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September 16, 2010, 09:00 AM ET

Urinary Segregation

By Laurie Essig



When I was 25 years old I was in New York's Guggenheim Museum. As I started walking into the women's bathroom, a security officer put his hand on my shoulder and said, "Hold on there a minute, you (expletive) pervert, you can't go in there."

I told him I was a woman, but he had doubts. After all, I was thin as a rail, my head was shaved, I wore no make-up, and my torn jeans and combat boots said otherwise. He was certain he was stopping a 12-year old boy from peeing and peeking at women. I literally had to go to the security office to convince him not to throw me out of the museum.

This sort of gender policing is extreme, but at a daily level, many people find going to the bathroom a similar ordeal. "This is the women's room," someone will politely point out. "The men's room is down the hall." That's why a couple of weeks ago the people in the building where I work voted to de-gender the bathrooms. We did this partly in response to a growing trans presence on our campus and in the country as well as a more obvious presence of "diversity of gender expression" among all of us. More and more people are willing to express gender as neither a this nor a that, but rather a multiple and shifting set of performances, identities, and sartorial signifiers. And public bathrooms, a product of modern technologies and anxieties, are no longer built to withstand our postmodern blurring of binaries.

Changing the little signs on the door, from "women" and "men" to "gender neutral," may seem trivial upon first glance, but toilets have long been a space where a lot more happens than urination. Indeed, as Jacques Lacan argued, urinary space is one of the most fundamental ways that we know gender.

Urinary segregation has been about more than gender. Race ("Colored" and "White" bathrooms) as well as abled bodies (handicapped accessible or not) and class ("executive" washrooms or "for customers only") have played out in the architecture of the modern public toilet. That's why over at the *Huffington Post*, Rutgers law professor Carlos A. Ball tells us that "bathrooms are a civil right."

Discussing the Conservative hysteria about the Employment Nondiscrimination Act (ENDA), Ball points out that "during each one of these civil-rights struggles, there were conservative critics who dismissed bathroom-related advocacy by minority groups as unnecessary and even silly. A similar response is taking place today as the LGBT rights movement pushes to prohibit employment discrimination against transsexuals."

For Ball, bathrooms are not trivial since gaining access to urinary space has historically been a way for discriminated groups to win rights. Although it may be difficult for white Americans to imagine what it is like to be "Colored" and for normatively gendered persons to imagine what it's like to be transgendered, we all have to go to the bathroom and we can all imagine that being able to pee in peace is a necessary right that should be afforded all humans.

Yet it would be a mistake to believe that the fight over urinary space will be won in the courts alone. We should remember that urinary segregation is not just a site of oppression, but a site of privilege and people with privilege will fight to keep it. If we look at urinary segregation as symbolic violence, we can see that it will take a lot more than legal arguments to take it away. By insisting that all bodies

must divide into “Men” or “Women,” “Gentlemen” or “Ladies,” or even “Dudes” and “Dudettes,” public toilets are able to erase the messiness of bodies and gender. For those of us (and yes, now that I’m older and no longer shave my head, that does include me) who pass easily through the doors, being confronted by the messiness of non-gendered bodies causes anxiety.

Whenever I bring up urinary segregation in my gender class, white women will say “rape.” When I point out that their bathrooms at home are not segregated by gender and that sexual violence is far more likely to be committed by people we know, they resort to “but men are gross.” The purity of white femininity—sexual purity, but also the metaphorical purity of cleanliness—the construction of white women as necessary to police “dirt”—makes urinary segregation by gender a necessary piece of race and gender hierarchies. Furthermore, the segregation of bathrooms by gender makes modern forms of desire legible by maintaining the fiction that there are men and there are women and desire is for one or the other or both. Without urinary segregation the entire basis of much of modern mojo, what Judith Butler calls the heterosexual matrix, will be called into question.

It is here, where social power is written on the door and maintained by those of us who easily pass the test, that we can see that the public toilet is a real mess.

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The Chronicle of Higher Education 1255 Twenty-Third St, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20037