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Fresh Words Multiply: Latrinalia in a St Andrews Public Restroom

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ABSTRACT

The pristine exterior of St Andrews includes a distinct lack of any form of visual chaos, be that posters, street art or graffiti. The phenomenon of latrinalia in the female bathrooms of Aikman's Bar and Bistro therefore offers a unique insight into the subjectivities of students at the University of St Andrews. Rather than focusing on the content of each individual inscription, as has been typical within previous studies of latrinalia, this ethnography examines the experiences of five female students at the University of St Andrews and their individual responses to the practice of latrinalia in Aikman's female toilets. The study found that these students characterised the space as vulnerable, connected and impermanent, creating a sense of solidarity amongst bathroom users. These findings provide a complex and diverse insight into the internal experiences of a selection of the student population and encourage further study of possibilities for self-expression within the town.

It feels right to start poetry with poetry

To begin a dismantling of words

With an entanglement of meaning.

Words like these feel safe,

And it is in safety where I begin,

A safety that I expand upon

And watch others describe.

They say to write you must read

And so, people have feasted and scrawled,

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Confessed and absolved,

Embossed their anonymity

Into a coat of white paint –

Fresh words multiply.

Like imprints in sand,

Their presence lingers in the sound of the dryer,

Preserved amongst the plugholes.

Absence takes form

In determined lines,

Irreverent shapes –

Decorated poetry.

Introduction

The interior of Aikman's Bar and Bistro is purposefully reminiscent of an informal European bar. Wooden tabletops are precariously balanced on wonky legs, frayed cardboard boxes house a selection of obscure boardgames, and a variety of Belgian, German, and Czech beer accompany weekly performances of live folk music. Despite its location in the heart of the town, Aikman's has arguably become a space that transcends the boundaries of St Andrews, visually, socially, and temporally. Its relaxed appearance does not align with the well-maintained exteriors of the town's mediaeval heritage, and its warm environment offers a respite from a student population pervaded by exclusive societies and social hierarchies. Furthermore, the nature of the space, as an alcohol-serving venue, augments these elements through an intoxicated rejection of linear time. The network of graffiti in Aikman's toilets, in particular, offers an antidote to the pristine exterior of a university town otherwise lacking in any form of visual chaos. There are words etched onto the back of the cubicle doors in biro, marker, red chalk, white lines where the wood finish has been scratched away, empty lines where the imprint of a broken pen has failed to leave its mark. There is an infectious energy in the repetition of an exclamation mark, a gestural movement in the curve of an underline, a

promised affection in the outline of a love heart. Phrases such as *don't take it too seriously* and *this is your sign to text him* accompany political statements like *trans rights are human rights* and *vaginas out for Corbyn*. Writing in 1966, Alan Dundes (2007) labelled this type of graffiti latrinalia – inscriptions specific to the walls of public restrooms. Much of the literature that followed this definition studied latrinalia by documenting and categorising each individual inscription (Stocker, et al. 1972; Gonos, et al. 1976; Cole 1991; Wolff 2010; Haslam 2012; Amevuvor & Hafer 2019). I have instead decided to focus more generally on the experiences of five female students at the University of St Andrews and their personal responses to the practice of latrinalia in Aikman's female toilets, to gain an insight into means of personal expression within the student population of St Andrews.

Vulnerability

One of the most unique aspects of public toilets is the fleeting anonymity that the cubicles provide. It is this juxtaposition between public and private that creates such poignant vulnerability. It seemed important to respect this anonymity by extending the privacy of the bathroom space beyond my field-site, so the majority of my interviews took place within the privacy of my flat. Curled up on the living room sofa, my flatmate Victoria, a second-year student of Art History and English, points out that "if people are capable of expressing themselves, it means that it's a vulnerable space." What does this say about the student culture in St Andrews, however, if anonymity is a pre-requisite for honest self-expression? Wallis, also in second year, describes the town as lacking in opportunity for dialogue. Because of the size of the town, words spread like wildfire: "it feels like everything you do and everything you say will be noted and will be attached to your name…nothing feels untouched, nothing feels safe". Consequently, an anonymous space like Aikman's bathrooms can offer an antidote to this incessant social pressure. "I think that's what's kind of beautiful about it, that no matter what you're writing, it's because you just want to write it and for it to be heard and seen for what it is instead of who you are", Wallis concludes. Victoria remarks that the isolation experienced as a result of this social pressure is also somewhat relieved by the intimacy paradoxically created through anonymity. "I think we take intimacy as being in physical proximity to one another, but that's not exactly what intimacy is. [St Andrews] is one of the easiest places to feel quite detached and quite isolated." She describes bathrooms as being intimate spaces that contrast this isolation; the act of undressing oneself in the cubicle is one of the most vulnerable acts that one can do. Anonymity enables vulnerability which in turn encourages freedom of expression.

Both Victoria and Wallis have published poetry in student run magazines. However, neither of them has yet contributed to the latrinalia in Aikman's. Having asked them to compare their perceived experience of writing in an identified versus anonymous setting, Wallis replied that she would find writing in an anonymous space less anxiety-inducing, whilst Victoria felt that it would be putting herself in a more vulnerable position. Both agreed, however, that this was not to do with the space itself, which they perceive to be very positive. Victoria also describes writing in an informal setting as freeing in comparison to the more rigid requirements of the creative industry: "all you have to do is physically be there and have a pen." There was a general consensus amongst all participants of the accepting nature of the space as a result of the positive tone of the latrinalia. Delilah, a second-year student of French, described

it as "a space to communicate your feelings. Every feeling is going to be accepted regardless of whether it's happy, sad, meaningful, light-hearted". There seems to be a universally friendly and supportive atmosphere in women's bathrooms, particularly in bars and clubs where women often compliment each other and give out advice. Existing social structures are suspended whilst a shared sense of vulnerability reigns. As Jocelyn Amevuvor and Greg Hafer argue, bathroom stalls offer a respite from the pressure of female beauty standards that permeate society; they are a gender-separated space in which women come together to reject the male gaze (2019: 98). In Aikman's, it is as if this female bathroom culture has taken visual form and attached itself to the walls, mentions Emma, a second-year student of Art History.

A consensus in much of the literature on latrinalia is that the anonymity of bathroom spaces permits individuals to express ideas that fall outside the accepted societal norms (Wolff 2010: 6; Amevuvor & Hafer: 102; Gonos, et al. 1976: 42). Victoria points this out, asking what it says about the university that people must write trans lives matter within the safety of an anonymous bathroom cubicle. Are LGBTQ+ rights not generally accepted within the student community? Or is the individual able to express themselves more openly and has simply chosen to repeat this message within this space? Caroline Cole extends this argument beyond the dichotomy of the individual and the institution to argue for the role of anonymity in challenging the patriarchy (1991: 403). Latrinalia "enables womyn to speak out freely since men cannot control what womyn write in the washroom" (ibid.). Restroom walls become a place of female expression, communication, and solidarity (Cole 1991: 401). In Aikman's, inscriptions warning other bathroom users of sexual assaulters express a desire to protect fellow women (see fig. 1). However, the use of initials rather than a full name perhaps indicates a lingering fear that the author's identity would be exposed if they were to name the perpetrator.

Most studies of latrinalia have focused on a comparison of male and female restrooms, attempting to find explanations for their differences to understand more general social trends. Terrance Stocker et al. contend that "graffiti, as an aspect of culture, can be used as an unobtrusive measure to reveal patterns of customs and attitudes of a society" (1972: 356). Observed differences in the content of male and female latrinalia show distinct contrasts. Women tend to use latrinalia as a positive means of self-expression or response to personal problems, whilst men's latrinalia tends to be more image based and aggressive in nature (Haslam 2012: 124). Without any awareness of the content of the male latrinalia in Aikman's, there was an assumption amongst all of my participants that it would be far less amiable than the female latrinalia they had witnessed: "I guarantee you there will not be love hearts everywhere" says Delilah, whilst Oriane, a fourth-year student of Philosophy, describes the supportiveness of female bathroom culture, saying "guys are a bit rough and just don't have that thing, so it would make sense that no one's going to write, like, 'love you mate' on the wall." A friend of mine offered to take some photos of the graffiti in the men's bathrooms and from the pieces that I saw the majority of inscriptions tended to relate to sex, politics or humour, with no instances of encouragement (see fig. 2). Perhaps this is due to spatial differences as, with only one cubicle, anonymity is not foregrounded within the space. Men also take less time in restrooms, and, as Trahan writes, there seems to be an apprehension of homosexual discomfort and a set of unspoken rules common to male bathroom culture in order to limit such discomfort: "no talking...no

eye contact...no lingering...no showing emotion" (Trahan 2011: 4). Signage, the act of undressing, and the act of excretion, posit gender as a focal point when it comes to restrooms, and so gender differences in the content of bathroom graffiti become exacerbated (Haslam 2012: 125). Although unavoidable to at least mention, I purposefully did not further explore the relationship between gender and latrinalia, as to give a comprehensive insight into it would have been beyond the scope of this ethnography. I am also more concerned with individual narratives of self-expression and connectivity within latrinalia. which is why I have contained my research to a select number of female-identifying participants.

Connectivity

As a result of the shared vulnerability created by the nature of the public restroom, as a place of both anonymity and intimacy, connections are formed between past, present, and future bathroom users. In Aikman's this connectivity manifests itself visually in the appearance of latrinalia. "It makes you feel so connected to someone you don't even know...they're on the same sort of level as you thinking about existential things" explains Emma. Victoria describes how essential moments of connection like these are in order to thrive in a place like St Andrews: "I think here, more than anywhere else in my life, I've yearned for connection with people･･･human relationships here are the most important thing because there's nothing else." Connection takes on both the form of in-person conversations undertaken within the bathroom space and more implicitly through the graffiti etched onto the back of the cubicle doors. De Zeeuw describes this graffiti as "an illicit and anonymous communication system" (de Zeuuw 2021: 364). It is irrelevant whether one is a writer or a reader in this situation. Everyone is actively consuming the words. As Victoria illustrates "I think even though I have never written something, it doesn't feel like there's this massive gap between me and the wall and all these people who've written".

Shared experience is also manifested through the act of looking. Inspiration for partaking in the writing of latrinalia takes place within the environment. As Delilah explains, it is unlikely for someone to enter the pub with the intention of going straight into the toilet to graffiti on the wall. People are influenced by the pre-existing latrinalia, upon which they may base their contribution. In some cases, people have even collaborated with, or responded to, previous graffiti. For example, one inscription reads i*f his name is Hugo don't bother* (see fig. 3). Surrounding it are a jumble of arrows in different coloured pens responding to this statement: *he put a baby in me! / #knockedupthefresher / never met a good Hugo.../ he's too good for y'all.* Cole describes this as "story-chaining", where subsequent authors reply to a central message (1991: 406). This type of collaborative graffiti is most common in female bathrooms and generally tends to feature respectful comments that never criticise the original author (1991: 460). Other examples of 'chaining' include graffiti that invite an answer, almost like a sort of in-flight entertainment for the viewer. Bold red ink exclaims: *[X] is the hottest tutor I've ever had!!! Tick if you agree* (see fig. 1). It is accompanied by five ticks. Further down the door *England* is crossed out in red ink and *Scotland* is scrawled above it (see fig. 1). A third party has added the colloquialism *4 eva!!!* underneath, creating a collaborative piece that reflects the existence of political tensions within and beyond the student community. Methods of 'chaining' demonstrate that connectivity exists beyond the presence of the bathroom user.

Absence

There is absence in the fresh coat of white paint that prepared Aikman's for The Open Championship last summer, concealing thirty-seven years of graffiti. There is absence in the words occasionally deemed inappropriate enough to be removed. There is absence in passing time and every occupant whose eyes have feasted on those words. There is absence in the meanings lost of poetry divulged.

I presented participants with a section of latrinalia which I believe encapsulates the tension between the connectivity and human absence of the space: *This graffiti is fleeting human contact. Both of us are lost. But for a moment we are lost together. I wonder who you are* (see fig. 4). Wallis' response was: "It's funny that it says lost together because I think in a lot of ways the Aikman's bathroom kind of represents being found together because I think of it as a positive space of graffiti." Victoria agreed with the message but was also unsure of the use of the word 'lost' and suggested 'connected' as a more fitting replacement. Similarly, Delilah took issue with 'lost' but acknowledged the beauty in recognising the connection between writer and reader: "I love the concept of fleeting human contact, because you can imagine this person writing it, and now you're there reading it with your eyes…in this specific moment, you're stood in the same place as them." Emma responded similarly: "it kind of feels like time travel, like they somehow planted themselves there and they can't really be removed."

Retaining a presence in a space that has become renowned within St Andrews was a central theme when I asked participants about their reasons for contributing to the latrinalia. Oriane plans to write something before she graduates in summer, "something positive and empowering and funny", something that speaks to other people rather than simply marking her presence with her name. Delilah, on the other hand, has already inscribed a message onto a ledge inside one of the cubicles. *Dil Pez loves you,* it reads. "I don't want to be known as Delilah in the town. I want to be known as Dil Pez, because I feel like that's the identity of myself that I most want to project into the world." She found herself in the bathroom with a pen and so the act of writing was a somewhat subconscious impulse to attach a piece of herself to that space, inspired by the presence and actions of others before. "I'm a very nostalgic person" she continues "and so I'd like to think that someone's going to see that in years to come." Last summer, a friend of Victoria who was leaving the town for a year inscribed a poem about blackberries into the white paint: "it was her way of keeping a tangible presence in St Andrews while she was away." The poem has since been covered up. Although Dundes' primary focus is on explanations of latrinalia as breaking the taboo of excretion by subliminally reverting to primal urges of marking one's territory, he also notes the importance of latrinalia in order "to leave a record of one's presence" (Dundes 2007: 370). There is something universal about the human urge to emboss one's existence into places of solidity, something nostalgic about acknowledging our impermanence.

Conclusion

There is a complexity and a multiplicity in the meanings and purposes of the latrinalia that have appeared in Aikman's bathrooms. Although there is no real way of knowing when, why or by whom each inscription was made, a selection of experiences by those who have read, written, would write, is enough to begin to interpret a network of expression specific to

its location within St Andrews. The expression of solidarity created through the shared space of a toilet cubicle offers a necessary antidote to the isolation apparent as a result of the town's somewhat suffocating size. Furthermore, observed gender differences in latrinalia production and bathroom culture invite alternative methods of enquiry to understand previous anthropological research within the context of St Andrews. Consumption of latrinalia makes all bathroom users active users, creating connections simply by having a body exist in that space and inviting new additions to the walls. Examples of graffiti show that there is a resistance in protection, an honesty in advice, a comedy in communication. There is a poignant universality in the human desire to be connected to those who have come before and in the need to leave one's mark upon the world.

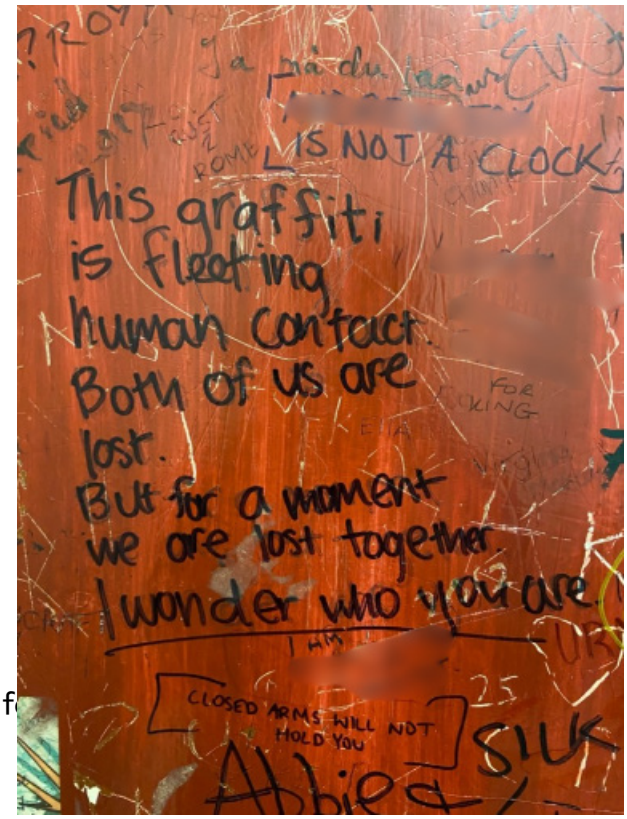
Photos[1]

Fig. 1 taken by me, Aikman's female bathrooms, 23rd March 2023.

Fig. 2, taken by Quentin, Aikman's male bathrooms, 4th April 2023.

1 Images have been altered to blur identifying information for privacy reasons.


Never met a gosd
HUGO
Idunn was here
name is Hugo. DONT bother!
He put a baby in me!
Tits | Ass
Queer?
Join Women's
Rugby


IS NOT A CLOCK
This graffiti
is fleeting
human contact.
Both of us are
lost.
But for a moment
we are lost together
I wonder who you are.
CLOSED ARMS WILL NOT
HOLD YOU
Abbie

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