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The Body, the Earth. The Participation of Disabled People in the Environmental Discourse

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Abstract

The essay aims to challenge the position of disability within environmental analyses and activism. I explore the broad environmentally focused discourse: namely, I will refer to the sociocultural texts, ideologies and worldviews that are implicated in the accounts of the environmental crises provoked by climate change. Which subjects have a voice, and which tend to remain in the background? Should the environmental discourse be understood as “neutral”, because of what is at stake on a global level? I will consider these concerns through the lens of disability. Firstly, I will explore how disability usually functions as a signpost for two issues: (I) disabled people are represented as victims of the precarious living conditions exacerbated by climate change and environmental devastation and, (II) disability is employed as a cautionary tale regarding the outcomes of environmental devastation. Secondly, I will examine a performance called “The Mermaid”, by Australian artist Hanna Cormick, which addresses the intersection of disability and environmental damage. I will read Cormick’s work through Donna Haraway’s concept of witness, proposing an update of environmental discourses. The aim behind this new framework is to positively situate disabled people: they should play an active role in addressing toxicity, capitalist extractivism and the entangled nature between the human subject and the environment.

Keywords: Disability; mermaid; Hanna Cormick; witness; climate crisis

Introduction²

Begin, though, not with a continent or a country or a house, but with the geography closest in—the body.

—Adrienne Rich, *Notes toward a Politics of Location*

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² I would like to situate the writing of this essay in a peculiar personal and collective moment: while I am concluding it, in May 2023, floods happened in my region, Emilia Romagna (Italy), leaving behind casualties (both human and non-human) and homeless people, who are currently in my thoughts. One of the causes appears to be the drought that dried out the region in the previous months, together with land consumption and missed interventions on hydrogeological instability.



Fever, nausea, and a rash can foster a keen appreciation of located knowledges.

—Donna Haraway,
Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium.FemaleMan©_Meets_OncoMouse™: Feminism and Technoscience

We situate certain bodyminds in specific positions within the environment, understood not exclusively as a geographic and material space but as a sociocultural and discursive arena as well. What does this say about our society? What does the emphasis on “toxicity” entail, whenever we include in the conversations not only nonhuman ecologies and urban environments but human bodyminds as well?

The essay aims to consider and challenge the position of disability within environmental analyses and activism. Firstly, I will present some keywords of the environmental discourse and secondly, I will consider how this discourse is often articulated. In particular, I will take into consideration the roles appointed to disabled people and people with chronic illnesses. Disability and illness work as a rhetorical reminder: they are employed as a negative signpost in the advocacy against toxic chemicals, contaminated water, air pollution, etc. Furthermore, disabled people are described as casualties of disasters and crises connected with climate change (wildfires, drought, rising sea levels, heat waves, etc.). To disentangle both the risks and the opportunities emerging throughout the article, I will employ a performance called *The Mermaid*, by the Australian artist Hanna Cormick, which explicitly addresses the conjunction of disability and environmental damage, and I will read it through Donna Haraway’s concept of “witness” (1997).³ Throughout the analysis, I will refer to Cormick’s intentions behind the piece: as she explicitly situates it within environmental/ecological discourses, I will analyse how this figuration can trouble and update some tropes that concern the nature of disability and the experience of disabled people.

I will join a growing debate: in the past few years, disability studies and environmental humanities, sometimes through the mediation of New Materialisms and Posthumanism, are proposing fertile and intersectional approaches.

The theoretical and political approach of the essay is shaped by Feminist Disability Studies (Garland-Thomson, 2002; Hall, 2011; Kafer, 2013), Disability Justice activism (Clare, 2017; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018, 2022; Berne and Darrow, 2020; Sins Invalid, 2020), and by the work of authors within the framework of Material Feminisms and Posthumanism/Compostism, such as Rosi Braidotti, Donna Haraway, and Stacey Alaimo, (Alaimo and Hekman, 2008; Alaimo, 2010, 2016; Braidotti, 2002, 2019a, 2019b; Braidotti and Bignall, 2019; Haraway, 2016). As suggested by the scholars mentioned, the context recalled is therefore the Global North. Whereas the challenges posed by climate change and disablement are urgent on a global scale, it is important to note that my analyses do not aspire to be universalistic. Also, the performance chosen, even though reminds us of a global challenge, is situated in the Australian context.

³ I wish to thank the artist, Hanna Cormick, for sharing an archival video recording of the performance.



My perspective, theoretically and politically, is especially indebted to Disability Studies and Disability Justice. Primarily, Disability Studies emphasize how a solely medical and personal understanding of disability is inadequate. The medical-individual model views disability as a personal tragedy and a bodymind concern that should possibly be *cured* or *fixed*. Disability is typically seen as a dysfunction, a collection of deficiencies, or a failure to meet specific standards. The social and political-relational models of disability challenge this dominant viewpoint, highlighting that disability arises from the material interaction between a bodymind and a given context. Disability is a political concept that is open to interpretation, rather than an immutable reality of bodyminds. It is intertwined with politics and personal connections, co-created in social and cultural processes, and continuously transformed (Barnes, 2016; Garland-Thomson, 2011; Goodley, 2011; Kafer, 2013). Therefore, it is crucial to contextualize the experience of disability in relational connections and sociocultural and political structures, rather than within the narrow boundaries of individuality. Disability is “experienced in and through relationships; it does not occur in isolation” (Kafer, 2013, p.8). Additionally, it intersects with other factors such as gender, class, and race, which impact an individual's experience within a given society.

Disability Justice activism has been developed by trans, queer, and BIPOC activists in the U.S.A, based in particular in the San Francisco Bay Area, and have then consistently spread internationally. It represents an intersectional platform. It centres disabled, Mad, and neurodivergent people's knowledge, expertise, and perspective in anti-ableist theory and practice, in the creation of collective access, and intersecting social justice issues (Nishida, 2022; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018, 2022; Sins Invalid, 2020). The movement promotes the crafting of more sustainable ways of living, especially rooted in interdependence, and aims to conjunctly end ableism and other systems of oppression.

On the other hand, the research field of environmental humanities represents an interdisciplinary framework (Weidner et al., 2019) which, starting from the acknowledgement of the anthropogenic impact on human environments and non-human ecologies as well, aims to face the social and cultural challenges posed by these accelerating processes (Bird Rose et al., 2012). Environmental humanities uphold that social, philosophical, and cultural analyses must be placed side by side with natural sciences and techno-scientific developments that may propose ways to decrease the effects of climate change. The practical and theoretical contributions necessary to build a sustainable future, with a more-than-human perspective in mind, entail attention to ecological, social, cultural, economic, and political dynamics, as they are inextricably entangled.

Furthermore, the concept of environmental injustice pinpoints the multi-scalar nature of the impact of climate change, which affects disproportionately on gender, racial, economic, and disability-related axes – parallelly with the multiscalarity of capitalism itself (Braidotti, 2019a; Johnson, 2017; Ryder et al., 2021). Therefore, the “disproportionate exposure” to “pollution, and its concomitant effects on health and environment” (Maantay, 2002), does not hinge on “natural” or geological forces but is structured on power imbalances and social injustice. This perspective also emphasizes how the portion of human society which threatens the environment the most, is not the most hit by the consequential toxicity, stockpile of waste,

ecological degradation, etc.⁴ As Rosi Braidotti repeatedly claims in *Posthuman Knowledge*: “‘we’ are in *this* together, but we are not One and the same” (2019a).

Disability in the environmental discourse

Who operates for the conservation of the environment? Who, on the other hand, poses a threat? In the analyses and rhetoric concerning the environmental crisis, subjectivities have often been appointed specific roles that follow identity routes. While feminist theory has worked to disentangle the rigid roles appointed to women – for example, framed as closer to Nature, and therefore as naturally having more propensity for caring for the Earth (cf. Haraway, 1991; MacGregor, 2006; Sandilands, 1999) –, I will consider a less frequent analysis: the representation of disabled people. As just mentioned above, a partial cross-pollination between disability studies and environmental humanities is already taking place. It is more frequent, though, that scholars and activists from disability studies initiate the conversation: in particular, this research area highlights how disabled people have been problematically assigned a rigid role too.

Identity narratives, in general, can promote essentialism and be dehumanising, as they do not represent subjectivities, but tend to craft an abstract homogeneity (cf. MacGregor, 2006; Sandilands, 2016). Identities, on the other hand, can represent the foundation on which to build fruitful political platforms (cf. Montalti, 2020). Even though I will extensively refer to disabled people throughout the essay, I do not mean to flatten the differences among these identity groups in terms of privilege, social obstacles, accessibility, and other intersecting factors (such as race or class). To counterbalance the abstract and immaterial perspective carried on by identity narratives, I find it important to keep in touch with situated examples, considering the experience of singular or small groups, specific examples of activism, and diverse voices within the same community – while at the same time, we also pose attention on power and symbolic structures. Disability will be examined both as a sociocultural trope and as a personal experience: for example, Cormick’s one, as an artist and a disabled person.

In environmentally focused discourses, disabled people tend to be relegated to a space of *passivity*. For example, they are distanced from “Nature”: it is often believed that they cannot be immersed in it, and appreciate it, *in the way they should* in order to care about it. This axe does not represent our main interest in the essay but is brilliantly exposed and challenged by Eli Clare (2017) and Alison Kafer (2013). I will rather focus on two different signposts, which also entail a form of passivity and minority: (I) disabled people as victims of the outputs of climate change and environmental devastation and, secondly, what we can call (II) *cautionary tales* regarding disability and the environment.

Disabled people in crises and emergencies are prevalently addressed in a minority and vulnerable position as if they were completely *unable* to combat the challenges presented by climate change.⁵ The association between disability and vulnerability has been critically debated: it is highlighted, in particular, how it can further exacerbate the narrative on disabled

⁴ For an extensive analysis of environmental justice, also in its difference from ecological justice, see for example Schlosberg, 2007.

⁵ It is worth noting how disabled people are, in at least a way, depicted as *active* and *responsible* towards the environment, but in a negative light: for example, it is recalled how accessibility needs, adjustments and tools can be potentially harmful to it (Kafer, 2013, 136-140; Wong 2019).



people's lack of agency. Associating disability with vulnerability might be dangerous, as it can reinforce a history of marginalization, partial participation in citizenship, and disempowerment (cf. Scully, 2014; Montalti, 2023). The point is not that disabled people are never vulnerable and should never be considered as such: it is instead challenged that their vulnerability should supposedly be interpreted in exceptional terms, othering and distancing disabled people as a consequence. The theoretical knot of vulnerability has a relevant role in environmental discourses as well: impairments could arise or be worsened by improper living and working conditions, insufficient healthcare provision, war, and climate crisis. Whereas urban, geological, and healthcare infrastructures are particularly precarious, disabled people are disproportionately impacted (Jampel, 2018; UN, 2020).

If disabled people indeed face increased risk – for example during wildfires that have crossed the U.S.A. and Australia –, it is also important that we do not exclusively consider them from a fundamentally passivizing perspective: their inventiveness and adaptability, even in emergencies, should be taken into consideration (Durrow and Berne, 2020; Kuppers, 2022, p.104, p.128; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018, 2022; Wong, 2019). The former narrative risks disregarding that they can possess skills and training in practising interdependence and living in often inaccessible environments. Disabled people weave modes of existence that we could define, in Haraway's terms, as "sympoietic" (2016). They shape inter-relationality that includes other human beings, or even non-human entities, as happens in the case of assistive animals as well (Michalko, 1999; Taylor, 2017). These experiences embody all the complexity and work required to co-become with many others. By contrast, the sociocultural frequent emphasis on total independence and autonomy is challenged (Fritsch, 2010; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018). Furthermore, *interdependence* characterizes every aspect of human and nonhuman life.

Secondly, disability is present within environmental discourses in a further position, which also risks being disempowering to disabled people. As Kafer (2013) underlines,

typing "environmentalism" or "environmental justice" into databases alongside "illness" or "disability" brings up hundreds of hits, but the majority of them are public health articles describing conditions linked to environmental exposure (e.g., asthma, cancers, and skin rashes). These pieces map disease clusters, detail specific exposures, record pollutant levels, and/or track chemicals and other pollutants suspected of being carcinogenic or teratogenic [...]. Finding illness or disability in these texts means finding stories of error and aberration; illness and disability appear almost exclusively as tragic mistakes caused by unnatural incursions into or disruptions of the natural body and the natural environment (p.157).

Natural and *normal*, as Clare (2014) pinpoints, tend to conflate, creating hierarchies. Disabled people are frequently evoked as representatives of the detrimental outcomes of environmental devastation. In this picture, disability, as sometimes *exacerbated* by environmental factors, conflates with environmental injustice (cf. Baldacci et al., 2018; Rauch and Lanphear, 2012; Tyler et al., 2008). This representation, however urgent on an ecological and human level, risks presenting certain bodyminds as damaged and defective (Clare, 2014), and their lives as a tragedy not worth living (Kafer, 2013; Kuppers, 2022, p.104, p.128). Valerie Ann Johnson (2017) describes the complexity inscribed in these claims as follows:

What is needed is to disaggregate the possible results of environmental injustice (i.e. exposure to toxic substances emanating from landfills or hog operations that injure the body) from the *person*, however they are embodied (p.76).

Even though I do not aim to exhaustively untie these knots, I will now turn to Cormick's performance to sustain different participation of disabled people in the environmental discourse, which hopefully does not choose a direction – the attention to the environmental crises – at the expense of the other – the attention to Disability Justice (Clare, 2017; Piepzn-Samarasinha, 2018, 2022; Sins Invalid, 2020) – and keeps track of the embedded complexity instead.

A premise on witnessing

Before introducing the performance of my interest, I will introduce the figuration of the “witness”. Feminist theory has frequently employed figurations as a theoretical tool: for example, Haraway's cyborg (1991), modest witness (1997) and Camille (2016), or Braidotti's nomad (1994). Figurations, or “conceptual personae”, Braidotti (2019c) explains,

are localized and hence immanent to specific conditions; [...] [they] are no mere metaphors, but material and semiotic signposts for specific geo-political and historical locations. As such, they express grounded complex singularities, not universal claims (p.34).

Figurations are not annihilated by complexity and power networks, but actively assist in the development of productive trajectories. They operate as conceptual signposts and serve as a guide in mapping both the processes that affect subjectivities and the contribution of these subjects in reworking them. They do not have a static nature but rather carry out theoretical displacements, sustaining speculative, political, and theoretical innovations:

Figurations are performative images that can be inhabited. Verbal or visual, figurations can be condensed maps of contestable worlds. [...] We inhabit and are inhabited by such figures that map universes of knowledge, practice, and power (Haraway, 1997, 11).

The mermaid itself may be understood as a posthuman figuration, with all its speculative, materialist, and cultural tentacles (Davis, 2019; Stifjell, 2022). Similar to the cyborg, it recalls the experience of liminality and the transgression of boundaries. It evokes the opportunity of hybridity between humanness and non-human ecologies (constituted by fishes, corals, the sea, and so on). At the same time, the figuration calls into question accessibility and dis/ability, as I will recall in the next section as well: the mermaid can fluently move in the water, whereas her life on Earth would put her at risk.

However, I will read the performance within a figuration proposed by Haraway in her work *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium.FemaleMan©_Meets_OncoMouse™: Feminism and Technoscience* (1997). The modest witness, one of the three intersecting figurations presented in the title, represents a feminist figuration, which counterbalances how the role of the witness is presented in scientific and technological processes: an “unmarked” figure, who has access to knowledge and power but occupies a dismissed position, and appears as trustworthy and persuasive in the accounts of an event (for example, whoever takes notes during a laboratory



experiment). The historical modest witness is not questioned, does not need to be embedded and embodied and thus appears dehumanised: it represents the objective observation.

Haraway (1997) proposes “to queer” this figure, centring the knowledge and the observation of “a more corporeal, inflected, and optically dense, if less elegant, kind of modest witness” (p.24). Whereas the historical, male-gendered, and transparent witness was presented as capable of *reading nature*, Haraway’s proposed figuration does not observe either nature or technoscientific processes from above: her modest witness understands the inextricable entanglement of human and non-human actors, intertwined in relations that cannot easily be isolated (Haraway, 1991, ch. 9). The witness, in this perspective, cannot avoid interacting with the material actions, events and contexts observed.

A Mermaid Tale: Exhaustion, Toxicity, and Participation

Bearing this methodological framework in mind, I will now explore Cormick’s performance. *The Mermaid* debuted in 2018 at the Art, Not Apart Festival (Canberra), and was also proposed at the I-Day Arts Conference (Canberra, Australia) in the same year, and at Sydney Festival in 2020. In the performance, Cormick resides in different spaces, both interior and exterior, but equally unadorned. The artist is dressed in a colourful mermaid costume, wears a shell-made crown and a respirator mask, and has her oxygen tank and her wheelchair on stage (she alternatively stays on it, lies down and crawls).⁶ Cormick presents a cluster of rare genetic disorders requiring the use of these medical-assistive tools, which are therefore not simply props. The performance is accompanied by her recorded voice (Cormick, 2018; Sperling, 2021; Stevens and Varney, 2022), which has a variable length, “dependent upon medical events”. One of Cormick’s conditions is Mast Cell Activation Syndrome: in case “she comes into contact with different environmental triggers, The Mermaid may suffer from real medical events: convulsive seizures, respiratory reactions, paralysis” (Cormick, n.d.). The somewhat whimsical and joyful aesthetics conveyed by the bright and iridescent colours is counterbalanced by the very real and risky possible outcomes and also appears striking connected with medical technology.

The mermaid on stage seems out of place, dislocated, as she is not situated in water, reminding the audience about the inherent frictions and complexities of accessibility practices and inclusion: the different environments disable or enable her mobility, and also put her life in danger or vice versa allowing her to breathe and thrive. The mermaid *mis-fits* the context, following Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s work: her partial and complex “juxtaposition” with the space of the performance, and therefore her *material* shifting in un/safe positionings, reveals insights about disability and the environment. The concept of misfit, Garland-Thomson (2019) explains, “emphasizes context over essence, relation over isolation” (p.593). Therefore, it serves to make emerge interdependent relations and “the permeability of our bodies and ecosystems” (Cormick n.d.).

I consider the performance as a materialization of Haraway’s witness. *The Mermaid* represents an embedded, embodied and situated form of *witnessing* the environmental crisis. Since Cormick’s conditions have a strong environmental basis, the artist deliberately makes herself visible, to draw attention to issues that concern both the micro-level – her specific body – and

⁶ The performance is not viewable online, but some pictures and brief frames of it can be easily found, for example here <https://2020.sydneyfestival.org.au/events/the-mermaid>.

the macro-level – the body of the Earth: contamination and toxicity, exploitation, extractivist⁷ capitalistic attitudes, exhaustion, hyper-productivity, and damage.

The Mermaid, as explained by Cormick, is “a celebration” of subjects that do not aspire to be self-contained and autonomous, in a position of mastery towards other beings, the environment, and *their bodyminds*, but on the contrary, accept limits, interdependence and the necessity to listen to their needs (in emotional, corporeal, spatial, and temporal terms). The colourful costume registers this form of pride: the artist shows the intention to claim a space.

So I wanted something that was hyper-visible, and I also wanted something that could turn my wheelchair into something enviable (Cormick cit. in Reich, 2021).

The relationship between disability/chronic illnesses and visibility is historically controversial. On one hand, staring has been an othering move: disabled people were marked as “deviating” by the public gaze, standing out against the background of normalcy. On the other hand, however, disabled people have been *rendered invisible* in the social arena. Furthermore, invisible disabilities and illnesses hardly participate in these visual exchanges, which can represent both a comforting and a risky position. Being stared at can produce both pride and shame (cf. Garland-Thomson 1996, 2005, 2009). When staring at disability is mediated by art requires further factors to be considered. Firstly, on a historical level, this visual exchange critically recalls the context of freak shows, and therefore a position of spectacularisation – sometimes, but not always, for the benefit of someone else, and in inadequate working conditions – and of potential dehumanisation as well. Secondly, on the other hand, art can become a space in which the ambivalence of staring is thematised (Sandhal, 2009). The invitation to *look* can also have political relevance, as “the public finds disability abhorrent” (Kuppers, 2022, p.127), and sometimes even disabled people themselves feel the same: Cormick’s performance, for example, becomes an “act of radical visibility”, which let disability and illness emerge not only in front of the public but in front of her own eyes as well (Cormick, 2021). In art production and performance, disabled artists can control the narrative, even though there is always a form of permeability and unpredictable outcomes (temporal, emotional, etc.) to consider – as *The Mermaid* pinpoints (cf. Johnson, 2022; Kuppers, 2022; Montalti, 2021).

The Mermaid, however, is also “a warning”, intended to refer to “both ourselves and the environment” (Cormick, n.d.). Cormick employs the performance to unveil the connection between environmental devastation and her embodied experience as a disabled and chronically ill person.

For some of us, the crisis isn’t coming, it’s here: air we can’t breathe, water we can’t drink, food and resource scarcity, sun that blisters our skin, pollution so thick that everything becomes a poison. I have been living inside a sealed room for five years, disabled by the environment that we have created through our actions. I have a rare immune disease, but the systems of my body are not wildly different from a regular person, just accelerated, amplified. My cells, ravaged by the effects of humanity’s addiction to fossil fuels, have mutated, and through the damage done to my body by the toxic environment we have created around us, I feel the damage we do to the planet (Cormick, 2020).

⁷ By extractivism, I mean an economic model that heavily relies on the extraction of natural resources, exploiting them without taking into account the long-term environmental and economic sustainability and the potential harm towards communities.



The performance can be framed as a visual and oral counterpart of the ongoing creation of an anthology of “toxic memoirs”, in which the protagonist is precisely the interconnection between bodyminds and the surrounding polluted environment (cf. Alaimo, 2010; <http://www.toxicbios.eu/#/stories>). Cormick’s recorded voice and text description recall:

I didn’t understand that my veins were as polluted as the rivers, my lungs full of plastic and petroleum,
pesticides soaking into my fat like the soil and switching on dangerous genes
(Cormick, 2018).⁸

She also refers to the “tremors” experienced both by her and the Coral Reef, recalling in this way the Australian context in which the performance was presented (Cormick, 2018). *The Mermaid* does not exactly *speak for nature* (cf. Sandilands 1999, pp.77-80), in an anthropomorphic and anthropocentric sense, but more subtly reclaims her presence in ecological processes – a presence, however, that does not equate with sovereignty and mastery. No part of the matter can be alienated from the other. As clarified by Alaimo, any form of environmental illness

offers a particularly potent example of trans-corporeal space, in which the human body can never be disentangled from the material world, a world of biological creatures, ecosystems, and xenobiotic, humanly made substances (Alaimo, 2010, p.115).

The audience, even though they do not experience medical conditions as Cormick does, is invited to explore this form of embeddedness and interconnection within any ecological relationship. Entanglements, as pointed out by Karen Barad (2007), have ethical implications: “we are always already responsible”, “not through conscious intent” but through the inextricability inscribed within materiality (p.393). Any interaction, Cormick asks us to acknowledge, should never be immune to accountability – even though there is no intention to harm (cf. Cormick cit. in Reich, 2021; Dow, 2019). The audience’s presence can affect the well-being of the artist and trigger several medical outcomes. The potential impact is not a collateral experience but a deliberate political action: it is explicitly integrated into the performance (Johnson 2021 and 2022, ch. 4; Stevens and Varney, 2022).

Furthermore, Cormick explores another interconnection between her embodied experience and the environment. She is not merely affected by pollutants, chemicals, and wildfires that make the air unbreathable, among other factors: her relationship with her own body mirrors the approach towards the environment in a capitalistic society. Cormick explicitly addresses this link:

I had been treating my body like a resource that I could draw upon until it was exhausted; treating my body like the fossil fuel industry treats the planet. (Cormick cit. in Reich, 2021)

The Mermaid reveals the precarious nature of resources of all kinds. In the capitalist and ableist mindset, therefore, *exhaustion* is unconceivable, as time, space, resources, and energy are

⁸ I had the opportunity to hear the recorded voice in the video shared by Cormick, but written references on the performance can also be found in Stevens, Varney, 2022.

treated as linear and/or infinite. Overwork, extractivism and hyper-productivity have detrimental and debilitating consequences on a more-than-human spectrum. Cormick uncovers and challenges through the artistic medium the sociocultural, economic, and historical conundrum that ceaselessly translates the narrative of *mastery* from the *outside* – Nature, the environment – to the *inside* – our bodyminds –, at the same reinforcing the false delusion of their discreet and impermeable nature.

What I want to emphasize is Cormick's approach to presenting this theoretical, artistic, and practical endeavour. The overlapping between her body and ecological processes, obviously also recalled by the choice of the mermaid as a figuration, does not end up presenting disability as a tragedy. Even though pain and personal renounces represent a legitimate self-narrative concerning disability, the performance does not become a reinforcement of the medical-individual narrative. Cormick extensively thematises structural ableism and presents her experience as inter-relational – also because of the specific and “ecological” nature of her medical conditions. In this perspective, the performance resembles Clare's writing (2017) on his experience of disability: “I tell this story not as a *tragedy*, but a *truth* [emphases added], a shrug of the shoulders, water over rock” (p.5). Cormick does not insist on tragedy, but rather on *injustice*: she does not call for compassion and pity, but rather for recognition and the possibility of action. What is represented as deeply undesirable is not the disabled body but the conditions of injustice that disable people and fragilize ecologies. From this perspective, the performance bypasses the risk of presenting *toxic* bodies – which may convey their inert and damaged nature – and insists on complex ecological connections instead.

Conclusion

I wish to highlight the fertility of a standpoint in environmental discourses that does not hinge on disabled people's passivity and can be conveyed by Cormick's performance. Firstly, the analysis of the performance can help expose a theoretical tension within disability studies, that can inhibit their interest in the environmental discourse. To challenge the medical model of disability and the cultural narrative that revolves around deficit and tragedy, disability studies tend to avoid addressing disability prevention. It is useful to consider, in this perspective, the solicitation presented by Braidotti to carry out non-oppositional reflections: practices and discourses are rarely framed in an “either/or” dichotomy, but rather in an “and/both” perspective. The philosopher invites us to keep in mind the heterogeneity of phenomena and the multi-layered nature of the present. Posthumanism “urges us to leap into the complexity and paradoxes” that constitute it (Braidotti and Regan, 2017; Braidotti, 2013; Braidotti, 2019a, p.19, p.33, p.37, p.41, pp.72-73; Braidotti, 2019b), enacting in this sense a post-dualistic epistemological approach.

To assume a truly liberating dimension, rather than further oppressive, for disabled people, it is necessary to hold two theoretical and political tensions together. The ambiguity of the relationship between disability and environmental crisis can be condensed into the formula, used by activism, #TheFutureIsDisabled. Activists like Alice Wong and Sunaura Taylor embrace not only empowering perspectives for disabled people but also those that compromise the lives of all living beings. In what ways can the future be considered disabled? The slogan primarily embodies the “harmful conditions” suffered by humans and non-humans due to the anthropogenic climate crisis, which must be addressed with clarity and urgency. Therefore, it is undoubtedly essential to maintain high attention towards the



economic and environmental devastation, which has disabling repercussions at a multi-species level. However, at the same time, the “disabled” nature of the future implies the assertion of space, participation, and agency.

These two meanings together feel powerful to me—that, yes, the future is increasingly disabled because of harmful conditions that we must act to alter, and, yes, it is also possible for this same disabled future to be accessible, to challenge systemic ableism, and to be liveable for disabled humans, nonhumans, and ecologies (Taylor and Orning, 2020, p.683).

The performance can help us experiment with rhetoric and visual possibilities to fight a capitalist system that persistently provokes damage to the environment and every human and non-human being (with the differential impact highlighted by environmental injustice), *without* employing disabled lives as theoretical support to disclose undesirability, tragedy, or deficit. Whereas it is necessary to dismantle the current production structure, it is also important to acknowledge how its debilitating outcomes on bodyminds can be inhabited with pride, creativity, and resistance. As Haraway (2016) suggests, “it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with”: the seriousness and the magnitude of environmental crises should not grant us the possibility to reiterate discrimination, marginalisation, and oppressive narratives on subjectivities.

Finally, the mermaid analysed is not acting as a “protectress” of Nature, as conveyed by a part of ecofeminism: she acts as a *witness* instead. Cormick’s performance drags herself and the audience “in the middle of involved witnessing, in the encounter zones between self and environment” (Kuppers, 2022, p.1). She is not passive; she does not simply *expose* her conditions through the visible presence of her body. She actively crafts artistic ecological politics. *The Mermaid* does not silence disabled people but rather highlights the value of their voices for sustaining the challenge posed by the environmental crisis: the performance values the knowledge and participation of disabled people. Furthermore, it enacts the fatigue sustained by the witness, materially and biographically imbricated in the same dynamics challenged. The performance represents an embedded, embodied and situated form of knowledge, but does not reproduce isolation and individuality: Cormick invites the audience to *step back* from doing unbearable harm during the performance – whoever wears perfumes or brings food (Stevens and Varney, 2022) – and at the same time invites everyone to *step forward* in terms of accountability and recognition: not only towards her but also towards their own bodyminds’ limits, and the planet’s ones.

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