

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Disabled Ecologies and Vegans for Ecoability and Species Justice

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Sunaura Taylor. 2024. *Disabled Ecologies: Lessons from a Wounded Desert*. Oakland: University of California Press.

Anthony J. Nocella II and Amber E. George, eds. 2022. *Vegans on Speciesism and Ableism: Ecoability Voices for Disability and Animal Justice*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc.



Humans are not the only animals who experience physical differences, illnesses, and chronic pain. Millions of nonhuman animals are, for example, confined in sizable concentrated feeding operations (CAFOs), their bodies commodified and killed for the meat and dairy industry. Chickens are one of the most exploited groups on the planet; in the United States alone, over 380 million hens are used for their eggs yearly. Hens are selectively bred to produce many eggs while being kept in cages that restrict their mobility, making them prone to bone diseases, broken bones, and stress. Likewise, the confinement of cows often leads to lameness and mastitis, a painful bacterial infection of the udders. The disabilities that farmed animals experience cannot be separated from their environment; for these nonhuman animals, the environment is disabling, not their bodies. This is akin to the social model of disability—a model that sees disability as produced by social barriers rather than by an individual's medically diagnosed impairment. It is a model that recognizes that disability is built on the social, political, and structural fabrication of suffering and marginalization.

But what if we imagined these nonhuman animals expressing their disabilities in ways other than through stress, pain, and abject terror? What if, hear me out here, we imagine them outside the factory farm, learning to live, breathe, and interact with other living beings? And, what if we recognize that human, nonhuman, and environmental





injuries are profoundly entangled and intimately interconnected, and identifying these entanglements can offer us ways and means to resist? Nonhuman animals and broader environmental ecologies have for a long time been subjects of ableism—discrimination based on awarding favor to able-bodied humans. With the earth and its nonhuman and disabled human beings being exploited for their difference, it is vital to recognize these bodily transmutations and interconnections. Now is the time to question our ideas about bodies—their aliveness, permeability, and nonconformity to the Western, wealthy, white male standard that has dominated our thinking for so long.

Two recent books, *Disabled Ecologies: Lessons from a Wounded Desert* by Sunaura Taylor and *Vegans on Speciesism and Ableism: Ecoability Voices for Disability and Animal Justice*, edited by Anthony J. Nocella II and Amber E. George, discuss the interconnections between human and nonhuman disability, environmental destruction, and the ways and means of resisting the powerful politics and practices of ableism. Taylor, in *Disabled Ecologies*, explores the human and non-human communities that live among the remnants of a post-World War II military manufacturing site in Tucson, Arizona—it narrates their injuries from residing within a polluted and toxically contaminated community, as well as their collaborations and moments of solidarity in resisting state-sanctioned practices of slow violence. *Vegans on Speciesism and Ableism* is an edited collection of stories written by people who experience daily differences due to ableism. The collection includes contributions from neurodiverse individuals and people with physical and mental differences. The key trope here is the advocacy of total liberation: the need to unite against all forms of oppression for the sake of the planet, people, and animals.

Both books embrace what Patricia Hill Collins (2008) calls “the lived experience as a criterion of meaning.” The writing is driven by emotion and personal reflection, which promotes the idea that knowledge is not something beyond our experiences of the world but is a standpoint inflected with meanings that we live *through* and *with* rather than apart from. Relatedly, both books also focus productively on the systemic and structural injustices that perpetuate intersectional forms of discrimination, most notably the overlapping matrixes of disability, animality, and ecological destruction.

Disabled Ecologies begins with the view that we live in the “Age of Disability,” the current geological epoch that “exposes how systems of power rely on, benefit from, and produce disability in and among human people in ways that are enmeshed with how they benefit from



and produce disablement in and among ecosystems and nonhuman species" (29). Consequently, when thinking about the production and construction of disability, we do not just isolate it from the perspective of our human lives but expand this notion to include the injuries wrought by nonhuman selves and how they are often complex and interconnected to our own. To illustrate this, Taylor deftly grounds her theoretical insights in a case study to which she has powerful connections of place to. Taylor returns to her place of birth, Tucson, Arizona, to study the contamination of the local aquifers due to a post-World War II manufacturing boom in defense technologies—a place that she long thought to have caused her disability. For over three decades, defense companies would dump barrels of toxic waste in open-air pits that eventually seeped into the desert sand and polluted the drinking water of neighboring communities. Here, she tells stories of this contamination and its impact on the predominantly Mexican-American and Indigenous communities living with it. Exposing these contamination histories, she begins to see how "utterly entangled this mass disablement of nature is with the disablement of human beings" (5). For Taylor, the hot yet severely harmed Arizona desert illustrates a disabled ecology—the material multispecies injuries that occur in environmentally damaged areas.

Taylor traverses the history of what happened to the land and its people on Tucson's southside and the Sonoran Desert region to tell a story about the harmful effects of volatile chemicals such as TCE (trichloroethylene) on the underground aquifer and the rivers and the injuries afforded by them to the people who live there. Espousing methodological pluralism, she embraces the lived experiences of the community, interviewing and attending meetings with southside organizers. These are the organizers who, for many years, have fought to have their voices heard among the mess of bureaucratic governance systems and the state and corporate actors who manipulate these systems to their advantage. Many of the latter refused to acknowledge the connection between the human-induced contamination of the groundwater, its environmental destruction, the illnesses, and the deaths of those who lived within vicinity of the contamination. Taylor delves into the archives to retrace the stories told by local journalists such as Jane Kay, who first reported the pollution, and explores the official documents of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and Tucson health boards. What she reveals is an insidious betrayal of the land and its people.

She tracks the journey of the pollutants through the land and riverways that make up the region from their source, the chemical waste



disposed of in unlined lagoons by the Hughes Aircraft Company from around the 1950s (chemicals used to craft and clean missiles that would be used as weapons of abject violence in the Korean War), through to their infiltration into the underground aquifers that eventually reach municipal and private wells. The “TCE plume,” as it became known (9), subsequently altered the chemical balance of the water, which would then be used to sustain the racially diverse local population—causing a myriad of diseases and incurable cancers. This chemical trail eventually spread across a large area, reaching five miles from the south (where the source was located) to the north.

Yet, there is hope. This enmeshment of multispecies disablements can also be a conduit for resistance and reform. Here, Taylor introduces us to an “environmentalism of the injured” (25), demonstrating how disabled ecologies can act as mobilization strategies that draw on conditions of “vulnerability, interdependency, and impairment to build more just worlds” (25). Here, radical environmental movements, disability activists, and anti-racist/decolonial forms of resistance coalesce to form storylines of defiance that recognize (in different ways) how bodies and environments are inseparable. Centering her narrative on the activist groups Tucsonans for a Clean Environment, Las Aquas, and the EPA-backed Unified Community Advisory Board, particularly the relentless activism of “community elders” Henry and Alicia Vega (60), Taylor tells a story of environmental racism, colonialism, and environmental degradation through the lenses of critical disability studies, environmental history, and radical ecology. In doing so, Taylor shows how an “environmentalism of the injured” works in practice and can facilitate unification, interdependency, and an ethics of care for the world around us. Taylor demonstrates how the lived experiences of the earth, its soil, air, and water, and the pollution it suffers impact local human and nonhuman communities and how these experiences are part of a larger story of environmental change related to the politics and economics of warfare capitalism. Cartography, Taylor’s artwork, photographs, and newspaper articles bring the book to life, giving it meaning and accessibility. This is coupled with a beautifully written set of stories that truly inspire and give the reader hope.

This relinquishing of environmental loss to a narrative of hope can be found in the edited collection *Vegans on Speciesism and Ableism*. Nocella and George introduce the idea of “ecoability.” Ecoability is a praxis that encapsulates animal liberation, disability rights, and environmental justice. Founded in 2010, it emerged from critical animal studies (CAS), exploring how “ecological destruction intersects with nonhuman



animal and disability oppression" (1). The aim is to create inclusive spaces where nonhuman animals, nature, and people with disabilities can work collaboratively and interdependently, experience direct democracy in action, and value difference and diversity for what they are.

In S. Marek Muller's chapter "Got Autism: PETA and the Rhetoric of Eco-Ableism," the power of language to confuse, obfuscate, and, conversely, facilitate change is discussed (9–27). With a focus on PETA's ableist rhetorical strategies, Muller assesses the ethical contradictions in PETA's 2008 "Got Autism?" campaign that suggested a causal relationship between the consumption of dairy milk and children displaying autistic behaviors. The chapter offers insights into how we can critique ecoableist forms of domination through the lens of CAS's notion of total liberation. It demonstrates how the use of ableism to fight speciesism rests under the rhetoric of the nebulous ideas of "freedom" (13–16).

Daniel Salomon's chapter, "Getting Solidarity: Toward an Interest-Based Conflict Resolution Approach to Resolving Conflict between Ecoability Equity and Animal Equity," continues the work of Muller's chapter and recognizes that being neurodiverse requires diverse communities to "fully acknowledge ability as one expression of diversity" (29). The personal narrative offered by Salomon about his neurodiverse journey with nonhuman animals is a poignant reminder that the supercrip story of autism—those autistic superstars such as Temple Grandin who perpetuate the abuse of nonhuman animals—negates diversity in its truest sense. Salomon highlights the intersectional relationship between the treatment of autism and the treatment of nonhuman animals of the laboratory, stating that "vivisection . . . projects cruelty onto autistic humanity, 'treating us like animals', applying Skinner-like Behaviourism on rats and mice, to us, used to violently socialise us into white society" (34). To have any form of social justice, Salomon advocates for a conflict resolution approach that calls for individual dignity and agency. Conflict resolution approaches refuse to "choose between lives" and focus on collaborating with all living beings on the planet for a more just, ecoable society.

In chapter 3, Birkan Taş, shifts the attention of the ecoability movement to assistance dogs. Taş highlights the shared vulnerability of humans and dogs and their resolute interdependence. A well-written critique of the history of dog-breeding and its antithetical to the aims of CAS is presented. A discussion about the myth of dogs being an instrument to aid human independence is explored. Based on the human–animal binary, dogs are treated as consumerist objects whose "invisible labour and care work are ignored within a discourse of speciesism and



ableism" (45). Instead, we must recognize interspecies ethics of care; drawing on feminist, crip, and queer accounts of the politics of care, Taş elucidates a way forward for humans and assistance dogs.

In "Queering the Animate Body: Toxicity, Ecoability, and Multispecies Solidarity in Duplin County, North Carolina," Zoie McNeill and Rebecca-Eli Long explore how toxicity impacts marginalized non-human, human, and ecological communities by drawing on theoretical insights from CAS, queer studies, and critical disability studies. Using CAFOs as a case study to explore the exploitation of humans and animals, as well as the ecological destruction brought by such factory farms, McNeil and Long create a framework for thinking through "disability, animal rights, and environmentalism that fights against industrialised farming and the capitalist food regime as a whole" (54). In decentering the human from our toxicity analyses, we can obliterate the false binaries that uphold what it means to be human or "other." We are queering the world and recognizing how we are all connected and interdependent, thereby allowing us to "imagine a futurity created by multispecies solidarity" (63).

The final chapter of this superb edited collection, T. N. Rowan's "Trauma-Informed Activism: New Directions for Interspecies Trauma in Ecoability and Critical Animal Studies," provides therapeutic practices that can support activists, vegans, and scholars with secondary traumatic stress disorder (STSD). Going and being vegan often involves viewing very violent and distressing material, and this can lead to people vicariously experiencing trauma. Rowan articulates possible practical solutions to help meet the needs of trauma survivors. For Rowan, trauma-informed care has a place in the vegan community and should be part of the training undertaken by activist groups. This means that the trauma experienced by vegan activists and communities is inherently political. When we talk about STSD, we are not using the individualized biomedical model of disability and illness but rather recognizing that trauma is a collective activity that is part of larger systems of injustice, oppression, and marginalization. By politically situating STSD within the vegan and CAS community, Rowan believes that "choice" remains an option for activists. Choice operates here to give people autonomy over their actions and can include "the ability to opt-out before being triggered or re-traumatized" (82)—discussions between activists about what content is triggering and violent is essential so that a person's right to choose what they view is maintained. Recognizing that viewing violence is part of the broader vegan community and the possibility that activists will have STSD can strengthen the bond between people in the



movement and politically situate the intersectional forms of oppression that all species experience.

Even though the notions of ecoability and the environmentalism of the injured are explored in different ways through the books' empirical situated materials, Taylor and Nocella and George offer superb insights into the intersectional nature of speciesism and ableism. Both books deal with the proposition that binary thinking not only damages people but also the planet and all its living beings. Disability, animality, and ecology are astutely interconnected and co-produced by existing power relations perpetuated by the capitalist system. Taylor's analysis makes it clear that the forces of destruction often hide behind the ideology of economic growth. Nocella and George's edited collection helps elucidate the common but differential impacts that diverse forms of speciesism and ableism have on the earth. Both books, however, offer stories of hope and meaning through activism. Recognizing ableism in all its forms is essential to working toward a more ecologically just society.

References

Collins, Patricia H. 2008. *Black Feminist Thought*. London: Routledge.



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