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Envisioning Disabled and Just Futures: Mutual Aid as an Adaptive Strategy for Environmental Change and Ecological Disablement

Rachel G. McKane, David N. Pellow, and Patrick Trent Greiner

ABSTRACT

Climate change and numerous other environmental catastrophes, both swift and slowly unfolding, are mass disabling events for humans, nonhuman animals, and ecosystems. How can we develop a praxis of indispenability within our own communities as we face the impacts of climate change? We bring critical environmental justice into closer conversation with critical disability studies and disability justice by drawing on concepts such as eco-ability, ecological disablement, and disabled ecologies. We present examples of disabled mutual aid groups and networks of care, often comprised of people with multiple marginalized identities, to explore how mutual aid can serve as an adaptive strategy for climate and environmental change by increasing community resilience, especially for those subject to routine state violence and neglect.

Keywords: mutual aid, critical environmental justice, disability justice

INTRODUCTION

CLIMATE CHANGE, TOXIC drift, drought, and numerous other environmental catastrophes, both swift and slowly unfolding, are mass disabling events—meaning they produce widespread harm and injury across multiple species and habitats. Anthropogenic climate change is altering the ways in which humans relate to each other and the more-than-human world. Many drivers of climate and environmental change—such as deforestation, mining, and centralized animal feed operations—increase the risk of mass disabling events while subjecting members of the biosphere to logics of domination.¹

Climate change has created favorable conditions for the spread of disabling illness, including waterborne disease, agitation of atopic conditions, Lyme disease, malaria, and a growing list of vector-borne diseases, to name just a few. Although there is no direct evidence that climate change influences the spread of COVID-19, we do know that the social drivers of climate change increase the risk of pandemics as well.² The ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the social and political responses to it, reveal a need to foreground equitable social policies and practices in our efforts to confront complex, multiscale problems that arise from climate change, environmental degradation, and transforming epidemic cycles.

Disabled people comprise a vast minoritized group globally, but are among the most systematically ignored

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¹Kyle Whyte. “Settler Colonialism, Ecology, and Environmental Injustice.” *Environment and Society* 9 (2018): 125–144.

²Robert G. Wallace, Luke Bergmann, Richard Kock, Marius Gilbert, Lenny Hogerwerf, Rodrick Wallace, and Mollie Holmberg. “The dawn of structural one health: A new science tracking disease emergence along circuits of capital.” *Social Science and Medicine* 129 (2015): 68–77.

populations in decision-making processes concerning climate adaptation. This omission is glaring, as disabled people are at particular risk from the impacts of extreme weather, among other dimensions of changing climate systems.³ The social model of disability argues that disability is not caused by impairment but by the way that society is organized.⁴

This is true of both the organization of physical space, which is not designed with accessibility in mind, and how capitalism has privileged relations that center independence and individualism—defining productivity through the monetary value our bodyminds can produce. Capitalism alienates humans from the “natural” world, masking our interdependence with our environments, other species, and each other.⁵ It is increasingly difficult, however, to ignore that both disabled and nondisabled people share interdependence with other humans, non-human animals, and ecosystems that support and sustain us.⁶ It is clear, for instance, that climate change is not only a mass disabling event for humans, but also for *entire* ecosystems.

Policy initiatives at the national and international scale are imperative for preventing environmental and societal collapse—both of which represent clear instances of mass disabling events. However, relying on state-operated bureaucratic systems alone to meet basic needs has never been an option for disabled communities, especially those with intersectional marginalized identities.⁷ Faced with erasure, disabled people—who are often also trans and queer people of color—have been organizing their own collective care, rooted in the notion of interdependence, through mutual aid networks for decades.^{8,9} Interdependence parallels the notion of indispensability put forth by critical environmental justice (CEJ).

CEJ calls for greater attention to minoritized peoples’, more-than-human animals’, and ecosystems’ *indispensability* by pointing out that we are all linked through webs of interdependence.¹⁰ As more and more people enter the category of “disabled,” establishing a praxis of *indispensability* in the era of climate change requires centering historically minoritized communities, and es-

tablishing policy structures that enable the design of a world by disabled persons, for disabled persons (in the broadest sense of the term, inclusive of multiple species).

And although mutual aid is just one of multiple possible strategies for achieving a praxis of indispensability, because of its documented positive impacts on marginalized communities and the general neglect of this topic by scholars of social and environmental change, we insist on its significance for the study of environmental justice struggles. Centering interdependence and indispensability inherently relates to another pillar of CEJ, which proposes that environmental justice activists seek social change through strategies that “rely less on the state to achieve their goals” (23).¹¹ The state has rarely crafted policy based on socioecological indispensability, and often relies on risk assessments that label some bodies and communities as dispensable by using logics rooted in colonialism and imperialism.^{12,13}

Although disability justice advocates and scholars have drawn comparisons between disablement and climate and environmental justice, it is largely absent in mainstream environmental justice theoretical frameworks.¹⁴ What is more, work in environmental justice studies has yet to explore how disabled communities are already building adaptive environments in response to ongoing and oncoming disasters. In this article we address this gap by bringing CEJ into deeper conversation with disability justice and critical disability studies.

We do so by exploring similarities in theoretical frameworks and by describing how two pillars of CEJ—seeking change beyond the state and indispensability—are exemplified through mutual aid networks of care established by disabled communities. We note these mutual aid networks hold potential to change social norms of “care” and challenge capitalist norms of productivity by demonstrating that value is inherent, multidimensional and, therefore, not totalized by the conversion of skill, information, and resources into money. In what follows, we evaluate how disabled notions of care, disability justice and joy, and emerging work on disabled ecologies and eco-ability challenge us to rethink our approaches to climate and environmental justice, and to create more holistic and just approaches to sustainability.

DISABLED ECOLOGIES, DISABILITY JUSTICE, AND CEJ

Climate change and other socioecological disasters are mass disabling events because they produce widespread

³International Disability Alliance. “Status Report on Disability Inclusion in National Climate Commitments and Policies.” 2022. <https://www.internationaldisabilityalliance.org/sites/default/files/drcc_status_report_english_0.pdf>. (Last accessed on March 25, 2023).

⁴Tom Shakespeare. “The Social Model of Disability.” In: Lennard J. Davis (ed). *The Disability Studies Reader*. (Routledge, 2010), 197–204.

⁵John Bellamy Foster, Richard York, and Brett Clark. *The Ecological Rift: Capitalism’s War on the Earth*. (Monthly Review Press, 2010).

⁶Sunaura Taylor. *Beasts of Burden: Animal and Disability Liberation*. (The New Press, 2017).

⁷Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha. *The Future is Disabled: Prophecies, Love Notes, and Mourning Songs*. (Arsenal Pulp Press, 2022).

⁸Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha. *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice*. (Arsenal Pulp Press, 2018).

⁹Ibid. Piepzna-Samarasinha (2022).

¹⁰David Pellow. *What Is Critical Environmental Justice?* (Polity Press, 2018).

¹¹Ibid. Pellow (2018).

¹²Michael Warren Murphy. “Notes Toward an Anticolonial Environmental Sociology of Race.” *Environmental Sociology* 7 (2021): 122–123.

¹³Laura Pulido and Juan De Lara. “Reimagining ‘Justice’ in Environmental Justice: Radical Ecologies, Decolonial Thought, and the Black Radical Tradition.” *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space* 1 (2018): 76–98.

¹⁴Catherine Jampel. “Intersections of Disability Justice, Racial Justice, and Environmental Justice.” *Environmental Sociology* 4 (2018): 122–135.

harm and injury to people and the planet. Sunaura Taylor's concept of "disabled ecologies" is useful here. For Taylor, disabled ecologies are the result of social activity, ideology, and policy that produces disability across species boundaries. Such social practices involve the (intentional or unintentional) disablement of both human and nonhumans when socioecological relations are significantly altered.^{15,16} Disability studies has always taken the position that the problem to be addressed is not the fact of physical or cognitive difference, but rather those social and cultural forces that produce disablement, demand cognitive and morphological uniformity, and reinforce able-bodied privilege.

The challenge of disabled ecologies, then, is to make clear that the institutional violence of capitalism, industrialism, and statecraft constitute urgent targets for analysis and action, while also valuing disabled persons (both human and more-than-human) as *indispensable* members of our communities. Disabled ecologies center our attention on the ways in which disabled persons are frequently agents of change and the realization of environmental justice, as well as leading participants in mutualist networks of care. Generally, critical disability studies offer a way of linking disability and environmental crises in a manner that focuses on the need for care work in the pursuit of environmental justice. As Taylor notes,

Disability activists, scholars, and artists have long theorized what it means to live with loss, limitation, vulnerability, interdependence, and adaptation. *So, what kinds of insights can this collective crip knowledge offer to conversations about how to live with and respond to our current regime of environmental devastation?* How can the ingenious ways of living that disabled people have for so long developed be put to use to help think through how to care for, respond to, and indeed create access for our increasingly impaired landscapes?¹⁷

Such an investigation requires considering the disability justice perspective, and its relationship to ecological disablement. Piepzna-Samarasinha explains that "Disability justice is to the disability rights movement what the environmental justice movement is to the mainstream environmental movement. Disability justice centers sick and disabled people of color, queer and trans disabled folks of color and everyone who is marginalized in mainstream disability organizing" (22).¹⁸ *Sins Invalid*—a disability justice performance project that uses many mediums of expression—articulates the core CEJ themes of interdependence, anarchism, and multispecies justice in their writings, and links disability justice to environmental and climate justice in generative ways. For example,

Disability Justice acknowledges that all bodies are valuable, hold beauty, and are deserving of care. This extends to our community bodies, to the bodies of our plant and animal kin, and to our shared planetary body itself, the earth. Capitalism, an extraction-based economy, debilitates the earth. A debilitated earth, whose precious resources are violently taken and used as fuel for endless consumption, causes and worsens disabling conditions for individuals and communities. Capitalism rests on the lie that disability is individually tragic and collectively burdensome. It rejoices as the world around us dies. As the world dies, disabled people (Crips) know that no one from the ableist white supremacist corporate world, including the governments it bought, is coming to save us.¹⁹

The CEJ framework was developed to push environmental justice scholarship and politics toward more transformative courageous territory. CEJ underscores the ethic of indispensability—the idea that all bodies, persons, species, and things are invaluable for embracing and realizing equitable, sustainable, and just futures. No one is to be left behind in this collective effort, which means that marginalized, minoritized, and stigmatized members of our diverse communities must be centered and valued. The ethic of indispensability is key to disability justice as well because disabled persons have long been erased from scholarly and political projects that purport to envision a more just future.

In that respect, indispensability reflects a core theme in the concept of the *just transition*—the vision of transitioning to a post-fossil fuel society in ways that ensure folks whose livelihoods and wellbeing are tied to the fossil fuel economy will have their core material needs addressed. Since most writings on the just transition focus on the able-bodied (White heterosexual male) figure of the fossil fuel worker, an expansion of this idea might center disabled persons—both human and nonhuman—as subjects and participants in that movement through what we might call a *disability justice transition*. In other words, centering indispensability means that environmental justice is only realizable when we also fully embrace disability justice and multispecies justice.

In the book *Earth, Animal, and Disability Liberation*, contributors introduce the idea of "eco-ability."²⁰ Eco-ability addresses the need for a philosophy that bridges "interdependency, inclusion, and respect for difference within a community; and this includes *all* life, sentient and nonsentient" (141).²¹ The concept reflects and enacts *cripistemology*—ways of knowing and navigating the world through particular experiences and contexts of

¹⁵Ibid. Taylor (2017).

¹⁶Sunaura Taylor. "Disabled Ecologies: Living with Impaired Landscapes." Presentation at the University of California Berkeley. March 5, 2019. <<https://belonging.berkeley.edu/video-sunaura-taylor-disabled-ecologies-living-impaired-landscapes>>. (Last accessed on March 25, 2023).

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid. Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018).

¹⁹Sins Invalid. "Disability Justice is Climate Justice." July 7, 2022. <<https://www.sinsinvalid.org/news-1/2022/7/7/disability-justice-is-climate-justice>>. (Last accessed on March 25, 2023).

²⁰Anthony J. Nocella II., Judy Bentley, and Janet M. Duncan (eds). *Earth, Animal, and Disability Liberation: The Rise of the Eco-Ability Movement*. (Peter Lang Publishers, 2012).

²¹Anthony J. Nocella II. "Defining Eco-Ability: Social Justice and the Intersectionality of Disability, Nonhuman Animals, and Ecology." In: Sarah Jacquette Ray and Jay Sibara (eds). *Disability Studies and the Environmental Humanities*. (University of Nebraska Press, 2017), 141–167.

(dis)ability that are always relational.^{22,23} Two major theoretical points emerge from eco-ability: first, humans and the more-than-just human world are interdependent and inseparable; and second, normalcy is a social construction, which invites us to understand that we must value diversity, difference, and multiplicity rather than supporting the stultifying narrowness of uniformity and conformity. The concept of eco-ability is also rooted in anarchist principles, which oppose competition, domination, and authoritarianism.²⁴ Thus, eco-ability and CEJ have clear and strong overlaps.

Environmental justice scholarship and politics have typically not centered disabled persons and disability justice,^{25,26} something that has finally begun to change more recently. Such work is urgently needed, as many leaders of environmental justice movements and subjects of environmental injustice *are* persons living with disabling conditions such as asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, cancer, and other conditions that are produced or exacerbated as a result of disproportionate environmental risk exposure. This fact invites us to recognize that environmental justice movements have often been led by disabled people, thus acknowledging their agency, and refusing the ableist tendency to see them as silent passive victims (without reinforcing the “super crip” myth—that these folks are somehow superheroes who have overcome all odds²⁷). Disabled ecologies, then, allow us to productively connect environmental justice, disability justice, multispecies justice, and the power and promise of mutual aid.

Finally, the CEJ framework urges scholars and advocates to imagine and practice environmental justice in ways that de-center the state. As a complex matrix of institutions, policies, and practices, the state has historically perpetuated harm against minoritized humans, more-than humans, and entire ecosystems. Importantly, achieving a just transition, or a disability justice transition, not only requires accepting the notion of indispensability, but also creating a praxis of indispensability within our own communities.

²²Merri Lisa Johnson and Robert McRuer. “Cripistemologies: Introduction.” *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 8 (2014): 127–147.

²³Anthony J. Nocella II, Amber E. George, and J.L. Schatz (eds). *The Intersectionality of Critical Animal, Disability, and Environmental Studies: Toward Eco-Ability, Justice, and Liberation*. (Lexington Books, 2017).

²⁴Liat Ben-Moshe, Dave Hill, Anthony J. Nocella II, and B. Templer. “Dis-Abling Capitalism and an Anarchism of “Radical Equality” in Resistance to Ideologies of Normalcy.” In: Randall Amster, Abraham DeLeon, Anthony J. Nocella II, and Deric Shannon (eds). *Contemporary Anarchist Studies: An Introductory Anthology of Anarchy in the Academy*. (Routledge, 2009).

²⁵Valerie Ann Johnson. “Bringing Together Feminist Disability Studies and Environmental Justice.” In: Sarah Jacqueline Ray and Jay Sibara (eds). *Disability Studies and the Environmental Humanities: Toward an Eco-Crip Theory*. (University of Nebraska Press, 2017).

²⁶Ibid. Jampel (2018).

²⁷Eli Clare. “Stolen Bodies, Reclaimed Bodies: Disability and Queerness.” *Public Culture* 13 (2001): 359–365.

A praxis of indispensability is crucial for populations that are routinely marginalized and ignored by the state (including disabled, neurodivergent, and/or queer Black, Indigenous, People of Color [BIPOC]) and is demonstrated by mutual aid networks that target those specific groups for support. Acknowledging the dangers of relying on the state as the sole provider of care is a long-held tradition in disability justice groups. We argue that disabled mutual aid networks that center disability justice serve as a model for developing adaptation strategies, and for elevating community resilience, in the era of climate change.²⁸

MUTUAL AID: CENTERING INDISPENSABILITY BEYOND THE STATE

The goal of mutual aid is to build lasting alternatives to state-sponsored systems of care through grassroots organizing. These networks of support are reciprocal and transparent, and their offerings are guided by the skills and knowledge of the participants. Theory underlying mutual aid proposes that we can build a world where various forms of support such as food, housing, and health care are accessible to all. The term itself was popularized by Peter Kropotkin’s publication of “Mutual Aid: A Factor in Evolution” and was partially created as a response to the use of Darwin’s work to naturalize individualism in the capitalist system—an individualism that inherently alienates disabled persons.²⁹

However, the practice of mutual aid has been around for hundreds of years. The central tenets of mutual aid can be found in abolitionist and Indigenous, anti-colonial scholarship and communities that highlight the significance of community care and knowledge.^{30,31,32} The same can be said of disabled communities, who have long resisted solely relying on the state as an agent of social change by creating collective access through networks of care—a topic we expand on in the sections that follow.^{33,34}

Mutual aid networks are often born out of oppression, both material and cultural, rooted in ostracism from decision making. These networks foreground something critical by posing a question of foundational significance for marginalized populations: *how can a state that was never built to serve their interests in the first place truly*

²⁸Elise Harrington and Aileen Cole. “Typologies of Mutual Aid in Climate Resilience: Variation in Reciprocity, Solidarity, Self-Determination, and Resistance.” *Environmental Justice* 15 (2022): 160–169.

²⁹Peter Kropotkin. *Mutual Aid: A Factor in Evolution*. (McClure, Phillips & Co, 1902).

³⁰Mariame Kaba. *We Do This ‘Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice*. (Haymarket Books, 2021).

³¹Kyle Whyte. “Indigenous Environmental Justice: Anti-Colonial Action Through Kinship.” In: *Environmental Justice*. (Routledge, 2020), 266–278.

³²Ruth Wilson Gilmore. *Change Everything: Racial Capitalism and the Case for Abolition*. (Haymarket Books, 2021).

³³Ibid. Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018).

³⁴Ibid. Taylor (2017).

help them meet their needs? Legal scholar Dean Spade provides a simple, yet powerful, definition of mutual aid: “Mutual aid is collective coordination to meet each other’s needs, usually from an awareness that the systems we have in place are not going to meet them” (7).³⁵

According to Spade, there are three key elements to mutual aid. First, the aim of mutual aid is not only to meet survival needs, but also to understand how systemic violence and systems of oppression have prevented people from meeting these needs to begin with. Essentially, processes of mutual aid require acknowledging how one’s social positions are embedded in histories of violence and oppression.

Reese and Johnson (2022) note that mutual aid efforts “work to transform geographies into liberatory space where people can both have their needs met and practice relationality that is not rooted in extraction” (38). They powerfully assert that liberation cannot be met without developing “infrastructures of care” that “counteract the violence of the state” (38).³⁶ One example of such practice is the Black Panther Party’s (BPP) free breakfast program, which not only provided community members with a meal, but also created a space to critically engage with the liberation struggle and established grassroots awareness of the systemic causes of shared oppression in both legal and extralegal traditions and institutions.³⁷

Mutual aid differs from charity models that operate in the nonprofit or voluntary sector, also known as the “shadow state.”³⁸ Charitable models of care ignore the role structural forces play in creating inequality by focusing on “individual limitations.” Mutual aid networks absent revolutionary frameworks that challenge White supremacy and ableism, risk adopting charitable notions of care. Piepzna-Samarasinha (2022) discusses how many of the mutual aid models that surfaced in the wake of COVID-19 failed to challenge charity models of care: “These groups seemed to be ignorant of the specifically ableist and racist histories of charities and how those dynamics easily crept into mutual aid” (63).

Importantly, Piepzna-Samarasinha (2022) notes, “Not only were they not thinking about ableism, they seemed to talk about ‘mutual aid’ without ever referencing that sick and disabled people had been practicing it for years, or that there might be something (or like, a lot) to learn from us, and that a pandemic is a disabled event” (63).³⁹ In contrast, disabled-led mutual aid networks practice indispensability while acknowledging the role of queer, trans, and BIPOC people in creating frameworks for community care.

Mutual aid is not just about providing temporary forms of relief in moments of crisis or institutional failure; it is about mobilizing people to build larger, more successful, and enduringly resilient social infrastructures. Mutual aid increases a community’s adaptive capacity through the creation and maintenance of long-standing grassroots networks of care. Creating an infrastructure of mutual aid networks allows communities to not only navigate the frequent disasters that will occur as global anthropogenic climate change unfolds, but also through the long-standing “slow violence” of environmental degradation.

These networks function by practicing and building the world community members want to live in.⁴⁰ Thus, mutual aid is a means of engaging in prefigurative politics.⁴¹ Such a practice may seem naive, but disability justice scholars have long noted that the alternatives to challenging the rules of social engagement and creating systems of care rooted in interdependence include continued segregation, deprivation, and death. From a critical perspective, the social model of disability pushes beyond a focus on survival through improvement of functional interactions between people and environment, toward nurturing systems of shared belonging.⁴²

DISABILITY JUSTICE AND MUTUAL AID NETWORKS

For disabled communities, mutual aid is indelibly tied to collective access and reclaiming care work. Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018) asks, “If collective access is revolutionary love without charity, how do we learn to love each other? How do we learn to do this love work of collective care that lifts us instead of abandons us, that grapples with the deep ways in which care is complicated?” (33).⁴³ Disabled people have always had a complicated relationship with care, as being cared for can feel infantilizing and oppressive in a society that rewards hyperindividualism.

Taylor (2017) states, “disability rights advocates have declared that we do not want to be cared for; instead we want rights, services, and an accessible society that does not limit our involvement and contributions” (206).⁴⁴ Often, society labels those in need of care as dependent or burdensome, vastly underestimating the contributions that disabled people can, and do, make to society every day. By unraveling the false dichotomy between independence and dependence, and accepting the interdependence of all people, species, and ecosystems, it becomes clear that we all give and receive care throughout our lives.

Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018) describes several communal and nonhierarchical collective care networks that

³⁵Dean Spade. *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (and the Next)*. (Verso Books, 2020).

³⁶Ashanté M. Reese and Symone A. Johnson. “We All We Got: Urban Black Ecologies of Care and Mutual Aid.” *Environment and Society* 13 (2022): 27–42.

³⁷Alondra Nelson. *Body and Soul: The Black Panther Party and the Fight Against Medical Discrimination*. (University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

³⁸Jennifer Wolch. *The Shadow State: Government and Voluntary Sector in Transition*. (The Foundation Center, 1990).

³⁹Ibid. Piepzna-Samarasinha (2022).

⁴⁰Ibid. Spade (2020).

⁴¹Simon Springer. “Caring Geographies: The COVID-19 Interregnum and a Return to Mutual Aid.” *Dialogues in Human Geography* 10 (2020): 112–115.

⁴²Aimi Hamraie. *Building Access: Universal Design and the Politics of Disability*. (University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

⁴³Ibid. Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018).

⁴⁴Ibid. Taylor (2017).

prioritize the needs of disabled people with intersecting marginalized identities. For Piepzna-Samarasinha, these efforts represent a “radical rewriting of care” by “taking anarchist ideas of mutual aid and crip-stemming them out” (46).⁴⁵ Piepzna-Samarasinha acknowledges that disabled people often rely on state agencies for support in some capacity, and generally support protecting and expanding policies such as the Affordable Care Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Nevertheless, the direct-action wing of the traditional disability rights movement would not be possible without envisioning radically different worlds. Eiler and D’Angelo argue that Camp Jened, the focus of the film *Crip Camp*, created a space that allowed disabled people to organize and advocate for their rights. They note that it is unlikely that the victories of Camp Jened, including regulations for Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, would have materialized without “the experiences of both prefigurative politics and mutual aid” (365).⁴⁶ Notably, this policy action was supported by the BPP, another organization known for its use of mutual aid tactics.

One of the key strategies of the BPP was the creation of “survival programs” that were essentially mutual aid programs designed to meet the basic needs of the community. These programs included the “Free Ambulance Program,” a medical campaign to provide health screenings and administer preventive care. The BPP also established the free breakfast programs, designed to address hunger in Black communities. Both programs were rooted in a tradition of self-reliant community building.

Heynen (2009) explains that the BPP “went on to use the Breakfast Program as an engine through which to push revolutionary politics at other scales” (p. 407). Schalk (2022) describes how the BPP “integrated disability into their revolutionary liberation ideology” by drawing on examples from the Panther’s support of Section 504 and their antipsychiatry activism (27). Schalk (2022) notes, “...the BPP regularly made connections between racism and ableism in an attempt at articulating solidarity” (34). Notably, the BPP worked to create a praxis of indispensability within its organization by encouraging political participation of Black disabled people.

Mutual aid groups have also centered intersectional approaches to community care while managing harmful impacts of climate change. In 2020, professor Aimi Hamraie led a series of solidarity chats for the podcast *Contra**, which is part of the Critical Design Lab—“a multi-disciplinary arts and design collaborative centered in disability culture and crip technoscience.”⁴⁷ In one

interview Hamraie speaks with Jay Salazar, a member of the Disability Justice and Culture Club (DJCC)—a collective of disabled and/or neurodivergent queer people of color who operate on Chochenyo Ohlone land in East Oakland. Salazar details the organization’s approach to mutual aid, or creating a community rooted in “joyful existence,” which includes allowing community members to express both their needs and their offerings to the collective.⁴⁸

Although the organization grew in the COVID-19 pandemic, it had been organizing disabled, queer people of color in response to California wildfires for years. The organization established both a political wing to rally against PG&E and protest electricity shutoffs, and a mutual aid network to provide members with essential survival gear. Salazar says, “...it wasn’t enough to say, ‘Well I’ll lay here and die,’ because unfortunately that’s how some of our community was seen, because there wasn’t anyone else responding to the need...”⁴⁹ DJCC created do-it-yourself air purifiers, blocked windows off to keep wildfire smoke from entering homes, and collected resources such as power generators. Importantly, Salazar noted that establishing these practices will make the community more resilient by increasing their adaptive capacity to care for members in future fire seasons.

Berne (2020) offers the following powerful statement on how disabled people are preparing for the impact of climate change in their communities:

Disabled queer and trans communities of color are already preparing for the survival of their communities through oncoming disasters, teaching one another skills in resilience-based organizing to strategically create the changes that we need for queer and trans futures. During the fires and floods of 2017, queer disabled organizers in the Bay Area shared masks and air filters with one another, while in Puerto Rico, communities banded together to share generators to refrigerate insulin. At the 2018 Solidarity to Solutions grassroots summit, held alongside the government-organized Global Climate Action Summit, trans Latinx organizers affected by the North Bay fires led a healing justice workshop for queer and trans people of color environmental justice advocates...“This burgeoning movement may be invisible to most, but it should not be surprising” (234).⁵⁰

Thus mutual aid networks have demonstrated the power of ensuring collective access to critical resources for community members experiencing precarity and marginalization, whether on a routine basis or during moments of crisis. The actions of the BPP, the DJCC, and other groups reflect the ways that mutual aid collectives can create adaptive capacity by delivering food, health care, and survival gear during times of great need.

⁴⁵Ibid. Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018).

⁴⁶Elijah C. Eiler and Karen D’Angelo. “Tensions and Connections Between Social Work and Anti-Capitalist Disability Activism: Disability Rights, Disability Justice, and Implications for Practice.” *Journal of Community Practice* 28 (2020): 356–372.

⁴⁷Critical Design Lab. 2022. <<https://www.mapping-access.com>>. (Last accessed on March 25, 2023).

⁴⁸*Contra**. Critical Design Lab. “Solidarity Chat 7: Jay Salazar.” June 10, 2020. <<https://www.mapping-access.com/podcast/2020/6/3/solidarity-chat-7-jay-salazar>>. (Last accessed on March 25, 2023).

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Patty Berne. “To Survive Climate Catastrophe, Look to Queer and Disabled Folks.” In: Alice Wong (ed). *Disability Visibility*. (Vintage Books, 2020).

Specifically, these groups' actions reveal how mutual aid networks can pivot and provide urgent resources when conditions and circumstances change, including offering health-protective and life-saving materials during the relatively new phenomenon of climate change-driven wildfires in California. These practices also underscore how mutual aid has been used as a method of embracing indispensability through interdependent collaboration with communities that the state has demonstrated little interest in serving.

MUTUAL AID AS AN ADAPTIVE STRATEGY FOR CLIMATE CHANGE

Examples from disability justice groups highlight the importance of care networks for those with intersecting identities, who all too often experience the violence of state (in)action. Utilitarian approaches to life, rooted in capitalist notions of unequal worth, often flourish in times of crisis. In the COVID-19 pandemic disabled people have feared de-prioritization for emergency medical intervention as a result of resource scarcity.⁵¹ Such fears have roots in the historical treatment of disabled people in times of disaster, which also serve as clear examples of struggles for environmental justice. In 2013, a federal judge ruled that New York City violated the rights of residents with disabilities by failing to accommodate their needs during climate change-related emergencies.⁵²

Disabled people were largely left behind in the Texas power outages of 2021 that left at least 246 dead—according to the Texas Department of Health and Human Services estimates⁵³—and by some accounts was responsible for as many as 702 preventable deaths.⁵⁴ In Puerto Rico, it is estimated that Hurricane Maria led to >4000 deaths, with a minimum estimate of 793 decedents and a maximum estimate of >8000.⁵⁵ Many of these

losses represent the sickest, poorest, and most marginalized residents within the broader community. In the United States, we routinely force disabled people into a category of multiple marginalization by requiring them to remain in poverty to receive access to state-run care programs.

We are not making an argument for non-state engagement as the *only* option in the face of climate change. That argument would ignore the multiple scales on which struggles for climate justice operate. However, acknowledging the many scales of struggle for environmental justice also entails developing a praxis of indispensability that centers those who the state leaves behind. We draw on lessons from disability justice and critical disability studies to demonstrate how public policy and other forms of state engagement cannot be the *only* strategy for climate affected communities, especially when such communities' members have intersectional marginalized identities. Mutual aid can be a powerful tool for communities as they fight for equitable solutions to climate and environmental crises by reinforcing resilience and increasing adaptive capacity.

This study demonstrates the possibility of reforming social and ecological relationships such that diversity, in the largest sense of the word, is understood as an imperative, and value as something inherent, as opposed to an attribute earned through participation in capitalism alone. As Sins Invalid cofounder Patty Berne (2020) powerfully notes, “We must move beyond our cultural beliefs that tell us we are worth only as much as we can produce. Just as each component in Earth’s ecosystem plays a vital role in supporting everything around it, so do each of us have an essential role to play in sustaining communities, our environments, our planet” (235).⁵⁶

Nevertheless, there is also strong evidence that diverting resources to create space for mutual networks of care to flourish offers multiple co-benefits.⁵⁷ These benefits include growing the scope of problem identification in decision-making processes beyond what decision makers are typically able and willing to see, and engaging marginalized community members in coproduction of knowledge and efforts to efficaciously address local, and slow-moving, disabling events.

The history and logic of the disability justice movement makes it well positioned to guide such an approach to climate adaptation, and offers a dynamic robust tool by which decision makers and the communities they are tasked with representing may rise to the challenges identified by CEJ. The long struggle of survival and beyond, including cultivating disabled joy offers powerful lessons about the salience of mutual aid networks. In the face of the numerous mass disabling impacts global en-

⁵¹Emily M. Lund and Kara B. Ayers. “Ever-Changing But Always Constant: ‘Waves’ of Disability Discrimination During the COVID-19 Pandemic in the United States.” *Disability and Health Journal* 15 (2022): 101374.

⁵²Marc Santora and Benjamin Weiser. “Court Says New York Neglected Disabled in Emergencies.” *The New York Times*. November 7, 2013. <<https://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/08/nyregion/new-yorks-emergency-plans-violate-disabilities-act-judge-says.html>>. (Last accessed on March 25, 2023).

⁵³J. Hellerstedt. *Winter Storm-Related Deaths—Texas*. (Texas Department of State Health Services, 2021).

⁵⁴Peter Aldhous, Stephanie M. Lee, and Zahra Hirji. “The Texas Winter Storm And Power Outages Killed Hundreds More People Than The State Says.” *BuzzFeed*. May 26, 2021. <<https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/peteraldhous/texas-winter-storm-power-outage-death-toll>>. (Last accessed on March 25, 2023).

⁵⁵Nishant Kishore, Domingo Marqués, Ayesha Mahmud, Mathew V. Kiang, Irmay Rodriguez, Arlan Fuller, Peggy Ebner, Cecilia Sorensen, Fabio Racy, Jay Lemery, Leslie Maas, Jennifer Leaning, Rafael A. Irizarry, Satchit Balsari, and Caroline O. Buckee. “Mortality in Puerto Rico After Hurricane Maria.” *New England Journal of Medicine* 379 (2018): 162–170.

⁵⁶Ibid. Berne (2020).

⁵⁷Eric Klinenberg. *Palaces for the People: How to Build a More Equal and United Society*. (Random House, 2018).

vironmental change invites, the rest of the world would do well to pay attention to what disabled communities, long rendered invisible, have to offer.

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