Restroom Conflicts, Bodies & Somatophobia

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Background

The contemporary struggle to find accessible public restrooms in New York City is reminiscent of previous times bathrooms were exclusive spaces, particularly the late 1800s when gender-segregated restrooms became popular, and during Jim Crow when life was demarcated along racial lines. One thread tying these three restroom conflicts together is a dismissal of the body given restrooms are spaces where the body is the primary focus. At the same time, there is a tradition in Western philosophy of prioritizing the mind over the body, such that philosophers like Aristotle, Nietzsche and Simone de Beauvoir, among others, have established a dualistic hierarchy [1]. The mind is virtuous, highly regarded, valuable yet the body is an obstacle, uncontrollable, deplorable. In response to such a tradition, philosopher Elizabeth Spelman presents her theory of somatophobia, which she describes as "the fear of or disdain for the body" [2]. Essentially, Spelman's theory of somatophobia seeks to point out that negative attitudes towards the body are mirrored in negative attitudes towards groups associated with the body. For example, women have been historically linked with the body whereas men are linked with the mind – one can think of how women are described as hysterical or emotional while men are rational and logical – and these associations, in turn, have been used to justify women's oppression.

The train of thought follows that if we conceptually place the mind above the body, and if there are also some groups associated with the mind and others with the body, then it is possible that such a conceptual hierarchy manifests itself in actuality to ultimately oppress the groups associated with the body. In the same way that the exclusivity of restrooms is directed towards certain marginalized groups, the association with the body also seems to apply to certain marginalized groups; as such, I became interested in researching whether bathrooms – given their focus on the body – have any connection to somatophobia whenever they are inaccessible, and any repercussions for marginalized communities, particularly women, people of color, and working class people. Upon further research, my findings show that limited access to restrooms has two effects on marginalized communities: it undermines their agency insofar they don't have the choice to be in control of their body, and it undermines dignity given they suffer a threat to their self-worth, and are socially excluded.

Goals & Research Question

- The goal of this research is to elucidate how the Western conception of the body relates to restroom conflicts, and what the implications of those conflicts are for women, people of color, and the working class.
- To what extent are historical and contemporary restroom conflicts real-life manifestations of somatophobia, and what do they elucidate about marginalized communities with regards to their associations with the body?

Methods

My methodology is two-fold: on the one hand, I conduct a historical investigation not only into the philosophical debates surrounding the mind and body – where I introduce the concept of somatophobia more in depth – , but also into previous bathroom frictions, particularly gender-segregated bathrooms starting in the 1800s and race-segregated bathrooms under Jim Crow. On the other hand, I also conduct a philosophical inquiry into the implications of restroom conflicts for women and people of color, respectively, by bringing in discussions of agency and dignity in relation to somatophobia. I converge the results of both methodologies – the historical investigation and the philosophical inquiry – by considering the contemporary NYC public restroom shortage. To evaluate the extent to which bathroom conflicts are instances of somatophobia, not only do I search for evidence that shows a disdain for the body, but also an analogous disdain towards groups associated with the body that is sexist, racist, and/or classist oppression.

Turning away from an additive analysis of oppression, and instead embracing a conceptual framework of intersectionality, I will explore different sections of identity individually for the sake of clarity, while also identifying the areas for intersectional nuances as they arise. Indeed, this maintenance of an intersectional approach while ensuring clarity was my biggest challenge throughout the research and writing process. The section regarding women and gender-segregated bathrooms almost exclusively discusses the experiences of white women given that the scholarship, as a reflection of the time being discussed, focuses on the preoccupations regarding white women during the 18th century. Indeed, women of color were excluded from the same preoccupations that their white counterparts benefited from, which is what leads me to discuss race-segregated restrooms. This part of my investigation itself was also complicated to conduct because white supremacist ideologies favor unisex bathrooms [3]. As such, I had to briefly elaborate on the specific experiences of women of color within a narrative that focuses on black people in general.

Discussion

Relying on traditional Western philosophical notions that the mind is superior to the body, and that certain groups are associated with each, Simone de Beauvoir constructs her argument that women's oppression ends where their transcendence of the body begins. de Beauvoir argues that women's association with the body causes their immanence, or in other words, their degradation of existence, so efforts to end their oppression should be focused on transcending the body [4]. However, philosopher Elizabeth Spelman contends that de Beauvoir's argument for transcendence is problematic because "de Beauvoir's prescription for women's liberation does not challenge the negative view toward the body; it only hopes to end the association between the body, so negatively characterized, and women" [5]. Spelman consequently introduces the concept of "somatophobia", which is I use to evaluate restroom conflicts.

First, even though a concern for women's safety was important, the most significant cause for implementing gender-segregated restrooms in the United States was the social anxiety of women leaving the domestic sphere which was counteracted by using pseudo-scientific justifications that reinforced the notion that women's bodies were weaker than men's. Thus, gender-segregated restrooms are a manifestation of somatophobia given they reinforce both a narrative about female inferiority through their bodies, and perpetuate women's oppression by undermining women's agency. Turning towards race-segregated restrooms, even though white supremacists often used a religious justification for segregation, the argument that God created different races rested directly on hierarchical bodily distinctions. Consequently, the deep-seated notion that black bodies were inferior to white bodies was primary over piety, and particularly, the belief that black people's bodily fluids threatened white people's health was used as justification for implementing race-segregated restrooms. Hence, race-segregated restrooms are a manifestation of somatophobia because they reinforce both a narrative about black inferiority through their bodies, and perpetuate racial oppression by threatening people of color's agency. Turning to contemporary restroom conflicts, New York City's public restroom shortage is also somatophobic because it too deals with threats to agency and dignity through the body similar to the segregation of bathrooms, particularly when considering its primary victim: working class people.

Conclusions & Next Steps

Restroom conflicts exemplify how marginalized communities associated with the body continue to face oppression through, indeed in virtue of, their bodies, specifically women and people of color. Although I hope my current analysis serves to shine light on the deeper, philosophical stakes of restroom conflicts, there is room to expand upon the existence, or dismantling, of somatophobia in other aspects of our lives. The concept of somatophobia can be taken into many different directions, and my hope is that we in the West begin to carefully consider the underlying biases and value-judgments that not only ground our systems, but that remain hidden when we fail to question them.

References

[1] Aristotle, The Politics, trans. by Ernest Barker. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946), 3.

[2] Elizabeth V. Spelman, Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), 126.

[3] Tynslei Spence-Mitchell, "Restroom Restrictions: How Race and Sexuality Have Affected Bathroom Legislation," Wiley Online Library, 2020, 16, https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/gwao.12545.

[4] Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex, trans. by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier. (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 17.

[5] Spelman, Inessential Woman, 126.

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