently become a father. James, in contrast to Sergio, stood in universal praise from Roger's Rec authors, and these inscriptions stand as a

testament to the power of community in this space, and the use of the bathroom walls as a keeper of memory and group knowledge. James' air of adoration has become locked into the walls of the Rec, and any onlookers can learn some of the intimate details of his personal life from these markers.

The final story that I learned from Tommy was that of the character of Big Hands. When I saw the inscription "R.I.P. Big Hands," with a response of "TRUTH!!!" volleyed directly at it, I didn't think twice about it. I wrongly assumed it was an unknowable text, lost forever in the privacy and anonymity of the bathroom space. When I was talking with Tommy, I didn't even ask about Big Hands, however, my probing into other latrine characters led Tommy to nevertheless open up about his story. Big Hands, Tommy said, was a regular at Roger's Rec; a man who seemed to exist inside the four walls of The Rec, and who was an important individual to the established community. To give him something to do, Roger's Rec would assign him watch over the back door of the bar. A few years ago, Big Hands passed away. Tommy told me a story about how, shortly after Big Hands' passing, an inscription appeared on the walls, coupled with a drawing of a large pint of beer. Upon inquiring about this drawing, Tommy learned that Big Hands, before every backdoor shift, would order a pint, walk into the bathroom, chug the whole glass, and walk out to start working. He laughed as he told this story. Through latrinalia, stories of a man well-loved by the Roger's Rec patrons could continue to spread, and new connections to Big Hands could be forged, even in his physical absence.

Roger's Rec, with its rich history and loyal consumer base, is more so a community than a business, and this is reflected in the latrinalia. The Roger's Rec men's bathroom is a diverse temple of localized, personal mythologies, shown through inscriptions. The lore of characters such as Sergio and Big Hands, as well as quotes, quips, and jokes that require, to at least a small degree,

some insider knowledge to comprehend lends to a space that seems deeply personal. Men have come into this space, Sharpie in hand, and inked across the red walls, and have created a glorious tapestry of a bar that, when one looks closely, hums with the power of so many memories contained in such a tight space. Until the management gets bored again and decides to wipe the slate clean, the Roger's Rec bathroom is a forum of the drunken, laughing, pulsing masses.

## **Discussion**

My walk down Dickson Street stops here. I have so far taken each of my field sites and the writings they contain as individual units, being discussed and understood in isolation. This is not how they exist. Patrons flow between these spaces easily and frequently. Indeed, some graffiti tags, as my best markers for authorial identity, were documented at more than one field site, indicating the porous boundaries between the spaces. Thus, I now want to understand these sites together, taking a comparative look at how authors engage with space, and how the anchoring of memory and the establishment of a codex of local folklore create in these bathrooms a multitude of places.

The inscriptions on the wall highlight the expansive and colorful attempts of hundreds of individuals at carving out a place for themselves amongst the crowded Dickson Street. They have inspired the space with meaning beyond bodily release. The bathroom is a place to these authors (and even to some viewers), as it has been filled with meaning, memory, and mythology that contest between and catalog an unknowable number of Dickson Street patrons, sprawled across time but residing in the same space. While the bathroom itself may not be particularly charged with meaning, it does exist as a site of "place-marking," carving out a marker that physically emboldens the author onto a space they view as place.

Place-marking, as I have called it, on the bathroom walls was done at my field sites in a variety of ways. Margaret Rodman (1992) wrote that “places have multiple meanings that are constructed spatially” (641). She goes on to talk of the idea of “multilocality,” which is a way of understanding place that relies “on connections, on the interacting presence of different places and different voices in various geographical, anthropological (cultural), and historical contexts” (Rodman 1992: 647). Multilocality, Low (2017) develops “empower[s] place by returning control of meaning to the rightful producers” of the place itself (28). There is no single, homogenous understanding of place embraced by latrinalia authors in these bars; instead, every piece of writing forms a kaleidoscope of meanings that intersect, interact, conflict, and contest, all constructed spatially within the material walls of the small bathrooms. Adopting a position of multilocality allows the ethnographer to “represent this sort of multiplicity and to specify both intended and unintended consequences in the network of complex connections within a system of place” (Marcus 1989: 25). Inscriptions on the bathroom walls are a beautiful way to see those connections between different meanings of place, as the latrinalia exists as echoes from the past, experiences in the present, and shouts into the future.

In the broadest sense of my fieldwork, the inscriptions reflect connections made on and about Dickson Street itself. From one's first nocturnal pilgrimage to the street all the way until the individual departs Fayetteville for post-graduate life, Dickson Street serves as a widely multivocal space that specializes in the generation of youthful memories and drunken tribulations. Nestled inside Dickson Street are the bars themselves. DSP, Ryleigh's, and Roger's Rec, among many others, serve for more specialized loci of human connection and place-making. And pushed into the backs of these bars are the bathrooms, where the promise of privacy leads to quiet reflection, and the anonymity breaks fears of identification.

Throughout these spaces, at all times when people are present, places are being formed through the imposition of emotion onto the material world. Setha Low (2017) writes that “emotion and affect are key elements in the creation, interpretation, and experience of space and a constitutive component of place-making” (146). Emotional experiences of all variations breach the boundary between the body and the landscape and allow for the implanting of an individual and their experiences into the fabric of the physical space. One’s emotional response is a “sociolinguistic fixing of the quality of an experience which is from that point onward defined as personal” (Massumi 2002: 28). Utilizing the private and anonymous spaces of the bathroom walls, those emotions locked up inside a person, can be translated back onto the spatial environment, creating visual and tangible markers of subjective feelings and experiences.

Writings such as “Love you!,” “For some people tonight: ♡ love, for you,” and “I will miss this place” from DSP were evidence of the emotional aspect of the space. Roger’s Rec held considerable emotional inscriptions, with one from 2022 reading “Thanks for the memories,” with a signature denoting its author, another saying, “I’ll love you forever,” and one stating “To [Caeden] and [Price] I love y’all fuckers ♡ Mason.” All the sites held some sort of declaration of love or emotion through the pairing of initials encased in hearts or musings over the desirability of certain individuals (“Sammy is hot!” wrote one individual in Ryleigh’s). Emotion can “flow between bodies...and allow for the removal of boundaries between human and nonhuman,” and latrinalia, through its removal of the boundary of the nonhuman aspect of time in a set space, allows for those emotions to achieve the aforementioned flow (Low 2017: 152).

Space, another nonhuman element, affects human actors, inviting emotional responses to applied stimuli. These actors, in turn, express these emotions back onto the landscape. It is a feedback loop that continues off into infinity, a constant refiguring of affective space through the

engagement of individuals with space. Latrinalia, as a form of spectacle in the bathroom space, invites a certain engagement with the audience. Emotional written responses, such as the vulgar Arkansas versus Alabama conversation or the verbal and etched aggression directed at Kappa Sigma (both at DSP), give agency to bathroom occupants to alter or respond to previous inscriptions and to challenge or reinforce claims on the landscape of the bathroom walls. Previous latrinalia inscriptions can even invoke more emotion in others and cause further engagement with the space. Even if one does not pick up a Sharpie or a knife and respond to an inscription, just the act of looking and reading the writings, passing judgments, or snapping pictures (or pondering the writings in an Honors Thesis), constitutes emotional engagement with this reconfigured place, altering ones understanding of the bathroom space into a bathroom place.

Wasabi's hostility toward the latrinalia in their shared bathroom with Ryleigh's highlights this idea. Even the act of viewing the latrinalia is potentially damaging. To protect its patrons, and its property, from spatial defilement, Wasabi has adopted antagonistic attitudes toward not only the writings but the authors and their assumed place of origin. Latrinalia situates bathroom occupants firmly in the multilocality of Dickson Street, drawing attention to and creating webs of connectivity as intricate, messy, and unpredictable as fractured glass. Some spatial authorities appreciate this and revel in its unique and beautiful disorder; however, others find it offensive and seek to disarm the space of its powers of human and cultural connection.

In the bathroom spaces where the web of connectivity was allowed to stand and expand, it is impossible to anticipate the individuals using or contributing to the production of the writings. The anonymity and privacy aspects that permeate our understandings of bathrooms lead any researcher of latrinalia to surrender their desire for the complete picture of motivations, contexts, and subject identities. The gendered aspects of the bathrooms may offer one ray of light through

these clouds of uncertainty (indeed, this is the crux the interrogation of latrinalia has rested upon for half a century). However, as DSP showed with the “gender destabilization” of the bathroom, even this clue into the authorial characters can be a red herring. This is the nature of latrinalia studies. The unknowing is important because, without it, these cultural writings would never come to be. Breaking the anonymity disrupts latrinalia’s purpose in place-making. Without that impassible wall between us as the readers and them as the authors, one critical place-making aspect of latrinalia would be lost in its ability to produce folklore and cultural stories.

Based on my research, I understand latrinalia as able to produce place from space in two ways. One is through a sense of collective identity. Through the latrine stories, as exemplified in Roger’s Rec with the characters of “Serrgio” and Big Hands, where one can see individuals whose lives have been suspended on the bathroom walls in ways that blaspheme or remember memories of these local individuals held by authors. Once these “characters” are implanted on the walls, they become a part of the language of cultural space. “Fuck Sargio,” “Fuck Serrgio,” “Fuck Sangria” all created a cacophony of animosity toward a figure that perhaps wasn’t even known to most authors. This collective place-identity can also be established through those direct ties to the space around them, such as the frustration toward the Roger’s Rec toilet situation (“I have to poop but the fuck is this stall”) or the establishment of “Cocaine Corner.” The community folklore that the inscriptions propagate can contribute to a collective place-making process of the bathrooms, as they engage with an individual’s stories to create collections of narratives that are woven into the fabric of the local culture.

Latrinalia can also venerate spaces through an individual’s experiences and authorship. Writings such as “I will miss this place,” and “Thanks for the memories” specifically tie both author and reader to space in a revered way, signifying deeply held waves of meaning without



having to know anything about specific experiences underlying the writings (Fig. 12). Small spaces, such as these bathrooms, are carved up and layered with meanings that others have bestowed upon it. Authors have deemed such sacralization worthy of their time and energy, enough to break the norms of the bathroom space to etch



*Figure 12: "I will miss this place"*

their understanding of place upon the walls. These spatial markings create a mythology of space that extends beyond the physical environment and into the cultural memories of both the individual and the collective. In these bathroom spaces, folklore of place exists in a constant state of fulfillment and reevaluation, as each subsequent viewer to an author's inscription both draws from this codex of local meaning and, in turn, reflects themselves back upon the space, creating new forms of engagement. Perhaps the dubbing of "Cocaine Corner" led to a greater occurrence of drug use at the site, or, upon seeing that "Houston peed on the floor," one took less care in appropriately aiming their urine, as the space had already been soiled. Folklore, like culture, is a process of humanity rather than a stagnate occurrence; one that creates place in often unassuming spaces. And latrinalia, endowed with the power to create place, can be the fuel to light the fires of human expression.

I now will push back against Alan Dundes' landmark latrinalia text. While Dundes views these writings to be an extension of a masculine need to create something with their bodies (through the act of defecation and its subsequent immortalization through latrinalia), I offer a different view. I say that instead, latrinalia on Dickson Street is the residue left behind by a different act of creation: that of place. As memories are made and stories are created using Dickson Street and its bars as catalysts, the latrinalia offers a way to immortalize those memories in the

space around them. These authors, these gods of latrinalia, create places as they move between shifting space and time. Latrinalia is more than just writings on walls, they are shouts into the wind; they are acts of genesis; they are humanity raw.

## **Conclusion**

Every writing, speckled against the bathroom wall, is no accident; each author meant *something* when they picked up their pen or their sword and inscribed. Emotional musings, the reconfiguration of space, and the acquisition of local folklore all lead to the creation of place in the minds of the people who exist in the space. Dickson Street, with its distinct ability to sanctify one's experiences, exists as a space charged with meaning. In between the drinking, the laughing, and the flirting, there is an electricity of youth, that scorches through time and space and freezes Dickson Street and its motley crew of bars in the memories of those who frequently hit the street.

One's early twenties exist as between two realms. One being the realm of the past, ripe with no responsibilities, late nights, and naivety disguised as freedom. This realm is where the idealized "college experience," characterized by partying, sex, and substance, resides. But this realm is in danger, for as each day passes, one creeps ever nearer toward the second realm: the future. This fractured experience of time leads to instability in existence between these two kingdoms.

In conclusion, I assert that latrinalia bridges the two realms of the past and future. These writings do not exist as aimless musing on the bathroom walls but instead are declarations of identity and memory that give a power of ownership to an individual over a space that has been endowed with personal or collective meaning. By inscribing themselves on the walls of the spaces that they love, spaces that are imparted with memory and life, these men are seeking to anchor themselves in a sense of place to ease the aching of the present slipping ceaselessly into the past.

By creating anonymous writings, authors can lay claim to a space, be it through a tag, a fraternity carving, or a declaration of memory, in such a way that others must interact and respond to their space in one way or another. Latrinalia solidifies memory to give it tangible significance, so as to prevent it from being washed away by the sands of time. They create a place to call their own. The temporary nature of the dwelling place provided by college is mitigated through the creation of inscriptions detailing one's thoughts, merriments, frustrations, and identities on the bathroom walls.

Through this work, I have illustrated the importance of latrinalia in the making of place from space. Upon reading this, I urge you not to ignore the writings on the stall. Instead, take a closer look at the inscriptions that you see; investigate the authors and their writings as a historian does an ancient manuscript, as an academic does a work of literature. When you do, you will find that there will be something more than simple quips or abrasive vulgarities. You will see places. You will see life. You will see authors whom you will never know, and whose lives may never, beyond this space and time, intersect with yours again. And I hope that these authors will dance across your mind in colors so vibrant, you'll forget the reason for your being in the space at all.

That is until the pressures of your body—quite rudely—remind you.

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