

(la'-tri-NA'-le-ah)

“What the hell is this?!” read a message in the Alameda High girls’ bathroom in Alameda, California. Underneath: ***“I don’t know. What would you like it to be?”*** In the boys’ room: ***“Don’t eat the big white mint!”*** above a urinal, referring to the deodorizer therein. But these bits of wit upon the walls were short-lived. An hour after I read them they disappeared under a coat of whitewash, ordered by summer-school principal Dr. Adeyjoka Fashokun.

Though considered vandalism by city officials, school principals, and business owners, bathroom graffiti has been studied, analyzed, and even classified. It’s called “latrinalia.” *Latrinalia*, as the experts define it, is a common piece of scribbling -- always found in more than one location -- and is traditionally concentrated in rest stops, bus stations, and high schools. It’s the poem, request, facetious direction, or philosophical musing that is read on one stall and found so brilliant, the reader takes it with him or her to another location. “The traditional forms: the poetry, the one-liners, the ones you’ve heard before or seen before are latrinalia,” says Dr. Alan Dundes, folklore scholar in UC Berkeley’s Department of Anthropology. Dundes refers to *Hapax Legomena*, on the other hand, as the writing that is one-of-a-kind and not spread anywhere else (“Mr. Skinner is an asshole,” for example).

While Dundes is considered today’s leading authority in latrinalia, researchers have been studying bathroom graffiti for centuries. Hurlo Thomas published *The Merry-Thought or The Glass-Window Bog-House Miscellany* in 1731, a compilation of scribbles from Merry Old England’s bog houses, or privies (public toilets). Filled with rhyming verse, it is easy to see the early roots of modern-day latrinalia:

“You are eas’d in your Body, and pleas’d in your Mind, That you leave both a Turd and some Verses behind; But to me, which is worse, I can’t tell, on my Word, The reading your Verses, or smelling your Turd.” —Bog house at the Nags’-Head in Bradmere

When modern excavation of the ruins of Pompeii began in the 1820s, researchers were surprised to find—along with the various wooden bowls, petrified bread, and shapes of humans buried under the ash from the **79 AD** eruption of Mount

Vesuvius—clues to the everyday lives of the people. Brushing ash from the walls of the public latrines and baths, they uncovered: ***“Apollinaris, doctor to the Emperor Titus, had a crap here.”*** Following this scrawl in ancient Latin was a burst of others: ***“Artimetus got me pregnant”***; ***“The risen flesh commands, let there be love”***; ***“Fortunatus made it with Anthusam”***; ***“Serena hates Isadore”***; ***“Daddy Colepius kisses the ladies where he shouldn’t”***; ***“Hullo, hullo Mago, fare you well, you’re obviously castrated”***; ***“Hullo! We are wineskins.”*** Underneath the philosophical scribbling — ***“Lovers, like bees, enjoy a life of honey”*** — was a deflating zinger in a different hand: ***“Wishful thinking.”***

Two of today’s die-hard classics are, ***“Here I sit all broken-hearted/came to shit but only farted”*** and ***“Kilroy was here!”*** The former originated as ***“Here I sit all broken-hearted/Paid a nickle and only farted”*** in the 1920s, when coin-operated stalls were commonplace. (Once the price was upped to a dime, the word *dime* replaced *nickel*.) The poem has read ***“Came to shit but only farted”*** since the 1960s, often written with additional lines, such as ***“Now I have a second chance!/Farted once then shit my pants.”*** According to Dundes, “Here I sit...” has been written all over the world, including a girls’ restroom at Hong Kong International School (1977). The poem was the inspiration for the title of Dr. Dundes’s 1966 seminal paper, “Here I Sit: A Study of American Latrinalia” in which he actually coined the term *latrinalia* and broke it into five style categories (*retype in – didn’t scan*).

“Kilroy was here!” (often accompanied by a big-nosed Private Kilroy peeking over a wall) dates from WWI and lasted well into the late 1960s and the Vietnam war. According to one legend, Kilroy supposedly was one Private Kilroy, a soldier in WWI, who — tired of hearing how the navy always arrived before the army — decided that he would leave his mark everywhere he went to prove otherwise. The line has been found in bathrooms all over the globe, and in such obscure places as the top of Lady Liberty’s torch in New York.

Turmoil of a political or social nature inspires more graffiti overall, including latrinalia. Take the Tower of London in the sixteenth century: Blood was the only available medium for the confessionary and high-minded graffiti of political prisoners awaiting execution there. “Be frend to one, Be ennermye to none,” wrote Charles Bailly; it’s just one of hundreds of marks left behind by the soon-to-be-beheaded. Says Dundes, “In places like Latin America it’s very big — anywhere there are political problems, you’ll see people writing on walls.” ***“Flush far peace!”*** reached its heyday at the height of the Vietnam conflict, and ***“Commit***

LBJ, not the USA” became the battle cry found on numerous stall doors at the same time. In other areas and times, the reflection is similar: Santiago, Chile, 1969: ***“To expropriate from the rich is no crime.”***

Forms of bathroom graffiti are often localized to reflect the patrons. Consider the classic plea to avoid missing the urinal: ***“Old rams with short horns please stand up close.”*** In New England, a variation read, ***“Puritans with short muskets step up to the firing line.”*** Or more direct is this example from England: ***“Stand closer, the monks have bare feet.”*** During a Texas draught, ***“Flush hard. Texas needs the water”*** was found in Oklahoma. Variations on this theme have appeared in a number of places where traditional rivalries exist (for example, ***“Ohio needs the water”*** in a restroom in Ann Arbor, Michigan).

According to Dundes, there is a theory behind the tradition of latrinalia: It is a result of repression — whether political, sexual, or scatological. Regarding the latter category, he says, people are uncomfortable about discussing anything that comes out of their bodies, particularly what comes out in the restroom. He talks briefly in “Here I Sit” about being taught in our society that anything coming from the body is dirty — including words we use to describe bodily functions.

“We are still very prudish people regarding anal or genital matters,” he says. “We really are not comfortable talking, even in our family, about it. We still have all these euphemisms. For example, people still refer to them as Number 1 and Number 2. In baby terms: pee-pee and poo-poo. People even use these terms on into adult life, which is a sign they’re embarrassed about it.”

Euphemisms cause stall pontification? “It’s folklore,” Dundes responds. Meaning? He listed what folklore includes: “Folktales, proverbs, riddles, and certain kinds of written materials such as autographs and graffiti. One type of graffiti is the type that appears in bathrooms. The whole purpose of folklore is that it allows you to express what normally cannot be expressed.” He adds that latrinalia is less about personal expression and more about our collective consciousness, as seen in times of political upheaval.

Yet some evidence suggests the opposite might be true in the case of curse words dealing with excrement or sex (“fuck” incidentally, is written on the walls of public restrooms more than it’s written any other place on earth). In his book *Graffiti: Two Thousand Years of Wall Writing*, Robert Reisner explains why these words appear so prevalently in public bathrooms. “I was surprised when studies turned up evidence that the expression of this [fuck] and other obscenities is not a sign of depravity or dirty-mindedness, and is in fact salubrious and good for the

psyche as well as the soul.” Indeed, research indicates that spewing out a “Shit!” or “Fuck!” releases stress and tension bubbling under the surface.

But who writes this stuff? The majority of bathroom graffiti appears in men’s rooms. The conclusions of Dundes’s paper are painfully Freudian-based as were most psychological theories of the 1960s: Women hold the innate ability to create life, so men, according to Dundes, using a sort of Womb Envy theory, are driven to create something that will live beyond them — anything, even if it’s just writing in a latrine that hundreds if not thousands have used before them.

But Susanna Shaw, women’s bathroom graffiti expert and author of the book *Women in the John*, suggests “Graffiti could be a remnant of what was once a common practice (males marking territory with urine). Perhaps removing clothing in a semi-public place for the purpose of elimination brings out primal instincts.”

But the question, itself a common piece of latrinalia, still begs to be answered: Why read it in the first place? Is it, as one Chicago stall-writer mused, “***Because it’s there!***”? Or is it because we’re simply a stuck, captive audience?

Dundes (again, heavily immersed in Freudian thought) insists we’re not stuck at all, but a receptive audience: “People feel somehow that they’re losing something that they’ve produced, and so they attempt to incorporate, in a sense, to make up for it, if you want to buy the theory here. That’s why people, I think, read on the toilet,” says Dundes. In a nutshell, by reading something, we are taking something back into ourselves to fill the void left when we, well, drop a load.

But even if you don’t buy into Freudian thought Dundes says not to worry. “If you knew what it was you were doing, you wouldn’t do it. So the fact that people are not consciously aware of the possible symbolic significance of their actions doesn’t mean that there is no symbolic significance.”

So what about those few women who do write in restrooms? “I think that women are, if anything, moving with the women’s movement, and that the women are trying to be like men. Men do it so women do it,” says Dundes. “On the other hand, women still don’t seem to participate so much in the traditional forms of latrinalia writing. They’re either lesbian themes, or long soliloquies about the world—about men, life, and the like.”

Shaw, in her research, highlights a few brief shining years where women did actually compete in this male-dominated arena. During the heyday of the women’s

movement — from the early 1970s to around 1977 — women’s bathrooms were coated floor to ceiling with some of the most intellectual, poignant, and witty scrawlings ever recorded: *“I’ll not ‘should’ on myself today”*; *“Women who want to be equal to men lack imagination”*; *“Everyone talks about apathy, but no one does anything about it . . .”* followed underneath by: *“Who cares about apathy?”*; *“Pleasure without power is a mindfuck!”*; *“A woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle!”* And from a six-year-old girl, identified as EC., *“Women Are Strong!”*

Women are generally considered to be far more communicative than men — which may best explain why males more often use stall walls as outlets. In lieu of a priest at confession time, males tend to spew it out in a place where at least someone can hear them — and no one can judge them.

One study at St. Joseph Hospital and Medical Center’s psychiatric unit in Chicago actually encouraged patients to write on the stall walls in an effort to observe and open communication. Patients — men and women — began engaging. Even those who were so sick, apparently, that they couldn’t verbally communicate began to leave messages on the latrine walls; all except those who were most severely depressed.

In Alameda High restrooms — both male and female — there was no shortage of personalized messages (*“Fuck you, Melvin!”*) before the principal had them removed.” Traditional latrinalia may very well contain a “Fuck you!” message, but what separates it from the personal message is that it speaks more to our collective situation than our individual differences. A “Fuck you!” is easier to swallow when it comes in a humorous form directed at no one in particular, as in the example written in calligraphy at Il Pirata bar in San Francisco, *“Phuque Ewe.”* But the in-your-face style of graffiti is what seems to be far more prevalent these days. Tagging — gang-style territorial markings with their own set of standards — has taken over both inner-city and suburban schools alike, and left little room for the classic stuff.

Perhaps alternative outlets are filling the need for spontaneous vertical stall pondering. An example might be the Monterey Jack Sandwich Company in Atlanta, Georgia, which has created bathroom graffiti zones for its patrons. The hired help couldn’t resist: *“Here I sit all tired and dirty, trying to hide until 4:30.”*

Or maybe the Internet is a modern-day outlet for our unconscious need to potty talk. There are many latrinalia examples found within signature files on e-mails

and usenet posts.

At lone rest stops on interstates, specific solicitations (***“I need your big cock. 8/23, 9-11 P.M., back stall.”*** — I-80, Nevada) cover every inch of the men’s room stalls, while traditional latrinalia is scarce. Still, according to Dundes, as long as we’re collectively embarrassed by bodily functions, as long as euphemisms for urinating, defecating, intercourse, and masturbation remain common cover-ups, latrinalia will remain alive and well — even if it’s washed off the day after it goes on the wall. As long as we “gotta see a man about a dog,” instead of “going to urinate” there will be plenty of reading material. After all, you know what they say:

“Those who write on shithouse walls

Roll their shit in little balls

Those who read these words of wit

Eat the little balls of shit.”