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Narratives that subvert site and identity

Urinal and Other Stories. John Greyson, 1993

review by Gordon Brent Ingram

"While these stories are fictional, they revel in the documentary frisson of real names, real places, real facts. Which are often real obscure. Readers should assume that what they're reading is true -- as in "true to you, darling, in my fashion, true to you, darling, in my way" (Cole Porter). Little Sisters bookstore *was* bombed, Joe Rose *was* murdered, Randy Shilts *did* tell the joke about the waiter jerking off in the salad, Walt Whitman *did* kiss soldiers on the lips, and yes, there *was* a sex museum on Hollywood Boulevard with a big, pink, stuffed dog humping a mannequin. It may still be there...I hope so." John Greyson (p. 19)

Any book that starts out talking about sex in public washrooms and that is also dedicated to the author's recently deceased mother takes on the aura of the surreal. Through imagined conversations between Langston Hughes, Sergei Eisenstein, Frida Kahlo, and Yukio Mishima, coverage of the 1987 Toronto bath house raids, and a history of public washrooms, *Urinal and Other Stories* is one of the most lewd books based on a screenplay in years. The book begins with the script of the 1988 film *Urinal* made in the anti-sexuality hysteria of the first wave of the AIDS epidemic. This was not a time when most people, even "queer theorists," wanted to talk about the importance of defending public sex. At one point in the *Urinal* script, "Yukio" states,

"Washroom sex. As old as the public washroom itself. Related to park sex, beach sex, sauna sex, elevator sex, alley sex, train sex, plane sex, church sex, gym sex. Where is this history recorded? Certainly, there is no authoritative volume on the subject. Instead, what we remember consists of fragments." *Urinal* (pp. 59 - 60)

The fragments take on a role in resistance and the book explodes with a vision of the "community" that Greyson see symbolized in the acts around the site.



A re-enacted scene from *Angles'* graphics files. Photo by Brett Johnson, 1985

It's quite a small washroom, and so there's a feeling of intimacy in a way. So when there's six men there, I don't know, there's a really nice feeling in a small space -- and there's a sense of privacy as though it's just your washroom. Quite often there's a guy standing at the door while other people are having sex and he will cough or make a noise when someone comes in -- so there's a sort of a feeling of community at that washroom." *Urinal* (p. 72)

Urinals is situated in southern Ontario. There are lots of names of small towns, details about washrooms and video surveillance, and even dates. The historic and conservative character of this conservative town culture is described along with the debates, of the time, about the Charter of Rights of Canada and sexual orientation. Given how fast the political landscape has changed, *Urinals* is a period piece with a mild stench.

The other half of *Urinals and Other Stories* consists of seven scripts and scenes for short videos leading up to Greyson's 1993 feature film *Zero Patience*. There is a great deal about *place* -- subverted and specifically "queered" -- which is oddly part of a longer running Canadian obsession with landscape and the contested nature of territory. Greyson's contribution is to identify more sites that are contentious and his very personal details of sexual politics and conflict. But historical forces in the larger context are always hovering on the edges of his narratives. For example the 1985 "Take Two Rivers" (pp. 138 - 157) earnestly touches on some "North-South" dialogues though even here Greyson almost obsessively situates his experience as a gay man living through an epidemic.

Most of the (postmodern) "queers" who will pick up this book have not had much public sex at all. We have not needed to. There are now safer and easier places for contact. Since the Stonewall Riots, "cottage sex" has moved from one of only a few options for contact to increasingly functioning as a fetish for those who like washrooms, and respective risks and pleasures, or for people who are married in heterosexual relationships and often closeted. The specific scenes that the stories consider are changing very quickly. Oddly, the descriptions of the public sex, indeed their veneration, are based more on details of the past than the present or the future. But it is this biting sarcastic-cum-nostalgic-realism that gives *Urinal and Other Stories* its impact.

Is *Urinals and Other Stories* a serious contribution to the postmodern narratives of "deterritorialization" and "delocalization" or just a smutty little book about (male) public sex? Greyson's film, *Zero Patience*, a musical about AIDS, suggests ironically the former. More importantly, the book wades into deeper currents and invests "pomo" pop culture to invigorate philosophy. The final piece, the 1988 "Parma Violets" (pp. 272 - 291) gets off around a spoof of nineteenth century dandyism by Joris Karl Huysmans' *Against Nature*: camp on camp. Somehow the connections make sense.

This is a book where the reader can almost smell the site and revel in the sleaze and the ghosts of the numerous anti-heroes. For Greyson, these sites become superb devices for creating a narrative in this *fin-de-siècle* that does not shy away from terror and loss and which oddly enough produces hope and inspires action. These "stories" are maps with a bit of idiosyncratic detail and with gaps for readers to fill for themselves. What unifies these fragments is the power in his in-your-face humour in this time of overwhelming loss.

Gordon Brent Ingram is an Assistant Professor of environmental planning at The University of British Columbia and is currently completing an anthology called Queers in Space: Landscapes of lesbian and gay male difference.