LIVING LEXICON
FOR THE ENVIRONMENTAL HUMANITIES

Disabilities

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It is Saturday in New York and the local trains are slow moving and plump with people. The line of train cars moves through the Hudson tunnel like a slug and I settle into my window seat. As we crawl into New Jersey, I think of how Newark poet Lynda Hull described the transit corridor: "surf of trees / by the railway's sharp cinders." It's more of a patchwork, now, of plastic bottles, pasture grass, and at least one superfund site along Berry's Creek.[1] As we pass Newark I think of the rest of Hull's poem, "Hospice," which recounts the life and illness of the speaker's sister in their home state, New Jersey: "the body, twisting / in a tissue of smoke and dust over Jersey's / infernal glory of cocktail lounges and chemical plants, / the lonely islands of gas stations lining the turnpike."[2] I remember Hull here not only because I am passing Newark—her city of birth and the partial subject of her book *Star Ledger*—but also because Hull's merging of New Jersey's environment with her sister's ill body is an important merging point for me as an environmental humanities scholar and a disabled woman. Hull gives us space to think about the affective ties between disability (visible and invisible) and ravaged environments. In this brief entry, I give shape to these affective ties by exploring the relation between physical disability and ravaged environments as one of resonance and echo and not as a canonized history or a tested theory. I draw on my personal history, as well as emerging work in disability studies and environmental humanities, in order to *literalize* these resonances and echoes across nature-cultures. [3]

1. "Superfund Site: Ventron/Velsicol, Wood Ridge Borough, NJ." Environmental Protection Agency. https://cumulis.epa.gov/supercpad/cursites/csitinfo.cfm?id=0200674 (accessed June 20, 2018.).

2. Hull, "Hospice," in *Star Ledger*, 87.

3. Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 15. I have talked about disability and species in an earlier essay: Grossman, "Ordinary Bodies."

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Born with what medical professionals called a "terminal deficiency of the left forearm," "a congenital abnormality,"[4] I spent my childhood locating more of myself in the smoke stacks and chemical plants of New Jersey (those discarded bodies) than I did in able-bodied, human communities. Much like the social construction of my own body, ravaged environments were "wounded space[s]," colonized and cast aside by ableist, capitalist culture.[5] I found comfort in environments whose burdens were as heavy as my own and utilized these environments as partners for mourning as well as spaces of alternative strategy for practicing nonnormativity.[6] Bringing disability into conversation with ravaged environments has been an essential part of how I've navigated and survived normative culture. These environments accepted me without complication: they taught me, before disability studies could, that physical disability is a condition of relational misfitting.[7] Like me, these environments had been cast as misfits—unrestorable bodies—and under my gaze, they became a new baseline of correspondence, one that replaced ableist culture and its means of comparison.

When environmental humanities scholars pay attention to the ways self-identifying disabled communities view, interact with, experience, imagine, and theorize environments, we elevate narratives that point not to "rehabilitating disabled people's experiences within normative social contexts," but rather ones that highlight the "emergence of alternative strategies of nonnormative living" as they relate to nature itself.[8] Positioning disabilities as a keyword within the environmental humanities is an invitation to give power to narratives of differing access, mourning, partnership, and affection that outline the alternative strategies of historically underrepresented communities. Emerging scholarship that attends to these intersections includes work by disability scholar Eli Clare, who narrates the complex history and lived experience of disability and cure culture. Clare brings discussions of disability and cure into conversation with environmental keywords such as *natural* and *normal*, disrupting the distance between studies of disability and the environment.[9] Unfolding experiences of disability trauma as lived experience tied to built and natural environments, Margaret Price and Alison Kafer explore the materiality of disabled bodies, articulating often-felt but less-often-disclosed experiences of pain and struggle; importantly, they show the limits of the social model of disability and make space for many within disability studies, and

4. I have uncovered this language from my medical records, the first of which was generated when I visited Shriners' Hospital as a three-month-old.

5. Here I borrow Deborah Bird Rose's understanding of "wounded space" as developed in *Reports from a Wild Country*.

6. Here I incorporate David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder's notion of "cripistemologies" in *Biopolitics of Disability*, 77.

7. Garland-Thomson, "Story of My Work"; Wendell, *Rejected Body*.

8. Mitchell and Snyder, *Biopolitics of Disability*, 77. For a discussion of how environmental studies has often privileged an abled body as its ideal, see Stacy Alaimo's forward to Ray and Sibara, *Disability Studies and the Environmental Humanities*.

9. Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection*. See also Ray and Sibara, *Disability Studies and the Environmental Humanities*.

those in disability communities, myself included, to disclose experiences of trauma and pain.[10] Hannah McPherson and Sara M. Judge bring neurodiversity, landscapes of blindness, and multisensory ways of knowing environments and geographies to bear on environmental planning and access.[11] This scholarship is important because it collectively reveals the juncture between disability and environments in a way that complicates the social model of disability, articulating various alternative strategies and practices of non-normativity. These works run counter to those traditionally offered within a set of scholarly fields that privilege mobility, health, neuro-typicality, and cure as primary modes of inhabiting and interpreting the biosphere.

Elevating these narratives helps us recognize previously unspoken relations between bodies and environments, highlighting how disability (in conversation with gender and race) spreads across nature-cultures.[12] Discourses of environment, disability, and cure—to return to Clare— illuminate the way normative culture approaches ravaged environments through binaries of cure and abandonment. Additionally, Clare's work helps us see how ableist notions of disability—as an aberrant condition—have spread to dominant values associated with particular environments, allowing humans to dismiss and abandon spaces that do not meet normative expectations of environmental productivity or beauty. In elevating narratives that attend to disability, pain, and trauma, we also build on work by historians of the body: from Sandra Steingraber's investigation of environmental contaminants and cancer in *Living Downstream* to Nancy Langston's work on women's bodies, ecosystems, and synthetic hormones in *Toxic Bodies*, ecologists and environmental historians have long shown the human embodiment of environmental damage.[13] Kafer and Alyson Patsavas build on this research and contribute to new narratives of nature-culture trauma, which have been, Kafer argues, taboo within disability studies.[14] Patsavas, too, argues for attending to psychic and physical pain, a "queercrip understanding of pain as a fluid, relational . . . and leaky experience that flows through, across, and between always-already connected bodies."[15] From Langston and Steingraber to Kafer and Patsavas, centering "disabilities" within the environmental humanities recognizes not only physical relationships between body and environment, but also affective ones, from pain to trauma.

Rather than attending to ruination, attending to affective relations across nature-cultures allows us to see how disability communities hold environments—ravaged or not—in their lives. Recognizing the pain of disability,[16] individual and collective, can be

10. Price, "Bodymind Problem and the Possibilities of Pain"; Kafer, "Un/safe Disclosures" and "Bodies of Nature."

11. Hannah McPherson, *Landscapes of Blindness*; Judge, "Languages of Sensing."

12. Harraway, *When Species Meet*, 15. See also Chen, "Lead's Racial Matters."

13. Sandra Steingraber, *Living Downstream*; Langston, *Toxic Bodies*.

14. Kafer, "Un/safe Disclosures."

15. Patsavas, "Recovering a Cripistemology of Pain."

16. On pain, see Scarry, *Body in Pain*; and Shildrick *Leaky Bodies and Boundaries*.

part of our disability pride and not an ableist threat to it. This is a recuperative justice that emphasizes "tend[ing to] the unrestorable places and ecosystems that are ugly, stripped down, full of toxins, rather than considering them unnatural and abandoning them," as Clare writes. Amplifying the voices of disability communities within the environmental humanities means being attentive to "bodily and ecological loss" as an "integral conundrum of both the human and nonhuman world."[17] It means we are attentive to relationships of pain and narrative that leak between biospheres and bodies.

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