

CYRÉE JARELLE JOHNSON AND CAROLYN LAZARD



This conversation has been condensed and edited for clarity.
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Cyrée Jarelle Johnson: Abled people are always telling me, 'In the future we'll all be sick' or that disability is the most likely result of climate catastrophe. And I'm like, everyone I know is already sick. Most of the people I know are *already* disabled. Whether through illness, injury, trauma, congenital disabilities—all of those. Being disabled can be like seeing into the earth's future. We already know what isolation and scarcity look like, and their consequences. We survived the eugenics, drank the poisoned water, swallowed the pills when no one could know the results. I think that disabled people already know how to remain resilient against the disabling future to come.

Carolyn Lazard: Yes! So much of what disability pride is for me is not necessarily a celebration of illness, injury, trauma, etc., but a pride in our resilience. Disability and futurity appear to be incompatible in an ableist world: The general vibe is that disability is a bad thing and we don't want it in the future. When nondisabled people envision an ideal future, it's one in which disability no longer exists. They want to have found ways to eliminate all potential manifestations of disability through the miracles of technological advancement. Not only is this unrealistic, it's incredibly ableist.

There is no possibility of a life which does not, in some way, produce disability. You cannot live in the world without getting hurt, going mad, or becoming sick. People long for life without disability but the experience of just being alive and disability are so intimately bound up in each other—especially for Black people. For me, dreaming of a Black disabled future is a radical practice.

Johnson: I'm so glad we're having this conversation two days before Umoja—I always gather together with my loved ones on Imani and fulfill my Black New Year's food obligations. My Kwanzaa celebrations mostly take place in my house, so they're reasonably accessible to me.

So many other facets of Black life in community feel complicated for me as a Black disabled person, particularly when compounded by other marginalizations: my personality, my social relationships, etc. It's as though community and collectivity are a reward for being respectable and nonthreatening, with access to a well-maintained social network, which is a luxury that many Black disabled people aren't afforded.

I don't just mean party and gathering spaces here; movement spaces, healing spaces, and living spaces are all complicit in ableism. The dream of collectivity and collective living in all of its permutations can be risky and complex for Black disabled people, when we're not left out entirely. What's most harmful about this rejection is that Black disabled people would be and are greatly benefited by collective accountability, collective responsibility, and interdependence, but as usual ableism keeps us from getting what we need. Black disabled futures cannot exist without collectivity.

Lazard: I really feel you in the sense that the idea of community itself can be really inaccessible for a lot of Black disabled people. Disability is endemic to Black communities, because the conditions of our lives as Black people are inherently disabling. Black folks, like all people, are born with congenital conditions; we also develop chronic illnesses and injuries disproportionately in comparison to other races. The prison industrial complex is an entire industry predicated on disability as a reason

for incarceration while simultaneously producing disability through incarceration. And yet, our communities disidentify with disability and don't always know how to engage with disability honestly and respectfully. Black political movements could be so deeply enriched by actually looking at what's happening in our community and accounting for it in some kind of way. Like saying, "oh wow. Black folks are really disabled. What's up with that?"

It would be absurd for us to have this conversation and not mention the work of the Harriet Tubman Collective (HTC), a consortium of Black disabled advocates, artists, and dreamers to which we both belong! HTC does advocacy focused on the intersectional lapses of Black social justice movements that deny the impact of ableism on Black communities and of the primarily White disability social justice movements that deny the inherently disabling nature of racism. Other Black disabled activists like Talila A. Lewis and Ki'tay D. Davidson have also done a lot of prison abolition work grounded in disability justice to support d/Deaf and disabled Black folks affected by state violence.

Johnson: I think it's also important to mention that HTC formed in response to Black Lives Matter's avowed ableism, both structural and interpersonal. It's so tempting to feel like just because movements for justice (occasionally) manage to stick disability at the end of a long list of marginalizations, that's the same as investing in politically disabled leadership.

It's vital that people don't get those two things confused. There will sometimes be disabled people that find themselves in positions of leadership, but without a framework of disability as a political and social identity, consequentially, their leadership may still be ableist. That's some of what I saw when HTC first started to work in coalition with the Movement for Black Lives, and it made me suck my teeth at first. Now it just makes me want to work with other cripples to create a disability justice movement that's more inviting to Black people. particularly multiply marginalized Black people.

In the future, disability justice will be irresistible because the work—both theoretical and interpersonal—is the sort of thing you reach for when your body is changed and there's no other map to consult.

Lazard: We have an entire history of social justice movements saying that "the personal is political" and yet disability has really struggled to be included in that statement. We are always being told that our impairments and our illnesses are ours and ours alone. So much of what disability justice provides is a framework for seeing one's personal experience extend to the realm of politics. It takes the hush-hush of disability and makes it public and political. And yet this too can be a complicated position to occupy: To be a Black person with a known or recognizable disability can put you at risk for all kinds of violence, whether you're read as being noncompliant by the police or losing your job for not being able to work in an ableist work environment (read: most work environments).

Johnson: Definitely. Collectivity can be challenging for Black disabled people too, particularly when the desire to be a part of community leads us to neglect our

accessibility needs. Some of that silence comes from community pressure to pull one's own weight because of the great demands that antiBlackness mounts on Black people. That pressure coupled with duty and responsibility to community members and organizations can run sick and disabled people ragged.

The Cancer Journals and "A Burst of Light: Living With Cancer" are preeminent disability narratives and a great example of what that pressure looked like for Audre Lorde as a Black creative with cancer. Throughout both texts, you can see her rapidly advance a disability analysis. By the end of "A Burst of Light," she has politicized her cancer, shared that new knowledge, and assimilated it into her other political identities.

I hear the quote "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare" all the time, but that quote doesn't typify the work. It comes all the way at the end of the book. after Lorde had traveled extensively with cancer and then she turns around and wonders how she would have felt if she made the choice to prioritize herself. It's so complicated and relatable to watch Lorde question herself about her quality of life and contributions to the Black lesbian community in the face of her own physical needs.

The Cancer Journals and "A Burst of Light" expanded and continue to expand how Black people who believe in justice think about disability.

They also provide a vision of what it means for Black people to be disabled and have close, violent contact with the medical-industrial complex on a structural level. There's this one part where she writes about prosthesis and is essentially like, why do you want me to have a prosthetic breast in here when I could just have no breast? The medical-industrial complex values my money and my appearance more than my life.

Lazard: This thing that Audre Lorde outlines about taking care, for me, really relates again to ideas of survival. She was trying to develop a framework for the sustainability of her own work as a Black woman. These same ideas are reflected in other modes of writing by Black women too. I'm thinking specifically about science fiction and fantasy in the works of Octavia Butler and N. K. Jemisin; two authors writing at different times in different genres, but with a lot of crossover.

So many of Octavia Butler's protagonists are Black women who are trying to survive in the face of unthinkable destruction while negotiating the political, ecological, and social constraints of their lives. Oftentimes these characters are disabled in some way or another, for instance, Lauren Olamina's hyperempathy syndrome in Butler's *Parable of the Sower* or the orogenic capacities of N. K. Jemisin's characters in the Broken Earth trilogy. In both of these examples, these deficits or marginalized traits become points of connection with others. Disability can fuck up your life but it can also be a source of transformation and power.

The Broken Earth trilogy also operates within geological time, taking place on a spiteful earth that hates its inhabitants and destroys itself over and over again. Jemisin is really thinking through to the other side of the apocalypse, which is basically what Black disabled people have been doing for generations! For a Black disabled future, these questions of ecological destruction are bound up with ableism and racism. It's like what you said earlier, "we drank the poisoned water" and we're still here. What do we do and how do we survive after the world ends?

Johnson: I actually haven't read N. K. Jemisin's work yet, but I'll put it on my reading list! That's such an important point because environmental racism is disabling. Environmental degradation is disabling. Of course there will be more illness now that our water is polluted with fertilizer and toxic waste is buried in the ground. Of course environmental catastrophes will leave people disabled by injury. Of course war and famine bring new plagues and bodies influenced by manipulated environments.

Disabled people survive and are created during each apocalypse—but no one can do so cleanly. With our new physical deformities, disabilities, and illnesses there will be new mental illnesses and addictions for which the outcome is unknown. I've read a fair amount of articles about Olamina's disability, hyperempathy syndrome, but I've never seen one about the new addiction that caused the transmission from parent to child. I also have never seen pyro users and their zeal for setting fires and watching them burn, sometimes dying in the process, situated in disability justice readings of *Parable of the Sower*.

Disability will sometimes be beneficial in the future, but some disabilities will be just as stigmatized and, yes, as difficult as what we currently experience. The present is the space where we can build collective care models that prevent emerging mental illnesses from consuming and isolating our loved ones and potentially ourselves.

Lazard: Yes, totally. It seems like the work that needs to happen now, to prepare for the Black disabled future, requires a radical look at why illness and disability are so stigmatized. Capitalism and white supremacy reinforce the idea that health is a personal responsibility, which means that if you aren't "healthy" then you've done something wrong. Wellness becomes this deeply individuated pursuit instead of something that requires collective accountability.

Johnson: Yeah, and if you're unable to fulfill the health goals that are seen as your responsibility to meet, you lose societal power and are blamed for your own marginalization. People think of disability as a kind of inherent worthlessness—a complete inability to do anything. In the future there will be so many disabled people that we'll be forced to recognize the things that disabled people can do. Everyone can do something, even if they need assistance to do so, even if it is breathing or laying. Those are things that all people do. That's not nothing. No one is doing nothing. That's one thing that human beings can't do. Hearts beat, people recline, people sleep, people's eyes flicker. I think that people think of disability in the way that White people think of Blackness, like as an inherently abject state.

I think that it's very easy when you're living through an unpersonhood to not want to add another unpersonhood. I additionally think that to some extent Black people have less to lose than they think, because you're already unpersoned.

That's why the cultural work collectives like Sins Invalid do is so important. Art is a catalog of perceptions and lived experiences. Not ensuring that disabled artists can meaningfully participate in the creation of those testaments to living means that whole identities, relationships, activist work, and thought aren't added to our collective mythology. When disabled artists have their access needs met, they can make those contributions that change perceptions and deepen understandings of disabled life.

Lazard: On a basic level, how can we even dream of the future without talking about accessibility? To be real, sometimes it feels like the Black disabled future is already here with Black people creating our own access and doing our own thing, anyway. Maybe everyone else will eventually catch up to us if they're lucky! The choreographer and dancer Alice Sheppard speaks to this in regard to her own work. I remember hearing her say something about how functionality isn't the only end point of accessibility. Access can also be beautiful and aesthetically innovative. I'm thinking about her dance company's piece *Descent*, which is performed on and with an architectural ramp installation. The work is so fantastic because it brings into being radical forms of movement and relation that come out of disability and dependency. Art is a catalog and it can also invent new experiences and perceptions.

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