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Research and theory on latrinalia

Adam Trahan

Introduction

Latrinalia, also known as bathroom graffiti, may seem like an odd topic for serious scholarship. Some of what we read on the bathroom walls, like the infamous “for a good time call . . .”, is so ostensibly mundane that it seems better off ignored. Some of it is so obscene that it seems better off unspoken. However, it is these very characteristics that make latrinalia such an intriguing and important topic of study. According to Schottmiller, “It is precisely because latrinalia seem so mundane, that it is so powerful. When the seemingly trivial is overlooked by serious scholarly analysis, it becomes normalized, and when scholars overlook this normalization, they become complicit in its reproduction” (2009: 4).

Closer inspections have shown that latrinalia goes far beyond the stereotypes we associate it with (Cole, 1991). People often mark the walls of public bathrooms with thoughtful commentaries and critiques of political, social, cultural, and economic issues to name a few. These graffiti often spark impassioned and ongoing debates between multiple authors. People also frequently write about deeply personal issues that confront them. Dermakardijian (2008: 12) stated that latrinalia is often a site for “secret sharing and confessions.” In short, the walls of public bathrooms contain discourse about a full range of topics, from broad social commentary to specific challenges in the lives of individuals.

These messages are also compressed and compact due to the characteristics of the space in which latrinalia are produced (Islam, 2010). Put simply, there is a limited amount of space and arguably time available to work with. Graffiti artists are thus forced to get straight to the point, so to speak. This establishes latrinalia as a uniquely direct form of expression (Ferem, 2006, 2007). It is highly unlikely that the messages contained on the walls of public bathrooms would appear in other spaces or types of discourse. For these and other reasons, many consider latrinalia to be a rich cultural form that can provide great insight into the psyches of those who write on the walls and the societies in which they live (Bartholome and Snyder, 2004; Ferem, 2006, 2007; Islam, 2010). For instance, Ferem (2006) considers latrinalia to be the “last strong hold of pure self-expression.” The following sections review the major themes of the current theoretical and empirical literature on latrinalia.
**Public vs private**

Do latrinalia constitute a public or private form of expression? Coming to some sort of understanding about this is potentially important. It could certainly influence the content of what people write on the walls. People may share very different attitudes and opinions in private than in a public forum. Moreover, public commentaries (can) serve a very different purpose than our private sentiments (Habermas, 1991). Indeed, it seems odd to even discuss the *social* and/or *cultural* significance of something that is quintessentially private. The answer to this question ultimately lies in whether the bathrooms that contain latrinalia are public or private spaces.

Theory and research on the public-private nature of bathroom graffiti have been guided in large part by Margaret Kohn’s (2004) cluster concept of public space. The cluster concept is a model that Kohn developed to measure the extent to which any given space is essentially public or private. It is comprised of three factors—ownership, accessibility, and intersubjectivity. Each of these factors is placed along a continuum with one side representing entirely public space and the other representing entirely private space.

Ownership literally refers to who owns the space. Kohn specifies three primary types of ownership—private people, corporations, and the government. She posits that spaces owned by private people are the most private, and those owned by the government are the most public. Accessibility refers to the ability for anyone to enter the space and travel freely within it. A space in which a large number and wide variety of people are allowed to enter and traverse is much more public, Kohn argues, than a space that restricts all but a few peoples access to it. These first two factors—ownership and accessibility—are frequently interconnected. Our homes would be high on the private side of the ownership scale because they are owned by private individuals. Because we own them, access to our house is limited to us and to anyone we choose to allow inside. Conversely, government property, such as a public park, is often accessible to virtually anyone precisely because it is owned by the government.

Intersubjectivity is certainly the most nebulous of the three factors. It refers to how people are positioned in any given space and whether that positioning fosters interaction. Ultimately, spaces in which there is a high degree of interaction between people are considered public whereas places that mute interaction are more private. Kohn offers movie theaters as an example of private space because they position people in such a way as to undermine the likelihood that they interact. Spaces that position people to face each other, such as parks, are considered more public because they foster interaction.

Two notable and recent studies of latrinalia have attempted to situate public bathrooms along the private-public continuum using Kohn’s cluster concept. Young (2009) examined the private-public nexus in both men and women’s bathrooms by analyzing the content and dialogue present in latrinalia at Miami University. Although Young never explicitly states where along the spectrum his findings would situate public bathrooms and latrinalia, his discussion seems to suggest that he considers them somewhere in the middle. He explains that 40 percent of the latrinalia he recorded were part of a dialogue between multiple people and therefore bathroom graffiti are public (interactive) phenomena. However, many of these discussions centered around very personal issues that suggest privacy is a functional element to the production of latrinalia.

Sawka (2012) recorded graffiti twice a day for one week from eight heavily trafficked women’s restrooms at the University of Winnipeg. After analyzing the physical structure of the bathrooms as well as the spatial distribution of the latrinalia and their content, she ultimately concludes that “women’s public washrooms are slightly more public than private” (p. 22). It is important to note, however, that Sawka’s conclusion may not pertain to men’s bathrooms. If women do
indeed interact more often than men in public bathrooms, women’s bathrooms will thus rank higher on the intersubjectivity component in Kohn’s model. These studies have yielded valuable information about the “public vs private” nature of restrooms and the latrinalia contained therein. However, attempting to identify a specific point along a continuum may be akin to splitting hairs. That is, public bathrooms and latrinalia are clearly both public and private, and understanding the interaction between these domains is arguably more beneficial than attempting to ascertain which is (slightly) more prominent in the production of latrinalia. Haslam (2012: 114–115) states that public bathrooms offer graffitists a unique mix of privacy and publicity. He states,

All graffiti writing requires a certain amount of secrecy, and bathroom stalls are more private than the spaces where other forms of graffiti are produced, allowing wall-scribblers more time and leisure to compose their messages . . . Public bathrooms are also in some sense more public than other shared spaces, offering graffiti-writers a confined and captive audience with whom to communicate.

Islam (2010) argues that latrinalia are both public and private because the graffiti are written in private but become public shortly thereafter, at least until their abatement. Moreover, the interaction between public and private elements seems to influence the form and function of latrinalia. As Taylor (2010) explains, public restrooms are simultaneously public and private, and that latrinalia “grow out” of the characteristics of this context. The public and private nature of the space allows individuals unique opportunities for deviance and self-expression. The privacy afforded by closed stalls permit us to voice attitudes and ideas that we may not express in purely public settings (Ferem, 2007). Conversely, the public elements of bathrooms allow us to express our sentiments to a potentially limitless array of different people. An interesting question to ponder is – why do we not write these statements on the walls of our home or private bathroom? We write them on the walls of public bathrooms, in part, because we know people will read them. The statements become public the second we vacate the stalls.

The privacy afforded in public bathrooms seems to influence the spatial distribution of latrinalia. Studies have shown that latrinalia tend to be heavily concentrated in particular places within public bathrooms. An overwhelmingly large proportion of all bathroom graffiti are written inside the toilet stall farthest from the door. For instance, Sawka (2012) showed that 89 percent of the latrinalia in her sample were found inside the stall that was located farthest from the door to the bathroom. Moreover, each stall that was closer to the door contained, on average, progressively less latrinalia. This spatial trend suggests that privacy is a powerful force in the production of latrinalia. People seem to seek out privacy or at least are more likely to write graffiti when their perceptions of solitude are at their highest.

Anonymity

The privacy of the stalls create a context for another essential characteristic of latrinalia – anonymity. Although privacy and anonymity are highly related, they refer to somewhat different elements that influence the production of bathroom graffiti. Privacy refers to the freedom from observation. Put simply, no one is watching when people write on the walls of a closed toilet stall. Anonymity on the other hand refers to the freedom from identification (Sawka, 2012). Latrinalia, and many other forms of graffiti, typically do not contain any identifying information and therefore cannot be tied to any individual. The most straightforward way to consider the relationship between privacy and anonymity in the context of latrinalia is that privacy provides
the opportunity for but does not require anonymity. Behind the locked door of a bathroom stall, free from observation, people can and sometimes do choose to attach themselves to what they write on the wall. Studies have found that “tags” – markers of group or individual identity – are not entirely uncommon among latrinalia (Ferem, 2007). For instance, Young’s (2009) analysis of latrinalia at Miami University found that 15 percent of bathroom graffiti contained expressions of identity. Research on latrinalia has however unequivocally shown that most graffitists seize upon the opportunity for anonymous expression (Nwoye, 1993). The majority of comments found on bathroom walls appear without any way to identify who inscribed them.

Dermarkardijian (2008) refers to anonymity as a “defining characteristic” of latrinalia. Indeed, anonymity itself affects the form and function of latrinalia in several important respects. The absence of individual or group identification means that “readers” can only view what was written, not who wrote it. Rodriguez and Clair (2009) argue that this establishes latrinalia as “free and open discourse.” That is, all the hierarchies that privilege some members of our society and their voices are suspended within latrinalia. The advantages of wealth, power, and status that can lend power to some people’s opinions in wider society are quite literally irrelevant among the anonymous markings on bathroom walls. Who we are and where we come from has no impact on the potency of our sentiments. As such, Rodriguez and Clair argue that latrinalia represents an “equal opportunity rhetorical form.” They also state that latrinalia is the only rhetorical form that affords such virtues.

This unique privacy-anonymity nexus also influences the content of latrinalia. Free from judgment and ridicule, people often choose to write about deeply sensitive personal information (Sawka, 2012). This is particularly true of latrinalia in women’s restrooms. Dermakardijian’s (2008) study of women’s latrinalia suggests that latrinalia often consists of secret-sharing and confessions. Other studies have shown that women often use latrinalia to share and solicit advice regarding personal problems in their lives (Green, 2003). Cole (1991) reports one lengthy exchange in which the author began with “people, help me with my problem.” This person then discussed sexual problems she was having in a relationship and how they were exacerbated by having been raped earlier in her life. Several responses advised the author of the original statement to seek counseling, offered suggestions on how to proceed in her relationship, and ultimately wished her luck.

Anonymity does not always influence the content of latrinalia in an explicitly positive, supportive, or pro-social manner. Many people, both men and women, often use latrinalia as an opportunity to direct antagonism toward other people and groups. Some of this “anonymous negativity” that appears on bathroom walls is relatively minor. For instance, one common theme among bathroom graffiti in University settings is facetious antagonism between members of different fraternities and non-fraternity students (Young, 2009). However, some latrinalia contains malicious attacks of different people and groups. It is not uncommon to read unapologetically racist, sexist, and homophobic content on bathroom walls. Privacy and the anonymity it affords play a key role in the production of malicious latrinalia (Young, 2009; Trahan, 2011). It’s highly unlikely that the authors of these graffiti would express the same sentiments in any other setting where they might be held accountable for their spite.

Content

Research on latrinalia content has generally involved creating taxonomies and classifying graffiti in an attempt to identify and explain exactly what people tend to write on the walls of public bathrooms. Before discussing the findings of this research, it is important to note that analyzing the latrinalia content is a much more precarious exercise than it may at first appear. The difficulty
lies in deciding what and how many categories to create, and determining which category any
given graffito belongs in.

Many of the markings commonly found in public bathrooms can fit into multiple categories
(Haslam, 2012). For instance, graffiti that is explicitly sexual also frequently contain attempts at
humor. It is not uncommon to read comments that poke fun at sexual conquests or genitalia.
Latrinalia such as this could quite accurately be classified as “sexual” or “humorous” and might
be classified differently from one study to the next. Some studies that have attempted to manage
these complexities have ultimately constructed over a dozen categories (Anderson and Verplanck,
1983; Bartholome and Snyder, 2004). This of course makes interpreting the research somewhat
challenging. However, given that there have been a relatively large number of studies on the
content of latrinalia, convergent findings and trends across the literature make it possible to
reach some conclusions about what exactly we tend to write about in the bathroom (Whiting
and Koller, 2007).

**Sexuality**

Studies have consistently found sexuality to be the most common topic of latrinalia. In part
because of the frequency of sexual latrinalia, these graffiti include a wide variety of different
types of messages. Many researchers have chosen to divide sexual latrinalia into heterosexual,
homosexual, and homophobic subcategories to account for the differences in their content.
Findings are somewhat conflicted as to which subcategory – homosexual or heterosexual – is
most common. Some studies have shown that homosexual graffiti outnumber heterosexual
inscriptions (Abel and Buckley, 1977). This is particularly true of latrinalia in men’s bathrooms
bathrooms found that only 3 (2.2 percent) appeared in women’s bathrooms. The remaining
132 were distributed across various men’s bathrooms. He concludes that the prevalence of
homosexual latrinalia in men’s bathrooms acts as a challenge to the heteronormativity of public
spaces (i.e. the socio-cultural establishment of heterosexuality as “normal” and “right”). Latrinalia
allows men to covertly resist the cultural milieu of hypermasculinity and heterosexuality as
the projected way of life. Homosexual latrinalia frequently consists of simple jokes about sex,
solicitations and desires for sex, and statements about the authors’ orientation and the challenges
they face in wider society (Innala and Ernulf, 1992).

Although some homophobic latrinalia are written as solitary messages, they often appear as
part of a dialogue with homosexual markings. That is, statements of hostility toward homo-
sexuality are often written in response to homosexual graffiti and vice versa. This can prompt
a back-and-forth response set among multiple authors. These “response chains” frequently become
quite hostile as people infuse their religious and ideological orientations into what they write
on the walls: “Homosexuality is a sin. [Response] Fuck all you homophobic discriminatory
males.” (Trahan, 2011).

Heterosexual latrinalia are also composed of a wide variety of different messages. People write
about their desires, brag about their bodies and conquests, and joke about sex acts: “Sex is
like a snow storm. They never know when they’ll get it, or how many inches they’ll get.”
(Bartholome and Snyder, 2004).

**Religion**

The abundance of religious graffiti that have been found in public bathrooms suggests that, as
one graffitist stated, “God is everywhere, even here [in the toilet stall].” Religious latrinalia
often appear as announcements of religious affiliations. Simple declarative statements such as “Christian and proud,” “Jesus is lord,” and other personal affirmations of religiosity appear frequently (Islam, 2010). There is also evangelism among religious latrinalia. Studies have found that people prescribe their own religious beliefs and attempt to convert others on the walls of public bathrooms: “Without Jesus you’ll be in hell.” (Trahan, 2011).

The last form that religious latrinalia often takes is what might best be described as anti-religion. These graffiti decry religious beliefs and the people who subscribe to them. Some anti-religious graffiti also promote atheism, humanism, and non-spiritual belief systems in much the same way as their religious counterparts prescribe their own beliefs (Trahan, 2011).

**Political**

Latrinalia frequently includes expressions of political ideology and opinions of specific political issues, elections, and politicians. Studies suggest that political latrinalia is especially common in university bathrooms (Haslam, 2012). Olusoji (2013: 6) analyzed bathroom graffiti in two college campuses and concluded that “the content of information provided . . . suggests that no national affair escapes the students’ attention.” Moreover, political latrinalia varies from short, facetious comments to more extensive and serious debates about contentious issues. For instance, Bartholome and Snyder (2004) found a lengthy debate about abortion in the women’s restroom.

**Humor**

Bathroom graffiti is often funny, or at least attempts to be. Humorous latrinalia may suffer more than any other category from the challenges to classifying graffiti noted above. Specifically, latrinalia in other categories, especially sexual and political, regularly contain jokes: “Sex is like a bridge – if you have a good hand you don’t need a partner.” (Bruner and Kelso, 1980). “If you voted for Clinton, you cannot sit here because your asshole is in Washington, DC” (Bartholome and Snyder, 2004). It can be easy to shrug off humorous latrinalia as less significant than some other content. However, studies have found several intriguing aspects of humorous graffiti. First, humorous latrinalia oftenokes fun at the physical environment of the bathroom. For instance, one recently observed graffito was written below a hook for hanging coats or bags and advised “do not use as a prostate massager, although it would be a great one.” Second, a prominent sub-category of humor is scatology, which includes jokes about excretion and urination: “Here I sit all broken-hearted. Tried to shit and only farted.” (Gonos et al., 1976).

These latrinalia may simply represent juvenile attempts at humor, but there is also evidence that they act to minimize both the author’s and audience’s discomfort with public bathrooms and what takes place therein (Trahan, 2011).

**Love and relationships**

Graffiti concerning love and relationships are much more common in women’s bathrooms than men’s. For instance, Batholome and Snyder (2004) found that love/relationship ranked thirteenth among sixteen categories in terms of frequency among men’s latrinalia. It was the second most common topic of women’s latrinalia in their sample. An interesting facet of graffiti in this category is that they are frequently conversational and involve advice seeking and giving. That is, graffitists, typically women, often describe their problems with relationships or desires for love which then sets off response chains. Others may give advice, whether solicited or not, which can be supportive or disparaging (Rodriguez and Clair, 2009).
Hostility

As an antithesis of sorts to the graffiti about love and relationships, some latrinalia express insults and hostility toward other people or groups. Some hostile latrinalia includes general insults directed toward almost any reader (Bartholome and Snyder, 20014). Other comments are directed toward specific groups of people. Common among hostile latrinalia are racial and ethnic derogations as well as comments that may overlap somewhat with other categories, such as hostile comments toward homosexuals and religious believers. For instance, Rodriguez and Claire (2009) found that women frequently use latrinalia to denigrate each other for supposed promiscuity and homosexuality. Studies suggest that the anonymity available to bathroom graffiti artists influences both the frequency and form of hostile latrinalia. People are afforded opportunities to express frustrations and opinions that they cannot in other social settings without having to confront the consequences of their hostility (Haslam, 2012).

Gender differences

Exploring the differences between graffiti in men and women’s public bathrooms is by far the most common focus of the existing scholarly literature on latrinalia. This should come as no surprise. Gender is, in a sense, fundamental to the organization of public bathrooms. They are one of the last remaining spaces in which people are conspicuously segregated. There are separate rooms, often situated right next to each other, for men and women and we are instructed which room we belong in by the signs and symbols that are centered on the front of the door. Put simply, public bathrooms make biological sex prominent and significant. Studying latrinalia as a social and cultural phenomenon necessitates an understanding of gender differences.

There is also an interpersonal element regarding gender and public bathrooms that may influence (and be reflected in) latrinalia. We patronize public bathrooms solely with members of the same gender as ourselves. As such, people who write graffiti on the walls of public bathrooms likely do so with an awareness that only members of the same gender will read what they write. These factors, combined with the anonymity available to graffitists in public bathrooms, may lead to the exaggeration of “maleness” and “femaleness” in latrinalia (Green, 2003). It is plausible then that latrinalia represent a unique and fruitful source of intra-gender discourse and identity (Schottmiller, 2009). Indeed, some of the earliest and oft cited studies of latrinalia analyzed differences in the quantity and content of graffiti in men’s and women’s bathrooms, and these studies shaped much of the later research on latrinalia.

One of the first empirical studies of latrinalia appeared in Kinsey and colleagues’ (1953) now infamous *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*. They recorded latrinalia in over 300 public restrooms, both male and female. After systematically comparing men and women’s graffiti, they found two patterns that would become the focus of latrinalia research on gender differences for the next half-century. First, they found that men produced more latrinalia overall than women. Second, men’s latrinalia was markedly more sexual than women’s. A full 86 percent of men’s latrinalia contained erotic content compared to only 25 percent of women’s. They found that women more often wrote comments about romantic love. In an attempt to explain these disparities, Kinsey and his colleagues argued that women wrote fewer latrinalia generally and sexual comments specifically because they are more committed to moral codes and social conventions. Studies that followed continued to find that women produced less latrinalia overall and proportionately less sexual content than men (Dundes, 1966; Landy and Steele, 1967; Peretti et al., 1977). Explanations for these differences continued to echo stereotypical gender roles,
such as greater adherence to social conventions and conservative sexual mores among women. Reisner (1971) went so far as to suggest that women are less likely to make markings in the bathroom because they place a greater value on clean walls due to the fact that they are usually the ones to clean them.

Research on gender differences in latrinalia stagnated until experiencing a resurgence beginning in the 1980s. A primary driving force behind this resurgence was a suspicion that women’s liberation movements throughout the late 1960s and 1970s might have caused a shift in women’s latrinalia. That is, if liberation loosened women’s commitment to social conventions, especially those regarding sexuality, then women might be expected to produce more latrinalia and that the content of their latrinalia would be proportionately more sexual. The findings of this research are considerably mixed. Some studies found that the gender disparities in latrinalia were shrinking (Bates and Martin, 1980; Grant, 1993). Others continued to find differences in the quantity and proportionate sexuality between men and women’s latrinalia (Bruner and Kelso, 1980; Loewenstein et al., 1982). In one of the most seminal studies of this period, Arluke et al. (1987) directly examined whether the differences in men and women’s latrinalia had narrowed over time. They found that the content of women’s latrinalia was less sexual than men’s. They concluded that liberation movements had little effect on women’s tendency to produce latrinalia, particularly of a sexual nature.

A bevy of recent research has produced a relative consensus regarding the quantity and sexuality of men and women’s latrinalia. Taken as a whole, the literature seem to suggest that Kinsey’s first finding – that women write less frequently on bathroom walls – may no longer be true (Haslam, 2012). While some studies have continued to find less latrinalia in women’s restrooms (Liu, 2008), other studies have found the opposite – that women produced an equal or even greater amount of bathroom graffiti than men. For instance, Bartholome and Snyder (2004) collected 269 latrinalia over a two week period and found that women produced slightly more (52 percent) latrinalia than men (48 percent).

Kinsey’s second finding – that men’s latrinalia tends to be more sexual in nature than women’s – has better stood the test of time (Green, 2003; Haslam, 2012; Olusoji, 2013). For instance, Matthews et al., (2012) conducted a sophisticated analysis of 1,201 graffiti recorded in the men’s and women’s bathrooms of nine bars. They found that men produced more sexual graffiti than women. Women composed more messages about romantic love and authored more insults. Olusoji (2013) found that, although sex was the most common topic among both, men wrote proportionately more about sex than women (46 to 37.5 percent).

Many recent analyses have gone beyond the somewhat narrow “quantity and sexuality” focus and discovered a host of other differences in men and women’s latrinalia. Findings show that men’s latrinalia tends to be more hostile and derogatory, including racist and sexist comments. Men’s latrinalia has also been found to be more argumentative, competitive, and generally conflict-oriented. Lastly, men’s latrinalia has been found to contain more humorous and political comments (Whiting and Koller, 2007). Conversely, women’s latrinalia is generally more conversational, friendly, and confessional. Women tend to discuss romance and relationships as well as offer support and express solidarity (Fisher and Radtke, 2014; Green, 2003).

Modern explanations of these sex differences focus on gender socialization and its influence on the ways that men and women view the public restroom. Gadsby (1995: 49) posits that women tend to view public restrooms as a “sanctuary, a safe retreat from a hectic world . . . a place to talk and put on make-up.” For men, public restrooms are functional spaces that are not for socializing. Young (2009) argues that interaction in men’s restrooms is intention-
ally subdued. Men abstain from conversation and avoid even having to acknowledge each other’s presence. The argument goes that these conditions lead to conversational, friendly, and supportive latrinalia among women due to their positive impressions of public bathrooms as a space for interaction. Men’s co-presence in public bathrooms is a source of angst and discomfort, and their deleterious comments develop out of these conditions. Whether and to what extent these are plausible explanations or a reiteration of gender stereotypes is debatable.

**Conclusion**

Many of the new directions of latrinalia research resemble the current trends in criminology and social science generally. For instance, several recent studies have explored different intersections of race, gender, and sexual orientation and their influence on latrinalia (see, e.g. Liu, 2008). This approach is based on the recognition that isolating these identity characteristics does not reflect the reality of people’s lives and backgrounds. For instance, past research isolated biological sex from, say, race, and sexual orientation and essentially placed all graffiti and their authors into two categories – men and women. From there, sweeping generalizations are made about the distinctions, or lack thereof, between what men and women write on the bathroom walls. This type of approach essentially ignores the fact that the people within each group derive from various different social locations. Women who produce latrinalia may be homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual, and transgendered. Women’s latrinalia contains messages written by and from the perspective of black, white, and Hispanic people. Some of the authors of bathroom graffiti are young and some are old. The combination of these identity characteristics may well influence what and why people write on the walls.

In one of the most sophisticated intersectional studies of latrinalia to date, Rodriguez and Clair (2009) analyzed how biological sex and sexual orientation shape latrinalia at a predominantly black university. Among the many intriguing facets of their research, they found that expressions of homosexuality were met with singular hostility. This ardent homophobia, they argue, reflects the general resentment of homosexuality in the black community at large. Even in university settings then, which are often considered epicenters of liberal thought and progress, marginalized people engage in derisive communication and further abuse and marginalize each other. This discourse functions to perpetuate the status quo and maintain current hierarchies of privilege. Findings such as this cannot derive from research that isolates one characteristic (e.g. biological sex) at the expense of other important aspects of our identities and backgrounds.

Research should also take into account the different settings and environments that bathrooms are located in. To date, the literature is comprised of research on latrinalia in a variety of different settings. Bartholome and Snyder (2004) analyzed latrinalia in a Bar-B-Que restaurant. Islam (2010) collected latrinalia from bathrooms in coffee shops. Matthews et al., (2012) used nine local bars. The most common site for latrinalia research is University bathrooms. The prevalence of Universities as sites for latrinalia research is likely due to several factors. Latrinalia are common to University bathrooms and they often contain a wide range of different messages. Thus, the quality and quantity of latrinalia in University bathrooms make them fruitful sites for latrinalia research. There is also a “convenience sampling” factor at play – scholars have relatively easy access to large samples of latrinalia in the Universities where they work. Despite a basic recognition among latrinalia scholars that, as Taylor (2010: 44) stated, “place is important” there exists no systematic theoretical or empirical mechanism for distinguishing between settings.
It is entirely plausible that the general environments and the peculiar characteristics have an impact. For instance, the restaurant in which Bartholome and Snyder (2004) collected data invited patrons to write on the bathroom walls. In this particular context, people may produce latrinalia of a different quantity and content than in other settings where latrinalia represents an act of transgression. Moreover, the qualities of latrinalia may vary across different regions. This is particularly plausible given that latrinalia has been found to reflect local political, social, and cultural values.

Research and theory would also benefit from exploring the similarities and differences between latrinalia and other forums. One that is particularly ripe for comparative analyses is the internet (Dermakardijian, 2008). Chat rooms, blogs, comment sections, and various messaging systems provide opportunities for expression that share some of the core characteristics of latrinalia. The most essential shared characteristic is that both afford people anonymity. By using screen names or other monikers, people can post almost anything without fear of reprisal. There is evidence that opportunities for anonymous expression on the internet lead to content that is similar to latrinalia. People often post political opinions, seek support, and antagonize each other (Johnson, 2000).

There are, however, several important distinctions between the internet and latrinalia as modes of expression. First, the internet is not segregated by gender. Second, public bathrooms are unique environments. Internet postings can be written virtually anywhere, but writing on bathroom walls requires occupying a toilet stall (Dermakardijian, 2008). It would be intriguing to say the least to explore the similarities and differences between virtual self-expression and the age-old act of writing on the bathroom wall. Doing so may shed light on how different and emerging modes of social interaction influence self-expression.

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