

# My World is Cactus Thorns: Intersections of Disability and Environmentalism in Naomi Ortiz's *Rituals for Climate Change*

**XAVIER MENEZES**

Assistant Professor

Department of English

R.D. National College of Arts, Science & Commerce, Bandra, Mumbai

## Abstract

*This paper aims to explore the connections traced between the shifting routines of navigating disabled life and the looming pressure of battling climate change in Naomi Ortiz's 2023 poetry collection, *Rituals for Climate Change: A Crip Struggle for Ecojustice*. The poetic form offers artists the potential to channel into language the finest nuances and textures of their identities, inscribing upon the text a cartography of their sensations, and in Ortiz's case, these essential emotions extend beyond the biological borders of the disabled body itself and weave it into the environments in which these bodies live. Employing an ecosomatic lens that integrates readings from the fields of disability studies and ecocriticism, this paper examines the ways in which Ortiz articulates her experiences of everyday survival to evoke empathy for the environment, paralleling pollution to impairment to paint the image of a disabled planet whose future relies especially on the support of its most disadvantaged populations.*

**Keywords:** naomi ortiz, disability, ecocriticism, climate change, poetry

## Introduction: The Body and the Planet

Recounting the ways in which her possibilities are flattened by ableist (un)imaginings in her seminal work, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, Alison Kafer writes, "Of fortune cookies and tarot cards they have no need: my wheelchair, burn scars, and gnarled hands apparently tell them all they need to know. My future is written on my body." (1). Everyday life for disabled subjects is a process that can involve painstaking and tenuous calculations of the physical and emotional resources demanded by impending tasks, but it is precisely the precarity of these daily tolls that render unfeasible a purely short-term or stopgap approach to envisioning disabled futures. The social model of disability, as described by activist Ellen Clifford, "draws a distinction between impairment and disability. Disability consists of the barriers that a person with impairment experiences as a result of the way in which society is organised that excludes or devalues them." (3). To manage disability, then, is not merely to devise a series of workarounds to ease friction between impairments and institutions, but rather to contend with the larger issue of shaping a society that is consistently able to accommodate the changing needs and myriad ambitions of a disabled subject, to afford not just 'ability', but also opportunity and aspiration. In this

regard, however, any logistical and legal advances achieved in the realm of disabled rights would be rendered largely insufficient in context of a capitalist society racing towards ecological disaster. All that it would take is a single lost season or natural calamity to shatter the delicate semblance of compromised and constructed stabilities that structure disabled life- a singular bad day, born of decades of systemic dysfunction and ignored protests, ruining forever the hopes of a disabled "everyday".

It is precisely this anxiety and frustration that blazes through the poetry of Naomi Ortiz (they/she), whose 2023 poetry collection, *Rituals for Climate Change: A Crip Struggle for Ecojustice*, addresses the myriad issues that disabled people face in a collapsing environment as well as a vision of what society must work towards to secure an inclusive and sustainable future. "Ortiz, a disabled Mestizo, explores the relationships between self, community, and place in the Arizona U.S./Mexico borderlands" (*Poetry Foundation*), an approach evident in this collection, which asserts that it is impossible to segregate the battle for disability rights from the struggle for ecological regeneration, since disabled people, stranded so often at the intersections of poverty and ostracism, stand worst-placed to sustain their already precarious

livelihoods in the face of an environmental catastrophe. Environmentalist themes and a fascination with nature as a site of alternate possibilities outside the repressive discourses of exclusionary “civilizations” echo through disabled poetics in every age, from Robert Duncan’s desire to break free of parental dependency and reach “horizons of stars beyond the ringing hills of the world where the falcons nest” (53) to Shiela Black’s evocations of native spaces to articulate disabled pride: “that body/ they tried so hard to fix, straighten was simply mine,/ and I loved it as you love your own country,/ the familiar lay of the land, the unkempt trees” (*Poetry Foundation*).

To Ortiz, natural environments are inseparable from the extended “body” of a disabled subject, a construct that integrates and interfaces landscapes into mindscapes, and desecrations of the environments she has woven her lifestyle into amount to not only to further impairment, but indeed a violent act of disabling, a pollution of her very possibilities. In this, they frame futurity through what Cella terms the ‘ecosomatic paradigm’, a lens that “assumes contiguity between the mind-body and its social and natural environments; thus, under this scheme, the work of negotiating a “habitable body” and “habitable world” go hand in hand.” (575). Accordingly, this paper endeavours to examine the ways in which Ortiz’ poems thematically and aesthetically intertwine representations of disabled life and thought with environmentalist concerns, linking abrasions upon the body with the scars carved across the spaces and times of the lands they traverse. To this end, it shall replicate in its theoretical foundations what Ortiz correlates in their poetry, drawing upon works from the field of ecocriticism as well as disability studies to illustrate the symbiotic and mutual relationship between the body and the planet.

### The Long Road to Tomorrow

The first poem we shall engage with is “Future Orientation”, which recounts the “worry conversations” (23) that Ortiz has with her partner, a communicative ritual that serves in equal measure as tactical and therapeutic, confirming and testing the edges of capability, the access to resources and the possibilities the couple may reach, compensating through careful planning for the impediments they shall encounter daily. However, Ortiz

also recognizes that there exists even within these discussions an implicit ableism, not on the part of the couple, who speak “as two Crips” (23), but on the part of the society they once imagined would ultimately maintain a degree of stability and predictability to the point where they could outline the issues to come- “once focused/ on how to stay out of institutional settings/ as we grew old, or/ work and family drama” (23). Pertinent as these concerns may be, they are rendered insignificant in the face of a new awareness of the environment’s collapse and the advent of catastrophes, which threaten to disrupt the already-unequal, but still relatively calculable obstacle course of disabled life to unimaginable degrees, breaking the very standard of “ableness” around which disabled subjects must plan, the margin further marginalized for the lack of a cognizable center.

The enormity of these dangers renders virtually impracticable any reliable strategy of resistance in the wake of an ecological disaster that would disrupt routes of essential supplies, let alone those specific to disabled needs, and force relocation for society’s most precariously positioned demographics. Nonetheless, the couple cannot afford to dismiss depressing realities, for escapism is not something the disabled subject may easily indulge in, especially in a society where so many have ignored the crisis of the planet for so long- “I look into their face which mirrors mine/ rigid pose to mask fear/ I know this answer is coming” (24). Snyder and Mitchell posit that disability in American literatures provides “the site where the conflicted nature of our beliefs about ‘viable lives’ gets acted out. Our writers mobilize this irreparable breach in order to dramatize the haunting questions: by what terms are all people endowed with equal rights? Does the collective ‘we’ include our disabled others?” (9). Ortiz does not and cannot conclude her poem with an optimistic vision for the earth’s salvation, but attests in her very act of writing to the importance of earnestly contending with the problem, for if escapism is dangerous to the disabled mind, then fatalism is doubly so, as the future and peace of those in her intersections is precarious at the best of times. Hence, they return to that basic unit of disabled temporality, the complex arithmetic of an “everyday” whose facing and triumph over in the form of survival is one more step that society had initially held her incapable of taking, affirming

her ability and willpower to traverse the spaces she inhabits, polluted as they may be. Coming full circle back to the present moment, Ortiz's poetics therefore express the realism of endurance- "to plot our way through/ what was once thought extraordinary/ turned real." (24).

### Borders and Bridges

We turn next to "My Sphere of Influence", wherein Ortiz represents their experience of the body as a field of possibilities and influences unfolding across time through variable lengths of verse, documenting the edges and contours of reality as prised by the shifting demands of her everyday life- "My world is community care collective meetings, zoom chats with self-care seekers, loud laughing phone calls with friends/ My world is sitting next to me on this porch swing swatting away mosquitoes" (103). Penned without periods to cut verses into sentences, the poem dispenses with metrical schemes or progressions in favour of an adaptive and organic approach to subjectivity, representing how priorities, initiative and the ability to perform certain tasks do not lend themselves to daily timetables, but are rather necessarily a variable function of the poet's physical and mental reserves of energy on any given day, a sphere that is porous and flexible. At times, Ortiz succeeds in processing the mounting pressures of a corrupt society into a series of practical countermeasures- "My world is nightly reading of *What the Fuck Just Happened Today?*, picking one outrage, writing representatives" (104), while in grimmer days it is all she can do to tide the storm of grief- "My world is missing a loved one that I couldn't pry loose from the cycles of addiction" (104).

Punctures, stresses and overflows impose on Ortiz's work a cavalcade of compromises and interruptions, never quite letting them settle into the routine of seasons or harvests, a fitting unpredictability given the ailing environments from whence she writes. Every encounter with an obstacle reconfirms the limits and pains of Ortiz' artistic and physical frame, an embodiment of Paterson and Hughes' reflections that "Exclusion, even oppression is a kind of homelessness. It implies a world of bodily discomfort, of being left out in the cold: all of which makes the body present, makes it 'dys-appear'." (604). Nonetheless, Ortiz transforms these collisions of hope with despair, initiative with obstacle, and desire with disruption

into a cartography of her life, tracing the edges and contours of her experiences into poetry, a medium that knits together into a broader tapestry the totality of her loves and losses, another limb of her enactive body. The capacity of the poetic text to contextualize and elevate scattered moments and images into an avenue for conveying the continuity and direction of a lifetime imbues disabled poetics with a prosthetic quality- not a concealment or replacement of the body's impairment, but a means to alloy action and identity into a testament of passing moments. Ortiz' extended body functions not only as a vehicle to steer, but a space to inhabit, an evolving field of possibilities eternally retraced, dispelling the myth of the individual figure for a framework of sensibilities resonant with verses future and past- "My world is plugging things in and unplugging them/ My world is small yet consumes all my attention" (104).

### Healing From Calamities

The final poem we shall examine is "Heart Remedy for Mountain Scars", dedicated to the Saint Catalina mountains of Arizona, which were ravaged in 2020 by the Bighorn Fire- a catastrophe caused by the introduction of invasive foreign grass species without consideration of the natural balance of biodiversity in the region (Franklin 7). Ortiz's poem views the disaster not merely as an event, but an injury done to a treasured friend, a living landscape whose pain and grief she deeply identifies with, projecting disabled subjectivity onto the environment in a characteristic exercise of connective empathy- "Now we share, *something happened!* Ripped through, for you centuries grown plants and soil/ for me, generations of ancestral grown skin and bone" (151). Inverting the script of the crippled figure as eternal patient, Ortiz casts herself as a healer, recognizing the pain that cries out from the slopes and soils of tormented lands and declaring that this, too, is a crisp experience, the sympathetic zenith of her ecosomatic outlook, where the ache of spaces is the agony of selves. The discomfort and frustration of navigating a world that relentlessly suppresses one's autonomy, rendering the body a palimpsest for endless repressive and experimental procedures, is simultaneously elevated to cosmic proportions and rendered ardently personal in Ortiz's intertwining verse: "Buffelgrass planted in our desert to feed cattle/ Surgeries to coerce body to be "functional"/

They always have some reason to insist poison/ will fix unproductive citizen" (152).

In associating her travails with the desecration of the mountains, Ortiz signals a sickness that stretches beyond bodies and places, impairing them both in the same action, the march of a socioeconomic machine that disables all life in its quest for mechanical productivity. As such, Ortiz declares that it is more rebellious to *not* rise to occasions orchestrated by cruel institutions, that a scar and a limp is a sign of defiance and shame, an abjection that is both the anchor of a disabled politics and an armament against the hegemony of perfection- "Rebellion in refusal to hurt self for promised gain/ Marked adult independence with ditched arm brace/ Limbs free to curl, shutter, move with a lilt/ a rhythm all my own" (153). This assertion of the value of one's lived experiences, from which poetry forges an expressive identity, a signature in the shape of a self, beats at the heart of Ortiz's poetry. They revere not the individualism that fuels capitalist metrics, but rather the complex specificity of being that arises from a constellation of ecological and social factors, the historic dance of influences between nature and culture, an awareness of which enables the poet to celebrate the profound uniqueness of their existence and the inherent value of their place in the world. In a work upon the relevance of nature poetry at an ecocritical time, Felstiner writes, "If words tie us in one with nature, tying human with nonhuman, and if speech in the beginning brings all into being, maybe the speech of poems will revive our lease on life. We can count on this: the poems we hear have news for us." (15). Fittingly, Ortiz finds in the rugged endurance of the mountain that overlooks her valiant struggle an icon of devotion and perseverance, tracing in the natural reflection of her selfhood not a life short or painful, but the immortality of survivors:

"I know and you know that  
Big Horn Fire Scar and Fierce  
Crip Name reality  
A legacy" (154).

### Conclusion: One Step After Another

In an essay exploring approaches to disabled poetics, the eminent poet Jim Ferris wrote, "I'm not sure if I want all poems to limp, but I know this: all the interesting ones do, all the lovely ones do, in one way or another." (232). The poetry of Naomi Ortiz thus proclaims that limping, too, is a form of progress, and one that experiences with especial keenness the contours of the lands it painstakingly traverses, the topography of trauma and relief. In works that range their songs out into the heights and wilds, Ortiz

nurtures the echo of lives swallowed up by the teeth of the ever-bloating city, hoping to hearten fellow drifters and plant in their minds a bud of futurity, which shall grow as the cacti and bush with a hardiness that treasures every drop of hope. Environmentalism is a dynamic of interdependency, and in an age where the planet that has nurtured us for so long begins to stagger and fall, it is we who must act as its crutches and canes. Accordingly, the thesis and inspiration of Ortiz's art is that the disabled community are not a liability, but rather the prophets and vanguard of this restoration, saving the glory of nature one "everyday" at a time.

### References

- Black, Shiela. "What You Mourn". *Poetry Foundation*. Retrieved 25 November 2023 from <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/160109/what-you-mourn>
- Cella, Matthew J.C. "The Ecosomatic Paradigm in Literature: Merging Disability Studies and Ecocriticism." *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, vol. 20, no. 3, 2013, pp: 574-596.
- Clifford, Ellen. *The War on Disabled People: Capitalism, Welfare and the Making of a Human Catastrophe*. Zed Books, 2020.
- Duncan, Robert. *Bending the Bow*. New Directions, 1968.
- Felstiner, John. "Care In Such a World." *Can Poetry Save the Earth? A Field Guide to Nature Poems*, edited by John Felstiner, Yale University Press, 2009, pp: 1-15.
- Ferris, Jim. "The Enjambed Body: A Step Toward a Crippled Poetics." *The Georgia Review*, vol. 58, no. 2, 2004, pp: 219-233.
- Franklin, Kim. "Fire and Buffelgrass." *Sonorensis*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2021, pp: 6-11.
- Kafer, Alison. *Feminist, Queer, Crip*. Indiana University Press, 2013.
- "Naomi Ortiz" *Poetry Foundation*, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/naomi-ortiz>. Accessed 15 May 2024.
- Ortiz, Naomi. *Rituals for Climate Change: A Crip Struggle for Ecojustice*. Punctum Books, 2023.
- Paterson, Kevin and Hughes, Bill. "Disability Studies and Phenomenology: The carnal politics of everyday life." *Disability & Society*, vol. 14, no. 5, 1999, pp: 597-610.
- Snyder, Sharon and Mitchell, David. "Disability Haunting in American Poetics." *Journal of Literary Disability*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2007, pp: 1-12.