PISSAR’s Critically Queer and Disabled Politics

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PISSAR (People in Search of Safe and Accessible Restrooms) offers an instructive example about the possibility for critically queer and disabled politics. Using public bathrooms as a site of activism, PISSAR, through the consubstantiality of shame, demonstrates the mutually constitutive and performative properties of bodies interacting in space. PISSAR’s actions provide pedagogical insight into the negotiation of coalitional politics, especially those politics inflected with queer concerns.

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One of the most exciting and productive sites for queer coalitional politics may be, ironically enough, the linkage between the everyday concerns of lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transpeople (LGBTs), and people with disabilities. I write “ironically enough” because many members of these communities, save those who live at the intersections of these identities, have labored to untangle the negative articulations of one with the other. LGBT advocates have invested considerable time and energy in countering the medicalization and pathologization of their identities and desires, a struggle that continues today with campaigns against religiously based reparative therapies and the continued classification of transgender identifications as “gender identity disorder.” As for people with disabilities, in ways different yet similar to LGBTs, they have been figured as asexual beings or hypersexual deviants. Therefore, to link the interests of people with disabilities and LGBTs may seem counterintuitive, regressive, and politically risky. Yet, in a liberal-democratic polity that only sometimes tolerates LGBTs and people with disabilities, the continued vitality and vibrancy of LGBT, queer, and disability politics is dependent largely upon the ability of these communities to work together.
advocates to develop forms of coalitional politics that articulate their modalities of domination to the interests of other similarly situated groups. In a context where queer liberalism, a potentially oxymoronic strategy of uncritical inclusion, prevails over queer politics, the recognition, promotion, and adaptation of alternative strategies for resisting the suffocating grip of “hetero/homo-corporo-normativities” is urgently needed.³

Narrowing down the larger topic of LGBT and/or queer coalitional politics to transgender advocacy actions, my interest here is how transpeople and people with disabilities have found common cause through their shared experiences. Despite the obvious differences between transpeople and people with disabilities, generally speaking they negotiate a number of similar issues in their daily lives, and their explicit articulation may prove useful in forging political alliances. These common experiences include: difficulties, if not outright discrimination, in: securing an education, job, and/or housing; demonization and/or condemnation by religious officials; violence from perpetrators of hate crimes; and, familial and social rejection, and shame.⁴ To this list I would add another issue which may at first glance seem trivial, yet, upon further consideration, is crucial for the living of meaningful lives: safe and accessible bathrooms.

Public bathrooms are far from a trivial concern given that face-to-face publicity is enabled and constrained in important ways by the availability of safe and accessible public bathrooms. First, the location and condition of public bathrooms provide explicit physical markers about the gendered and abled expectations of the bodies in that area. The differences between the lines for the men’s and women’s bathrooms, as well as the use of bathrooms designated for people with disabilities by people without disabilities, speak volumes about the infusion of cultural norms into architecture. Second, as critical geographers Rob Kitchin and Robin Law note, an individual’s inability to find safe and accessible public bathrooms subjects them to “‘the bladder’s leash,’ restricting how long they are able to stay in a place and thus constraining their participation.”⁵ The “bladder’s leash” not only limits the amount of time that a person can spend in a public location, it can prevent someone from even attempting to participate in these publics. As a result, people with disabilities and transpeople must be uniquely mindful of the accommodations available in places such as restaurants, stores, airports, schools, and their places of employment.

Instead of atomizing the differences between people with disabilities and transpeople, and further participating in the dissimulation of the interdependent circuitries authorizing the able-bodied and bigendered normativities underwriting the regulation of public places, I suggest these struggles are two sides of the same coin in that members of these identity groups want to be free from their bladder’s leashes, both of which are ultimately tethered to the pole of an idealized, mythic, and normative body. Thus, in the spirit of promoting and developing radical democratic coalitional politics interested in challenging intersecting modalities of domination, in this essay I explore how these seemingly disparate groups have articulated, negotiated, and managed their differences while practicing a coalitional politics that questions the safety and accessibility of public bathrooms.
This argument unfolds in the following manner. The following section makes a case for taking more seriously the mutually constitutive and rhetorical relationship between place, space, and identity. Communication scholars often treat place and space as the site of rhetorical practice, noting it as a material constraint without exploring the interpenetrating rhetorical relationship between individuals in place and space. In lieu of this two-dimensional flattening of place and space, one that treats them as inert and extra-discursive material realities, I mobilize these concepts as three-dimensional and dynamic elements integrally linked to the rhetorical production of identity and agency. More specifically, the examination of public bathrooms offers insight into the gendered and abled logics actively undergirding these seemingly banal places. Communication critics can offer interventions into these cultural practices by attending to the identity work negotiated in/through the materiality and performativity of these spaces.

The next section analyzes the actions of People in Search of Safe and Accessible Restrooms (PISSAR), a genderqueer and disability coalition composed of college students and staff dedicated to providing safe and accessible bathrooms. With the goal of demonstrating the productive potential of coalitional politics informed by critical queerness and disability, I explore the invention resources created by the interaction of genderqueer and disabled bodies in campus bathrooms. The members of PISSAR addressed multiple forms of shame directed at them, including the internalized shame of their own bodies, the shame associated with bathroom activities and politics, and the potential sources of shame created by the articulation of their stigmatized identities together. By surveying and actually meeting in campus bathrooms, PISSAR negotiated a spatially-based consubstantiality of shame to challenge the homo/hetero-corporo-normativity of public places and spaces. In the concluding section, I suggest that in their recognition of public bathrooms as a site of performative identity formation, PISSAR exemplifies a provocative model for theorizing and practicing critically queer politics outside of the hegemonic and increasingly ineffective logics of gay white male shame that guide much of contemporary GLBT and queer politics. To justify these conclusions, I first turn to a discussion of the relationship between rhetoric, place, space, and identity.

The Rhetoricity of Place, Space, and Identity

In the context of this essay, the concepts “space” and “place” are informed by Michel de Certeau’s simple yet provocative maxim: “space is a practiced place.” Place and space, in Certeau’s formulations of the terms, are given meaning by the practices employed in them creating a relationship between place and strategy, and space and tactics. The association of place with strategy signifies how locations are “circumscribed as proper and thus serve as the basis for generating relations with an exterior distinct from it.” To clarify, in an attempt to dictate the proper set of actions and relationships between members of a polity, the “strong” use strategies, or the recourse to naturalized hierarchies outside of the immediate physical relationship, to create places to manage the maneuvering of the “weak.” Public bathrooms, then, are places...
in that they are designed and provided for a limited number of functions (urinating, defecating, changing a diaper, vomiting, washing our hands, fixing our hair and/or makeup, gaining our composure, and brushing our teeth), they are divided by the sexes through an appeal to a naturalized system of biological separation, and they are regulated and surveilled by the law to enforce these taken-as-given differences.

Of course, public bathrooms are used for a number of purposes unintended by their owners—some people fuck and suck in them, others use them to buy and use drugs, and individuals who are homeless may use them for hygienic purposes or as a respite from the elements and the violence directed toward them. In these ways, the place of the public bathroom becomes a space. To complete the explanation of the dialectical pairing, as opposed to places and strategies, spaces are associated with tactics or “calculated actions” that “play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power.”

Remembering Certeau’s interest in the rhetorical conditions of contingency and probability, those interested in turning places into spaces:

must accept the chance offerings of the moment . . . and make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers. It poaches in them. It creates surprises in them. It can be where it is least expected. It is a guileful ruse. In short, a tactic is an art of the weak.

The spatiality of resistance, inherently wedded to timing, relies on fugitive power relations, and these relations create the conditions to reimagine the material worlds we inhabit. Steven Pile reminds us that while “spaces of resistance are multiple, dynamic, and weak (in their effectiveness, but also because resistance is also dangerous),” they are “only ever in part controlled by the practices of domination.” Therefore, challenges to cultural hegemonies are located primarily in the alterations of quotidian routines, and in spatializing the understanding of resistance, we can, as Pile and Michael Keith urge us to do, draw “attention not only to the myriad spaces of political struggles, but also to the politics of the everyday space, through which political identities constantly flow and fix.” This conceptualization of space and place, along with strategies and tactics, assists us in understanding the complex interaction between space, identity, and agency.

As should be clear, the concomitant construction of identity and space is inherently communicative, and it deserves further theorization. Communication critics are especially well-attuned at thinking through the constitutive symbolic conditions of a culture. However, these critiques tend to isolate and privilege symbolic action over the spaces in which they are enactment and, thus, we seldom take up the task of understanding their co-production. Considerations of place and time are often taught as instrumental and normative guides to the proper response to or experience of a given exigency. The purchase of this epistemological certainty exacts a high opportunity cost in that its faith in the determining relationship between place/occasion and the rhetorical act comes at the expense of thinking in more complex ways about the constitutive nature of space and communication. In the words of communication scholar Raka Shome, critics interested in intervening in cultural
formations must forego the notion that space is “a mere setting or an innocent background in, over, or across which cultural activities and practices are seen to be occurring,” opting instead for a perspective that acknowledges “the role that space plays in the (re)production of social power.”\textsuperscript{15} The implication of this move, according to Shome, is that we must account for the symbolicity of space as it “functions as a technology—a means and a medium—of power that is socially constituted through material relations that enable the communication of specific politics” while making others more difficult.\textsuperscript{16}

Certeau’s perspective assists us in understanding Shome’s attention to the contextualized agentic effectivities of space and identity. While drawing attention to the spatial dimensions of power relations, Shome simultaneously problematizes acontextual understandings of identity to prevent the importation of stable subjectivites into the dynamic operations of space and identity.\textsuperscript{17} As a result, agency is found in the localized interaction between subjects and the spaces in which they operate, which is to say in the performativity of identity and space. Nothing is guaranteed in advance as subjects necessarily work in between the constraining and enabling conditions found in the contingent and the probable, whether they recognize it or not.

With that said, the regulation of place presents formidable obstacles to practices of resistance, and critical attention must be paid to the contextualized nature of this dialectic. As Michel Foucault provocatively suggested “a whole history remains to be written of spaces—which would at the same time be the history of powers (both these terms in the plural)—from the great strategies of geo-politics to the little tactics of the habitat.”\textsuperscript{18} In a lecture first presented in 1967, Foucault was particularly interested in the secularization of Western societies and the attendant spatial effectivities of these cultural transformations. Ever-concerned with the dispersion and dissimulation of power relations, he postulated space was in a period of partial desanctification, meaning that as the unilateral exercise of power and hence the determination of subjectivity had transferred from the centralized location of the church to the exercise of power from innumerable points, resistant subjects increasingly challenged the naturalness and centrally controlled meanings of places. The complete desanctification of places remains incomplete, however, because our cultural logics are arranged around “oppositions that remain inviolable, that our institutions and practices have not yet dared to break down,” including those spaces and places defined by the split between public and private matters.\textsuperscript{19}

Cultural geographer David Sibley locates the limits of desanctification in micropolitical and biopolitical exercises of power. Sibley argues that in spite of the continual undoing of places into spaces, “there seems to me to be a continuing need for ritual practices to maintain the sanctity of space in a secular society . . . Today, however, the guardians of sacred spaces are more likely to be security guards, parents or judges rather than priests.”\textsuperscript{20} In the case of public bathrooms, they are treated by many as places of gender regulation as they are policed in the both the figurative and literal senses of the word.\textsuperscript{21} Transpeople often face the possibility of being treated as gender transgressors for using the “wrong” bathroom. In response to a survey taken
by the San Francisco Human Rights Commission, transpeople documented the negative reaction to their use of public restrooms. The stories ranged from having security guards harass them to losing jobs to “[getting] the shit kicked out of me for using the ‘wrong bathroom.’” One respondent wrote that they “almost got killed.”

The bathroom problem,” according to Judith Halberstam, “illustrates in remarkably clear ways the flourishing existence of gender binarism despite rumors of its demise.” In spite of increasingly fluid notions of gender, the binary logic of sex remains the dominant ideology of corporeal legibility, a legibility defined primarily by visual c(l)ues. Ironically enough, then, Halberstam contends, “gender’s very flexibility and seeming fluidity is precisely what allows dimorphic gender to hold sway” as the “definitional boundaries of male and female are so elastic, there are very few people in any given public space who are completely unreadable in terms of their gender.”

In turn, these codes of cultural legibility authorize the biopolitical practice of gender policing, thereby allowing anxious individuals to punish those who trouble the stability of sexual and gender categories. Thus, even with the malleability of gender codes, “the transphobic imagination,” according to Richard Juang, allows the bathroom to “become an extension of a genital narcissism (which could be expressed, roughly, as ‘my body is how sex should be defined for all other bodies’ and ‘the presence of other kinds of body violates the sex of my own body’).”

Anxieties about public bathrooms are heightened by the fact that, in using the bathroom, we perform a private act in a public place with strangers. Moreover, using the bathroom leaves us vulnerable. We are in compromised positions that limit our lines of sight, be it because of a stall or a urinal. We expose parts of our bodies that are otherwise hidden from view—parts of our bodies that we typically don’t want strangers to see. We pass fluids and objects that make a mess, can be noisy, and smell. In order to allay some of our anxieties, we invoke state-based protections to ensure that public bathrooms are places regulated by a variety of legal technologies. Transgender individuals are especially prone to this violence because of the naturalized assumptions about bodies, genders, and sexuality. Kath Browne explains how transgender transgressions of public bathrooms are especially threatening “in part because the leakiness of bodies cannot be associated with the fluid possibilities of sexed bodies” for “where bodies are revealed as unstable and porous, flowing between the sexes may be more threatening; where one border (bodily) is contravened others (man/woman) may be more intensely protected.”

Of course, women’s and men’s restrooms are policed in similar yet different ways. According to Patricia Cooper and Ruth Oldenziel, for women, more than men, the bathroom is a space “where they take care of their bodies and where they might remove themselves from public scrutiny or surveillance, exercise some authority, or forge bonds of solidarity.” Public bathrooms for women are areas where non-excretory activities are more likely to take place—women may, among other things, go to the bathroom in groups to have private conversations, reapply makeup and fix their hair, or regroup after a confrontation. In contrast, men’s public restrooms involve what Halberstam terms “an architecture of surveillance” where each man stands at his urinal and looks straight ahead at the wall for fear he might be spotted...
sizing up the competition; talking at the urinals or between stalls is reserved only for the closest of friends and only when other men are not around. However, Halberstam continues, it is also a space for “homosocial interaction and of homoerotic interaction.” Halberstam summarizes the distinction between men’s and women’s bathrooms in the following manner: while men’s bathrooms “tend to operate as a highly charged sexual space in which sexual interactions are both encouraged and punished, women’s rest rooms tend to operate as an arena for enforcement of gender conformity.”

For transpeople, then, pissing and shitting always carries with it the chance for legal and physical violence.

Taken together, the works of the preceding theorists are useful heuristics for understanding the spatio-temporal modalities of power as well as the need to focus on the actions of specific bodies in particular spaces. As Tim Cresswell astutely notes, “the geographical ordering of society is founded on a multitude of acts of boundary making—of territorialization—whose ambiguity is to simultaneously open up the possibilities for transgression.” Attention to the communicative acts associated with space-making practices helps to bridge the practico-theoretical aporias identified by geographers in resistance scholarship. For example, Doreen Massey reads Certeau as offering too strict an opposition and distinction between place and time, privileging the latter while negating the dynamism of the former, which has the inadvertent effect of stabilizing the meaning of space and obscuring its constitutive political potential.

Massey interrogates this dualism as one complicit with feminizing space and masculinizing time, and thus connected to larger logics underwriting the naturalization of gender ideologies. Similarly, Lise Nelson identifies the lack of spatial consideration in many invocations of performativity (a Butlerian concept indebted to Foucault), operative primarily in representational critique, as a limiting condition to effective political intervention. With these criticisms in mind, I would like to suggest that an reinvigorated reading of Certeau and Foucault, one that mobilizes their work in relation to contextualized communicative acts in a spatio-temporal context, especially that of quotidian practices such as those associated with public bathrooms, addresses the concerns of geography scholars who are rightly worried about acontextualized understandings of space and identity. If we take seriously the notion, like Robyn Longhurst, that “bodies are also always in a state of becoming with places,” and that practices of resistance are inaugurated by the fluidity of both bodies and places/spaces, we can comprehend more fully, as Lynn Stewart suggests, how “space [is] a product of the human body” where the “ability to produce space, rather than just to conceive space, is the means by which people can take back power in their everyday lives.” Accordingly, the histories of power, space, and place that remain to be written must be sensitive to the gender, racial, and able-bodied discourses (to name only a few categories of analysis) that animate these spaces. Using their perspectives to inform my reading of PISSAR’s actions, I turn to such behavior to demonstrate how the performativity of identity is informed by and simultaneously informs spatial politics.
gay male shame, “that focuses its libidinal and other energies on simply rebuilding
the self that shame dismantled rather than taking apart the social processes that
project shame onto queer subjects in the first place.”

She continues: “If queer studies is to survive gay shame, and it will, we all need to move far beyond the limited
scope of white gay male concerns and interests.” Echoing Butler’s commentary on
critical queerness, Halberstam suggests that queer theorists and activists must be
willing to learn from and adopt the intersectional critiques forwarded by those
steeped in feminist, ethnic studies, and I would add crip theory/disability studies to
the list. Critically queer groups such as PISSAR that define themselves broadly as
c coalitions countering related forms of domination provide a provocative model for
thinking outside of the logics of gay white male shame. And in a rhetorical culture
where normalcy is the dominant trope, this is an urgent task indeed.

Notes

[1] I consciously employ “people with disabilities” and “disability” over other terms because
these are the terms preferred by the majority, if not all, of the authors I cite. As with all
identity categories, we must be attentive to linguistic self-determination and the cultural-
political work performed by these identity markers. Unfortunately, according to Simi Linton,
many terms meant to mark the agency of those with disabilities (such as “differently-abled”
or “physically challenged”) “convey the boosterism and do-gooder mentality endemic to the

[2] As Robert McRuer explains, LGBTs and people with disabilities often serve as metaphors for
the other through “conflation and stereotype: people with disabilities are often understood
as somehow queer (as paradoxical stereotypes of the asexual or oversexual person with
disabilities would suggest), while queers are often understood as somehow disabled (as an
ongoing medicalization of identity, similar to what people with disabilities more generally
encounter, would suggest).” “Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and Queer/Disabled Existence,” in Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities, ed. Sharon Snyder, Brenda Jo Brueggemann,
and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (New York: Modern Language Association of America,
2002), 94.

[3] For more on the anxieties generated by queer liberalism, see David Eng, Judith Halberstam,
and José Esteban Muñoz, “What’s Queer About Queer Studies Now?,” Social Text 23 (2005):
1–17. Like Santiago Solis, I use “hetero-corporo-normativity” to highlight the interrelated
logics of able-bodiedness and heterosexuality. “Snow White and the Seven ‘Dwarfs’— Queerrcipped,” Hypatia 22 (2007): 129. I add “homo” to this term to mark the potential
for sexual minorities to participate in these normativities.

[4] This list is adapted from one generated by Carrie Sandahl, “Queering the Crip or Crippling
the Queer? Intersections of Queer and Crip Identities in Solo Autobiographical Perform-
ances,” GLQ 9 (2003): 26. There are, of course, important differences between these two
populations. As Ellen Samuels notes, the commonalities are strained when issues such as
visibility and coming out are factored into the analogy for there are a number of disabilities
that are not optically obvious. “My Body, My Closet: Invisible Disability and the Limits of
Coming-out Discourse,” GLQ 9 (2003): 233–55. Thus, while many of the disability issues
discussed here involve physical impediments created by human-designed architecture, I
understand “disability” as a category of identification that encompasses more than physical
impairment.

[6] “Genderqueer” often refers to individuals who refuse traditional sexual and gender markers such as “woman” or “man,” and the attendant gender expectation with these categories.


[8] Ibid., xix.

[9] Ibid., 36.

[10] Ibid., 35.


[14] While not considered in the text, two strands of inquiry in communication studies are notable exceptions to this rule. First, numerous essays have dealt with the connection of memory, identity, and place/space in venues such as museums and memorial sites. Second, critics concerned with counterpublics have taken up the issues of rhetoric and space in a sustained fashion. Most notably, Phaedra Pezzullo’s ethnographic study of toxic tours poignantly captures the transformative possibilities of cultural performances in the spaces of corporate pollution. *Toxic Tourism: Rhetorics of Pollution, Travel, and Environmental Justice* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2007). My essay complements this work by attending to the mundane production of identity in the unremarkable spaces of everyday life.


[16] Ibid., 40.

[17] Ibid., 43.


[37] Ibid., 189.

[38] Ibid., 192.


[40] Chess et al., “Calling all Bathroom,” 191.


[44] Ibid., 194.

[45] Ibid., 193.

[46] Ibid., 193.

[47] Ibid., 194.

[48] Ibid., 194.


[54] Ibid., 21.

[55] Ibid., 21.


[57] Ibid., 201.

[58] Ibid., 201.

[59] Ibid., 200.

[60] Ibid., 200.


[62] Ibid., 33.

[63] Ibid., 31.

[64] Ibid., 35.

[65] “PISSAR Mission and Goals.”


[68] Ibid., 230.

[71] Ibid., 30.
[72] “PISSAR Mission and Goals.”
[74] Ibid., 184.
[76] Ibid., 191, 201.
[78] Ibid.
[84] Ibid., 224.