Mapping disability politics through cyborg coalitions

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Abstract

This essay aims to craft intersections between the figure of the cyborg and disability that part from the usual ones. I will frame disability advocacy through the concept of "cyborg politics", as proposed by Donna J. Haraway in her famous Cyborg Manifesto. I will discern two possible meanings of it, affinity and avidity. I will examine how affinity is performed within disability identity and politics, mentioning the positioning of Deaf advocacy too. Afterwards, I will most extensively frame the concept of avidity, presenting an example of restrooms politics (PISSAR) in which disabled and trans/genderqueer people collaborated. I will also examine how this last intersection let emerge additional concerns, especially rooted in gender normativity. In conclusion, I will underline the positive impacts that a mobile politics, based on affinity and avidity, had (and can still have) for disability advocacy.

Keywords: restrooms, Cyborg Manifesto, advocacy, gender, Deaf community.

1. Introduction

"If coalition is uncomfortable", Bernice Johnson Reagon wonders, "why is it necessary?" (1983, 349). Through several examples, we will attempt to frame the potentialities of coalitions, as outlined by Donna J. Haraway, with regards to disability politics.

This paper serves a twofold purpose; firstly, it attempts to open a conversation between the cyborg trope and Disability Studies and advocacy, that will posit disabled people in the political realm. Therefore, we will build the dialogue upon cyborg politics, a famous concept extracted by Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto*, which entails coalitions based on *affinity* or *avidity*. We will observe its efficacy and outcomes not within feminism, as she envisioned, but about disability movements. We will mention the cross-disability movement as an epitome of *affinity*, and we will briefly discuss the concept also in relation to Deaf advocacy. Then, most extensively, we will put *avidity* to test through the collision with People In Search of Safe and Accessible Restrooms (PISSAR). Situated at the University of California in the early 2000s, the group emerged as a platform participated by genderqueer/trans and disabled people.

Secondly, we will be able to observe how cyborg politics can be fruitful both for political and for epistemological outcomes; briefly, with regards to disabled and Deaf politics, and then specifically to restroom politics. For example, the encounters that occurred in the latter can provide interesting insights on gender structures. We will consider the intertwining of disabled accessibility, childcare concerns, safety for gender-nonconforming bodies, and menstruation issues. Thanks to this project, we will be able to unravel *which* bodies are assumed to do *what*.

We will rely on disability scholars situated in the Global North, and especially employ Alison Kafer's *Feminist Queer Crip* (2013) – both because she was a PISSAR member and for her insistence on the couplings between cyborg theory and Disability Studies.

Methodologically, it is also important to signal asymmetry in the essay; while trans/genderqueer advocacy takes part in the PISSAR project, our focus will be disability.

In the first paragraph, we will briefly sketch how, in the majority of cases, intersections between cyborg studies and disability studies have been crafted mutually overlooking the political premises. In particular, disabled people evoked along with the cyborg often underwent this depoliticization. Still, there have been attempts in Disability Studies to employ the *Manifesto* more creatively, and we will follow this path too; we will address its political nature and employ it as a theoretical framework in the following paragraphs.

In the second paragraph we will examine more closely Haraway's cyborg politics; firstly, when it is based on *affinity*. In particular, we will examine its relationship with identity politics. Afterwards, we will connect the concept to disability advocacy. It could be referred to shared political claims among people with different impairments, but also to particular forms of alliance and identification, as emerges from d/Deaf community.

In the second part of the essay, we will focus on a cyborg politics based instead on *avidity*, framing it also through Rosi Braidotti's Introduction to the *Manifesto*. As mentioned above, we will employ as an example a project about restrooms, which truly represent a political space. In the third and fourth paragraphs, we will, therefore, present PISSAR's origin, the aims conceived by its members, and the connections established around the campus which highlighted additional compelling concerns. We will underline how the coalition can be uncomfortable, and how it functions as an important tool.

In the last paragraph, we will pinpoint the importance of analyses that intersect gender and disability issues. Respecting PISSAR's aim to theorize "from the body", we will see how – doing politics around and inside the restroom – gender normativity can be enlightened and debated. We will also wonder about a destabilizing role played by disabled people towards its structures.

2. ACyborgManifesto©_Meets_DisabilityStudies

After the publishing of the *Cyborg Manifesto* in 1985, several disability scholars have addressed cyborg theory. However, the debate has not reached Italian Disability Studies; the reading of the *Manifesto* through the lens of disability represents then a novelty in this context[1]. The critical analyses offered by disability scholars are fuelled by the proposed overlapping of the cyborg and the disabled person. This identification is sketched directly by Haraway in the text:

> Perhaps paraplegics and other severely handicapped people can (and sometimes do) have the most intense experiences of complex hybridization with other communication devices. Anne McCaffrey's pre-feminist *The Ship Who Sang* (1969) explored the consciousness of a cyborg, hybrid of girl's brain and complex machinery, formed after the birth of a severely handicapped child (1991a, 178)[2].

Haraway did not elaborate further the hint over the years, but it nonetheless became quite a trope in cyborg studies, sometimes collectively named "medical cyborg" (see Clarke 2002, 35-36; Gray *et al*. 1995, 2-4; Gray and Mentor 1995, 223; Hayles 1999, 84, 115; Caronia 1996; Clark 2003, 16; Yehya 2004, 35)[3]. Disabled people have been often intended as "self-evident" cyborgs – and quickly, the overlapping entered mainstream media (see Kafer 2013, ch. 5).

Disability is often employed, in cyborg theory, as support for discourses on prosthetics, and dealt with abstractly. It is mentioned as an illustration of a body-technology interaction; the materiality of this cohabitation is seldom taken up (see Mitchell and Snyder 1997; Jain 1990; Garland-Thomson 2002; Sobchack 2004; Siebers 2008, 63-66; Serlin

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[1] An exception is represented by Parisi 2016. In addition, Monceri briefly frames disabled athletes as cyborgs (2012a, 36). On the fragmentation of Italian Disability Studies see Ead. 2017, 46. Since I situate myself in the Italian context, in some passages I will report in the notes some regulatory and advocacy references.

[2] For an account of McCaffrey's novel ableist premises, see Cheyne 2013 and Cherney 1999.

[3] In addition, a new volume has just been published, edited by Gray, Mentor and Figueroa-Sarriera. "Medical cyborgs" are more extensively debated than before, and it includes a chapter by a disabled author (2020).

2006; Reeve 2012; Betcher 2001). Most importantly, when disabled people are recalled in cyborg studies, disability politics is rarely mentioned – as in Haraway's quote. In some cases, they are also recalled personally, as in the reference of Christopher Reeve made by Chris Hables Gray. In this case, Kafer pinpoints, Reeve's "cyborg politics" is character-ised as a "unified front of invalid cyborgs", and his quest for a cure seems transversal to disabled people (Gray 2001, 1; see Kafer 2013, 105-115). Even though cyborg politics is presented as anything but "unified" and prone to wholeness in the *Manifesto* – as we will see – in Gray's viewpoint the disabled community applies it differently compared to other members of society (see 2001, 30, 200).

Disability scholars have been both voicing concerns and praising for the potentialities in framing the experiences of disability through cyborg theory[4]. However, they employed the figure mostly as a representation of bodies interfacing with technology, and passages from *Manifesto* have been extrapolated accordingly. Just as disability has been inci-dentally picked up in cyborg studies (McRuer 2006, 224n32), disability studies have mostly returned the favour, overlooking several aspects of the *Manifesto*. While disabled people as political actors have been quite absent from the cyborg desk, cyborg politics has been rarely taken up by disability scholars, with notable exceptions as Kafer, Ingunn Moser (2000), and James L. Cherney (1999)[5].

> [T]here are few disability studies pieces that focus exclusively on the figure. […] [T]he cyborg as a critical intervention in feminist theory is often not the cyborg that appears in disability studies. Yet it is this cyborg we most need (Kafer 2013, 105).

This practice of cutting-out is probably due to the nature of the *Manifesto*; it is so dense that invites every reader to treat it like a hyper-text and follow specific links. In our case,

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[4] Here is presented a substantial list of references, albeit incomplete: see Reeve 2012; Shildrick 2002, 121-128; 2015; Garland-Thomson 1997, 114-115; Mintz 2007, 138-140; Kafer 2013, ch. 5; 2009; Adams *et al.* 2015; Gough 2015; Williams 2019. We include also authors active in Deaf Studies as Schriempf 2012 and Cherney 1999; on the differences and common points with Disability studies see Burch, Kafer, 2010.
[5] More complex interactions with the cyborg are also briefly prayed, for example, in Betcher 2001, 37-38, McRuer 2006, 159 and Kurzman 2001, 382.

we will focus on the embedded cyborg politics, based on coalitions, proposed by Haraway.

Primarily, we will, therefore, acknowledge the *Manifesto*'s political premises, "announce[d]" since the very "opening paragraph" (Sofoulis 2015, 9).

> This chapter is an effort to build an ironic political myth faithful to feminism, socialism, and materialism. […] At the centre of my ironic faith, my blasphemy, is the image of the cyborg (Haraway 1991a, 149).

As Haraway explained, "the manifesto is not politically programmatic in the sense of proposing a priority of options", but it was nevertheless rooted in the political struggles of the time, and proposes a strategy for change (1997, 14; see Lynes and Symes, 2016, 124-126). "The cyborg", Haraway stated, "gives us our politics". The figure of the cyborg – approached in a "utopian" and embedded way at the same time – encouraged non-innocence, partiality, and irony (Haraway 1991a, 149-151). A fundamental part of the political response proposed by the author was "coalition", whose two declinations will be examined in the following paragraphs.

Besides, Haraway's political project did not happen in virtual reality. Despite the speculative and ironic slant of the text, and the resulting varied readings (see Cohen Shabot 2007), the cyborg subject emerged as intensively embodied and embedded (see Haraway 1991a, 180-181; 1991b). Haraway's explicit aim was to "explor[e] what it means to be embodied in high-tech worlds", especially concerning the flexibility of "bodily boundaries" (1991a, 174, 169). What she specifically chased for feminism was, in fact, a "needed *body politics*", and we will draw on this urge as well (Ivi, 174, emphasis mine).

Hence, despite some critical premises of the encounter between disabled people and the cyborg, the multiplicity of several essential issues in the *Manifesto* encourages us to continue the "cross-pollination" with respect to disability (and Deaf) politics (see Kafer 2013, 116; Sofoulis 2015).

3. Affine cyborgs for disability and Deaf politics

Cyborg politics, based on coalitions, has a twofold development. In this paragraph, we will examine the first meaning, *affinity*, and we will connect it to alliances within disability advocacy. Haraway clarified that coalition had to be constituted through "affinity" – and therefore "not identity" – with people related to each other "by choice" and not "by blood" (1991, 155; Threadcraft 2016, 125-133)[6]. The concept of affinity derives by chemistry: it means "the appeal of one chemical nuclear group for another" (Haraway 1991, 155; see Lackie 2013, 17).

She employed the concept to problematize the essentialist foundation of every identity politics (see Haraway 1991a, 155-157; Castiello 2012).

> Since cyborgs negate the unity and/or singularity underpinning conventional identity politics, it is safe to say that cyborg politics will not be grounded in pre-discursive essentials (shared identity, natural features, and so on) (Lloyd 2015, 154).

Haraway attempted to overcome the feeling of stagnation she recorded within feminist politics, with the aim to escape two dead-end prospects: "endless splitting [and] a new essential unity" (1991a, 155). "We do not need a totality in order to work well", she stated, and therefore it would have been preferable to drop out dreams of "wholeness" (Ivi, 173).

Consequently, the political subjects she invoked were the heralds of "multiple" and "frayed" identities (Ivi, 177; see McRuer 2006, 63, 159).

> What kind of politics could embrace partial, contradictory, permanently unclosed constructions of personal and collective selves? (Haraway 1999, 157).

Cyborgs, Moser asserts, tend to craft "a family of composite and *partially* connected subjects and actors" (2000, 232-233). They tend to "define themselves by identity labels

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[6] Haraway was particularly indebted here to Chela Sandoval; "lines of affinity" are comprised in "the notion of mestizaje in the writings of people of color". See her essay in Gray *et al.* 1995, 407-422.

[…] always for strategic purposes", while on a large scale they are drawn "together based on common interest and lifestyle" (Carlson 2001, 306)[7].

The debate on the political efficacy of a strategy based on affinity compared to one based on identity is still open, and the conceptual premises are not crystal clear either (see Lloyd, 2015; Ferrando 2019, 153-154; Heyes 2016). In fact, in order to build a convergence based on affinities, the parts must share some discreet traits on their inside; without identity, there cannot be affinity. As Lloyd and Stacy Alaimo highlight:

> Assuming that chemical nuclear groups share essential qualities that define them, it might be assumed that affinity, in coalitional terms, is essentialist, grounded in a pre-existing identity. Indeed, as Stacy Alaimo notes […], "affinity (…often slides into essentialist definitions of 'woman')" (Lloyd 2015, 156)[8].

Therefore, *affinity* does not make *identity* implode; but rather they conceptually co-assemble and disassemble one another. The foster can contribute to trouble the latter, to interfere and draw out "unexpected directions" in the political realm (Moser 2000, 235). In place of a solution, Haraway's concept could represent a multifaced theoretical tool helpful to raise even *more* questions on identity issues – in our case, within disability politics and Deaf[9] advocacy, as we will see in the following sections.

On a preliminary level, affinities could do justice to the permeability and porosity of the category of 'disability' itself, as particularly claimed in cultural and critical accounts of it (see Davis 2014; 1999; Kafer 2013, 11-12; Meekosha and Shuttleworth, 2009). We could seek a "way out of the maze of dualisms" – affinity *or* identity politics? – and promote a flexible interpretation of the terms instead, which does not require a clear-cut refusal *or* embrace of 'disability' (Haraway 1991a, 181). We would follow, in this sense,

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[7] I do not entirely agree with the author, who states that Haraway's political strategy aspires to let every identity claim implode ("race", "gender", "class", "sexual orientation"). On the subject, see Haraway 1997.
[8] See also Sandilands 1999, 105.
[9] The capital 'D' signals that we are not simply referring to deaf and hard-of-hearing people, but to a specific community among them that values their difference and rarely sees it as a disability. Even if "some deaf people and deaf studies scholars" are actually "moving away from the 'big D/little d' convention" (Kafer 2013, 199, n. 9), we will employ it to follow Cherney terminology (1999, 26-28). See Davis 1999, 511, n. 1; Lane in Davis 2006, 79-92; Brueggemann in Ivi, 321-330 and 1999.

Robert McRuer (see 2006, 202) and Dennis Carlson, who propose a non-exclusionary practice. Crip theory, as McRuer states, involves:

> 1. Claiming disability and a disability identity politics while nonetheless nurturing a necessary contestatory relationship to that identity (Ivi, 71).

Carlson, for example, integrates cyborg affinity with Judith Butler's analyses of identity, in order to supply queer theory with extra-mobility; he asks us to "reconcile identity politics and post-identity politics [and learn] to affirm identity and troubling it simultaneously" (2001, 308)[10].

On a wider level, "cyborg politics" could be "a useful resource for disability studies scholars and activists crafting a movement among people with different impairments" (Kafer 2013, 106). The approach of a cross-disability movement emerged in the Seventies and implied the overtaking of previously mostly fragmented advocacy[11]. It is clarified by Simi Linton in this quote:

> We are all bound together, not by this list of our collective symptoms but by the *social and political circumstances that have forged us as a group*. We have found one another and found a voice to express not despair at our fate but outrage at our social positioning (1998, 4, emphasis mine).

This approach "would not require an amputee, a blind person, and a psychiatric survivor to present their identities and experiences as the same, [and would] encourage the formation of flexible coalitions to achieve shared goals" (Kafer 2013, 106).

The "shared goals" among people with different bodily variations, various degrees of pain, several mobility modes, diverse experience of the space around them – and so on – can encompass multiple directions. Disabled people, as stated by Tobin Siebers, "tend to

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[10] For extensive analyses on identity politics by disability scholars see Davis 2014; Mallett and Runwick-Cole, 2014, ch. 6; Shakespeare 2014, 92-110.

[11] On disability advocacy history in the USA, see Barnartt 2009.

organize themselves according to healthcare needs, information sharing, and political advocacy" (2008, 66). Some activists do not find the approach useful, as it risks to homogenise very different experiences and levels of discrimination (see Friedner *et al.* 2019; Shakespeare 2014, 99-101). Nonetheless, the cross-disability approach, based on affinities among the participants, has for example accomplished "strong civil rights victories", a renegotiation of purely medical-individual accounts of disability, and interfered in the cultural scripts of normalcy/normate and compulsory able-bodiedness/mindedness (Linton 1998, 5; see Oliver 1990; Davis 2006, 3-16; Garland-Thomson 1997; McRuer 2006; Kafer 2013). Donna Reeve (2012, 107) and Margrit Shildrick, too, evoke Haraway' proposal:

> What she recommended in place of identity politics was the pursuit of to build temporary and partial affinities, *ad hoc* alliances that would give leverage to socio-political claims without solidifying and policing the reductive coils of sameness and difference. The very diversity of disabilities demands a similarly sensitive temporal approach that recognizes broad overlapping interests but refuses the putative safety of naming oneself as a member of a fixed and bounded category (2012, 33).

Besides, a cross-disability politics could proceed in parallel with more specific actions and, as explained above, should not necessarily rest on a monolithic view of the category of 'disability'.

Concerning Deaf politics, we are going to problematise Cherney's rejection of the cyborg (1999). He connected the *Manifesto* to the debate sparked by the diffusion of the cochlear implant (especially in the Eighties and Nineties) in the d/Deaf community[12]. Cherney's critical accounts of the cyborg were therefore based on its evoked merge with technology and on the "unnecessary risk" represented by its politics (Ivi, 33). On the latter point, Cherney observed that "Haraway's cyborg threatens identity politics at its core"; by contrast, he stated, identity politics might actually benefit the Deaf community agenda.

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[12] See for example the position of the National Association of the Deaf (USA): https://www.nad.org/about-us/faq/ (retrieved 06 August 2020).

The emphasis on their cultural specificity – which may even lead to a separatist perspective – could in fact guarantee them "real political gains [and] cultural awareness" (Ivi, 32-33).

However, as became clear throughout the analysis, Haraway's move was not simply directed to post-identity politics, and regarding Deaf people, it could account for at least two existing forms of convergences. Firstly, a form of affinity is for example embodied by Children of Deaf Adults (CODA), who are hearing and nonetheless feel a sense of belonging to the Deaf community (see Kafer 2013, 13; Davis 2000; Hoffmeister 2008). In Cherney's account too, they could legitimately be considered participants to Deaf culture (1999, 26-27)[13]. In addition, their liminal positioning between the Deaf and the hearing world can be productive (see Brueggemann 2006; 2009).

> Every Coda leads two lives: one as Coda and one as a hearing person. […] It is possible that the contribution Codas can make is to help clarify the definition of culturally Deaf or the word "deaf". […] The binary relationship we have established by the terms Deaf and Hearing must he depolarized (Hoffmeister 2008, 191-193).

Furthermore, some d/Deaf people do not identify themselves as disabled, but rather as a linguistic minority (see Cherney 1999, 27; Davis 1999, 503; Burch and Kafer, 2010)[14]. Yet, they might still choose to claim the category to advocate for their rights and in solidarity with disabled people, with whom they

> share a history of oppression, discrimination, and stigmatization because of their differences from a perceived "normal" body. As a group, Deaf and disabled people can work together to fight discrimination, and they have done so since the birth of the modern disability rights movement in the late 1960s. Thus, while some Deaf people may be opposed to […] seeing deafness as a disability, they may simultaneously be

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[13] Some scholars explore more widely the risks and the potentialities of a "nondisabled claim to be crip" (McRuer 2006, 36; Sandahl 2003, 27). A similar claim is also made by Charlotte Cooper in her "social model approach to fatness" (cit. in Shakespeare 2014, 102).
[14] Deaf people convergences with linguistic minorities claims could rightfully be framed in the next paragraph on cyborg avidity. See Murray 2015.

willing to identify themselves as disabled or to ally themselves with disabled people in order to work toward social changes and legal protections that would benefit both populations (Kafer 2013, 75-76).

Cherney concluded his essay twisting the *Manifesto* final lines; "We would rather be Deaf than cyborg" (1999, 34). However legitimate the rejection of the cochlear implant may be – here epitomized by the figure of the cyborg[15] – Deaf people could be cyborg-like on a different, more productive, level; politically. CODA members feel more affine and allegiant than "simple" hearing allies, and some d/Deaf people "partially" adhere to the 'disabled' label for strategic and political purposes. In conclusion, the richness of Deaf cultural participation and the mobility of their political advocacy can embody cyborg co-alitions based on affinities.

4. Avid cyborgs for restroom politics

When Haraway mentioned the concept of affinity, she recalled the term "avidity" too, which also has a biochemical background and refers to the "strength of binding, usually of a small molecule with multiple binding sites by a larger" (Lackie 2013, 60). Even if 'affinity' and 'avidity' partially overlap, with the latter term we are referring here to the second possible interpretation of cyborg politics. In fact, in this paragraph, we will examine the "striving" to build transversal, non-innocent "connections" on specific issues (Moser 2000, 232).

"My cyborg myth – Haraway told us – is about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities. […] We might learn *new* couplings, *new* coalitions" (1991a, 154, 170, emphasis mine)[16]. In this perspective, as Catriona Sandilands sums up, the strategy aimed to "constructs connections among struggles that may be not only diverse, but opposed to one another in many respects" (1999, 100). This aspect is also high-

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[15] Antonio Caronia, too, linked the cochlear implant users with the cyborg (1996). See also Schriempf 2012.
[16] In *Staying with the Trouble*, Haraway will elaborate further this collaborative networking, insisting on the acknowledgment of non-human entities as well (2016).

lighted in the Introduction of the Italian edition by Braidotti. Therefore, Harawayan politics was not only directed to respect "diversity among women", but it also opened up to gather around "precise programmatic issues" (Braidotti 2018, my transl.; see Åsberg 2018).

> In support of transversal alliances, of grouping around particular issues, and opposed to party politics or monolithic confrontations, Haraway proposes a politics of mobility. […] As a political manifesto, [the essay] renews the language of political struggles, distancing from the tactics of frontal oppositions and replacing it with a more specific and scattered strategy, based on irony, oblique attacks, coalitions based on affinities, etc. (Braidotti 2018, 21-25, my transl.).

Haraway proposed a few real-life examples of "constructed unities" that built "effective oppositional strategies". Three of them represented political actions carried on in the Eighties against nuclear arms and in favour of demilitarisation: Fission Impossible, the Livermore Active Group, and the protest in Santa Rita jail which united guards and arrested demonstrators (Haraway 1991a, 154-155). She also proposed a coalition-to-be; feminists working from "the belly of the monster" that is technoscience, and "high-tech cowboys" working in Silicon Valley (Ead. 1997, 6; 1991a, 169). In a later text, *When Species Meet*, Haraway sketched a further case, located in Arizona; The Second Chance Prison Canine Program, "a group of advocates for people with disabilities, prison inmates, and animal welfare [that founded] a prison pet partnership program to address issues common to these three groups" (2008, 330). Thus, this framework could be useful to both *analyse* and *promote* transversal alliances on themes and among diverse communities. As Moser highlights,

> [Cyborgs] get involved, interfere, make communication and stories turn in new and unexpected directions. They create surprising connections and strange bedfellows. […] [T]hey are there to help us produce something new and different (2000, 235).

Specifically, in the following example, genderqueer, trans and disabled people gathered around "particular issues" (Braidotti 2018, 21) concerning *restrooms*.

Spaces are, of course, never neutral. In Haraway's words, "spaces" – as much as "bodies" – are not "sacred in themselves" and can endure multiple interfacing (1991a, 163). From now on, we will be able to observe various possibilities concerning how bodies and spaces can be combined in ways that seemed unlikely before.

Restrooms, as our space of interest, are crossroads of issues as participation, exclusion, norms, violence, public/private intersections, resistance, difference, in/equality (see Cavanagh 2010; Martin 2001, 94-95; Molotch and Nòren 2010; Bank 1990; Kafer 2013, 154; Casalini and Voli, 2015). It is no surprise that these "seemingly banal places" have been invested several times in history by the struggles of activists; they certainly are "contested terrain" (West 2010, 158; Molotch and Nòren 2010, 184). As Judith Plaskow pinpoints in her essay:

> Almost all the social justice movements of the last century in the United States have included struggles for adequate toilet facilities as an at least implicit part of their agendas: the civil rights movement, feminism, disability rights, and rights for transgender persons. […] The absence of toilet facilities has signaled to blacks, to women, to workers, to people with disabilities, to transgender people, and to homeless people that they are outsiders to the body politic and that there is no room for them in public space (2008, 52, 61).

Hence, few places are imbued with politics as restrooms. With this history in mind, Kafer exhorts us to "recognize the possibility for queercrip alliances in the space of the toilet" (2013, 155). The aim fits quite well in her general project to fight against the constant depoliticization of disability[17]. As Plaskow states, "bathroom activism has the potential to bring together very diverse interest groups" (2008, 52).

Our example of *avidity* is represented by the group People In Search of Safe and Accessible Restrooms (PISSAR), and by other interests which gravitated around it. PISSAR is "a coalition of UC-Santa Barbara undergrads, grad students, staff, and community members" which has been formed by chance in 2003:

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[17] Besides Kafer' work, see also Monceri, who questions the role of disability in the unfolding of political participation (2012b).

Meeting for the disability caucus and for the transgender caucus were scheduled in adjacent rooms. When only a few people showed up for both meetings, we decided to hold a joint session. Everyone in the room suddenly began talking about the possibilities of a genderqueer/disability coalition, and PISSAR was born (Chess *et al.* 2008, 217).

The group was determined "to raise awareness about what safe and accessible bathrooms are", "to map" the "accessible and/or gender-neutral bathrooms", and to ask for more bathrooms if needed. They started to distribute flyers throughout the campus in order to encourage people's contribution:

CALLING ALL RESTROOM REVOLUTIONARIES:

People In Search of Safe and Accessible Restrooms (PISSAR) needs you! We are a coalition of queer, genderqueer, and disabled people working toward greater awareness of the need for safe and accessible bathrooms on campus and in the dorms. Be a restroom revolutionary! Join PISSAR as we develop a checklist for genderqueer safe spaces and create teams to map safe and accessible bathrooms around campus (Ivi, 216).

PISSAR carried out an embedded practice; the members "ke[pt] [their] bodies involved in [the] project" (Ivi, 219). After developing a checklist based on their needs (Ivi, 230-233), they patrolled the campus to check the existing bathrooms and their conditions regarding accessibility and safety. During this mapping process – a practical counterpart of the feminist cartography? – they were also able to observe other people's reactions around the campus. At the same time, queer and disabled folks patrolling together managed to see first-hand the problems encountered by the other community (Ivi, 227). Their whole project centred on an embodied political subject, and they did not shy away from evoking bodily functions:

PISSAR's work is an attempt at embodying theory, at theorizing from body. […] The body evoked in the checklist is a real body, a menstruating body, a body that pees and shits, a body that may not match its gender identity, a body subjected too

often to violence and ridicule, a body that may have parts missing or parts that don't function "properly", a body that might require assistance (Ivi 219, 225).

The chosen name itself, PISSAR, worked as a reminder to get straight to the point, in order to "avoid abstraction" (*Ibidem*).

They recognized how talking about restrooms might have seemed "politically dangerous", or "trivial" and "irrelevant". They precisely wanted to challenge the majority's assumption that "political activism is […] about ideas, not about who pees where" (Ivi, 220). Their analyses revolved, in fact, around a fundamental question, shared by both groups and unequivocally political: "what kind of bodies are assumed in the design" of standard restrooms (Ivi, 216-217)? In fact, disabled people do not always find accessible bathrooms (see Mairs 1996, 95) – however mandatory following the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990)[18] – while genderqueer and trans people, but also anyone who is not perceived as gender-aligned, are at risk of harassment, violence, or arrest in single-gender bathrooms[19].

The potentiality of "bathroom activism" was quite clear to PISSAR[20]; as they were able to notice right away, it represented a space at the heart of various groups' concerns in the campus. They got to know, for example, Aunt Flo[21] and the Plug Patrol, a group which made sure to maintain the tampon/pad dispensers in the bathroom functioning and stocked and used the profit to fund student activities. They joined "their effort to make the campus not only a safer and more accessible place to pee but also to bleed". They were also committed to "include issues of childcare"; the presence of changing tables in the stalls could be of interest of many parents on campus (Chess *et al*. 2008, 218). These concerns were reflected in the checklist they produced; for example, they included points that asked on the "width of the door", if "the bathroom [was] marked as unisex", if the

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[18] For the Italian context, see d.P.R. 503/1996.

[19] Usually trans and genderqueer people, but also intersex people, dykes and femme men. See Chess *et al*. 2008, 223; Munt 2001, 102-103; Molotch and Nòren 2010, 192; Trotta 2016; Bender-Baird 2016; Casalini and Voli, 2015.

[20] As Kafer explains, similar initiatives that put together disabled and trans/genderqueer people concerns in the space of the bathroom have already started in other campuses, as Brandeis University and University of Washington (2013, 157).

[21] It is a popular nickname for periods.

tampon/pad machine was broken or empty and if there was a changing table (Ivi, 230-233).

"Restroom activism", as Kafer sums up, "is an ideal platform from which to launch broader coalition work"; these alliances let emerge the insufficiency of movements based only on *one* identity (2013, 220).

> Coalitions of feminists, queers, and crips lobbying not only for broadly accessible
> toilets but also affordable and accessible diapers may not yet be familiar, but I hope
> it is starting to sound necessary (Chess *et al.* 2008, 157).

These encounters permitted PISSAR to enlarge their analyses on "the assumptions that are made about genderqueer and disabled bodies" (Ivi, 218). We will observe, in the next paragraph, what those intersections can tell us about gender stereotypes too.

5. "Difficult conversations" in the restroom

As Braidotti explains in *Posthuman Knowledge*, it is really hard to enact "transversal connections", but we all have to keep "engaging in difficult conversations on what troubles us" (2019, 19). In her proposal of affirmative ethics, the weaving of diverse political subjects "need[s] to be [constantly] composed and enacted" (Ivi, 53). "Coalition work", as Johnson Reagon reminds us, "is not work done in your home. Coalition work has to be done in the streets" (1983, 346). What about the coalition work of our interest, crafted in restrooms? As we will see, it has been a fruitful method.

During their work together, PISSAR's members came to know the difficulties in building coalitions, especially from the two communities they felt to belong. On one side, the Lgbt+ community has left trans and *visibly* queer people undefended, and this made the conjunction with disabled people useful. On the other side, the community has also "internalized the larger culture's ableism", which has firstly made connections like this one difficult and secondly has led to further marginalization of queer people with illnesses and disabilities (Chess *et al.* 2008, 221-224; Brown 2017, 165). They have in fact always

"labored to untangle" their experiences from "medicalization and pathologization" (West 2010, 156).

At the same time, the encounter was complicated by the desire of some disabled people – constantly cast as deviant – to "assert [their] 'normalcy' in other aspects of [their] lives, including [their] sex lives"; this alliance seemed to them pointlessly "politically risky" (Chess *et al.* 2008, 224; West 2010, 156). This fear has sometimes led to "homophobia and heterocentrism" within broader disability advocacy, especially from straight/cisgender disabled people (Chess *et al.* 2008, 224).

All these difficulties in developing a workbench were explained, in the PISSAR foundational report, with the "embodied shame" felt by both groups: "the shame that we feel in our bodies and the shame that arises out of the experience and appearance of our bodies" (Ivi, 225). It was, then, the acknowledgement of this shared embodied experience, and the debate around their body needs – and how they are sometimes overlooked – that was able to "lift [them] out of this polarization" (*Ibidem*). Through the patrolling and the confront with each other, as already mentioned, they were finally able to get how *access* can be rough for other members too (Ivi, 227).

> Recognizing bathroom access as a site for coalition building can potentially move us *beyond* the physical space of bathrooms. […] Indeed, part of the pleasure and possibility of restroom revolutions is that they offer the opportunity to expand the terms of our movements and our theories (Kafer 2013, 157).

As we have read in a Sandilands' quote, affinity politics can be assembled also through struggles "opposed to one another" – as it happens to be, in many ways, among the members of the trans/genderqueer and the disabled communities.

6. Gender and disability through "restroom revolutionaries" experiences

Feminist, queer and disability scholar Kim Q. Hall strongly underlines the necessity of analyses on bodies that encompass both able-normativity and gender structures (2015,

255-261). An effective inquiry should include, then, how bodies *perform* – and at the same time *are subjected to* – gendered and disabled identities[22]. In addition, it has been claimed from many quarters how compulsory able-bodiedness/mindedness, heterosexual desires and gender dichotomy constantly co-construct each other – and subjects, from their parts, creatively intervene in those patterns (see McRuer 2006; Kafer 2013; Arfini 2010, 362). As Flavia Monceri states, the "ability/disability binary is at the basis also of the sex, gender and sexual binaries" (2012b, 64).

Intersections can – and should – be established also in the advocacy realm; Hall observes as sometimes trans activists have employed some accomplishments of the social model of disability as a theoretical and practical tool. They have, for example, "used state disability discrimination laws to locate the problems of exclusion and discrimination in the built and conceptual environment" rather than in their bodies (2015, 258).

Firstly, questions about gender cannot be avoided; PISSAR is talking about bodies, and how they navigate restrooms. This point emerges, for example, when they ask the chancellor for improvements on safety and accessibility on campus. Even if the members of the staff in the boardroom are not accustomed to gender identity issues, gender studies programmes, genderqueer/trans advocacy, and everything it entails, they are forced to enter the conversation, in order to understand a problem raised by members of the university community.

> Now, with the reality of bathrooms on the table, the chancellor needs some clarification about the differences between sex and gender. What he is saying is, "What kinds of bodies are we talking about here?" [We] facilitate an open and impolite conversation about pissing, shitting, and the organs that do those things, right there in the boardroom (Chess *et al*. 2008, 228).

Furthermore, the coalition itself can be epistemologically fecund for its members – and for whoever approaches the matter – in order to grab insights on the structures challenged by their bodies. We will take further PISSAR's aim to produce theory "from the

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[22] On the ways in which disability and gender interplay in women experiences see Mintz 2007. For a queer account of masculinity and disability see Serlin 2003. See also Morris 1993 and Clare 2015.

body"; a method rooted in feminism too, which bring us back to Haraway (1991a, 169; see Threadcraft 2016, 117-124). Obviously, the massive presence of binary restrooms represents in itself the popular view of human variation; only two possibilities are forecasted, and there is no space left for those who do not feel represented, or whose appearance does not *fit* in. Although, here we will focus on side-lined "details" that are enlightened through the disability and queer experiences and the rich coalitions emerged in the PISSAR project. The emerged hints exceed the space both of the campus and of the bathroom.

Firstly, the tampon/pad dispensers are an interesting locus of analysis. For example, Aunt Flo is concerned that they are usable, and similar initiatives are quite common in university campuses – mostly, the participants insist on tampons/pads affordability too[23]. These practised affinities reveal also the importance of space; where the dispensers are present, where they are not, and also where they are placed in the bathroom. It seems like

> the right to tampons and pads is reserved for people who use gender-specific women's rooms and can reach a lever hanging five feet from the ground (Chess *et al*. 2008, 218).

The absence of dispensers in disabled stalls mirrors the persistent assumption that disabled bodies are somehow degendered, and reminds us of the process of desexualisation they often endure (see Clare 2015, 121-151; Brown 2017; Neumeier 2015; Monceri 2012b, 65-66). On the other side, PISSAR's document highlights the need to include tampon/pad dispensers in gender-neutral restrooms as well. Not all those who menstruate are women, actually (see Chess *et al*. 2008, 218).

A second interesting intersection is made with parents' concerns; while PISSAR takes notes on the presence or absence of childcare commodities[24], we are left to wonder, again, on *spaces*. From this starting point, *where* do we imagine the necessity of changing tables in general? The debate on their presence in men restrooms has not ended yet in many

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[23] In Italy there are many similar campaigns across the country; for example, the one promoted by the feminist collective La MALA Educaciòn, at Bologna University.
[24] Obviously, their presence or absence also reveal the typical population we expect to find on campuses.

countries, and it has not always led to resulting legislation[25]. Do we expect that gender non-conforming people could actually be parents, and consequently picture a unisex bathroom with a changing table?[26].

Regarding the stalls for disabled people, the matter is more complicated. The debate principally parts in two directions; on one hand, changing facilities are sometimes placed in disabled stalls for reasons of space – which obviously causes longer waiting times for disabled people. On the other hand, parents of children and adults with disabilities rightfully advocate for adult-size changing facilities in every disabled stall. A third option seems absent in the debate; disabled *parents* might actually need to change their children, and the changing tables should be accessible to them as *carers*, not only as the assisted ones[27].

> Somebody with a chronic illness/invisible disability who has a baby/child may find accessible toilets with baby changers the *ideal* setup. The baby changers are at standing height, keeping in mind they were not designed for the use of a disabled parent, they are still helpful to some. However, a parent who's a wheelchair user may struggle with the standing height baby changer and […] aligning your wheelchair under the drop down changer may not even be realistic without the ample turning space (How Changing Places 2019).

Sometimes, it is pointed out that disabled people appear to be as a *third sex* in the restroom division. In fact, the accessible one is often located outside the female/male stalls, as a single-occupancy one – "as if disability was a trait powerful enough to obliterate gender, sex and sexuality" (Casalini and Voli, 2015, my transl.; see Brown 2017, 164; Neumeier 2015). As Sally Munt observes.

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[25] In Italy, for example, a draft law on the topic has been submitted to Senate, but it has not been debated yet; see d.d.l. Sen. 13/4/2018. The proposal has sparked the indignation of the philosopher Diego Fusaro, who found it "emasculating" (see Redazione, 10/05/2019).

[26] There are also other possibilities, as "family restrooms", but they are not widespread for now.

[27] See for example the websites of two companies that sells washroom facilities: Good Enough?, n.d., A Requirement?, 2018. See also reports and handbooks on accessible buildings: Coleman 2006, 363; Bright 2009, 29-30; Cooper *et. al.* 2009, 97-99; we conclude the list with the clear-cut statements in Greed 2003, 298-299: "Baby-changing units should *never* be placed in adapted lavatories assigned to people with disabilities. […] Changing tables should be mounted at *adult height*" (emphasis mine).

> Used by variously sexed individuals, the disabled toilet, with its generous full-length mirror, offers a space for reflection (2001, 102).

Should disabled people fight for their integration in female and male restrooms? At least who feels to fit in one or the other? As we have mentioned, disabled people are sometimes perceived as degendered, and stressing this point could open a conversation about these stereotypes. While genderqueer people are not interested in fitting male or female categories, some trans and/or disabled folks might actually prefer to reinforce their gendered identity – which is often questioned.

On the contrary, might this particular location of the disabled bodies empower them to trouble the cultural gender scripts (see Molotch and Nòren 2010, 17; Casalini and Voli, 2015)? Kafer is quite sure about the path to take and clarifies how problematic would be to answer affirmatively to the first option.

> The problem with that answer, though, is that it fixes—in both senses of the word—the problem of access too narrowly; rather than transform existing structures, both physical and political, it merely argues for including more people within them (by excluding others). Not only does it overlook the reality that some disabled people are also, simultaneously, trans and genderqueer people […], it also forecloses on the possibility that disability studies and activism could ally with other movements (2013, 156).

As highlighted by Isaac West, PISSAR advocacy can challenge, as a final point, "the homo/hetero-corporo-normativity" of the spaces they practice (2010, 158). Their initial contestation of the inadequacy of restrooms can actually lead to a larger contestation of the sites they do not want to be forced to enter. These locations might be binary, small, unsafe stalls – but also binary, narrow, uncomfortable gender structures. This alliance is evoked also by Munt; as a butch, the disabled toilet represents for her "a stress-free location, a queer space […], an interval from the gendered public environment" (2001, 102).

These alternative political stances appear to embody Monceri's distinction between dissent and transgression. "Dissent" qualifies as a "strategical tool to renegotiate rules that are nonetheless recognized" – and would mean, in our case, that disabled people

choose to struggle for inclusion in toilet gender binarism. The move undertaken by PIS-SAR could instead be framed as "transgression", which "does not imply a renegotiation of existing rules, but the claim to establish new [ones]" (2012a, 30). With their bodies, already marked as "transgressive", they assert new possibilities (see Ivi, 36-39; Cossutta *et al.*, 2018).

7. Conclusions

As emerged throughout the article, coalitional politics is a struggle; "the *benefits* […] are bound up in the *difficulties*", because it is never simply an "additive process" (Kafer 2013, 150; Sandilands 1999, 106). We have conceptually split cyborg politics in two variations, affinity and avidity. We have proposed several interpretations of it centred on disability political alliances, mentioning the criticism that each example entails but mostly focussing on the potentialities. We have observed how disability politics – either explicitly or not – fruitfully enacts cyborg politics demands, originally meant for feminism.

In the first part, we have mentioned how the disability movement itself can be framed as affinity politics. Also, the concept can represent the liminal position of some people; CODA with respect to Deaf culture, and the latter with respect to disability politics. As Deaf advocacy appears to be a suitable interlocutor to cyborg politics, these declinations could also be examined more extensively. In the second part, following Braidotti's interpretation of cyborg politics, we have debated avidity. As exemplified by our main example, the PISSAR project, the concept entails couplings crafted upon particular, shared concerns.

Can a coalitional politics of this kind be effective? Or is this particularization detrimental in the end? Whether a politics of affinity could actually be quite resistant – as exemplified by the cross-disability movement, and partially by the connections between disability and Deaf advocacy – its *avid* counterpart can be scary. These alliances may shift; they do not represent "inevitable convergences", and therefore are often "transient and temporary" (Sandilands 1999, 101). The possibility to build strategies on particular

issues does not imply the avoidance of united front movements. Meanwhile, flexible alliances might be able to track the interstices that universal politics fails to enlighten adequately.

> Given that no one set of objective interests encompasses the totality of social conflicts in need of transformation, the process of making connections among a variety of antagonisms becomes crucial […]. Coalition here is seen to reflect both a respect for the particular and a continued desire for a universal politics. Perhaps even more importantly, coalition is able to speak to the proliferation of identities associated with new social movements (Ivi, 99).

Therefore, "site-specific alliances" may be considered desirable and fertile both because of the immediate outcomes they can reach and for their work in "exposing the internal limit of representation" and the "incompleteness" within broader group politics (Ivi, 100, 107). They can account for stratified identities.

The particular case we have extensively analysed, PISSAR, was precisely a "temporary coalition" built to achieve specific adjustments from the University of California administration (West 2010, 170).

> In a coalition you have to give, and it is different from your home. You can't stay there all the time (Johnson Reagon 1983, 346).

Obviously, in our case trans/genderqueer disabled people may be particularly benefitted by an interlaced politics. We may frame other groupings based on affinities, which could also reveal more enduring; for example, the alliance between Intersex Human Rights Australia and the disabled community against forced sterilization[28].

Obviously, the need for more adequate restrooms is not a *theoretical* claim; as PISSAR reminds us, it is a crude, embedded, matter. Still, we have observed how focussing on "precise programmatic issues", as restrooms, could let flourish additional connections –

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[28] They collaborated in a 2013 Senate Inquire on the matter. See Carpenter 2010; 2012; 2013.

with periods and childcare issues, for example – which open a broader debate about body normativity and gender stereotypes. Maybe, a "monolithic confrontation" would have let some concerns untouched. A political gaze that focusses on "details", instead, "leads to a proliferation of possible sites of political contestation" (Lloyd 2005, 2). Contesting specific practices and spaces does not run the risk of analyses centred on a disembodied political subject, and can simultaneously enhance theoretical assemblages too. It is also a reminder of the necessity of situated analyses in Disability Studies; in different contexts, fitting affinities may rise.

Cripping Haraway's coalitional politics allowed us to light up its nature and to conceive in which circumstances it can be an "effective strategy"; besides, we entered a fruitful conversation between the figure of cyborg and disability, which honours the political premises of both. On the way, we have met queer advocacy too; if the cyborg "do not stay still", the queer and the crip do not either. Disabled people, on which this essay particularly focusses, *do not* need the cyborg to move, but this is the kind of intersection we need. Haraway's *Manifesto* can still represent an invitation to political engagement which recognizes mobility and impurity; it invites us to mix up in unstable and unpredictable ways.

The conceptual terms employed, *affinity* and *avidity*, do not represent a solution within debates on identity politics and intersectional alliances; they rather provide productive trouble. "We do not seek partiality for its own sake", Haraway states, but "for the sake of the connections and unexpected openings" (1991b, 196). We do not need to have solved every shared matter in order to start a conversation; we can endure a certain grade of *messiness*.

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