

Shitting Words

Dirty Protests, Dirty Wars, Dirty Subjects

by Michael Murphy

It is reasonable to represent one kind of imprisonment by another, as it is to represent anything that really exists by that which exists not.

Daniel Defoe

Mine to see to; mine to mind. Thus it was that the politics of waste branded the subject to his body, and prefigured, not so insignificantly perhaps, the Cartesian ideology of the I.

Dominique Laporte

There continues to appear, published, work that falls under the heading ‘prison writings’. As Martin Luther King’s *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, Eldridge Cleaver’s *Soul On Ice*, Jean Genet’s *Our Lady of the Flowers*, or the majority of the writings by the Marquis de Sade show, prisons excrete literature. Political activist Saul Alinsky explains why prisoners seem to ‘need’ to write while incarcerated when he states that, “[In] jail, there is no physical escape [so] you are driven to erase your surroundings imaginatively: you escape into thinking and writing.” (*Rules for Radicals*; pp.142) Alinsky claims that the enclosed *space* of the cell makes prisoners desire freedom; that inescapable prisons, by definition, make prisoners want to escape. If physical escape is impossible, then mental escape must suffice. The prisoner, to survive his solitude, must write. He performs a communicative gesture that inscribes an imaginative escape. This moment—a moment of communicative escape—is experienced as freedom.

If the act of writing performs a subjective release of thoughts, then what does imaginative freedom look like, in what form does it emerge? For Cleaver, Genet, King, the Marquis De Sade, it takes the novel form; for others, a ‘lower’ less articulate form appears: graffiti.

In 1980, inside the prisons of Northern Ireland, graffiti appeared as excrement smeared upon the walls of cells. In Argentina, during the same year, the Military Junta painted over cell graffiti left by previous inmates. Argentina’s “Dirty War” against subversion erased cell graffiti as pervasively as it disappeared those 30,000 Argentine inmates from existence. Both countries are anomalous prison experiences. Yet both examples are instances where prison graffiti appears and then disappears (as excrement is cleaned, or scratched marks are painted over) with an urgency and ferocity that seems to

force us to ask Alinsky: why, in even the most limit cases of imprisonment, must prisoners write?

The focus of this paper will be to examine graffiti as one very interior, private, and transcendent example of how an act of communication can perform psychological escape. Northern Irish and Argentine prisoners imagine and desire escape because they exist within complete abjection. By abjection I mean that not only were bodies subjected to imprisonment, but psyches too were trapped within a cell of isolation—a psychological sh[c]ell: the tortured prisoner. Thus, in order to grasp the much greater understanding of how graffiti and writing enact freedom to the imprisoned psyche, we must step outside of the cell into a much more quotidian type of cell: the bathroom stall.

The bathroom stall stands out as the most ordinary of isolating cells. The stall is ordinary because we visit it one, two, maybe three times a day. The question however is, if subjects write to escape ‘isolating spaces’, then how can cells like the stall still remain so seemingly comfortable and ‘ordinary’? If we can articulate why individuals always write, speak, perform to themselves while alone, in an effort to ‘free’ or ‘escape’ isolating spaces, then the ordinary space of the bathroom stall appears extra-ordinary—because it remains a prison we don’t ‘want’ to escape. Or rather, maybe one should ask: what really is so ordinary about the perverse, retrograde, and incredibly identical graffiti marks in almost every bathroom we encounter? The novels under the heading ‘prison writings’ thus have their, un-publishable, quotidian counterpart: bathroom graffiti. To put it more clearly, the bathroom stall is related to the prison cell because that stall *is* the prison cell of civilization.

To prove this claim, and to establish the psychological significance of realizing our very common and ordinary excretive imprisonment, this paper needs to travel

through a series of linguistic arguments around authorial intention and the agency of the written artifact. Bathroom and prison graffiti, ultimately, complicates Jacques Derrida's claim that we don't use language, language uses us. Graffiti shows that writing must be a narcissistic or self-referential engagement with one's own subjectivity. Writing proves that selfhood, and thus subjectivity must exist, because marking communicates a sense of self *to* the self. In order to argue this point against post-structuralism and even its critics, we must refuse to believe, as anthropologist Mary Douglas and coincidentally the military Junta of Argentina believed, that identity is erasable.

The most contrasting fissure between Northern Ireland and Argentina is that to the Irish, identity was not erasable but as one prisoner put it, rather born in the prison. In Argentina conversely, the 30,000 disappeared have effectively been erased from existence; but, I question: have their identities? The Irish remain identifiable because within the space of the prison, they forged a political and national identity through writing shit as language. Smeared excreta on prison walls, almost immediately, summons our contrasted prison, the bathroom stall—also stinking of waste and covered in graffiti. The relationship between shit and language, and thus the prison and the bathroom cell, however, is more than simply a coincidental relationship. Writing and excreta begin to appear as both tools and weapons; objects of control, and abjects of fear; as conceived products and infectious diseases. Shit and language emerge together as the mechanisms through which we define our world, and through which we define ourselves. Language is shit.

Language As Shit

“Out of shit, a treasure arose: the treasure of language”
Dominique Laporte, *The History of Shit*. Pp.15

Shit is really gross. Colloquially, shit is putrid, diseased, contaminating, filthy and dirty. Shit is...well, it's shit! It smells like shit, it looks like shit, it is the symbol of everything disgusting in our world, it is the worst of the worst. Shit is the grave, shit is the fear of death. The existences of 'shit' allows us to imagine an infectious contamination, an other which we then can actively work to erase, to clean, to evacuate from our subjects, from our bodies.

Civilization attempts to ease such active cleaning by partitioning bathroom stalls into isolated depositories. We ignore our visceral reality and coincidentally 'properly', 'civilly', 'cleanly', 'sanitarily' and orderly dispose of our/this filthiness. Our civilization is defined by the existence of such 'closets' of cleanliness; they separate 'our' filthiness from filth itself – they allow us to *feel* clean. Without these proper facilities for adequate deposition of waste however, not only does shitting become gross, but you (your body, your being) become gross. Likewise when these facilities are removed and prisoners are forced to live in/with their own shit like Republican Prisoners in Northern Ireland's Armagh and Long-Kesh prisons were during the Dirty Protest from 1978-81, feces gradually changed from an infecting disease to a weapon of empowerment. This simple re-signification would forever redefine the Irish's—and thus our—terms of civilization.

I. Northern Ireland's "Dirty Protest"

It was the increased harassment and heightened violence accompanying the use of toilets that sparked the Dirty Protest in 1978. In a coordinated action, prisoners refused to leave their cells except to go to mass and visits. At first they emptied their chamber pots through windows and peepholes of the doors. When the guards boarded them up prisoners began to dispose of feces by leaving them in a corner of their cells. This, however, allowed the guards to mess the mattresses and blankets of prisoners with the feces during cell searches. Finally, prisoners began to smear their excreta on the walls of their cells.

(Aretxaga, 1995. pp127)

It did not take long for northern Irish prisoners to reject even the 'seemingly necessary performances' of cleaning in order to protest their incarceration and soon following, complete hygiene. At first, the Irish smeared excreta on the walls as an offensive maneuver to stop prison 'screws' from smearing mattresses, floors, and prisoners with *that* pile of shit in the corner. Some Irish would argue that we could view such 'organizing' maneuvers as a cleansing methodology—instead of sleeping *in* excrement, they could sleep away from it. As Mary Douglas claims, purity involves the organization, cleaning, and placement of things into acceptable social domains (pp.12). Prison warders and prisons organized the bodily functions of the prisoners as they determined when, where, and how much each prisoner cleaned. Showers and bathrooms added increased fear of cleaning because warders cavity searched, interrogated, beat, and controlled prisoners as they attempted to follow understood rules of hygiene—as they attempted to shower, shave, and shit. Feldman names such bodily colonization, colonization (pp.174). Hygiene thus became imbedded in the language of oppression—of civilization. When prisoners refused such 'privileges,' feces not only acted as a weapon against established prison abuse, but also as a weapon against the established norms of civilization itself.

Allen Feldman uses colon-ization to explain how cavity searches made ordinary activities like excretion near impossible. Such biological actions had to be relearned on prison terms—were motivation enough to begin the Dirty Protest:

The bodily interior of the inmate was detached from his control... This established a correspondence between institutional performance and biological performance. Two systems of penological training converged—coercive economic exchange and optical exposure of the body. This colon-ization of the prisoner’s body was intended to force divestiture, to divorce the prisoner from what little sense of somatic mastery he had managed to retain in prison. The beatings of the prisoner that transformed his use of the toilets and showers into a trial by ordeal ... were the mechanisms that propelled him into contradiction. Intimate biological functions over which the Blanketman had little control became zones of betrayal that intensified his exposure to the state. His body was now a periphery, a margin of the state. (1991, Feldman pp.174—italics mine).

Purity then, is the civilized state. As Mary Douglas would agree, “Purity is the enemy of change, of ambiguity and compromise” (pp.191). Feces weakened the concrete margins of the prison, because every act of excretion was a political statement. Prisoners were now protesters, bodies were now weapons, cells were now blackboards. The Irish were fighting against what the British ‘term’ as pure, because otherwise, the Irish would always ‘be’ British excrement.

British colonialism sustains a long history of associating the Irish with savagery and filth. British rhetoric, combined with the prison structure of isolation and confinement was an effort to pulverize (read reform) Irish identity and humanity. As Douglas states, “A long process of pulverizing, dissolving and rotting awaits any physical things that have been recognized as dirt. In the end, identity is gone”(pp.189). If the Irish were to activate their ethnic Irish identity (like almost all other post-colonial, nationalist, power movements)¹ for effective and successful protest, they must *become*

¹ This appropriation of ‘pulverizing terms’ is repeated over and over again to the point of cliché. “Black is beautiful”, the use of Faggot as empowering, the re-emergence of ‘Nigger’ as a term of brotherhood today.

that shit. And that is just what they did; In Northern Ireland in 1978, shit moved from the absent, removed, cleaned, flushed abject to the very active, present, filthy and created object. As Douglas asserts, “So long as *identity is absent*, rubbish is not dangerous... Where there is no differentiation there is no defilement”(pp.189. italics mine).

Douglas as stated however, makes an argument not about identity appropriation but rather that identity can turn to absence, and that identity can be pulverized until gone. The pulverization of identity imagines how the effects of prisons, warders, torture, abuse, solitary confinement, and shit can destroy subjectivity and agency in prisoners. Yet, I still wonder, what exactly it is like to have ‘identity gone’?

Elaine Scarry in her book, *The Body in Pain*, calls the eradication of identity the ‘unmaking’ of identity. She claims that pain and torture unmake subjects through the inability to communicate pain. Scarry states that in pain, “all the psychological and mental content that constitutes both one’s self and one’s world, and...is made possible by language, ceases to exist” (pp.30); and also that “Torture is an undoing of civilization, it acts out the uncreating of the created contents of consciousness” (pp.38). In both cases, pulverization and destruction unmake identity; the goal of ‘state reform’ then is about the destruction of the individual psyche.

Although these examples might suggest that identity is in fact pulverized, it would perverse to say, however, that complete erasure, complete eradication of subjectivity occurs. Most evidently, in Northern Ireland and in Argentina we have examples of selfhood maybe digested, but not eradicated. Prison writing still appears, at the very least, carried as contraband in rectums, and upon the walls of cells. Like a state digestive system grinding individuals to reform, the left over shit, appears as subjectivity,

declarations of existence and writing in the cells.² In Northern Ireland, language, and thus shit communicated through protest that identity is not erasable. The Irish signified a new language which demanded a recognition of Irish terms of protest, metaphorically signaled and parodied Irishness as filthiness, and communicated solidarity with other protesting prisoners through the mere sight of its smear—of its mark. The Irish tell us that marking and communicating are acts that not only identify addressees but also identify most specifically, authors. What occurs to identity then seems more accurately titled a shift, instead of a pulverization. Julia Kristeva hints at this by saying, when abjected, “‘I’ is expelled”. This refers to a separation and shifting of conceptions of selfhood, instead of a total and complete eradication of selfhood. We shift, we do not disappear under complete abjection. I shi[f]t, therefore I am.

Northern Ireland was one very extreme situation where terms of selfhood were being put into question. Argentina, as I will show is another. The bathroom stall is the most ordinary. To understand what triggers this ‘excretion of subjectivity upon the wall’ as I might call it, we must explain why we as humans attempt to leave traces of our selfhood everywhere we are isolated. To learn that however, we need first to understand how the Northern Irish were able to overcome biologically learned relativities like hygiene, cleaning, and the fear of shit, in order to re-write their identities upon the walls of prison. In other words, we need to understand what Julia Kristeva terms the abject.

² let us not forget Ivan Reitman’s brilliant film “Twins” starring twin brothers Arnold Schwarzenegger, and Danny Devito to see the healing power of shit. Arnold was made to be the perfect man, while the left over crap, the shit that the process did not need, created Danny Devito. This film does help this paper to imagine the productive power and the pure agency that waste (or Danny Devito) can amount to. In the film, it takes both the pure man’s subjectivity, and his waste’s wit to beat the bad guys, get the girls, and free themselves from death. Waste sure can do a lot, and speaks upon the cell wall to the subject himself.

Surpassing Abjection: I shi[f]t therefore I am

If dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be, the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything. It is no longer I who expel, "I" is expelled.
(Kristeva 3-4)

Shit might be the most talked about object in all of our language. Shit's inherent grotesqueness allows excrement to designate all that is filthy, all that is disgusting, all that is shameful, and thus all that is frightening. Julia Kristeva doesn't think that shit is an object, however. She says that it is so pervasive and effective at making our psyches fear themselves, that she rather puts it in the category of an abject—that which is almost totally undefinable. She states, "The abject has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to *I*...what is abject...draws me toward the place where meaning collapses." (pp.1,2)

The abject, however, is not simply where meaning collapses. That is merely one effect. Abjection is Kristeva's answer for that moment when the psyche cannot comfortably contain the body anymore, when what your psyche *thinks* is retched, actually triggers your body to *feel* like retching. She states, "Loathing an item of food, a piece of filth, waste, or dung. The spasms and vomiting that protect me. The repugnance, the retching that thrusts me to the side and turns me away from defilement, sewage, and much. The shame of compromise" (pp. 2). We all are familiar with this sense of filth. The dirty protesters certainly were, especially as they triggered a retching reaction from even their sympathizers, Catholic church and Amnesty³

³ Aretxaga presents a brilliant testimony of a moment where the Irish women's abjection was so 'out of the civilized world' that a priest had proper tea with prisoners without even mentioning or pretending to notice the soiled bloody pads, piles of shit, or smeared blood on the walls. Brenda Murphy's testimony states, "Cardinal O'Daly and O'Fiaich visited the jail once and came into the cells with two women there and shit on the walls, piss on the floor and sanitary towels on the corner. They must have been gagging, and they were there sitting with a cup of tea that prison officers had provided them. They were there with a cup and

The border which Kristeva points to is not a wall which can be easily peered over. The amount of vomit ejaculated from one's body, the cold shivers from stench, the tears forced from knit eyelids are neither translatable—nor calculable reactions. Rather, the abject persists as an infinite border, a seamless series of enclosed walls, a place of no exit, a location where an interior self has reached all limits of self-hood—imprisoned alone. The abject is the prison cell of the psyche. Abjection demands a realization that the body and the self are two isolated things. In Jean-Paul Sartre's short story "The Wall", protagonist Pablo Ibbieta says the body is an "enormous vermin" he cannot be untied from (1964, pp.12). John Donne refers to his body as a 'sack of bones, broken within' (1992, pp.331: "*His Picture*"). The tortured body, like the torture chamber, like the prison cell, becomes not only a space for abjection, but the space of abjection. For Elaine Scarry, the psyche (imprisoned in the bodily sh[c]ell) and the Prison cell collapse upon each other to explain how torture and abjection 'unmake' subjectivity. She states:

The room, the simplest form of shelter, expresses the most benign potential of human life. It is, on the one hand, an enlargement of the body: it keeps warm and safe the individual it houses in the same way the body encloses and protects the individual within; like the body, its walls put boundaries around the self preventing undifferentiated contact with the world, yet in its windows and doors, crude versions of the senses, it enables the self to move out into the world and allows that world to enter. But while the room is a magnification of the body, it is simultaneously a miniaturization of the world, of civilization. Although its walls, for example, mimic the body's attempt to secure for the individual a stable internal space...the walls are also, throughout all this, independent objects, objects which stand apart from and free of the body, objects which realize the human being's impulse to *project himself out into a space beyond the boundaries of the body in acts of making, either physical or verbal, that once multiplied, collected, and shared are called civilization.* (pp.39—italics mine)

saucer and the stench...and we were sitting there pretending we were just having a nice cup of tea with the local bishops!...Your mother is trying to show how much she loves you by pretending you don't smell at all. And you would have preferred that she didn't do that, but they all pretended that you didn't smell." (1997. pp.141)

Like walls confine bodies, Kristeva sees excrement as a confining, polluting agent (Aretxaga, 1997. pp.142). Excrement, Aretxaga states, pollutes from the exterior—like the ephemera proving the body’s container—and menstrual blood pollutes the interior. Thus excrement defines our civilization by designating what is filthy and gross. Menstrual blood, as Aretxaga notes, “on the contrary, stands for the danger issuing from within identity (social or sexual); it threatens...the identity of each sex in the face of sexual difference”(1997. pp.142). What is abject then defines us, and designates our identities into cells threatened by the realization of our own corpor-reality. When Kristeva says, “I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which ‘I’ claim to establish *myself*.”(pp.3, author’s italics) she is scrambling for emancipation, gagging for protection, *desiring* to free herself from her self—from her cell[f].

In this moment of abjection, the expelled ‘self’, like in Northern Ireland is quite viscerally shot, ejaculated, and smeared upon the cell wall itself. Almost identical to Kristeva, Scarry states that the subject, when abjected, tortured, imprisoned, and oppressed must, “project himself out into a space beyond the boundaries of the body in acts of making, either physical or verbal, that once multiplied, collected, and shared are called civilization.”(pp.39) Thus, in the Dirty Protest, the self is not eradicated but rather shifted (or rather excreted) outside of the body, unto the most immediate surface—the cell wall. This excretion takes the form of written language intended not only to signify colonial abjection, but to re-‘make civilization’ as an Irish civilization.

To write is to shit:

Guys would be making designs on the wall with the porridge and the excrement.

(Feldman. pp.170)

As the Irish prisoners covered their walls with their own excrement, power of language as a liberating force, a mechanism of protest, and a unifying symbol of solidarity changed shit into language, or language into shit. By evacuating waste, the protesters evacuated thoughts, symbolization and resistance. The biological imprisonment of excretion—when re-appropriated—became biological warfare, as each excretion was one more sentence, each smearing was one more thought. Smearing shit, in all its filthiness was an act of ‘cleaning’ the cell. As Roland Barthes asserts, “when written, shit does not smell” (1971, pp.140). Fully understanding shit, as the Irish learned, meant reversing biologically controlled bodies into agentive ones. In the shit, Gaelic began to appear when the walls functioned as blackboards and classrooms teaching new prisoners Irish language, history, and culture (Feldman, pp.217). As one prisoner noted, “Ireland will be born in prison”. The prisoner, with the contradictions of filth, shit, and civilization smeared in front of her, began to leave the space of the cell. Living in complete abjection became the mortar of solidarity.

In Northern Ireland solidarity was formed through the resignification of excrement and filth as shit eventually lost what Mary Douglas calls the ‘dangerousness of dirt.’ Although the prisoners found comfort in solidarity, their hope for release and freedom was not quenched, they still remained incarcerated except incarcerated in shit. Even prisoners were astonished that they rarely got sick and remained significantly

healthy during the years of the Dirty Protest.⁴ Medical experts told them they would die of scabies, infections, blood poisoning, scurvy. The Irish imagined their own filth would kill them in hopes to get the world's attention. (Feldman, pp.182). Soon however, both the prisoner's and the medical community's fears of shit were disproved. Sweat was cleaning out pores, and determination kept prisoners aware of their body's slight alterations. The Irish did not die and for three years realized their Dirty Protest was not getting the international recognition it deserved. The Irish proved, maybe most alarmingly to themselves, that shit is not as dangerous as Douglas or civilization might claim.

To establish what it meant to be Irish, prisoners then needed to fight with England's very own rhetoric. They needed to use what the civilized termed pure in order to make the world see England's filthy but somehow living excretion. By merely shifting international focus from excretion to ingestion, from protesting to desisting, from apprehending identity to disintegrating selfhood, active to passive, violence to non-violence, writing to erasing—the Irish Prisoners went from the Dirty Protest of agentive excreta, to instead, a very clean, recognizable, well sympathized and 'pure' Irish Hunger Strike. A hunger strike which freed them because the world finally read its 'pure' intentions.

Mary Douglas has stated that "purity is the enemy of change" and that identity is 'erased' through dirt and filth. The Irish Hunger Strikes scutinize Douglas' anthropological conceptions of purity because for the Irish, purity was the *mechanism* of change, and filth *built* identity. The Irish Hunger strike struck an international nerve

⁴ Case histories admit the fear that prisoners, England, and warders felt towards living with so much human excrement. A whole ward for hospitals and immunizations was cleared in anticipation of the increased

because hunger strikes traditionally are something readable, clean, understood, symbolized by gods, martyrs, heroes, cultural figures, non-violence, purity, emptiness, and a very very clear message about deterioration. Shifting from the embarrassingly disgusting language of shit, back to the noble and recognized discourse of Christian martyrdom was exactly what hit the International nerve. It was using the goals of purity in fact with the ‘purified’ language of hunger striking which cleaned the Irish for international consumption and sympathy. The sight or mark of a deteriorating body in the news is lightly more effective than written marks which eventually deteriorate. Martyrdom and the slow dying process of the hunger strike gathered sympathy and support because the Irish had learned to *mark* their deterioration, instead of merely allow their *marks* to deteriorate.

Instead of a new *Irish* language, the well known language of martyrdom effected the public because the deteriorated Irish body became a public artifact—a public text. Both England and the world finally understood the extent of their influence in Northern Ireland when they viewed the stripped, emaciated, subjects choosing not to eat. By refusing to eat, the mark they left was not smeared excreta but the mark of erasure itself. Instead of writing in shit, the pen was now the body of the prisoner. The mark left was a deteriorating, erasing mark: a body which was soon to die, to disappear. The Irish communicated and marked themselves, by erasing themselves.

To be erased in Argentina, unlike in Northern Ireland, was not an agentive move. Hunger striking takes agency and *Los Desaparecidos* were disappeared by the state. The disappeared body, or the erased/deteriorated body in both examples, however, fuses a

deaths of the Irish. None of those beds were utilized, and to the Irish and England’s surprise, no one died from loss of hygiene.

moral language with a deteriorating mark. Both deteriorating bodies are subjects and artifacts. Artifacts as Jacques Derrida would claim act independently from the subjectivity of the author. He states that, “To write is to produce a mark that will constitute a kind of machine that is in turn productive, what my future disappearance in principle will not prevent from yielding...reading and rewriting.”(pp.316). In Northern Ireland, Derrida’s post-structuralism are focuses on the agential ability of the written artifact to act independently. ‘Written shit’ acts as a ‘type of machine’ that affected and effected the Irish conceptions of selfhood. Thus, the written artifact in Ireland operated itself at times as Derrida would note like an independent agent, saying something completely ‘other’ than the Irish intended—namely, that the Irish were still barbaric. The Irish would disagree with Derrida however because such claims do not allow for political interpretations in narratives like West Belfast’s, where we can read the Irish body as both artifact and as disappeared subject. By collapsing the Irish body and the written graffiti into artifacts which deteriorated themselves and at the same time, were deteriorated by the state—we may be able to gather a more complicated picture of what it may mean to be disappeared—like the 30,000 subjects (not victims) have been in Argentina.

In Argentina, the eradication of political bodies was so efficient that memorialization is the only manner in which *Los Desaparecidos* can re-appear. Unlike Northern Ireland, however, where all 42 hunger strikers name’s are accounted for, in Argentina, the names of the disappeared are unknown, undocumented, not *artifactual*, but rather grouped under a large umbrella of The Disappeared. Argentines know that these state victims will remain unknown forever, therefore, memorials are built to rewrite *them*

and to mark *them* again.⁵ The problem with marking *them* is that *they*, or The Disappeared, are nameless, eradicated identities, with no subjectivity. We imagine *them* in memory as a nameless mass of victimized artifacts.

To argue, like memorialization may, for mere victimization, does not acknowledge the choices, actions, attempts at freedom or the subjectivities of the ‘victims’. It believes that identities are erasable. Instead of imagining the vague figure of 30,000 disappeared, then, we may merely imagine one ‘disappeared’ subject writing in her cell, Like Marcho Bechis has in his film *Garage Olimpo* acting, thinking, and attempting to free herself. By writing in her cell, like Saul Alinsky did, the Argentine prisoner attempts to operate as escape through communication. She attempts to stay alive, to prove she was human and to communicate herself to her world.

We must imagine this scene because there exists little to no artifact of Argentine cell graffiti. La Junta, before throwing her into the Atlantic Ocean⁶, would erase or paint over the marks left in her room. To Derrida, with no artifact, there is no subject. Thus, there is no identity because there is no identifiable artifact. Politically, this conclusion is inadequate because most certainly, even if no artifact exists today, this individual performed subjectivity, acted language, and projected her selfhood upon the walls of her room, upon the walls of her container in a verbal and linguistic act Elaine Scarry would call was “re-making her world”. An act Allen Feldman implies, might begin to free her from her cell[f]. (pp.216) Such is the dilemma of explaining Argentina. However, as

⁵ In West Belfast, this takes the form of large murals and political graffiti which aim to memorialize and honor the hunger strikers. (Nordstrom, 1992)

⁶ See Horacio Verbitsky’s *The Flight: Confession from an ex-Dirty Warrior*. This book was some of the first public proof that large flights took, drugged, and dumped thousands of disappeared bodies into the Atlantic Ocean.

Argentina proves, erasure marks not because we may see erasure, but because we may imagine it, in memorialization.

II. Writing activates being: Argentina's *Desaparecidos* appear

This is the irony of history: it is written not to be forgotten, and yet, once it is written it can be forgotten.
(Aretxaga, 1997. pp.6)

The Dirty War in Argentina from 1976-1983 set the precedent for regimes of torture, abuse, and imprisonment. The military Junta disappeared 30,000 Argentines from streets, records, and existence during a *tour de force* of institutional massacre. The Dirty War against subversion, or *El Proceso*, is very different than the struggle in Ireland. Primarily, the war against subversion was a military dictatorship which re-structured governmental systems, erased political and social resistance from its own population, and implemented a rule of terror to either force out or kill any leftist reactionaries to the regime. In Ireland, although the North continues to fight a territorial war, the enemy lies in the reigning rule of the greater colonial England and the loyalist supporters of that colonial power. As Aretxaga argues (1993), Ireland is an ethnic conflict; Argentina is a political one. Jacobo Timmerman explains that, “in Argentina, the attitude of military...or police toward left-wing terrorists was the way you might feel toward an enemy...the psychological relationship was simple—confrontation with one’s enemy or adversary, and the desire to destroy, to eliminate, that individual.” (pp.66)

Regardless of the roots of the conflict, the prison played a crucial role in implementing the extent of the control that the reigning powers held over their subjects. In both Northern Ireland and Argentina, torture, solitary confinement, mental abuse, beatings, and filth were associated with prisoner incarceration. In both examples,

prisoners were characterized as dirt. Argentine prisoners, unlike the Irish were usually tortured to extremes of corporeal limits and then murdered. The Dirty War against Subversion is a gaping wound in global movements surpassing many other regimes of terror in its complete and total erasure of the resistant body.

Argentines define these erased victims as the disappeared. As we might ask Argentina and thus Mary Douglas: how does a subject exist and then cease to exist—not die, but disappear? There remains an apparent inability for Argentines to define the absent-ness of disappearance. Memorialization seems the only way Argentina appears these imagined bodies. Memorialization, however, remains culturally loaded and politically imprecise. Memorialization is an argument for victimization, thus for the disappeared to re-appear, these Argentines must cease to be a group of nondescript victims. As the disappeared ‘imagined’ a future freedom in their cells, we too may imagine prisoners performing actions, agency, choice—at the very least—by writing on cell walls. In this manner, through writing, the most eradicated selfhood can be imagined to appear as an active, subjective, and powerful agent—and author of her self.

Prisoners’ psychology of existence: Absence finds Presence in writing

The normal attitude of torturers and guards towards us was to consider us less than slaves. We were objects. And useless, troublesome objects at that. They would say: ‘You’re dirt.’ ‘Since we “disappeared” you, you’re nothing. Anyway, nobody remembers you.’ ‘You don’t exist,’ (*Nunca Más*, pp.25)

Creating a definition for ‘disappearance’ must include an a-historical element. When a torturer says, “We disappeared you, therefore you don’t exist,” not only has he erased a subjects body, but also a subjects history—he no longer exists or existed. Elaine Scarry’s ‘unmaking’ of the world also includes the erasure of history from the self. As Scarry notes, “Intense pain is also language-destroying: as the content of one’s world

disintegrates, so the content of one's language disintegrates; as the self disintegrates, so that which would express and project the self is robbed of its source and its subject." (pp.35). This source and subject in Northern Ireland was found in the filth of excrement. In Argentina, cell graffiti is subjectivity; memorials merely locate the end of the victim through memory.

Argentines obsess over minute acts of memorialization in order to re-construct narratives of the absent citizens. Most Argentines refuse to remember, but the few Argentines who refuse to forget go about utilizing memory for political and social therapy. Los Madres de la Plaza de Mayo are the most famous storekeepers of memory in Argentina. To Las Madres, the re-construction of lost children through memory is a psychological state they have chosen to exist within—they cannot forget because 'to forget is to let the disappeared die'. One Mother, Matilde Mellibovsky states in her novel *Circle of Love over Death*, that, "without Memory, continuity in life does not exist." (pp.xv). This Argentine reality remains paradoxical, however, because it demands that political activism focus on the recognition of past atrocities, instead of the state of current political unrest. Another problem with activism driven through memory is that individual psyches and individual peoples cease to exist. *The disappeared* begin to become one sore, one open wound, one memory of atrocity instead of a conglomerate of 30,000 anarchists, pacifists, teachers, terrorists, students, feminists, generals, policemen, husbands, innocent bystanders, ad infinitum.

The problem with memorialization is that it never stops romanticizing the injustice and the innocence of the victims. Memorialization disallows victims to control their history because it refuses to seek any agency through the discourse of victims. *Los Desaparecidos* had lives after incarceration, no matter how unrecorded. As far as

memorials, Las Madres, and human rights activists are concerned however, life ended with *Los Desaparecidos*' immediate disappearance. They changed from active Argentines to one of many victims of the state. Mellibovsky shows this view in a reductionist romanticisation of the disappeared's similitude, "These children...were they all alike? Yes: in their interests, their generosity, solidarity, altruism"(pp.1). Of course, many disappeared shared traits, but many others were not generous, altruistic, motivated, critical; in fact, many citizens were taken by accident, not to mention the many children kidnapped and sold from 'left-leaning' mothers.

The point is that memory and memorialization are reductionist and incomplete accounts of victims. Jacobo Timmerman, an ex-Desaparecido, argues even more drastically in his book about Argentine prisons *Prisoner Without a Name, Cell without a Number*, that, "Memory is the chief enemy of the solitary tortured man" (pp.36). Memory to the prisoner, he claims, is torture itself because memory recalls a subjectivity that cannot exist within the confines of such authoritative cell walls. Timmerman's refusal to remember, utilized an agency and active participation in his victimization. If there is no agency attributed to the tortured victim, then there is no subjectivity. He merely becomes one of the many Disappeared, an absent subject. Timmerman proves that subjectivity still operated, however stripped and unmade it appeared.

Douglas' absence and Scarry's unmaking seem to imply that torture could be so complete that all agency, and all sense of self-signification could effectively be erased. Although this may appear somewhat true, it is not completely true. Jacobo Timmerman writes about another method of realizing his own subjectivity in prison—that of choosing or refusing the temptation for suicide. He states, "There's a pride in the idea of potential suicide. It's the primary temptation in response to the continual humiliation from one's

torturers.” (pp.91). This is one example of how prisoners could ‘act’ human and realize that they still had some humanity; writing graffiti on walls of their cells was another. Like choosing suicide, prisoners in Argentina realized they were part of a larger human society by writing language upon cell walls. Not only did such action prove a remnant of that supposed ‘eradicated I’, it also communicated narcissistically back to the self, to prove that in some manner, language—at the very least, even if no one will ever read it—communicates an author’s own subjectivity back to herself as author, creator, and master of her world.

Writing beyond the cell wall:

The cell is quite high. When I jump, I’m unable to touch the ceiling. The white walls have been recently painted. Undoubtedly they once had names on them, messages, words of encouragement, dates. They are now bereft of any vestige or testimony.”

Jacobo Timmerman (pp.3)

In *Nunca Más: The Report of the Argentine National Commission on the Disappeared*, a picture of a man inspecting a former detention center ignites a lighter, exposing the scratched graffitied surfaces of a small cell wall. The writing is indecipherable, and the walls seem to collapse upon the inspector, the writing is hardly visible. And yet, someone scratched those lines, maybe with their finger nails, maybe with a sliver of metal; someone “...was [t]here”. Who was that prisoner, and who was s/he writing to? Memorialization refuses to acknowledge that Argentines ‘enacted’ agency, and yet this image is a marking, an inscription, a proof that one individual Desaparecido did in fact *exist*. Here is proof of one specific psyche, which was not merely victim, but author of his own thoughts, writer of language.

Graffiti is twofold then; it stands in as a marker of placement, a proof of existence at one time, at one moment, where at that juncture a performance of writing happens which initiates a dialogue. The second function of graffiti is that the performance of writing—the release of thoughts onto a page, onto a wall, onto a planar surface—is a communicative process that performs a human function. It signals individual identity; and proves to the self, that authorship, subjectivity, control and agency—that humanity—still exists no matter how dire or oppressive the situation is. Writing allows us to imagine prisoners as subjects—writing activates freedom.

Freedom in both Northern Ireland and Argentina was a psychological state. In Northern Ireland smearing shit performed a communicative escape where the psyche embodied freedom through the performance of writing. As Feldman explains:

The Adamic act of ‘first’ naming in Gaelic initiated a new historicity, a new beginning. The prison was no longer interminable, but a portal for historical exiting—an act enabled by the accumulated symbolic systems that ranged from new languages to ascetic disciplines of the body. With the acquisition of Gaelic, the Blanketmen truly began to leave the prison. (pp.216)

In Argentina, the few scratched marks are the only artifacts we have of that activation of freedom through graffiti. Even though those marks revealed through a photograph in *Nunca Más* are indecipherable artifacts, the intention to communicate is evident—this is one Disappeared trying to appear.

If the majority of Argentines can imagine a group of 30,000 disappeared individuals as a national wound, so can we, use imagination to view imprisoned, undocumented authors writing upon cell walls. It is not inaccurate to imagine that Argentines wrote upon cell walls and such writing, as Timmerman hints, was painted over or erased. We have no artifact and no proof, but somehow the very act of writing communicated something. What, or how exactly non-*artifactual* writing communicates is

a debate which the post structuralist theories of Derrida and his critics, Knapp and Michaels, will help explain.

Linguistic Reasons for Staying Alive:

To recount, Derrida's post-structuralist theories use language not as a tool that helps individual subjectivities communicate; but rather a culturally coded and socially loaded system which operates on us as communicating subjects. As stated, 'we don't use language, language uses us;' he continues:

Can it still be said that upon the death of the addressee, that is, of the two partners, the mark left by one of them is still a writing? Yes, to the extent to which, governed by a code, even if unknown and nonlinguistic, it is constituted, in its identity as a mark, by its iterability in the absence of whoever, and therefore ultimately in the *absence of every empirically determinable 'subject'*.

...

To write is to produce a mark that will constitute a kind of machine that is in turn productive, that my future *disappearance* in principle will not prevent from functioning...I must be able simply to say my disappearance, my nonpresence in general, for example the nonpresence of my meaning, of my *intention-to-signify*, of my wanting-to-communicate-this, from the emission or production of the mark. For the written to be the written, it must continue to 'act' and to be legible even if what is called the author of the writing no longer answers for what he has written. (1971 pp.315, 316-*italics mine*)

Along with his interest in a 'disappearing' author, Derrida believes that what a reader reads is as irrelevant as the 'author's intention-to signify'—it is a mark even in "the absence of every empirically determinable 'subject'". For Derrida, though, writing still must include an imagined future addressee. The 'post-structuralist' aspect of his theory states that the imagined addressee will always remain completely irrelevant compared with the written artifact's force and affect; and yet we to we must imagine *to* write. For Derrida, the artifact demands a future addressee who is both imagined and but necessary for the artifact of language to operate independently. He states, "All writing, therefore, in

order to be what it is, must be able to function in the radical absence of every empirically determined addressee.” (pp.316) Like a diary entry written to a future reader who does not own the key to open the locked and sealed pages, writing always imagines a reader related to that distant publisher aptly named Dear Diary. Derrida states:

A Written sign is proffered in the absence of the addressee. How is this absence to be qualified? One might say that at the moment when I write, the addressee may be absent from my field of present perception. But is not this absence only a presence that is distant, delayed, or, in one form or another, idealized in its representation? (pp.315)

For Derrida, a reader needn't exist for communication to occur. He creates a system of an artifact which communicates both to the reader and to the author. For Derrida, the artifact determines the subjectivity of the author. A writer's intention to signify shows how writing constructs subjectivities through its system of signs. Derrida's diagram resembles a triangle with artifact as the pinnacle and author and audience as the base angles. Critics of Derrida and post-structuralism however, strongly disagree with this model because they ask how could language communicate thoughts and choices if there existed no intention-to-signify. For post-structuralism, the author is irrelevant for writing to operate. For critics of such theory, the author's subjectivity is inherent in his intention to signify, otherwise it would not be writing.

In their essay *Against Theory*, Stephan Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels rework the post-structuralist triangle diagram and replace it with an elliptical model where the author's intention-to-signify uses the artifact to communicate to a reader (whether imagined or real). They state that, “marks without intention are not language” (pp.21). This is a response to post-structuralism's weight on the artifact because for example, such theory would defend even random marks left by a chimpanzee as language. Knapp and Michaels argue that such writing is not language because it has no intention and doesn't

mean anything. They state that, “marks produced by chance are not words at all but only resemble them” and further more that, “what a text means and what its author intends it to mean are identical.” (pp.20,19).

For Knapp and Michaels, the artifact means something because it was intended to mean something. The Knapp and Michaels model assumes that if language expresses an authorial ‘intention-to-signify,’ then writing demands that the subjectivity and agency of both author and reader must exist for it to operate. The question to pose to both post-structuralism and *Against Theory* then is: how does language operate if the artifact is never read? Or rather, to restate my problem with both arguments: how does language operate when the artifact which intended to signify authorial meaning, is erased, painted over, never read, and or never seen? Does this mean that language does not exist? The graffiti that Los Desaparecidos wrote in their cells, which as Timmerman says, “had been recently painted” over, certainly was intended to communicate. But, like the Disappeared themselves, such subjects can only appear in our imagination.

We may find a solution to this impasse, however, if we re-examine where both *Signature Event Context*, and *Against Theory* fail by not questioning the possibility of the death of the artifact. In effect, both theories incorrectly focus on how language affects or does not affect a *reader*, and how a *reader* correctly or incorrectly *reads* language. But when there is no reader, and coincidentally no artifact either, we must analyze how language operates solely to the author alone. Effectively, both these essays give us the groundwork to be able to ask the right questions in order to re-imagine the Disappeared re-appearing.

Knapp and Michaels’ model of writing inherently proves that an author and thus a subject at one point existed. Similarly, Derrida’s theory that an imagined and idealized

addressee is apparent in all writing [the “dear diary” model] mirrors exactly the structure of public graffiti and cell writings. But like a diary that no one will ever read, erased and painted-over graffiti still functions as language. Communication occurs because the author is still involved in a dialogue, just a narcissistic and imaginary one. To combine these two points, communicative escape exists because communication occurs to the self from the self. There exists a narcissistic relationship between the psyche and hand of the author every time she writes, mimics or performs an imaginary act of writing while alone. When a prisoner writes upon the wall, the addressee (the world) is imagined as a group of similar writers and readers. In a place where almost all subjectivity has been eradicated, like in Argentina and Northern Ireland, one of the only active strokes a prisoner can make is to write to herself as a member of a society which communicates. As Knapp and Michaels claim, because writing shows intention, and meaning is inherent in intention, then writing proves the subjectivity of an author. To prisoners who are stripped of subjectivity, writing proves they are alive and still human.

Writing activates freedom because freedom is subjectivity. Communication is solely narcissistic as much as it constructs the fundamental fibers of society. The fringe examples of Argentina and Northern Ireland show that acts of communication are freeing because they are responses to the psychological pressures of abjection. There exists through graffiti a communicative escape because these authors utilize language in order to re-locate their abjected, dislocated selves.⁷ Furthermore, the structure of writing is such that an author need only exist for it to operate. As Derrida, Knapp and Michaels fail to realize, writing, and even the *artifactless* performance of writing operates an author as

⁷ Kristeva states that, “Abjection is therefore a kind of *narcissistic crisis*: it is witness to the ephemeral aspect of the state called “narcissism” with reproachful jealousy, heaven knows why; what is more, abjection gives narcissism (the thing and the concept) its classification as “seeming.”

a re-emerging subject within a society of communicating s[cell]ves. We therefore communicate through *artifactual* text as instantly as we write it, because we communicate with that ‘idealized’ reader. Like a dear diary entry that will never be read, and a graffitied cell that may be painted over, the cathartic and therapeutic—not to mention ontological and identity forming presence—that language activates is the ultimate and fundamental structure of writing. Language works because we imagine it working all the time—and through us. Since this structure is one that operates solely within the author’s psyche, I would go so far as to propose that communication occurs without even leaving any mark or artifact at all. This is, at least the case in Marcho Bechis’ film *Garage Olimpo (Dirty Garage)*, when the main character Maria communicates with no one but herself.

After a violent abduction, protagonist Maria’s imprisonment as an Argentine *Desaparecido* places her into an isolated/isolating cell within the bowels of Buenos Aires. In this scene, Maria furiously writes sentence after sentence—taking time to dot her I’s and cross her T’s—upon the gray and desolate wall of her prison. After squinting, the viewer soon realizes that Maria hasn’t written with any object other than her coupled fingers. Maria leaves no traces behind the sweeping brush strokes her hand makes across the walls of her cell. What a film viewer witnesses is a subject who has left no markings where she wrote, and could never re-read what she was trying to communicate. Bechis’ careful attention to this lack of marks made demands a re-reading of how communication works. For Maria, *what* she writes is not important but rather *that* she writes is what is important.

Maria in essence performs the process of communication upon a wall which no one will read and no one will respond to. The mere act of performing the inscription of

those words is an excretion of thoughts—of self—as language that will not be read.

Bechis' uses this metaphor in his film to construct an analogy about disappearance. In essence, Bechis' wants the viewer to imagine what it would be like to disappear; it would be something like writing and leaving no mark at all—ever.

A few connections appear from this rendering. Bechis wants us first to imagine erasure, and then he conceptualizes for us that existence is about leaving marks; that life is a series of mark makings, a series of communications. He imagines life is about the traces that one leaves behind. To be disappeared not only stops traces from being left, but also slowly removes traces from ever existing.⁸ Bechis confirms that writing is not isolated to its artifact-ness or its legibility as a read item, but rather that writing and communication are first and foremost the self and the psyche in dialogue with each other. In this case, Maria excretes by mere performance, her self upon the walls of her prison cell in order to prove that she communicates with and like the un-imprisoned Argentines, above her in the disappearing streets of Buenos Aires.

Bechis' artistic insight triggers another factor in this discussion, that of the real value of communication. The use-value of such 'performance' of writing could only be interpreted as being cathartic, because it appears as the need to excrete one's thoughts out of one's body. Maria is a figure that cannot survive without expelling the thoughts, ideas, and narratives clogged up in her mind awaiting release. Surely the solitary space of the prison, the isolation, and the existence of imprisonment (physical and psychological) triggers a communicative release through expression. Philip Kaufmann's film *Quills*

⁸ This abstract construction is most certainly recognized in the fact that the disappeared lose individuality in their inherent grouping as disappeared. So many Desaparecidos only left mark is that they are part of the disappeared—what memorialization proves. Through writing however, we can imagine them as very active, agential, recognized subjectivities who attempted to remain human[e] in the most grotesque of situations.

makes a similar argument that prison and confinement excretes thoughts through the performance of writing. In the film, the Marquis De Sade's existence was so determined through writing, that when he was stripped of all communicative tools (quills, blood, glass, tongue, voice), he ended up smearing words in his own filth upon the walls of his cell.

We may return to Alinsky here to note that jail and isolated spaces require a narcissistic communication with one's own psyche. Alinsky calls this communicative imagination, escape; warders might call this interiority reform; the Marquis de Sade would call it survival. Regardless of the title, the desire for physical escape triggers a psychological escape through communication. Bechis, as noted, imagines a more dramatic version where physical escape is impossible, where writing does not exist, and where every act of communication is one of torture. And yet, Bechis still implies that even the mimicry of communication is enough to communicate self—to search for interiority. Thus, no reader is necessary to operate language and prove subjectivity. Furthermore, I want to argue that communication could also occur without any artifact, written word, or even performance of writing in order to operate escape or search interiority. Communication is complete with the self and the self alone. Talking to yourself is not merely for the psychological insane, in fact it could be called the fundamental act of spirituality—prayer.

From the Prayer Closet to the Water Closet

One thus retreats to solitude, enters the closet, not only to approach God, but also to engage the self.

Closet devotion, in other words, is the technology by which the soul becomes a subject.
(Richard Rambuss; pp.105, 109)

In his book *Closet Devotions*, Richard Rambuss' describes renaissance devotional poetry as produced from the enclosed space of the prayer closet. The space of the prayer closet oscillates between comfort and complete abjection when Rambuss looks at poems by George Herbert, John Donne, Richard Crashaw, and others. For these poets, and for Rambuss, the prayer closet is the space of self and psychological purgation. Such purgation enacts communication to a God, who quite spiritually responds and communicates back. Most importantly though, this God communicates through language without any marked artifact to read or audience to respond to—he is summoned by psychological and spiritual dialogue in prayer.

The prayer closet demands a meditative purgation of the soul, which can both clean, meditate, relax, and calm the psyche; or, as John Donne might say: usurp, rape, imprison, and remove self from its physical confines (1992 pp.1271). Rambuss claims that the isolating space of the closet, allows the self to “fully descend into”⁹ itself in what he terms a “spatialized ‘deep self.’”(pp.106,107) Thus, selfhood for Rambuss finds subjectivity in the closet. He states that “subjectivity is both the product and the implement of devotion.”(pp.107) Interiority and the search through prayer, meditation, and thought is not only a cleansing of the outside world, but also a dialogue between the self and his God, effectively inspired by the space of the closet itself. Rambuss states:

⁹ Rambuss quotes this line from “Parr’s metaphor and its metaphysics of internal depths.” (pp.106,107)

The self that...proponents of closet devotion envisage as the object of scrutiny is not only insistently individualized, but also ever more trenchantly interiorized. In both respects, the door of the prayer closet opens onto an incipiently modern figuration of selfhood, the work of the closet likewise hinging upon a more individuated self conceived to reside at an inward remove from outward deed and public expression. "Every man is that really which he is secretly." (pp.105,106)

For Rambuss and his extensive research of devotional poetry, the self and the subject is forged and created in the isolated prayer closet. The personal and individual space of the closet not only isolates people in prayer but forces them to create a dialogue with God through a psychological deep self. Although at times safe and comforting (as in prayer) the closet is most definitely also a frightening space where inner demons, fears, and anxiety pressure purgation, repentance, and guilt upon the self. The prayer closet like Alinsky's cell, may be productive in its isolation; like Maria's cell, it is also a violently frightening space which quite effectively can also 'expel self from I.'

Like Maria's stripped sense of self-representation, John Donne in his *Holy Sonnets* also shows a subjectivity which seems dislocated from the self's own sense of agency. He asks God in "*Holy Sonnet 14*" to, "Batter my heart, three-personed God" and "knock, breathe...o'erthrow me, and bend / Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new...Take me to you, imprison me, for I, / Except you enthrall me, never shall be free, Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me."(2000, pp.1271) In *Batter My Heart...* Donne is so uncomfortable with his relationship to God that he asks him to imprison and rape his own physical body, in hopes to effectively 'free' his psyche. This seventeenth century example of Kristeva's abject is almost verbatim, "I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which 'I' claim to establish *myself*...My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border...nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit." (pp.3) Donne is clearly an early example of the abject

state that Kristeva meditates upon, and also a metaphoric example of how Maria will literally escape her 'earthly' imprisonment—by rape, imprisonment, and death.

Richard Rambuss makes this connection also, calling Donne's *Sermon 5* a "Viscerally disfiguring abjection." (pp.115) The prayer closet then, although at times comforting, can most certainly be as violent as a prison cell. Rambuss cites John Donne's *Sermon 5* to show how subjectivity is both eradicated and born in these very violent and psychically penetrating moments/spaces:

Donne's prayer closet serves, not as the place for the comprehension and organization of the self, but instead as the scene of its disruption, its disarticulation: "I am upon my knees, and I talke, and think nothing." Under the heightened pressures of prayer and introspection uniquely engendered here, the self is repetitively, almost ritually, undone: "I deprehend myself in it" continues Donne... "and I goe about to mend it, I gather new forces, new purposes to try againe, and doe better, and I doe the same thing againe."

(Donne.1953:-1962 pp.250, Rambuss: pp.115)

Rambuss collapses history when he sees Donne's theory of 'deprehending the self' reappearing, among other places, in Georges Bataille's theory of "dissolution" from *Death and Sexuality*. Collapsing history, like Rambuss has done, helps to show the pervasiveness and timelessness of the questions around subjectivity. Donne's deprehension of selfhood parallels the terms dissolution, abjection, eradication and un-making. Although explanations of subjectivity are certainly as old as literature, the spaces which seem to force from subjects, their meditations on subjectivity have not been fully interpreted. As the prison cell remains a space of purgation (what some call reform), we as subjects carrying on our quotidian movements, also find examples of abjection and isolation in everyday spaces that seem less like purgatory. Like the prayer closet, its twentieth century cousin, the water closet is the most isolating and isolated public space of abjection, purgation, self-denial, and self-construction that we may know.

We make and unmake our world there, because the bathroom—as both safe-haven and violent prison cell—is the cornerstone of civilization.

IV. The Toilet: A Home of Our Own

The only moment I'm ever alone is when I go sit on the toilet, and even then I'm surrounded...In almost every public men's room, there's a hole chipped through solid wood an inch thick by somebody with just their fingernails. This is done over days or months at a time. You see these holes scratched through marble, through steel. *As if someone in prison is trying to escape...*

I'm on a toilet in the Miami airport, and right at my elbow there's the hole in the stall wall, and all around the hole are messages left by men who sat here before me.

John M was here 3/14/64

Carl B was here Jan. 8, 1976

Epitaphs

Some of them are scratched here fresh. Some are covered up but scratched so deep they're *still readable* under decades of paint.

Here are the shadows left behind by a thousand moments, a thousand moods, of needs traced here on the wall by men who are gone. Here is the record of their being here.

Chuck Palahniuk, *Survivor*. pp.113 (*italics mine*)

The rhetoric of filth and cleanliness is much greater than merely a system of colon-ialization, filth and cleanliness resemble the totality of our systems of judgment. Like the abject, filth and cleanliness are learned and thus can be relearned; or as Scarry proposes—unmade. The Irish prove that cleanliness and filthiness are relative. Yet, they have not shown why filth and cleanliness are so pervasive that we do not even recognize when we abide by their effects. In other words, notions of cleanliness and dirtiness affect us every time we publicly deposit, sop up, evacuate, excrete or flush your corporeal and psychological waste away from your body.

The jump from the prayer closet to the water closet is not a perverse leap. For both spaces, safety and fear are codified by partitioned walls that require self-meditation and introspection. Like the prayer closet, the leap between the bathroom and the prison cell is not a perverse—or coincidental—one either. For instance, in Northern Ireland and Argentina, the act of cleaning out one's bodily waste occurred, partitions or walls separated other subjects/prisoners from each other, and one's own stench was constantly

apparent; likewise and most importantly, written inscriptions, graphics, and graffitied symbolizations made of a history of other subjects spoke constantly to prisoners upon the planar dialogue of the partitioned walls.

Bathroom graffiti is one of the most raw and telling societal cries that we encounter. In no other space do we have a history of anonymous subjectivities excreting the most offensive, taboo, humorous, and sexually explicit thoughts from their psyches. Jean-Paul Sartre states, “toilet-poets engrave their dreams upon walls; others will read them...Whereupon the words become huge, they scream out, swollen with the other’s indignation.” (1952. pp.17) The stall wall, just like the prison walls of Argentina and Ireland speak a social dialogue on a planar surface, comments respond to each other, and declarations of identity are forged through the medium of public and anonymous discourse. We too are social prisoners within each and every bathroom stall. As Lee Edelman in his essay *Men’s Room* states:

The design of the men’s room, simply put, has palpable designs on men; it aspires, that is, to design them. As a site of representation...the men’s room gives the male subject his body in its relation to symbolic space...by allowing him, before the only public, the male one, whose witness can matter, to enact, as if in a theater, the law of its mandatory closeting. (pp.152)

Bathroom stalls speak to us as prisoners in two directions. One, the filthy, taboo, shitty social truths that Scarry claims must be excreted from our bodies appear on the stall wall as shaming social mores. Like Donne, the enclosed space of the closet forces reductionist statements about sexuality (Mark is a faggot, Mark is a whore), racist/ anti-Semitic comments, offensive humor, and violent, misogynist comments (Marcy is a nigger/slut/cunt). The bathroom and the prayer closet are isolating spaces which demand self-flagellation and social conservatism. As displacement from the reality of excretion, we squeeze out social dialogue.

Another manner in which the stall imprisons the psyche is that subjectivity and identity seemed to be forged through the body onto the wall in a language seeming to claim “I am still here.” Moments of anonymity propose pure declarations of love (Mark loves Marcy) and declarations of identity (“Carl B was here Jan. 8, 1976”). The declaration of identity through text is a graffitied and social poem that we are all familiar with. What it means however is rarely touched upon. Such statements infer that identities are urging to be spilled out, like Scarry states, projected upon the walls themselves. Also the naming of spaces—like gang graffiti, or political graffiti in West Belfast—applies ownership to public locations and helps to make unsafe spaces, identifiable, familiar, homely. Bathroom graffiti is a primitive internet chat room, an explanation for uncomfortable social identity; an anonymous re-structuring of one’s own sense of self.

In the bathroom stall, we like prisoners in isolation also actively operate a communicative escape, writing graffiti instead of realizing our own shit (our own discomfort, our own excrement, our own smells, our own filth). The imprisoning abjection remains a refusal to acknowledge the very visceral realities occurring. We thus erase shit, and our ability *to* shit, from our vocabulary—we flush it away as the ultimate ‘other.’ Scatological theorists want to refuse this reality, and see shit not as erased but as a produced, and valuable object. As Scatologist Dominique Laporte states, “It would seem that human excrement, like the soul, carries the ‘noxious’ trace of the body it departs.” (pp.35). The body Laporte speaks of is the social body; the civilizing body believing in hygiene, order, cleanliness, beauty.¹⁰ The stall is able to mediate this figure

¹⁰Order, cleanliness, and beauty are Sigmund Freud’s definitions of civilization in *Civilization and its Discontents*.

because it demands a self-reflexive, narcissistic, look at interiority. As Lee Edelman states:

The men's room [the bathroom], through a segmentation of space that can justly be called self-reflexive, gestures, despite the accessibility of that space to a subset of the 'public,' towards an idea of interiority, towards a principle of containment, implicit in the architectural imperative that shapes the subject—forming and informing him as the subject of ideology—in its own monumentalizing image, modeling the subject as container of space through the articulation of structural, because structuring identities. (pp.152)

The stall is civilization. It operates as the prison cell, the liminal space between filth and cleanliness, and the most common space of abjection. The stall forces an abjection however, that is so normative, comfortable, expected, and allowed, that it is a safe abjection. As Jean Genet demands of the prison cell, "Let the veil be lifted. Alone in the cell, in almost breast like rhythm (it beats like a mouth), the white tile latrine gives its comforting breath. It alone is human." (pp.250) Human feces is a border which will never be crossed but can be avoided through such displacements as writing, thinking, and dreaming. The hunger strikers found an intentional chord of sympathy while living in abjection, because they harnessed sublimation and a language of purity as an abject journey towards death: a journey called martyrdom. Kristeva explains:

Sublimation, on the contrary, is nothing else than the possibility of naming the pre-nominal, a pre-objectal, which are in fact only a trans-nominal, a trans-objectal. In the symptom, the abject permeates me, I become abject. Through sublimation, I keep it under control. The abject is edged with the sublime. It is not the same moment on the journey, but the same subject and speech bring them into being." (pp.11)

Similarly, the bathroom stall existence has harnessed human abjection comfortably to the degree of complete control. We control our bowels, as we retain our social roles—or as Laporte says, "the barbarian craps where he pleases; the conqueror emblazons his trails with a primordial prohibition: 'No shitting allowed.'"(pp.57). Thus,

the civilized shits where so decreed—as Laporte claims, “the [civilized] state is the sewer” (pp.57). The state then can be partially to blame for the construction of spaces, which socially re-construct our psyches—a Foucaultian argument that prisons and bathrooms abject us. Such abjection allows us to forget, and thus confuses what processes really *are* functioning: our shitting, or our socially ‘stated’ roles. Lee Edelman notes, “this locus of functional attention to culturally abjected bodily functions always necessarily functions in excess of a logic of mere functionality.”(pp.152) In other words, our excrement remains state owned, culturally loaded, and erasable if we use the stall—it exceeds a logic of functionality. Furthermore, our refusal to question, or rather our complete uncomfortable and abject psyches reactions in the presence of excrement—is the state’s successful act of naming the ‘other’. The stall is a prison cell of abjection we don’t want to be free of. *That* freedom, we might assume, would quite possibly be the limit of civilization.

The confines of the bathroom stall remain thus remain the birthplace of ‘the other’. Everything disgusting, everything offensive, everything grotesque and violent, is everything shitty. As we infer from Bechis, existence is about leaving marks behind, that life is a series of mark makings. Shit must stop being the dirt, the erased, the absent abject of civilization. Rather, we must realize the productive product of shit to notice our selves—to stop us from disappearing, quite literally, in that deep contemplative space of the stall. And yet, we must pass through it in order to clean and leave that ‘other’ trace behind. Kristeva explains such tension, “It is not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.”(pp.4). We are constantly in that tension because we are constantly exiting and entering that space in

which to clean. We are constantly performing the civilized, we are always attempting to clean—that is our prison, that is our abjection.

Thus in many ways, the savage and grotesque acts that Northern Irish Dirty Protesters enacted as they began to live within the grave of earthly shit was the most ‘civilized’ conception of protest imaginable. While the graffiti exemplified the desire to be free of psychological imprisonment, the shit itself freed the prisoners from corporeal incarceration. As Joel Sanders states, “Contrary to our expectations, biology is not destiny in the public bathroom” (*Two Public Toilets* pp.165). Although I do not demand that we spread ourselves with feces and run around shouting about civilized imprisonment, we as human subjects clearly ache for the freedoms of our psychological constraints. We, too, subconsciously plead for escape from isolating spaces—which make us feel abject, uncomfortable, violent, reduced. Through the medium of graffiti and anonymous social dialogue, we also attempt to reject the fact that more times than not we feel like dirty, gross, and shameful objects whose absence and/or disappearance might clean the world of its diseased problems. We attempt to reject these colonized fears of purity, but we must also acknowledge, as the dirty protesters did, the corporeal aspect of our imprisoned states; and thus the state of flushing civilized society down the drain. Within a pure state we might call a sewer, performing as we might describe as ‘natural’. The movements of hygiene, which strive towards vague conceptions of order, cleanliness, and beauty; without the realization that our fear of shit is merely one constraint of our psychologically, civilized infection:

We must demand a new Post-Colonial moment.

Conclusion – A Colonial Moment: a Post-Colon

Solitariness of place is fittest for meditation. Retire thyself from others...if thou wouldst talk profitably with thyself...one finds his closet most convenient, where his eyes, being limited by the known walls, call in the mind after a sort from wandering abroad.

Bishop Joseph Hall, *The Art of Divine Meditation*

Godliness never rises to a higher pitch than when men keep closest to their closets”

Thomas Brooks, pp.162¹¹

If one should not run naked covered in shit around the streets of Vatican city, Westminster Abby, jail; then what shall we do to enact this post-colonial moment? This paper has spent a significant amount of time attempting to analyze why we do such similar actions when we are alone, or more specifically, when we are forced into isolation. It seems that I am obsessed with what is produced, or what we mime into production with such spaces; writing, journals, safety; we produce shit, we produce filth, we produce language. As Lee Edelman argues, male bathrooms are spaces which by regulating desire, produce male subjectivity—they produce men. (pp.152)

An unconscious production of the self occurs during moments of imprisonment, forced isolation, loneliness, anxiety, pain, and psychological erasure. Kristeva admits that the abjection of self is sometimes so comfortable that we don't notice it—as in the bathroom; and other times, it is the total loss of identity, the stripping of self identification—of *I*. It would be a perverse read, however, to assume that the search for escape while in bathroom stalls is not a search that also installs comfort and initiates safety. It would be an incomplete analysis not to take into account that the escape that we search for in writing bathroom graffiti alone, anonymously, is in no way connected to the

¹¹ Both quoted from Rambuss: pp104, 105

escape that the space of the bathroom stall affords us. The stall may imprison us, but it would be misleading to not realize that the stall also grants us escape from the outside world—as a place of freedom.

HIV/AIDS activist Zachie Achmat recounts this freedom within South African public toilets in his memoir, *My Childhood as an Adult Molester*. He states, “The black of koki pens transformed [the toilet doors] into works of art. It was not the drawing, it was not the misspelt words...that transformed these symbols into art...They spoke of unspoken, unwritten and unsung love. They celebrated sex between men. They advertised sex between men. They told wonderfully erotic stories of sex between men. I loved it. Toilet doors became galleries for the art of love between men.” (pp.333). To Zachie, Apartheid was imprisoning, the toilet on the other hand, was an escape from imprisonment, a liberating space.

Bathroom stalls isolate subjectivity to forget the actually corporeal-reality of excrement, while also serving—spatially—as locations of freedom. The bathroom is the space or the very border of ambiguity and abjection that Kristeva finds unlocatable. Historically, a space used to escape the public eye through drug use, secretive sex, homoerotic introduction, gender identification, violence, and in the case of Apartheid South Africa, some rare racial ‘gray’ zones where blacks, whites, and coloreds all mixed and all fucked. Bathrooms compound the need to escape the clutches of civilization by remaining a silent interior space void of voiced public scrutiny.

Apartheid South Africa is a third limit case of politically tumultuous environments that helps locate a definition for the very quotidian, completely ubiquitous space of the bathroom stall. Gcina Mhlope’s story “The Toilet” quite inadvertently shows how one particular toilet was a young girl’s freedom from Apartheid, and that it

allowed her to dream, to communicate through envisioning others, and to write; “I call it my toilet because that is exactly how I felt about it...Many more writings saw me sitting there writing. Sometimes it did not need to be a poem; I wrote anything that came into my head—in the same way I would have done if I’d had a friend to talk to” (pp.7)

Like Mhlope, Zachie Acmat too found freedom and identity in the South African toilet. Achmat discovers the unregulated public toilets (of the colonial English sewage system) in Cape Town as freeing his fears of being a *moffie* and deconstructing his Muslim taboos about filth:¹²

Any toilet in Muslim mythology – whether whites only, blacks only, mixed, public or private – is evil. The *Shaytaan* dwells in the toilets. You enter them with your left foot reciting a toilet prayer...It is *haraam* (forbidden) to leave the toilet without washing...I had sex at toilets every day, sometimes twice or three times a day. I would go to the library to get books, which I would read in the toilet... Apartheid worked in mysterious ways. From denying me the use of one set of toilets, it opened the world of another set to me...Apartheid forced me to use Observatory Station toilets, but apartheid was destroyed in those toilets. By men who had sex with men, regardless of race or class.” (1995, pp.332-34)

In these examples, toilets compounded the ubiquity of state segregation with the moral mythological segregation of Muslim theology, to create a very real and definable place of secretive sex and gay identity. Not only does Achmat present varying examples of ‘closeting’ mechanisms—religion, apartheid, homophobia—but he most directly ‘comes out of the closet’ by stuffing himself inside another perverse closet: the water closet. The water closet, as Lee Edelman shows, both frees male subjectivity in its architecture, and collapses or closets what male-ness *is* outside the bathroom. The men’s room does not allow male-ness to function as such within. He states, “the straight male body becomes a closet itself: a spatial enclosure for an autonomous subject able to

¹² Psuedo-Afrikaans word for faggot or effeminized man; however less derogatory and more easily appropriated into the *moffie* community. Also, *moffie* is very colloquially descriptive of a ‘colored’ gay man, as opposed to an Afrikaans, white, gay man.

imagine inhabiting his body only by conceiving his body simultaneously as container and thing contained; as *being* and *needing* a closet”(pp.152)

To Edelman, to be in a closet, we also need a closet which defines those terms of sexuality. Terms of sexuality or *those* closeting parentheses, summon the ‘civilizing terms Feldman terms British colon-ialization. In fact, as Achmat shows, the religious closeting and the state closeting—their terms—operate very similarly. Not coincidentally, what is excreted in that middle ground, in that ‘unforseeable border’, in the ambiguous space, appears on the beautiful toilet door, exposing artistic renderings of how wonderful it is for men to fuck men.

But let us not forget that such optimism about freeing spaces—spaces too scary to patrol, too liminal to segregate, too smelly to designate—invite as much violence as they do love. In the play “The Toilet” by Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka, the toilet is most evidently both the site of homoerotic love—where Edelman claims that dicks demand public contemplation—and also the site of violence against those tempting thoughts. As some clarion call of “hey Faggot’ dislodges one’s gaze from the gushing member of another, Baraka composes a toilet where such faggots must also be killed to compose the rigid hierarchy of masculinity *outside* of the toilet. The character Karolis states, “Yeh. That’s what I’m going to do Ray. I’m going to fight you. We’re here to fight. About that note, right? The one that said I wanted to take you into my mouth.” (pp.59)

Baraka’s toilet is a ‘space’ which demands isolation, violence, sanctity, and—like Apartheid South Africa—a space where laws, and rules do not apply. Such violence and lawlessness is also why the stall wall becomes a blackboard for the most retrograde and offensive comments we encounter; “Marcy is a whore/slut/cunt”, “Karolis is a faggot”,

etc. Not only is gender, sexuality, and biology¹³ designated through violence, but also through an inscription that seems to still shine through the paint covering it. It is the graffiti which, as Palahniuk so eloquently implies, never allows us to feel alone.

The closet is the space which designates ord[o]r, it operates gender, and it disallows such operations from occurring within. For this reason, the toilet also serves as the most prominent space of contemplation, of deep thought and of a mental vulnerability constructing and hiding from civilization.

Richard Rambuss explains the seemingly timeless phenomena of isolated contemplative thought when he states, “One thus retreats to solitude, enters the closet, not only to approach God, but also to engage thy self.” (pp.105). Rambuss focuses his work to not only the self-contemplation that poets, priests, authors, and theorists found in the prayer closets but also on the fear that many, like John Donne, found codified in the confines of those impending ‘walls.’

The deprehension or dissolution of selfhood that Rambuss speaks to is not far from how Argentine prisoners experienced torture, or how Kristeva ‘expells’ herself, ‘expells’ any conception that may form *I*. The destruction of selfhood is also similarly located in the undoings of Freud’s uncanny who, as Lee Edelman notes, “the subject, in *its* [the uncanny’s] grip, will always feel that he is losing *his*, finding himself no longer at home in the world he thought he knew” (pp.156). This sense of insecurity or un-safety imagines the walls crumbling as authoritatively as they represent the concrete power of Scarry’s notion of statehood. Edelman continues, “this alarming disappearance of the sense of ‘at homeness,’ which occurs, however paradoxically, with a certain sickening

¹³ Begonia Aretxaga’s main argument is actually how the dirty protest re-codified gender alignment because women on the Dirt protest were forced to deal with menstrual blood, which to author’s like Tim

familiarity, signals a toppling of the walls within which the subject has been constructed and through which he has realized the imaginary architecture of a self.”

Leo Bersani’s essay *Is the Rectum a Grave?* asks similar questions about the subjectivity, however in the example of a men engaging in passive anal sex. (Rambuss, pp.116) Bersani compares those very authoritative spaces like the rectum—a space where in Achmat’s case, he seems to be born and freed—with the grave. Bersani’s grave—his rectum—seems also to eradicate, to abject, to unmake, and disappear subjectivity, agency, selfhood, identity, a sense of ‘I.’ Like Baraka’s toilet, however, the rectum becomes violently eradicated while it is instantly composed—what Foucault would call a countersite. Foucault states:

There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places—places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society—which are something like countersites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. (Foucault, *Of Other Spaces*)

The death drive, or *jouissance* that Bersani claims characterizes passive anal sex seems for Rambuss the explanation of how Donne constantly asked God to purge, torture, imprison and rape his soul—asking, “is the prayer closet a grave?” In continuation then, this paper thus must also ask if such *jouissance* is what allows us the safety and escape that makes the toilet so meditative and also so grotesque. As we bury our dead, we flush our fecal matter into the bowels of state sewer systems. We must, like we reconstruct the identities of the dead in memorial, reconstruct our identities in our excrement. Shit is the ‘other’ only so much as we create that otherness and choose to push it away. What we flush must be at least acknowledged as socially productive, culturally significant, and

Pat Coogan, was “even worse when women were on it” because they had “their menstrual cycles to contend with” (pp.129).

quite dramatically alive. What we flush must also be reproduced then upon the social stage in countless performances of segregation, and endless acts of naming and re-naming, which do sometimes appear on the walls of bathroom stalls. Although not completely Freud's anal birth, Bersani allows excrement to appear as more of a social abortion—our filthy selves being reproduced and then ritually slaughtered. We must, in continuation of Rambuss, then ask: if whether the toilet is actually the grave that Bersani is talking about?

Certainly the toilet is that very space where death occurs, where we evacuate, where an eviction of selfhood—what Laporte calls the shit that carries the noxious trace of the body it departs—carries with it the fear we have in facing it. If there does exist some freedom, some escape that bathrooms trigger, it may not be much different than the escape that shitting forces us to imagine—or rather write upon the walls of our daily imprisonment. The abjection of self into safe and homely situations cannot stop even though we must shit in public, piss in front of others, and hear the gargling sounds of the bodies' and the cities' bowels move. Such unexplainable tension, as Edelman shows, locates even more telling and rigorous structure within those very liminal spaces that water closets are; those countersites which invert the totality of all other social spaces.

Toilets frighten me, and I need them; bathrooms force me to feel filthy; and I clean them. Stalls 'imprison me so I can never be free' and ask me why I may ever really want to *feel* free? I am always and forever shitting to come to terms with the fact that I am always also dying—comfortably and painfully. Every time we shit, we are killing our civilized and necessary s[cell]ves and flushing it away and never saying goodbye.

A post-colon-ial moment then is something where we appreciate that our subjectivity is being systematically and ritually eradicated and killed, because in the

rectum and through the rectum it is also produced, created. We are always and everyday aborting ourselves upon and through the space of the bathroom. Seeing how that death reflection is also a birthing, and thus a useful product of our psychic fears remains one moment where we become the Irish smearing our feces upon our own walls. This moment is also less optimistic than Foucault's hope to free us from the 'ruses of sexuality' because it is in such defined moments of abjection, times of battered hearts and dislocated 'I's' that all that is desired is liberation. A liberation that is not ironic like Foucault jokes, and which is performed through movements of primitive communicative non-actions—solely intended to insert a notion of 'community of communicators' into the imprisoned's mind. A post-colonial moment is maybe something more akin to the realization that Irish Prisoners were forced to come to terms with, refusing the colonial language of oppression, demanding rights through the embodiment of excreta, a total circus act of endurance and resignification; a biologically retraining, psychologically meditative, world naming protest to the death. A post-colonial moment is something that in effect, will never strike that international nerve. A post-colonial moment will never work. A post-colonial moment would effectively kill us all.

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