



Olga Gershenson, Barbara Penner, eds. *Ladies and Gents: Public Toilets and Gender*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009. x + 250 pp. \$79.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-59213-939-2; \$27.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-59213-940-8.

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Gendering the Toilet

Ladies and Gents presents a sprawling introduction to “toilet studies” by bringing together sixteen essays from scholars in the social sciences and humanities that explore the relationship between public toilets and gender. As one of the most visited, yet least discussed, public spaces, the toilet stands as a locus of cultural anxiety surrounding privacy, the body, and the abject. Indeed, the fierce reaction the editors received to their initial Call for Papers showcases the ways in which foregrounding a supposedly obscure space such as the toilet can bring forth new insights into issues central to the study of gender more largely defined. *Ladies and Gents* presents both a useful introduction to “toilet studies” as well as insightful contributions to scholarship on the body, the construction of gender roles and expectations, and the gendering of space.

Following an essential introduction laying out the state of the field, *Ladies and Gents* is divided into two parts. Part 1, “Potty Politics: Toilets, Gender, and Identity,” focuses primarily on questions of access and the availability of public toilets to women in contemporary society as well as historically. Part 2, “Toilet Art: Design and Cultural Representations,” turns to the toilet as a signifier of cultural meaning. The organization makes a certain amount of logical sense, but also tends to separate thematically similar essays. The contributions speak to one another over the volume’s divide between studies of space and use and examinations of design and representation.

The first contributions of the volume focus on physical need. As they point out, the universal necessity to eliminate bodily waste has not translated into equal access to facilities for men and women in the United Kingdom and United States. Clara Greed argues that a well-functioning city depends on hygienic

and readily available public facilities for all its citizens, but since women “are the ones most frequently out and about in the daytime, travel on public transport more than men, and often are accompanied by children or elderly or disabled relatives,” their needs often fail to be met (p. 36). Similarly, Kathryn H. Anthony and Meghan Dufresne’s essay advocates for “potty parity,” guaranteeing women the same access as men to facilities in public space. Although women are now encouraged to enjoy public space, they are still limited by the practicalities and choices of urban design.

These two essays make valuable contributions to public debate and underline the continued phallocentrism of urban planning. Speaking from the perspective of public policy, urban design, and architecture, they seek to underline the ways in which the built environment must change to serve real physical needs. In contrast, Barbara Penner’s fascinating exposé of three attempts to design new modes of elimination for women “demonstrates that the true problem with rethinking the female toilet is that it is not simply a functional response to a physical need but a cultural product shaped by discourses about gender, the body, privacy, and hygiene” (p. 142). Intense cultural investment in an ideal of female modesty, Penner shows, has restricted the success of technologies and facilities that do not revolve around the fully enclosed and seated stall.

The tenacity of the assumption of female modesty and discretion has strongly affected the meaning and use of public toilets by women. Andrew Brown-May and Peg Fraser describe how the provision of facilities for women in Melbourne did not automatically lead to their use because entering a public toilet conflicted with norms of bourgeois propriety. Alison

Moore, for her part, brilliantly shows how the association of non-Western toilet practices—such as the use of squats or water instead of toilet paper—with “barbarity” continues in contemporary tourism. Women especially, she argues, are implicated in this association in “pressur[ing] ... tourist industries of the post-colonial world to adopt ‘Western’ facilities” due either to their own “toilet conditioning” or their disruption of “gendered divisions of public and private life” that exist in other cultures (pp. 121-122). Both revolve, ultimately, on Western women’s supposed internalization of norms of bodily propriety. Jami Anderson shows how the state continues to define “women’s right to privacy in terms of their need for modesty” (p. 90), while Bushra Rehman discusses how social shaming enforces the secrecy of nonnormative bathroom practices. Discourses of shame and modesty foreclose some practices while encouraging others. Solving the problem of “potty parity” described by Greed, Anthony, and Dufresne, then, requires more than building more toilets for women.

Ladies and Gents features a number of essays that discuss the ways in which the toilet has served as the setting for challenging the cultural categories and boundaries that discipline the body. Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain* (1917) and those influenced by it, as Robin Lydenberg argues, disrupted divisions not only between art and everyday object, but also between self and other and public and private. Johan Andersson and Ben Campkin’s essay, in addition, shows how popular literary representations of “cottageing” evoke shame and pleasure, safety and danger all at the same time. The artistic and everyday uses of public toilets undermined the dominant representations that associated the toilet with filth and shame. Ultimately, the meaning of the toilet emerges through a complex relationship between its place in the built environment, its representation in discourse, and its everyday use.

Finally, *Ladies and Gents* also includes a fascinating discussion of the association of violence with school toilets in sub-Saharan Africa by Claudia Mitchell. Naomi Stead provides an entertaining exposé of the ways in which we avoid mentioning the toilet through euphemism in order “to avoid direct reference to ... certain culturally determined taboo objects and activities” (p. 126). The essays that describe how artistic production surrounding the urinal challenges social boundaries are numerous and, indeed, slightly repetitive: in addition to those already mentioned, they include Kathy Battista’s study of Sarah Lucas’s artistic production, Alex Schweder’s discussion of his own work, and Frances Pheasant-Kelly’s examination of cinematic representation of toilet scenes. Finally, Nathan Abrams concludes the volume with an essay of vignettes revolving around depictions of the toilet in Jewish popular culture that presents some interesting examples, but does not truly cohere into an argument. An afterword by filmmaker Peter Greenaway provides a pithy and ironic closing to the text.

Together, the essays that comprise *Ladies and Gents* nicely illustrate the necessity of taking seriously the interrelationship of physical structures and discourse in the creation of cultural meaning. Unlike the need to eliminate bodily waste, toilet practices are not natural and immutable. Rather, they change according to both the provision and design of toilet spaces as well as their cultural representation. Although readers of H-Histsex may lament the relative lack of the history of sexuality in the volume, *Ladies and Gents* serves its stated purpose: to introduce readers to the emerging field of toilet studies through the lens of gender analysis. As an illustration of the variety of approaches one can take to the study of gender and space more broadly defined, *Ladies and Gents* comes very highly recommended.

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