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Disability Studies and the Environmental Humanities

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Disability Studies and the Environmental Humanities

Disability Studies and the Environmental Humanities

Toward an Eco-Crip Theory

Edited and with an introduction by
Sarah Jaquette Ray and Jay Sibara

Foreword by Stacy Alaimo

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Foreword

Stacy Alaimo

While we might wish that all our ethical and political commitments would align and become so beautifully articulated as to be inseparable and synergistic, it is nonetheless often the case that historically rooted discursive and ideological formations mean that ethics, politics, and scholarship take place within more messy, vexed, and contradictory terrains.[1] Eli Clare, in his potent essay in this volume, navigates through volatile conceptual landscapes, writing that four concepts in particular, "natural, normal, unnatural, and abnormal," "form a matrix of intense contradictions, wielding immense power in spite of, or perhaps because of, the illogic." Political movements for environmentalism and disability rights have rarely converged, so it is not surprising that disability studies and the environmental humanities would have developed as separate fields. But this separation, however predictable, is hardly a neutral oversight. Mainstream U.S. environmentalism, saturated by wilderness ideals, as Sarah Jaquette Ray argues in this collection, has a "hidden attachment" to the abled, hyperfit body, which has resulted not only in scholarly and political exclusions of disability from environmentalism but also in the physical exclusion of disabled people from the secluded landscapes of national parks, as Alison Kafer argues in the chapter from Feminist, Queer, Crip that is reprinted here. Shifting from the environmental humanities to the allied field of critical animal studies reveals clashes that are even more glaring. David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder write in these pages, "It's safe to say that the relationship between disability and animality is a strained one."

Elizabeth A. Wheeler, in her essay in this collection, notes the “devastating, even genocidal history of comparing people with disabilities to animals,” which makes alliances between disability rights and animal rights as well as disability studies and animal studies terribly overburdened. And yet the work of Sunaura Taylor, Temple Grandin, Dawn Prince-Hughes, and others intrepidly fosters multispecies relations. In the pages that follow, Anthony J. Nocella II advocates for a philosophy of “eco-ability,” which brings together “disability theory, animal advocacy, and ecology.” The account of his own protests against dolphin captivity provides a striking example.

Projects that seek to connect disability studies with animal studies and environmentalism are often fraught, as such alignments are hardly “natural” but must instead be constructed and reconstructed through multiple positions, critiques, and rearticulations. It could even be the case that the conflicts arise not just from a lack of attention or a lack of dialogue but from more obdurate differences based in constitutive exclusions and overdetermined histories. Critiquing the values of “stability” and “integrity” in Aldo Leopold’s *Sand Country Almanac*, a classic in environmental studies, with its influential concept of the “land ethic,” Kim Q. Hall writes that the “devaluation of impurity and changing bodies and places . . . has informed heteronormativity, classism, racism, ableism, and sexism.” Even if we shift our attention from canonical texts of environmental ethics to more contemporary environmental justice paradigms, we find that they are propelled by the ideal of “natural,” “healthy” bodies. Valerie Ann Johnson notes in her reprinted essay, “Those of us in the environmental justice community are not immune to our society’s standards of health, beauty, and normality.” Indeed illness and disability may be evidence that environmental injustice has occurred. Jina Kim, in “Cripping East Los Angeles,” writes, “While studies of environmental racism invariably reference disability to denote environmental harm, few if any address the phenomenon from a critical disability perspective."

Examining the physical and the conceptual in/accessibility of environments, environmentalism, and environmental studies is one starting point for cripping environmental studies and forging alliances between the fields. Starting from the other direction, disability studies could be enriched by attending to multispecies perspectives and ecological systems. Sarah Gibbons, for example, suggests an alliance between the environmental value of biodiversity and the concept of neurodiversity in her essay discussing the "disconnect . . . between the concern that environmentalists express for rising diagnoses of autism" and the struggle for "equal rights" for those with autism. Biodiversity, which remains rather problematic as a scientific category, is nonetheless invaluable during this era of the Sixth Great Extinction. Biodiversity stresses the value of each species but also insists that diversity is crucial for the workings of broader ecological systems. Siobhan Senier argues in her essay on "blind Indians" that "for the most thoughtful scholars in environmental humanities, disability studies, and indigenous studies, systems are critically important." Senier explains that sustainability science and indigenous ecological knowledge enable us to understand these systems, insisting, however, that indigenous knowledge is "utterly intertwined with indigenous sovereignty" and not a "free-floating commodity, ready to be lifted by settler colonials when they feel in crisis." Indigenous thought, environmental studies, and disability studies converge within epistemologies that are immersed, entangled, embodied, and political. Similarly posthumanisms, new materialisms, and ecomaterialisms may help crip the environmental humanities and extend disability studies beyond the anthropocentric as they traverse human/

nonhuman divides, emphasize interactive material agencies, and encourage us to consider the human as part of assemblages with nonhuman species, as well as with technologies, substances, and prosthetics. Wheeler's beautiful essay, "Moving Together Side by Side: Human-Animal Comparisons in Picture Books," which concludes this collection, calls for "a 'prosthetic community,' a cluster of living beings, ideas, resources, and objects that enable disabled children's full inclusion."

Disability Studies and the Environmental Humanities takes on the difficult challenge of working within both of these fields, putting forth multiple ways of critiquing, accessing, and recasting natural and cultural worlds. Many of the essays within this wide-ranging volume grapple with volatile conflicts and contradictions that are not readily resolved. Indeed, the epistemologies, ontologies, politics, and trajectories of disability studies and the environmental humanities often diverge. But it is precisely these bold attempts—that refuse ready answers—that make this volume so significant, positioning it as an invaluable point of departure for further scholarship. Referencing Jack Halberstam's model of unlearning, or "negative forms of knowing," Jasbir Puar states that "disability studies is already successful in this vein, undoing conventional ways of knowing and knowledge of the body, of capacities, of human and species variation." But she proposes something "wilder": "an overwhelming of modes of knowing such that what constitutes knowing itself becomes confused, disoriented, dissembled."[2] Many of the essays that follow promise such productive confusion and disorientation. Kelly Fritsch, after noting the "troubling consequences for how ableism and environmental activism come together against disability, particularly when disability is framed as an individual health problem resulting from a toxic environment," asserts that "the problem is not toxicity or disability but rather our continued emphasis on disability as an individually economically quantifiable toxic condition.” While I disagree that toxicity itself is not a problem, the way toxicity leaks and disperses in metaphorical and discursive directions remains an issue for many intersectional political struggles. Natasha Simpson analyzes the intersectional quandaries in the food justice movement. The food justice movement is rightfully meant to center the experiences of poor communities of color; however, it also often centers specific notions of health, which can limit its relevance and impact for people with disabilities—particularly those with multiple oppressed identities. These essays challenge us to unlearn fundamental conceptions of toxicity and health, calling us to imagine how other key terms could be recast as part of new political movements attuned, simultaneously, to disability, environmentalism, and environmental justice.

Puar’s invocation of the disorienting, dissembling “wild,” like Ladelle McWhorter’s recasting of the term deviance, suggests that human and nonhuman lives be thought within paradigms that stress dynamic transformation and nonhuman agencies. Such a framework would be a far cry from predominant, managerial notions of sustainability that seek to stockpile inert “resources” to ensure the continued prosperity of the few.[3] But in the pages ahead Hall revitalizes the cold, wooden discourse of sustainability by proposing that we “crip sustainability”: “To crip sustainability means valuing disability as a source of insight about how the border between the natural and the unnatural is maintained and for whose benefit. It means understanding a sustainable world as a world that has disability in it, a perspective that recognizes the instabilities, vulnerabilities, and dynamism that are part of naturecultures.”

Kafer’s essay explores “new understandings of environmentalism that take disability experiences seriously, as sites of knowledge production about nature.” My conception of “trans-corporeality” in Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self emerged from fluctuating disability experiences, involving multiple chemical sensitivity (MCS) or environmental illness (EI), as it is also interconnected with something that could be diagnosed as rheumatoid arthritis (RA).[4] In Joseph Dumit’s terms, MCS, EI, and even RA are illnesses or syndromes you have to “fight to get,”[5] meaning that the path to diagnosis is rocky and often inaccessible. Years ago I woke up on New Year’s Day feeling severe joint pain and immobility. I managed to get to the hospital to be told by one physician that I had Guillain-Barré syndrome, while another rolled his eyes and uttered a different diagnosis: “That disease that starts with an ‘M,’ you know,”—as the first physician rolled her eyes in turn. “Do you mean MS?” I ventured. This incident and the years that followed intensified my interest in disability studies as well as in science studies’ theories of material captures and the relations between embodied experience, diagnostic categories, and the alternative epistemologies of social movements and communities. People with MCS or EI, for example, move through the world as something akin to a scientific instrument that registers as harmful the very substances that others do not even notice or, if they do, consider to be harmless, normal, or even commendably sanitary and fresh. Epistemological quandaries are inherent in this condition, as questions of proof and dismissals of paranoia rarely recede. Kim’s concept of the “epistemology of somatic witness” suggests the politics of knowledge involved in this and in many other situations of embodied knowledge production.

When both impending storms and public air fresheners cause pain, diminish mobility, and create mental fog, the “environment” cannot be readily divided into “nature” and “culture,” nor are human bodies and minds separate from wider material interchanges and interactions. The nineteenth-century notion of "rheumatics" as "environmental invalids" that Traci Brynne Voyles discusses is, I would argue, part of a trans-corporeal paradigm that interconnects disability and environment. Thinking through the epistemological and political problematics of, say, diagnostics or accessibility, with the sense that one is always immersed within that which must be reckoned with, may be productively scaled up to grapple with immense problems of climate change, global environmental injustices, and extinction. The concept of the anthropocene, for example, in which the human is often imagined as a disembodied, abstract force, requires an exhaustive cripping, which could begin—"cripistemologically" in the words of Robert McRuer and Merri Lisa Johnson—by attending to "rejected and extraordinary bodies" and to the "places where bodily edges and categorical distinctions blur or dissolve."[6] This may seem a stretch, and yet thinking of humans and all other species as they exist at the permeable, enmeshed crossroads of body and place, within wider networks and interchanges, may be much more revealing and generative than imagining environments as external resources and humans as discrete agents. There are many sites, concepts, and theories that would benefit from thinking environmentalism and disability studies together. This capacious and thought-provoking collection analyzes an abundance of such sites, challenging scholars, activists, and everyone else who inhabits a bodymind within this multispecies world—wrought by neoliberalism, ableism, racism, homophobia, and other modes of exclusion and domination—to live and think in ways that are more inclusive, more fierce, and more just.

NOTES

1. I use the term articulate in the sense of connecting ideological or discursive elements, as described by the cultural studies and post-Marxist theories of Stuart Hall and Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe.

2. Jasbir Puar, in McRuer and Johnson, “Proliferating Cripistemologies,” 164.
3. See Alaimo, “Sustainable This, Sustainable That.”
4. See Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*.
5. Dumit, “Illnesses You Have to Fight to Get.”
6. Johnson and McRuer, “Cripistemologies: Introduction,” 134.

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Introduction

Sarah Jaquette Ray and Jay Sibara

Our goal in this project is to bring into dialogue the interdisciplinary fields of disability studies and the environmental humanities. While scholars in the environmental humanities have been troubling the dichotomy between “wild” and “built” environments and writing about the “material turn,” trans-corporealities, and “slow violence” for several years now, few focus on the robust and related work being done in the field of disability studies, which takes as a starting point the contingency between environments and bodies. Like environmental justice and the new materialist scholar Stacy Alaimo’s (2010) theory of trans-corporeality, which insists that the body is constituted by its material, historical, and discursive contexts, disability studies challenges dominant perceptions of the body as separate from the contexts in which bodies live, work, and play.

Similarly the environmental humanities focus on issues, from food justice and migrant farmworkers to climate debt, military legacies, and green imperialism, that also concern disability studies scholars, such as the validity of a mind/body dualism, corporeal and mental health as a new form of privilege in what Ulrich Beck (1992) has deemed a “risk society” in Western culture, the impact of nation-building on marginalized populations and places, the myth of American rugged individualism, and parallels between the exploitation of land and abuses of labor. Putting these fields in dialogue means identifying what we learn by recasting these concerns of the environmental humanities in terms that disability studies scholars enlist, such as ableism, access, and the medical model.

For example, when we recognize that bodies are “becoming” or “temporarily abled,” we begin to see how the prevailing use of pesticides disables farmworkers in order to provide fruit and vegetables to (make healthy) those who have access to them. Likewise the slow violence of military legacies, to use the postcolonial ecocritic Rob Nixon’s term, manifest most often as physical and mental disabilities, both domestically and abroad. The myth of the rugged individual contributes to the social construction of “disability” and simultaneously, as many environmental thinkers argue, fosters the exploitation of natural resources. Work in environmental justice, in both the humanities and social sciences, has made some motion in the direction of disability studies by emphasizing toxicity and “body burdens,” but it rarely draws on the insights of disability studies scholars, who assert that disability not be understood as a “burden” and who increasingly acknowledge that the ablement of the privileged often relies on the disablement of others (see, e.g., Meekosha 2011). And when environmental scholars critique the implicit white, male body of the outdoor enthusiast, naturalist, or adventurer, they fail to acknowledge the ableism these categories ultimately serve to reify (see, e.g., Braun 2003). In other words, it’s not just any white male that heads “into the wild” in the pastoral fantasy; it’s what Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2013) calls the “normate” body, or more specifically what Ray calls in her essay in this volume a “wilderness body ideal.”

The lack of exchange between these fields goes both ways and has at times reflected missed opportunities and also opposing frameworks that lead to tensions, as Alaimo outlines in her foreword to this collection. Though disability studies scholars show that built environments privilege some bodies and minds over others, few have focused on the specific ways toxic environments engender chronic illness and disability, especially for marginalized populations, or the ways environmental illnesses, often chronic and invisible, disrupt dominant paradigms for recognizing and representing "disability." Indeed the focus on built environments dominates in disability studies without recognizing wilderness as a constructed environment (Kafer 2013), and connections between the environment and disability, when addressed, are done so in the natural and social sciences, often without the critical lenses of humanistic fields, with the exception of Eli Clare's (1999) groundbreaking work. The humanities fosters a clearer understanding of how texts do the cultural work of ableism or resist such ableism, as well as attunement to the ways nature and space are similarly asked to do the work of social control. If, as geographers and anthropologists focusing on disability recognize, environments can be disabling, and if, as new materialist environmental justice scholars argue, our bodies are our first environments—the "geography closest in," as Adrienne Rich (1976, 212) puts it—it seems that environmental humanities and disability studies indeed have much to offer each other.

In recent years a handful of scholars have acknowledged and begun to articulate the tensions that have prevented more collaboration between these fields and to provide models for cooperation and convergence. For example, in 2013 the flagship journal for ecocriticism, ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment, included a special essay cluster on disability and ecocriticism; an essay from that issue by Matthew J. C. Cella is reprinted in this collection. The 2014 sustainability-themed Society for Disability Studies (SDS) conference generated even more discussion, reflected here in works by Siobhan Senier and Jina B. Kim. The editors of this volume also convened panels to foster these conversations at the 2013 American Studies Association (ASA) conference on climate debt as disability; the 2015

SDS conference, which brought some authors of the essays herein together; and the 2016 ASA conference's Environment and Culture Caucus, which presented another opportunity to continue the conversation among contributors and other audiences. Moreover in 2016 George Washington University hosted its biennial Composing Disability conference with the theme of "crip ecologies."

Inspired by these early conversations and seeking to foster more, we solicited papers by graduate students and independent scholars working in the humanities or closely related fields. We welcomed broad understandings of disability and strongly encouraged submissions that take into consideration intersections not only among disability and environment but also among other categories of difference that are co-implicated in those first two terms, including race, gender, class, sexuality, and immigration or nation. We also welcomed pieces covering historical and contemporary periods as well as proposals addressing non-U.S. regions and transnational relationships. The contributors we selected from this search demonstrate in varied and sometimes unpredictable ways just how much these two fields have to offer each other.

As we looked for thematic and theoretical connections among the submissions alongside the foundational pieces, we narrowed down to a collection with a primary geopolitical focus on North America; essays that expand beyond that focus, including works by Cathy Schlund-Vials, Julie Sadler, and Anita Mannur, share a concern with tracing the disabling legacies of U.S. military, national security, and industrial impact. Thus the collection ultimately reflects our shared scholarly background, expertise, and networks in transnational American studies and will likely be especially useful to scholars and students of disability and environment working in and around this expansive field, but we expect it will prove productive for those working beyond the boundaries of American studies as well because of its interdisciplinary strengths.

Temporally the project spans the seventeenth century to the present, beginning with Senier's essay engaging the legacy of American colonization and continuing with Ray's essay tracing the history of ableism in early environmentalist thought and the wilderness movement of the Progressive Era, as well as work by Traci Brynn Voyles on the history of the Salton Sea (1920s–present), Víctor M. Torres-Vélez on the U.S. Navy's occupation of Vieques Island, Puerto Rico (1941–2004), Mary E. Mendoza on the U.S.-Mexican Bracero Program (1942–64), Schlund-Vials on the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency's "Secret War" in Lao People's Democratic Republic (1964–73), Natasha Simpson on the Black Panther Party's food justice organizing (beginning in 1969), Mannur on Union Carbide's disaster in Bhopal (1984), and Sadler on the U.S. Iraq War (2003–11), all of which provide historical context for the pieces with a more contemporary focus. The historical breadth of the collection offers multiple temporal points of entry to students and scholars and allows for analysis across historical eras, countering what some have criticized as a "presentist" focus in disability studies (Wheaton 2010, 4). Further, if we take seriously Nixon's arguments about slow violence, limiting the eras around which these essays are organized misses the point: many of the injustices these essays describe have burdened and will continue to burden bodies and minds well beyond the scope of their declared time frame.

In addition to representing several historically oriented essays, the collection deliberately contains a broad mix of disciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches in the humanities and closely related fields, ranging from literary studies to community development and medical anthropology. The selection also reflects our commitment to intersectional analysis and to including the work of emerging and independent as well as established and senior scholars.