Mosaico feminista
Tejiendo conocimiento a través de las culturas
Feminist Mosaic
Weaving Knowledge Across Cultures

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STOP CO₂
NO PLANET B!
DISABILITY JUSTICE IS CLIMATE JUSTICE
SCIEN NO SIL
SAVE OUR ONLY HOM
SAVE THE PLANET!
feel the heat

To Be Vulnerable // The Calm of the Storm

Jessica Olson

Climate change is making storms and disasters both more frequent and more intense. While this is a global phenomenon, some people are being harmed more than others. The Global South and the already over-polluted communities in North America are being disproportionately impacted by climate impacts. These disproportionate impacts are also being felt by people in bodies and minds already coping with an ableist, cis/hetero/sexist, racist, xenophobic day to day reality.

Inspired by feminist scholars Julia Watts Belser, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Sara Ahmed, I seek to center the works and stories told by disabled people in order to resist the depoliticization of our experiences and to find “a constructive, redemptive storytelling that illuminates and critiques social and political exclusion, that underscores the agency and dignity of people in crisis, that valorizes the disability justice movement’s call for interdependence in community, and that captures the artistry and resiliency of disabled lives” (Belser 2015, 51). In this critical essay, existing scholarship on disability and climate change is interwoven with an original poem describing a personal experience with disability and a climate-related weather event. In Spring 2022, I lived at home with my family in a small Texas town without tornado sirens. The very theorizing that I had been undertaking at graduate school came hurling towards my house and my body/mind in the form of a tornado. A poem of my personal experience with the tornado is italicized throughout the essay to accompany the work of disability and feminist scholars.

Analysis, lived experiences, and links to theoretical frameworks move us from discussing only negative climate impacts to imagining collective power. Ahmed says that feminism is “how we survive the consequences of what we come up against by offering new ways of understanding what we come up against” (Ahmed 2016, 22). In this essay, I ask myself: what is a framework for considering consequence, survival and the future in a world that is violently changing as temperatures rise and storms intensify?

I. The Calm Before the Storm

Disability and religion scholar Julia Watts Belser explores stories and representations of vulnerability following Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy. Belser “draw[s] upon the stories told by and about people with disabilities in disaster situations to examine how our discourse about disability shapes the way we represent vulnerability, survival, and environmental risk—and to illuminate the way these tellings affect the lived experience of people with disabilities in times of disaster” (2015, 54). By way of “meaning-making,” the act of storytelling, particularly about disasters, can have deep consequences serving either as ramifications that create conditions of exclusion or as a bolstering force for agency and dignity for disabled people.

The weekend before
The weather forecast comes early
Storms on Monday
Severity is unknown but the projections are

Unusual

Monday morning comes rolling in
The clouds nowhere
The forecast everywhere
I secure furniture and cover my car’s windshield
We only get hail here

At least
Usually

Belser asserts that “because disaster tales are intertwined with these critical processes of meaning-making, the stories we tell about disaster are never ethically neutral” (2015, 52). Though theorizing specifically about women of color, Gloria Anzaldúa argues that people telling their own stories through writing is essential, particularly in the context of preventing tokenization. Otherwise, individuals “are in danger of being reduced to purveyors of resource lists” (Anzaldúa and Keating 2009, 29). Personal narratives reflect the perspectives, experiences, and analysis of disabled people of color and queer people—who are often excluded from mainstream academic texts.

David Perry outlines the “four basic different types of needs related to disability that emerge in the aftermath of disasters: health maintenance (medicine, electricity, medical care), ability to move in and through physical areas, effective communication access, and what the experts call ‘program access’” (Perry 2017). Stories about people’s interactions with disaster response systems, or the lack thereof—as is often the case—underscores that being disabled does not mean inherent vulnerability.

I connect these storytelling and narrative practices with Sara Ahmed’s idea that “feminism is DIY: a form of self-assembly” (Ahmed 2016, 27), wherein the narratives shared counter the ideas that people are passively harmed. By sharing the systemic failures of climate and disaster processes, disabled storytellers undertake a critical “noticing”, which Ahmed calls an act of political labor (2016, 32). This “noticing” pokes holes in the idea that a one-size-fits-all approach to climate-related disaster response and planning are adequate. This “noticing” also evinces that vulnerability is manufactured, not inherent—a crucial distinction necessary for countering harmful assertions about disabled people’s experience of disproportionate climate-impacts (Belser 2019).

The thunder we anticipated languishes
A lazy rumbling in the distance
Nothing seems severe
Except the tone of the meteorologist
This time is different
I feel it in my gut

An hour later
Panicked tweets
A tornado

Down the street from our house

My sibling my dog and I
Squish our bodies into our prepared shelter
We normally never prep one

But my gut told me this was different

The same gut that is now churning
As furious as the rotating clouds

Making noises that scare my younger sibling
More than the howling stillness
Of a tornado barreling towards our house

II. The Eye of the Storm

Unlike slow-onset events, like sea-level rise or drought, or certain climate-related disasters, such as hurricanes, there is very little early warning and planning that can be done for wildfires. In the case of the California wildfires, which have both increased in number and intensity in the past five years, there is a clear connection between some of the more manageable aspects of this disaster such as planned power outages and shelter accessibility, and the social model of disability. Perhaps given the recent nature of these specific climate-related events, the most comprehensive and poignant accounts largely fall outside of peer reviewed, academic writing. As evinced by the work of Gloria Anzaldúa, there is power in the personal narrative. Personal narratives become especially important when dealing with disability, disaster, and climate because "In a lot of situations they [non-disabled people] would rather we weren't born, or were 'allowed to die'" (Morris 2001, 12). Sharing stories can be viewed as an act of resistance against the erasure of queer and disabled people's disproportionate burden in a rapidly changing climate.

We watch live videos
Of a wall of swirling grime
Absorbing fragments of people's splintered homes
Picking up cars and people
Slamming them to the ground

It is coming for us

We don't know if there is more than one tornado
All we know is that it has gone quiet
Except for my intuitive gut
Screaming that nothing is okay

My body unusual as usual

My younger sibling is terrified by the noises my body is making
Turning on music to muffle my traitorous body
And the distress it is causing them

Disability justice activist, Stacey Milbern asserted that people's experiences navigating a climate disaster and the failings of capitalism should prompt society to consider disabled people (Milbern 2019). In remarks at a publicly held vigil in Oakland, California in October 2019, Milbern underscored the structural and systemic violence faced by disabled people during climate-related crises by sharing her own lived experience with the crowd. When the California wildfires raged in parts of the state, PG&E instituted rolling blackouts where there was high fire risk due to their negligent power line and capacitor maintenance. The sweltering, historic heat waves strained California's energy grid with more air conditioning units online than normal. For Milbern, having access to electricity is a matter of life or death. She needed to be able to power her "life sustaining medical equipment, [her] ventilator, 16 hours a day" (Milbern 2019) but accessing information about her energy forecast was near impossible. To learn whether or not her home would be affected by the Utility's planned blackouts after seeing her neighborhood zoned for outages on multiple maps, Milbern called PG&E. After many hours on the phone, when she was finally connected with a representative, they were unable to provide helpful information about any protocol for medical baseline users and "confirmed there was nothing really in place. He literally told me 'this is why we let the public know so you would have time to prepare.' To PG&E, my life is not important" (Milbern 2019).

Beyond her personal experiences, Milbern cites the disability justice movement's demand for "the right to be rescued," which depends upon a clear understanding of *how* systems need to be updated in order to protect the lives of all people. Similarly, David M. Perry explains that under current procedures in California, "deaf residents of Sonoma were often not alerted to the urgent fire threat because current systems rely on phone calls and sirens. One 28-year-old wheelchair user, Christina Hanson, died in the fires" (Perry 2017).

In a series of Instagram posts, a disabled California resident tells their own experience with the evacuation process. The original content was created by Jessi (they/them) from their account @disablednotdefeated and later shared by public facing group Oakland Abolition and Solidarity. Jessi's caption to their series of infographic style images tells the story of the many obstacles they faced during evacuations from fires on the Central California Coast, near Santa Cruz, in 2020. Jessi's experience demonstrates the severe impact of disability sidelining in climate conversations and planning; in everything, *from* lack of accessible evacuation sites to not being informed about the number of remaining beds, *to* forcibly paying for an unaffordable hotel room (Jessi 2020).

When all anticipated options rapidly become untenable with limited information, how does the right to not be left behind also translate into the right to shelter? The wildfires in California, much like recent hurricanes, are acting in ways that were once unthinkable. Not only are they unseasonable, but these fires are also spreading faster and are hotter than in the past. We must do better because "at their best, the responses combine the resources of both formal and informal networks to create resilient systems of protection and response for disabled people in the wake of disasters. When systems fail, people die" (Jessi 2020).

Our house rattles and we hear
the train of dirt and air approaching
But my sibling is scared
Of my protesting body

Our home was untouched
Just covered in a thick film
Of other people's misfortune
That I can wipe off my car
As easily as the tears from my eyes

In every direction around us
Streets are closed
Debris obstructing paths and confining us

Lightning tired of the twister stealing its thunder
Takes over
Punishing us late into the night

We were the lucky ones
Distressed as we were

But I learned the hard way
A direct hit wasn't needed
To injure me

III. After the Storm

Ahmed asserts there is a point of snapping where, "from the shattered pieces, we start again. We pick up the pieces. We take care; we must take care, because history has sharpened their edges; sharpened our edges. We pick up the pieces; we start again" (Ahmed 2016, 211). Her words give language to something I experience when reading these stories—a shattering. Why is it that people's lives continue to be pushed aside? It is these stories that do the sharpening and the recording of history that galvanizes future action. Engaging with feminist theoretical frameworks that center lived experiences as theory and as political is necessary when engaging with disability and climate change.

We are not passive victims. Disabled people are uniquely positioned to envision the future that humankind needs in a just climate future. Sins Invalid, a disability justice collective, makes this case by stating that "what ableism hides, as does every interconnected system of oppression, is that our survival as disabled people instills us with powerful wisdom that is necessary now more than ever for our human and planetary survival" (Sins Invalid 2019, 95).

My insides
Already susceptible to stress
Teetered on the edge

As my neighbors patched their homes
The pain became unbearable
Nine hours in the emergency room
Confirm what I know
This pain is just my life

My endometriosis
Inflammation stirred by the storm
But I didn't make this connection alone

Another spoonie[1]
A friend asked,
"is this a flare up from the tornado?"
I was too deep in my pain to recognize
The dominoes outside of me
Knocking down the final piece
Inside of me

Alison Kafer (2013) roots ideas of a political/relational model of disability; this perspective "makes room for more activist responses, seeing 'disability' as a potential site for collective reimagining" (9). Building on this idea, being both disabled, or crip, and queer offers an even more unique perspective with a legacy of resistance and future building. This assessment is presented by Vanessa Raditz and Patricia Berne (2019) article published in *Yes! Magazine* stating:

> The history of disabled queer and trans people has continually been one of creative problem-solving within a society that refuses to center our needs. If we can build an intersectional climate justice movement—one that incorporates disability justice, that centers disabled people of color and queer and gender non-conforming folks with disabilities—our species might have a chance to survive.

These systems of interdependence created by and for disabled people are key sites of survival and resilience. Belser (2015) likewise centers this argument within her storytelling about disabled survivors of Hurricane Sandy sharing that:

> Within disability circles, it is common to emphasize the critical sustaining power of activist and self-advocate communities that allow people to live and thrive because they support and care for each other. We see that writ bold in Hurricane Sandy's aftermath, when disability activist and ventilator user Nick Dupree and his wife Alejandra Ospina lost power in their lower Manhattan apartment—and a group of disability activists, friends, and community members rallied to organize life-saving battery back-up power through the days of blackouts. (64-65)

Milbern reminds us to center community, saying to “go home and check on your neighbors. Rest. Reflect on why we must combat capitalism, racism, classism and ableism that thinks so little of humanity that some people are reduced to expected losses. There is a lot to do and it’s going to take all of us” (Milbern 2019). Taking such actions saved Lake Kowell, who “had an emergency plan, which included a bag with supplies to last about a week, connections with neighbors to help with evacuation, her own wheelchair van for transportation and a place to stay with family in nearby Petaluma. A strong network of friends and neighbors helped her through the disaster” (Ghenis 2019). Raditz and Berne continue weaving storied insights about the many examples of not only community planning, but mutual aid: in 2017, queer disabled organizers in the San Francisco Bay Area developed systems to share and distribute air filters and masks, while organizers in Puerto Rico ensured their community had access to generators to power refrigerators to store insulin in the aftermath of Hurricanes Irma and Maria. The following year trans Latinx organizers led a healing justice workshop for queer and trans organizers of color from around the world to build community, heal, and share knowledge.

We are left behind in many ways
Our bodyminds unconsidered
On purpose?
With purpose

Evacuations, yes
But also explanations

Community is the key resource
Sharing knowledge
Comradery
And questions we may not ask ourselves

I cannot exist outside of my body
I can exist within my community

Solidarity and community care praxis illustrate why having a coalitional definition of disability is necessary for addressing the undesirable aspects of climate and disability. As emphasized by Kafer (2013):

> Disabled people have more than a dream of accessible futures: we continue to define and demand our place in political discourses, political visions, and political practice, even as we challenge those very questions and demands. More accessible futures depend on it. (169)

There is no exception in the case of climate change. Out of necessity, queer and disabled people exemplify the most accessible form of response to the climate crisis: mutuality and care as resistance. In order to imagine a world where climate change is no longer an existential threat, feminists must build solidarity with queer and disabled folks and learn from one another not only how to confront crises, but how to pursue the transformative power of true climate justice where no one is left behind.

IV. The Storm Within

Our stories are a noticing
A maintenance of the political
When our bodies are depoliticized
We resist through stories

Our stories reveal
The lies of causality

Our experiences reveal
The lies of response measures
A shattering of facades

The failures
Are a necropolitic
Negligence laid bare

The right to be rescued
The right to be sheltered
The right to live
Should not have to be political

Our bodies reveal
The lies of neutrality

Our stories reveal
The core of our survival
Each other
Weaving community
Sown from seeds of interdependence
Impermeable to rising seas

Notes

1. "Spoonie" is a term used by people with disabilities and chronically ill to describe the experience of living with a lesser amount of energy that differs from societal expectations.

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