

Sins Invalid's Vision of Crip Sustainability

By Nina Muehlemann

"Crips can't afford to live being prepared for the worst, although the worst will always hit us harder." In a scene of the 2020 Sins Invalid performance We love like Barnacles: Crip Lives in Climate Chaos, also captured in the 2021 documentary Loving with Three Hearts: Behind the Scenes of the 2020 Sins Invalid Performance, disabled artist Maria Palacios makes the position of disabled people in ecological disaster painfully clear. In the performance, which was released in a streaming format only, Palacios, a poet, author, spoken word performer, and workshop facilitator who has performed with Sins Invalid since 2007, talks about the scarcity of resources available to disabled people, particularly disabled people of colour, and the impossibility of being prepared for disaster within those circumstances, as well as the neglect of official bodies to make access for disabled people part of emergency evacuation plans. Sins Invalid is a US-West Coast theatre collective that has created performances since 2006 and incubates and celebrates artists with disabilities, centralising artists of colour and LGBTQ/gender-variant artists as communities who have been historically marginalised (Pentilla 2014). 1 Both We love like Barnacles and the documentary Loving with Three Hearts highlight how disabled people hold an extremely vulnerable position in the Anthropocene, yet tend to be forgotten in the discourses and strategies that promote sustainability and climate crisis relief. This article argues that the work of Sins Invalid addresses ableism within the environmental justice movement, and that as a form of systemic oppression it works in conjunction with environmental harm. I will give a brief overview of how disability is often excluded from environmental justice and action, and discuss how the work of Sins Invalid fits into this discourse. I will then lay out how the company uses their work to propose a vision in which disability justice is part of environmental justice, and the concept of sustainability is rooted in crip time, the recognition of intersectionality and the acknowledgement of the needs of all bodyminds.

Disability and Ecological Disaster

This vulnerable position of disabled people amidst ecological disaster is well established: Jampel, for example, opens with the research done on hurricane Katrina, which shows that disabled people are more unlikely to be able to flee natural disasters, that they might find services and aid strategies for those affected inaccessible, causing further harm, and that disabled people disproportionately often live in areas affected by environmental disasters (2018, p.127). In his note "The Right To Be Rescued: Disability Justice in an Age of Disaster", Adrien A. Weibgen lays out several cases and lawsuits that establish the lack of access to emergency services for disabled people, while Julia Watts Belser details the story of wheelchair user Benilda Caixeta, who was not able to flee her home in New Orleans when hurricane Katrina hit, despite making every effort to do so and alerting numerous services for disabled people, as well as emergency services (Watts Belser 2019, Weibgen 2015). Additionally, environmental harm creates chronic illness and disability, particularly in populations already subject to systemic oppression (Jampel 2018, p. 128). Despite these vulnerabilities, a lens

¹⁾ The information about the company, including details about the performing artists, stem from their website, www.sinsinvalid.org, last accessed 14.5.22.

that addresses ableism is rarely present in the environmental justice movement (Johnson 2017, p. 75). Even though "disability is a central condition of our existence in the Anthropocene", as Watts Belser remarks, disabled people often tend to be only present in environmentalist discourse "as evidence of environmental damage, as a material marker of what has been done to land and flesh alike" (Watts Belser 2020). And the simplistic binaries, with which environmental discourse sometimes operates, such as in the ban of plastic straws which have been and continue to be a vital access tool for many disabled people, and who have their origin in healthcare, often center on nondisabled people and fail to take disabled people's realities and access needs into account (Wong 2019, p. 4).

Furthermore, both Wong (p.3) and Stacy Alaimo point out that sustainability, as a societal trend and a measure within institutions, can be evoked in a way that does "not in any way question capitalist ideals" (Alaimo 2012, p. 559). Both Stacy Alaimo and Kim Q. Hall have challenged notions of sustainability in their work, with Alaimo opening up the question of "what it is that sustainability seeks to sustain and for whom" (p. 562). Tracing the history of sustainability in an article on food justice, Hall picks up Alaimo's question and observes that the association of sustainability with resilience and stability means that definitions of the term can stand in opposition to vulnerability and changing bodies, and thus reinforce ableist and classist values that uphold whiteness and heteronormativity (Hall 2017, p. 427-428). Hall comes to the conclusion that to crip sustainability "means understanding a sustainable world as a world that has disability in it, a perspective that recognises the instabilities, vulnerabilities, and dynamism that are part of naturecultures" (p. 438). Environmental practices are often based on and presume a nondisabled bodymind, and thus reinforce compulsory ablebodiedness (McRuer 2002, p. 89). This might also be based on the societal belief that disability and nature are inherently incompatible, what Sarah Jacquette Ray labels in her work the "disability-equals-alienation-from-nature trope" (Ray 2013, p. 63). Alison Kafer also points out that "trails, which are mapped, cut, and maintained by human beings with tools and machinery, are seen as natural, but wheelchair accessible trails are seen as unnatural" (Kafer 2013, p. 138).

In the following section I will discuss how through their work, Sins Invalid offer ways of engaging with nature that do not reinforce compulsory ablebodiedness, and propose practices and notions of sustainability that are informed by intersectional thinking and disability justice. In doing so, Alaimo's question of "what it is that sustainability seeks to sustain and for whom" is answered through a crip, anti-capitalist lens and points to transformatory practices in theatre and beyond.

Streaming as a Practice of Collective Access and Sustainability

The tension that arises from disabled people being excluded from environmental initiatives and discourse, paired with the fact that disabled people, particularly disabled people of colour and multiply marginalised disabled people, often are more exposed to the effects of environmental disaster is the subject of the performances in We Love Like Barnacles and the content of the documentary Loving with Three Hearts, which showed the working process around the performance. Unfortunately, I missed the original live streaming performances of We Love Like Barnacles, which also included a digital foyer, but it is available to view on the company's website.

"We Love Like Barnacles" contained twelve performances by seven artists, some of them solos, some duets, and a music and flamenco dance performance that featured several performers. The performances were filmed at four theatres, except for one by Alex Cafarelli, which was performed outdoors in Toronto. Maria Palacios was filmed in Houston, Seema Bahl and Nomy Lamm per-

formed in Seattle, Lateef McLeod, Bianca I. Laureano, and Antoine Hunter performed in San Francisco. Some of these artists, like Palacios, have been part of Sins Invalid for a very long time, some started working with the company fairly recently (Elysium 2020). The performances included dance, spoken word, and music, and featured audio description, and American Sign Language.

This was the first streaming-only performance by Sins Invalid. Prior to 2020 the company showed an annual performance in the Bay area over several nights. This practice in itself, which does not rely on the typical touring practices that the arts sector tends to require from artists, and which often are full of barriers for disabled people, is very noteworthy. In addition to this, it is worth noticing that the company has shown streamed recordings of past performances as part of their access practice since at least 2011, when an announcement on their website stated: "As a mixed ability organisation Sins Invalid recognises that everyone has access needs, and sometimes getting to one of the annual performances is not physically, mentally, or financially possible. That's why we're bringing Sins directly to your living room, or pool, or basement, or ...". The past performances were not streamed live, or live-stream only, but the PSA video Sins Invalid released in 2011 in order to announce their new streaming practice involved Sins Invalid performer Neve Be(ast) and then-intern Allegra Heath-Stout suggesting that these performances should be watched in community: "We need your support and your enthusiasm for organising a viewing party wherever you want, with whomever you want – your lovers! Your support group! Your mom!". These alternate ways of watching performance, long before the Covid-19 pandemic forced most artists and theatres to engage with online formats, come, as the statement above illustrates, from the company's knowledge that in-person attendance is inherently not accessible to many people, for various reasons. Neither the performers nor the audience are required to travel. Sins Invalid artistic director Patty Berne has elaborated on this point further. In her 2015 text 'Disability Justice – a working draft by Patty Berne', she talks about "those of us who cannot pay, physically or financially, for ableist transportation", thus making apparent the connections between ableism, capitalism and the expectations to be physically mobile. Later in her text, Berne remarks that "given the isolation enforced by ableism and classed boundaries, many of us have often found ourselves as agents of change from within our respective communities and isolated from in-person community with other disabled people of color or queer or gender non-conforming crips, finding "liberated zones" instead online" (Berne 2015). The decision to create work that predominantly can be accessed online thus comes specifically from the intersections of disability and other forms of marginalisations from which Sins Invalid was born, a collective of queer disabled artists of colour. Berne's statement thus strongly suggests that the decision to rely on annual performances in one single location, and additionally the practice of streaming, are not only based on the recognition of access needs for audiences, but on those of members of the company too, and allow the company to generate ticket sales without having to rely to such an extent on "ableist transportation". The digital distribution allows the company to work sustainably and accessibly, both lessening the impact of travel on disabled and multiply marginalised bodyminds of actors and audiences alike, as well as on the environment. Although the company has not explicitly stated the environmental impact the "ableist transportation" the most recent performance makes it very clear how ableism and environmental harm are intertwined, and that their work points towards a vision in which dismantling one relies on dismantling the other.

"The truth is, being disabled and being prepared means being mentally prepared to be forgotten and left to die"

The calling out of ableism in this direct way can also be found in the first scene after the opening sequence of the 2021 documentary Loving with Three Hearts: Behind the Scenes of the 2020 Sins Invalid Performance, which starts with Maria R. Palacios being filmed talking to someone off-camera. "Ableism is so fucked up real, so painful and so real", she says, "an oppression that the nondisabled world...", "do not understand", affirms a different off-screen voice. Palacios and the person Palacios is talking to seem to be in a backstage setting, mirrors and bottled water can be seen in the background. The next shot shows her from behind, her wheelchair decorated in ornate letters with the word "Goddess", as she is getting her makeup done, so she may possibly have been talking to the makeup artist. Considering that the title of the piece suggests that this is a documentary about Sins Invalid's working process during the pandemic, these strong statements about ableism could feel like a puzzling opening scene. However, the announcement on Sins Invalid's website reads as following:



Image description by Sins Invalid: A photo of a solemn-looking Latina woman with long dark hair wearing a bathrobe, sitting in a wheelchair, framed by a digital screen. In the background of the image, the same figure is visible as an out-of-focus blur. Photograph: Nine Lam, Courtesy of Sins Invalid.

How do eight crip artists collectively create a performance about the effects of climate chaos on their lives during an uncontrolled global pandemic, unprecedented wildfires, and the same old racist, homophobic, transphobic, ableism? That's the story of Loving With Three Hearts, a behind-the-scenes look at what it took to make We Love Like Barnacles: Crip Lives & Climate Chaos.

Learn how Sins Invalid brought together performers in four cities to sound a warning that nobody should miss, all while navigating a virus that was allowed to spread because of ableist hate. Each interview illuminates disabled BIPOC life during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, reminds us what we're fighting for, and gives us new reasons to hope. (Sins Invalid 2021)

From this blurb, it becomes clear that Sins Invalid have chosen to highlight ableism, because the work of the company generally addresses how ableism intersects with other forms of marginalisation. The blurb and the documentary suggest that the Covid-19 pandemic, in particular, was allowed to spread to the degree it did because of ableist cultural practices. Additionally, the spreading of wildfires and the "uncontrolled global pandemic" placed next to each other suggest, that the spreading of different environmental disasters are linked, and that ableism is always present during these disasters. As proposed earlier in this article, there is research to back up the structurally disadvantaged positions in climate disaster of disabled people, particularly multiply marginalised disabled people. By viewing climate change through a lens that addresses systemic ableism, and the compounded effects of racism, queermisia, ableism and wealth distribution, the documentary is able to raise awareness of the exclusion of disabled people from the environmental justice movement, to make a strong case for the contributions of disabled people to the environmental discourse, and to highlight how the prevalence of ableism in our societies interacts with climate disaster.

Palacios' first monologue in "We Love Like Barnacles" is the second performance after a camp BDSM singing and spoken word performance by Alex Cafarelli as "Mistress Asthma". Although Cafarelli's performance deals with ecological disaster and asthma, the tone is very playful and full of sexual innuendo, and as such a stark contrast to Palacios' performance, even aesthetically: While Caferelli is wearing a leather costume and is surrounded by props which combine medical equipment and BDSM toys, Palacios is performing on an empty, softly lit stage in pyjamas and a dressing gown. "What does it mean to be prepared for disaster?", is Palacios' opening question, and in her monologue, she highlights how preparedness is tied to class, race and disability, as the resources to "be prepared" are expensive, even more so for disabled people. "Most crips who can't breathe on their own can't afford to own a generator able to generate the same opportunity of survival. Crips can't afford to live being prepared for the worst, although the worst will always hit us harder". Her monologue builds up to the moment where Palacios proclaims: "The truth is, being disabled and being prepared means being mentally prepared to be forgotten and left to die." Her monologue discusses the bureaucratic hurdles disabled people experience in order to get access and care, and the lack of access at emergency shelters and relief initiatives. This means that access is never regarded as something that needs to be provided consistently, even in extreme conditions, but as something that can be done without and disabled people need to be grateful for receiving. This is illustrated, for example, when Palacios, in tears, talks about disabled people being left immobile, sitting on plastic chairs, because their wheelchair was not evacuated and the bureaucratic hoops for a replacement take an extremely long time, or about disabled people losing their home in an emergency and being placed in a nursing home due to the lack of accessible housing available. Palacios also mentions how undocumented disabled people lack basic resources, food, medical care and access, and have to rely on private networks for their survival. Palacios' monologue highlights how shame and ableism work hand in hand, saying "ableism taught us to be grateful for whatever leftovers we get." The unpredictability of state- and society-provided care and access, even in periods between or before disaster, as noted in Palacios' monologue, place it outside of what is available

consistently. The structures that should provide access and care for disabled people are not built sustainably.

In an op-ed, disability scholar Julia Watts Belser suggests that discussions around ecological disaster often not only do not acknowledge ableism, they actually reinforce it and frame ableist structures as unavoidable:

After a recent discussion of disability and disaster, a colleague of mine threw up his hands. "It's terrible," he told me. "But what can you do? Some people just aren't going to make it." Once I got over my outrage, I realised my colleague had unwittingly named a core problem facing those of us organising for climate justice: the assumption that some folks simply aren't cut out to survive.

How we tell this story matters.

If we persist in framing disability and climate change as a problem of physical vulnerability, we miss the underlying realities of structural violence: how ableism, racism, class inequality and other forms of oppression work together to compound and intensify risk. (Watts Belser 2019)

Access and care for those who are most vulnerable is not seen as sustainable, disabled lives are not seen as the ones that can and should be sustained at all costs. Coming back to Alaimo's question "what it is that sustainability seeks to sustain and for whom" we can also ask who it is that sustainability seeks to sustain, and why ableist, racist, and classists mechanisms are not tackled alongside efforts within climate justice and environmental efforts, and instead are just framed as a given.

Crip Survival and Care

In their work, both the performance itself as well as their work practice, which is documented in the film, Sins Invalid offer a glimpse into a reality, shaped by crips, that centres care and access for those most vulnerable. One way the collective does this is by centering care and access in their response to the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020. At the very early stages of the pandemic Sins Invalid released a text on their website, "Social Distancing and Crip Survival: A Disability Centered Response to COVID-19". In the text, various members of Sins Invalid share links to resources, as well as glimpses into the ways the pandemic has affected them in their everyday lives, and what they are doing to protect themselves and their loved ones. Some comment on things that have changed and that are hard for them, such as the worry of being alone and sick, or that they miss human touch or have developed elaborate disinfecting routines. Several people remark that this new reality it is not so different from their usual way of living, something the general, collective statement in the text points out as well:

In some ways, it isn't so different from how many of us live our lives every day as crips, with long stretches of time at home, limited access to community or touch or social engagement, engaging in mutual aid, sharing meds & home remedies. Many of us who are immunocompromised/ suppressed or chemically injured have had to think about how many people we will encounter on any given day, what that will expose us to, and how it could impact our health. It's an irony that the whole world is talking about and

problem solving with us now. It's painful that able bodied/minded people evidence their ableist privilege with frustration that air travel is inaccessible, that their schedules are impacted by others' schedules, that they can't do their normal social routines... Welcome to our world! (Sins Invalid 2020)

In the documentary, which is available in different versions that provide audio description, American Sign Language and closed captioning, we see online conversations between different members of Sins Invalid, and the artists and crew repeatedly talk about the way the pandemic altered their working conditions. The making of the performance is a huge undertaking, as it becomes clear in the documentary: Four film crews were working at four different theatres, recording each of the twelve performances and then cutting them together into one cohesive whole. While the documentary does not explicitly stress the fact that disabled and chronically ill people are particularly vulnerable to the effects of covid, access needs and covid-safe working conditions are brought up repeatedly together during a sequence of the film, and Covid safety measures are framed as simply another access need that needs to be respected as much as possible. Self-identified nondisabled and disabled crew members talk on camera about learning about accessibility and the language around needs during the working process and how the process is informed by disability justice. The needs for different timings are brought up and we see artists and crew members checking in on each other regarding access needs: In one scene in particular, which occurs during the filming of Alex Cafarelli's outdoor performance that deals with nature and gardening, we see Cafarelli asking the crew whether there are any access needs in the group that currently need to be addressed before working can continue. The working process can be slowed down at any moment as people negotiate what they need to be present and safe. We hear Palacios proclaim: "Sins Invalid: teaching us having the right to ask for whatever the fuck we need."

From this segment that introduces the practice of Sins Invalid as being based on access and care, the documentary moves seamlessly towards the issue of climate change: We hear Patty Berne in a zoom conversation about how the company's artistic output became informed by environmental justice because "we couldn't talk about disability justice without acknowledging the context we are in, extreme crisis on the globe." Berne asserts that "the people who get hit the hardest are crips" and explains that to her, climate change shows that life is fragile and that life could be very different if everyone would acknowledge the labour that it takes to live. The scene then cuts to performer Bianca Laureano, as she prepares for her performance, wearing a sequined green outfit, a sort of altar of personal tokens next to her. "Do you recall what it was that finally made you realise that climate chaos is real?", she asks and goes on to explain how she was in Puerto Rico when she heard that hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans, and in New Orleans when she heard Puerto Rico was devastated by flooding. Laureano reflects on how those experiences were intertwined for her with grief for the loss of her mother and her story powerfully connects the personal, the global and the political. We then see Sins Invalid performers Nomy Lamm and Antoine Hunter talk directly to the camera about their anger around climate change, and Lamm discusses the importance, as a fat crip Jewish femme, of finding pleasure in the midst of climate collapse, which also inspires their performance of an original song about bees.

The seamless shift of the documentary's focus from access and care towards environmental justice makes sense, because the documentary frames ableism and environmental harm as having the same roots, systemic oppression and capitalism. When Berne calls out "ableist transportation", it becomes clear from the framework Sins Invalid operates in, that systems of ableism, capitalism

and environmental harm are not seen as separate, and that practices like streaming or avoiding flights are used to address them together.



Image description by Sins Invalid: A fat Afro-Latina femme with curly red hair, wearing a green sequined dress, holding a beautifully decorated journal. In front of her on a chair is an altar on a sequined cloth, with shells, bottles, photos and other sacred items. Photograph: Richard Downing, Courtesy of Sins Invalid.

The glimpse into artistic practices that are based on needs, not demands from the cultural sector, ties into the performances themselves, which also undertake a retelling of climate collapse that centre stories of the survival of disabled, black and brown, queer and trans communities. A Watts Belser says, "How we tell this story matters." Antoine Hunter's performance, dance with a voiceover text, for example, calls attention to Deaf ways of listening and expression with the whole body and includes a passage on melanin as means of survival in climate change, and so reveals white supremacy as a lie. Hunter's dance expresses exasperation and tells the story of global warming before gathering strength and ending with undefeatable determination, as the voiceover states "listening to us requires you to stop lying to yourself". That some bodies are framed as disposable is a lie.

Sustainability and Crip Time

Sins Invalid's work questions artistic working practices by showing and documenting a practice that advocates for a recognition of needs, of temporalities not informed by capitalism, and a focus on intersectionality. Likewise, their artistic work centres black and brown, D/deaf and disabled and queer perspectives, and the survival of marginalised bodyminds, and thus shifts the narrative of "some are just not going to make it" as a choice society makes, shaped by capitalism. Individual performances in Sins Invalid's work show that Alaimo's question "what it is that sustainability seeks

to sustain and for whom" is often entangled with capitalist demands, and the societal belief that access and care cannot be provided sustainably, taking also preparation for extreme circumstances into account. The collective offers an alternate vision of sustainability, one that seeks to sustain all lives, for the greatest chance of survival of the vulnerable. Sins Invalid's ten principles of disability justice that inform their practice are intersectionality, leadership of those most impacted, anticapitalist politics, commitment to cross-movement organising, recognising wholeness, commitment to cross-disability solidarity, interdependence, collective access and sustainability, which is defined as follows:

We learn to pace ourselves, individually and collectively, to be sustained long-term. We value the teachings of our bodies and experiences, and use them as a critical guide and reference point to help us move away from urgency and into a deep, slow, transformative, unstoppable wave of justice and liberation. (Berne and Sins Invalid 2015)

The final principle is collective liberation, "with a vision that leaves no bodymind behind" (Berne and Sins Invalid 2015). This commitment to sustainability does not regard access and sustainability as incompatible, as the environmental movement does at times, but instead regards them as interdependent frameworks. The fear of some bodyminds being left behind is illustrated when Palacios talks about hurricanes and fires in an interview: "Disabled people are being left behind, and disabled people are always left behind," she says (Dworetzky 2020). However, the documentary does not finish with all-too-real nightmarish scenarios, but instead moves towards Sins Invalid members talking about the things that give them hope, such as the belief that one day disability will be recognised simply as part of life, or the care networks of trees that are reminiscent of the care network between trees. 2 Eli Clare points out that biodiversity, and its sustenance, should be at the centre of climate justice, and notes that "the absence of disability, even the desire for its absence, diminishes human experience and the inextricable interweaving of bio- and cultural diversity" (Clare 2017, 258). Sins Invalid's call for a "move away from urgency" and emporalities shaped by crip experiences, reflected both in their artistic practice and their artistic output, offers a perspective of human experience that runs counter to definitions of sustainability shaped by capitalism, and recognises diversity of experience and of bodyminds as that what needs to be sustained. The final scene, both of the performance and the documentary, is made of various screens that show dozens of Sins Invalid performers, workers and organisers past and present, who first talk over each other but all end up saying, simultaneously: "I will fight for you, will you fight for me?".

This final frame, showing both the pandemic reality as well as a huge community of queer, disabled people of colour, who have found forms of collective access to work and create art together, embodies how the company works, both during the pandemic but also in general. The documentary implicitly frames the pandemic as part of, as Palacios calls it, "mother nature's anger", and highlights how, once again, racism, wealth inequality, queermisia and other forms of oppression lead to historically marginalised people being hit the hardest. Forms of sustainability that are rooted in disability justice, care and the acknowledgements of needs, and that challenge capitalist time structures, are offered as a response, both in the documentary itself and the writings Sins Invalid

²⁾ Former Sins Invalid performer Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha describes networks of care and collective access as "care webs" and their book Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice provides examples and a detailed engagement with their intricacies.

have published on their website, and they can also be found in the working processes the company proposes and demonstrates. Working processes that are slowed down, where access needs are discussed on a regular basis and where "no bodymind is left behind" offer a vision of sustainability outside of capitalism and outside of systems of oppression that create environmental harm.

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