

# 13 Meditations on Natural Worlds, Disabled Bodies, and a Politics of Cure

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## Prairie

You and I walk in the summer rain through a thirty-acre pocket of tallgrass prairie that was, not so long ago, one big cornfield. We follow the path mowed as a fire-break. You carry a big pink umbrella. Water droplets hang on the grasses. Spiderwebs glint. The bee balm hasn't blossomed yet. You point to numerous patches of birch and goldenrod; they belong here but not in this plenty. The thistle, on the other hand, simply shouldn't be here. The Canada wild rye waves, the big blue-stem almost open. Sunflowers cluster, spots of yellow orange amid the gray green of a rainy day. The songbirds and butterflies have taken shelter. For the moment the prairie is quiet. Soon my jeans are sopping wet from the knees down. Not an ocean of grasses but a start, this little piece of prairie is utterly different from row upon row of corn.

With the help of the Department of Natural Resources, you mowed and burned the corn, broadcast the seed—bluestem, wild rye, bee balm, cornflower, sunflower, aster—sack upon sack of just the right mix that might replicate the tall-grass prairie that was once here. Only remnants of the original ecosystem remain in the Midwest, isolated pockets of leadplants, milkweed, burr oaks, and switch-grass growing in cemeteries, along railroad beds, on remote bluffs, somehow miraculously surviving.

You burn; you plant; you root out thistle and prickly ash. You tend, save money for more seed, burn again. Over the past decade and a half of labor, you've worked to undo the two centuries of damage wrought by plows, pesticides, monoculture farming, and fire suppression. The state of Wisconsin partners in this work precisely because the damage is so great. Without the massive web of prairie roots to anchor the earth; bison to turn, fertilize, and aerate the earth; and lightning-strike fire to burn and renew the earth, the land now known as Wisconsin is literally draining away. Rain catches the topsoil, washing it from field to creek to river to ocean. Prairie restoration reverses this process, both stabilizing and creating soil. So you work hard to restore this eight-thousand-year-old ecosystem, all the while remembering that the land isn't yours or the dairy farmer's down the road,

but rather stolen a mere century and a half ago from the Dakota people. The histories of dirt, grass, genocide, bison massacre float here.

We have taken this walk a dozen times over the past fifteen years—at noon with the sun blazing, at dusk with fireflies lacing the grasses, at dawn with finches and warblers greeting the day. My feet still feel the old corn furrows. As we walk, I think about the words *natural* and *unnatural*, *normal* and *abnormal*. Does this fragment of land in transition from cornfield to tallgrass prairie define what *natural* is? If so, how do we name the overabundance of birch and goldenrod, the absence of bison? What was once *normal* here; what can we consider *normal* now?

*Normal* and *natural* dance together, while *unnatural* and *abnormal* bully, threaten, patrol the boundaries. Of course, it's an inscrutable dance. How does *unnatural* technology repair so-called *abnormal* bodies to their *natural* ways of being? Dismissing the distinctions between *normal* and *abnormal*, *natural* and *unnatural*, as meaningless would be lovely, except they wield extraordinary power.

### Abnormal, Unnatural

It is not an exaggeration to say that the words *unnatural* and *abnormal* haunt me as a disabled person. Or maybe more accurately, they pummel me. Complete strangers ask me, "What's your defect?" Their intent is mostly benign. To them, my body simply doesn't work right, *defect* being another variation of broken, supposedly neutral. But think of the things called defective—the boom box that won't play a CD, the car that never started reliably, the calf born with three legs. They end up in the back closet, trash heap, scrap yard, slaughterhouse. Defects are disposable and *abnormal*, bodies to eradicate.

Or complete strangers yell at me down the road, across the playground, "Hey, retard!" Their intent is often malicious. Sometimes they have thrown rocks, sand, rubber erasers. Once on a camping trip with my family, I joined a whole crowd of kids playing tag in and around the picnic shelter. A slow and clumsy nine-year-old, I quickly became "it." I chased and chased but caught no one. The game turned. Kids came close, ducked away, yelling *defect*, *retard*. Frustrated, I yelled back for a while. *Retard* became *monkey*; became a circle around me; became a torrent, *monkey defect retard you're a monkey monkey monkey*; became huge gulping sobs of rage, frustration, humiliation, shame; became not knowing who I was. My body crumpled. It lasted two minutes or two hours until my father appeared and the circle scattered. Even as the word *monkey* connected to me the nonhuman *natural* world, I became supremely *unnatural*.

Or complete strangers pat me on the head. They whisper platitudes in my ear, clichés about courage and inspiration. They enthuse about how remarkable I am. They declare me special. Once a woman wearing dream-catcher earrings, a big turquoise necklace, and a fringed leather tunic with a medicine wheel painted on its back confided that I was, like all people who tremor, a *natural* shaman. She

grabbed me in a long hug and advised that if I were trained, I could become a great healer. Before this woman, sporting a mishmash of First Nations' symbols, jewelry, and clothing, released me from her grip, she directed me never to forget my specialness. Oh, how *special* disabled people are: we have *special* education, *special* needs, *special* restrooms, *special* parking spots. That word drips condescension. It's no better than being defective. As *special* people, we are still *abnormal* and disposable.

Or complete strangers offer me Christian prayer or crystals and vitamins, always with the same intent—to touch me, fix me, mend my cerebral palsy, if only I will comply. They cry over me, wrap their arms around my shoulders, kiss my cheek. Even now, after four decades of these kinds of interactions, I still don't know how to rebuff their pity, how to tell them the simple truth that I'm not broken. Even if there were a cure for brain cells that died at birth, I'd refuse. I have no idea who I'd be without my specific trembling, slurring, tense body. Those strangers assume my body *unnatural*, want to make me *normal*, take for granted the need and desire for cure. *Unnatural* and *abnormal* pummel me every day.

### Restoration

As an ideology seeped into every corner of Western thought and culture, cure rides on the back of *normal* and *natural*. Insidious and pervasive, it impacts many, many bodies. In response, we need a politics of cure: not a simple or reactive belief system, not an anticure stance in the face of the endless assumptions about bodily difference, but rather a broad-based politics mirroring the complexity of all our bodies and minds.

*The American Heritage Dictionary* defines *cure* as “restoration of health.” In developing a politics of cure based upon this definition, it would be all too easy to get mired in an argument about health, trying to determine who's healthy and who's not, as if there's one objective standard. As an alternative, I want to bypass the questions of who defines health and for what purposes. So many folks are working to redefine health, struggling toward a theory and practice that will contribute to the well-being of entire communities. But I won't be joining them with a redefinition of my own. Instead, I want a politics of cure that speaks from inside the intense contradictions presented by the multiple meanings of health.

Today in the white Western world dominated by allopathic medicine, the meanings of health range from individual and communal bodily comfort to profound social control. Between these two poles, a myriad of permutations exist. Health is both the well-being sustained by good food and the products sold by the multimillion-dollar diet industry. It is both effective pain management for folks who live with chronic pain and the policed refusal to prescribe narcotic-based pain relief to people perceived as drug seeking. It is both the saving of lives and

the aggressive marketing of synthetic growth hormone to children whose only bodily “problem” is being short.

Rather than offer a resolution to this whole range of contradictory, overlapping, and confused meanings of *health*, I want to follow the word *restoration*. To restore an object or an ecosystem is to return it to an earlier, and often better, condition. We restore a house that’s falling down, a prairie that’s been decimated by generations of monoculture farming and fire suppression. In this return, we try to undo the harm, wishing the harm had never happened. Talk to anyone who does restoration work—a carpenter who rebuilds 150-year-old neglected houses, a conservation biologist who turns cornfields back to prairie—and she’ll say it’s a complex undertaking. A fluid, responsive process, restoration requires digging into the past, stretching toward the future, working hard in the present. And the end results rarely, if ever, match the original state.

Restoring an ecosystem means rebuilding a dynamic system that has somehow been interrupted or broken—devastated by strip mining or clear-cut logging, taken over by invasive species, unbalanced by the loss of predators, crushed by pollution. The work is not about re-creating a static landscape somehow frozen in time, but rather about encouraging and reshaping dynamic ecological interdependencies, ranging from clods of dirt to towering thunderheads, tiny microbes to herds of bison, into a self-sustaining system of constant flux. This reshaping mirrors the original or historical ecosystem as closely as possible, but inevitably some element is missing or different. The return may be close but never complete.

The process of restoration is simpler with a static object—an antique chair or old house. Still, if the carpenters aren’t using ax-hewn timbers of assorted and quirky sizes, mixing the plaster with horse hair, building at least a few walls with chicken wire, and using newspaper, rags, or nothing at all for insulation, then the return will be incomplete, possibly sturdier and definitely more energy efficient, but different from the original house. Even though restoration as a process is never complete, it always requires an original or historical state in which to root itself, a belief that this state is better than what currently exists, and a desire to return to the original.

Thinking about the framework of restoration, I circle back to the folks who offer disabled and chronically ill people prayers, crystals, and vitamins, believing deeply in the necessity of cure. A simple one-to-one correspondence between ecological restoration and bodily restoration reveals cure’s mandate of returning damaged bodies to some former, and nondisabled, state of being. This mandate clearly locates the problem, or damage, of disability within individual disabled or chronically ill bodies.

To resist the ableism in this framing, a disability politics has emerged in the past forty years. It asserts that disability is lodged not in paralysis but rather in

the stairs without an accompanying ramp, not in blindness but rather in the lack of Braille. Disability itself does not live in depression or anxiety but rather exists in a whole host of stereotypes, not in dyslexia but in teaching methods unwilling to flex, not in lupus or multiple sclerosis but in the belief that certain bodily conditions are a fate worse than death. In short, disability politics establishes that the problem of disability is not about individual bodies but about social injustice.

But for some of us, even if we accept disability as harm to individual bodies, restoration still does not make sense, because an original nondisabled body does not exist. How would I, or the medical establishment, go about restoring my body? The vision of me without trembling hands and slurred speech, with more balance and coordination, does not originate from my body's history. Rather, it arises from an imagination of what my body should be like, some definition of *normal* and *natural*.

### Not Simple

To reflect the multilayered relationships between disabled and chronically ill bodies and restoration, a politics of cure needs to be as messy and visceral as our bodies. To reach into this messiness, I turn to story.

*You and I know each other through a loose national network of queer disability activists, made possible by the internet. Online one evening, I receive a message from you containing the cyber equivalent to a long, anguished moan of physical pain. You explain that you're having a bad pain day, and it helps just to acknowledge the need to howl. Before I log off, I type a good night to you, wish you a little less pain for the morning. The next day you thank me for not wishing you a pain-free day. You say: The question isn't whether I'm in pain but rather how much. Later as I get to know you in person, you tell me: I read medical journals hoping for a breakthrough in pain treatment that might make a difference. You wait, trying to get doctors to believe your pain, and once you get the appropriate scripts, working to find the right balance of narcotics. The rhetoric of many disability activists declares: There's nothing wrong with disabled bodies and minds, even as they differ from what's considered normal. I have used this line myself more than once, to which you respond: Not assuming our bodies are wrong makes sense, but the chronic fatiguing hell pain I live with is not a healthy variation, not a natural bodily difference.*

I pause, thinking hard about *natural*. In disability community we sometimes half-sarcastically call nondisabled people *temporarily able-bodied*, or *TABs*, precisely because of the one instant that can disable any of us. Are these moments and locations of disability and chronic illness *natural* as our fragile, resilient human bodies interact with the world? Is it *natural* when a spine snaps after being flung from a car; when a brain processes information in fragmented ways after being exposed to lead, mercury, pesticides, uranium tailings; when a body or mind assumes its own shape with withered muscles or foreshortened limbs, brittle bones

or ears that do not hear sound, after genes settle into their own particular patterns soon after conception? And when are those moments and locations of disability and chronic illness *unnatural*—as *unnatural* as war, toxic landfills, and poverty? Who, pray tell, determines *natural* and *unnatural*? I'm searching for a politics of cure that grapples both with the pain, brokenness, and limitation contained within disabled bodies and with the encompassing damage of ableism.

I return to story. *You and I sit in a roomful of disabled people, slowly inching our way toward enough familiarity to start telling bone-deep truths. And when we arrive there, you say: If I could wake up tomorrow and not have diabetes, I'd choose that day in a heartbeat. I can almost hear the stream of memory: the daily insulin; the tracking of blood sugar level; the shame; the endless doctors judging your weight, your food, your numbers; the seizures; the long-term unknowns. You don't hate your body or equate diabetes with misery. You're not waiting desperate, half panicked. All the time and money spent on research, rather than universal health care, a genuine social safety net, an end to poverty and hunger, pisses you off. At the same time, you're weary of all the analogies: the hope that one day AIDS will become as treatable and manageable as diabetes, the equating of transsexual hormone replacement therapy with insulin. You want to stamp your feet: pay attention to this specific experience of Type I diabetes—my daily dependence on a synthesized hormone, my life balanced on this chemical, the maintenance that marks every meal. You'd take a cure tomorrow, and at the same time you relish sitting in this room.*

In creating a politics of cure, we need to hold both the desire to restore a pancreas to its typical functioning and the value of bodily difference, knowing all the while that we will never live in a world where disability does not exist. How do we embrace the brilliant imperfection of disability and what it has to offer the world while knowing that very few of us would actively choose it to begin with?<sup>1</sup>

I return again to disability community. *You and I talk, as we so often do, over food, this time pasta, bread, and olive oil. It would be cliché to start with a description of your face across from mine, a story of color and texture, which I both see and don't. Certainly, I observe the vivid outline of your birthmark, its curve of color, but that colored shape does not become your entire being. Poet Pat Parker describes this balance in the context of race in her poem "For the white person who wants to know how to be my friend." She writes, "The first thing you do is to forget that i'm Black. / Second, you must never forget that i'm Black" (99). I know from your stories that all too often your face precedes you into the world, that one visible distinction becoming your whole body. You say: I don't know why I stopped wearing that thick waxy makeup; why after a childhood of medical scraping, burning, tattooing, I didn't pursue laser surgery; don't know when I stopped cupping face in hand, shielding the color of my skin from other humans. I listen as you try to make sense, track your body's turn away from eradication toward a compli-*

*cated almost-pride. You research beauty, scrutinize the industry of birthmark removal, page through medical textbooks, see faces like yours, swallow hard against regurgitated shame. You've started meeting and talking with other people with facial distinctions; tracing all the different survival strategies, desires, kinds of love and hate, denial and matter-of-factness. Tonight you wear a bright shirt, earrings to match; insist on your whole body with all its color.*

I ask again: what becomes *natural* and *normal*? Who decides that your purple textured skin is *unnatural*, my trembling hands *abnormal*? How do those small and life-changing decisions get made? I don't want a politics of cure that declares anyone's specific bodily experience *normal* or *abnormal*, *natural* or *unnatural*.

I turn yet again to story in disability community. *You and I meet at a disability cultural event. I've given a presentation about body shame and body love, how bodies are stolen and reclaimed. Afterward, you find me. Military pollution in the groundwater in your childhood neighborhood shaped your disabled body, toxins molding neurons and muscles as you floated in utero. Most of the time when you talk about the military dumping of trichloroethylene (TCE) and its connection to you, folks look at your body with pity (Taylor and Taylor). As you tell me this story, I think of all the ways disabled bodies are used as cautionary tales: the arguments against drunk driving, drug use, air pollution, lead paint, asbestos, vaccines, and on and on. So many public campaigns use the cultural fear and hatred of disability to make the case against environmental degradation. You want to know how to express your hatred of military dumping without feeding the assumption that your body is bad, wrong, unnatural. No easy answers exist. You and I talk intensely; both the emotions and the ideas are dense. We arrive at a slogan for you: I hate the military and love my body.*

As simplified and incomplete as it is, this slogan is also profound. How do we witness, name, and resist the injustices that reshape and damage all kinds of bodies—plant and animal, organic and inorganic, nonhuman and human? And alongside our resistance, how do we make peace with the reshaped and damaged bodies themselves, cultivate love and respect for them? Inside this work, these stories, the concepts of *unnatural* and *abnormal* stop being useful.

## Loss

The desire for restoration is bound to bodily loss and yearning—the sheer loss of bodies and bodily functions, whether it be human, bison, dirt, or an entire ecosystem. For many disabled and chronically ill people, there is a time before our particular bodily impairments, differences, dysfunctions existed.

What we remember about our bodies is seductive. We yearn; we wish; we regret; we make deals. We desire to return to the days before immobilizing exhaustion or impending death; to the nights thirty years ago when we spun across the dance floor; to the years before depression descended, a thick, unrelenting fog; to

the long afternoons curled up with a book before the stroke, before the ability to read vanished in a heartbeat. We feel grief, bitterness, regret. We remain tethered to the past. We compare our bodies to those of neighbors, friends, lovers, models in *Glamour* and *Men's Health*, and we come up lacking. We feel inadequate, ashamed, envious. We remain tethered to images outside ourselves, to Photoshopped versions of the human body. Tethered to the gym, the diet plan, the miracle cure. But can any of us move our bodies back in time, undo the lessons learned, the knowledge gained, the scars acquired? The desire for restoration, the return to a bodily past—whether shaped by actual history, imagination, or the vice grip of *normal* and *natural*—is complex.

Even those of us who live with disability or chronic illness as familiar and ordinary and have settled into our bodies with a measure of self-love, even those of us who have no nondisabled past, deal with yearning. Sometimes I wish I could throw my body into the powerful grace of a gymnast, rock climber, cliff diver, but that wish is distant, dissolving into echo almost as soon as I recognize it. Sometimes the frustration of not being able to do some task right in front of me roars up, and I have to turn away again from bitterness and simply ask for help. But the real yearning for me centers upon bodily change. As my wrists, elbows, and shoulders grow chronically painful, I miss kayaking, miss gliding on the rippling surface of a lake, miss the rhythm of a paddle dipping in and out of the water. Restoration can be a powerful way of dealing with loss. Cure—when desired, possible, and successful—offers the return some of us sometimes yearn for.

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Of course, the connections among loss, yearning, and restoration are not only about human bodies. Many of us mourn the swamp once a childhood playground, now a parking lot. We fear the wide-reaching impacts of global warming as hurricanes grow more frequent, glaciers melt, and deserts expand. We yearn back to the days when bison roamed the Great Plains in the millions and Chinook salmon swam upstream so numerous that rivers churned frothy white. We yearn for a return, and so we broadcast just the right mix of tallgrass prairie seeds, raise and release wolves, bison, whooping cranes. We tear up drainage tiles and reroute water back into what used to be wetlands. We pick up trash, blow up dams, root out loosestrife, tansy ragwort, gorse, scotch broom, bamboo, and a multitude of other invasive species. Sometimes we can return a place to some semblance of its former self before the white colonialist, capitalist, industrial damage was done. And in doing so, we sometimes return ourselves as human animals into the *natural* world, moving from domination to collaboration. When it works, restoration can be a powerful resolution to grief, fear, despair.

Restoration's possibilities grow even more inviting as loss extends beyond individual bodies and places to entire communities and ecosystems. I remember

bison herds hunted to near extinction, carcasses left to rot. White hunters sold bison tongue and skin, returned later to collect bone. Then ranchers with cattle and farmers with plows tore up the grasslands; beef animals, wheat, corn, and soybeans replaced prairie. In a photo from the 1870s, a man stands atop an immense pile of bison skulls waiting to be ground up for fertilizer (*Bison Skull Pile*). The immensity of this mountain of bone is irrevocable. I remember whole forests of towering Douglas fir, western red cedar, Sitka spruce, and redwoods leveled. Loggers left slash piles, clear-cuts, and washouts in their wake. In a photo from the late 1800s, fourteen men stand, sit, and lounge in the deep cross-cut of a single redwood tree in the process of being felled (Ericson). The breadth of this stump provides a window into the forests demolished. I remember mountaintops removed wholesale in Kentucky. Miners cleared, blasted, dug, and blasted some more in the southern Appalachian Mountains, extracting layer upon layer of coal, creating huge, open gashes. In a photo from 2003, the mountaintop has been leveled into a pit that stretches out toward the horizon, the scale large enough that I can't quite make sense of what I see (Stockman).

As evidence of ecosystems destroyed, all three of these photos measure magnitudes of loss, a sheer loss of bodies—animal, grass, tree, earth, mountain. This devastation includes, of course, human bodies. The mass slaying of bison interweaves with the genocide of First Nations peoples who depended on those big shaggy animals and open prairie for material and cultural sustenance. So many loggers broke their backs, lost their limbs, damaged their hearing as they cut down the titan trees. The bulldozers displaced and relocated working-class and poor folks from their generational homes, turning both people and mountaintops into rubble to push over the edge.

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But how do we deal with bodily and ecological loss when restoration in its various manifestations is not the answer? Sometimes viable restoration is not possible. Sometimes restoration is a bandage trying to mend a gaping wound. Sometimes restoration is an ungrounded hope motivated by the shadows of *natural* and *normal*. Sometimes restoration is pure social control. I want us to tend the unrestorable places and ecosystems that are ugly, stripped down, full of toxins, rather than considering them *unnatural* and abandoning them. I want us to respect and embrace the bodies disabled through environmental destruction, age, war, genocide, abysmal working conditions, hunger, poverty, and twists of fate, rather than deeming them *abnormal* bodies to isolate, fear, hate, and dispose of. How can bodily and ecological loss become an integral conundrum of both the human and nonhuman world, accepted in a variety of ways, cure and restoration only a single response among many? When the woman whose body has been shaped by military pollution declares, "I hate the military and love my body," she is saying something brand new and deeply complex.

## Monocultures and Biodiversities

In pursuing the analogy between restoration of health and restoration of ecosystems, curious questions begin to emerge. Are disabled bodies akin to cornfields? After all, both kinds of restoration—the one grounded in medical science and the other in environmental science—arise from the certainty that cornfields and disabled bodies are damaged and need to change. Restoration declares that cornfields need to return to a *natural*, self-sustaining, interdependent ecological balance and disabled or chronically ill bodies to a *normal*, independent functioning.

I remember walking a cornfield in early autumn. The leaves, stalks, husks rattle and sway overhead. Rows envelop me, the whole world a forest of corn beginning to turn brown. I step into the furrows between rows, onto the mounds upon which the stalks grow. Sound, sweat, and an orderly density of the same plant over and over fill the space. Nothing chirps or rasps, squawks or buzzes; the cicadas and grasshoppers have gone dormant for the season. I hear no warblers, finches, sparrows; I see no traces of grouse, pheasant, fox. The earth is laced with petroleum-based fertilizers and the air laden with pesticide residue. In spite of the damage they embody, cornfields are also beautiful on the surface, lushly green and quivering in the humid Midwest summer before they dry up in the fall, becoming brown and brittle. The stalks stand tall and sturdy, tassels silky and the color of honey, kernels of corn plump and hidden. Little tastes better than ears of sweet corn fresh from the field, husked, boiled, and buttered. But this beauty is deceptive; the monoculture of a cornfield has brought nothing but soil depletion and erosion; a glut of nonnutritious, corn-based processed foods; and wholesale destruction of prairie ecosystems. Restoration is not just a pleasant environmental pastime but a desperate need.

Let me return to my prompting question: are disabled human bodies akin to cornfields? The ideology of cure answers with a resounding yes. Speaking through the medical establishment and dozens of cultural assumptions and stereotypes, cure declares that the need for the restoration of health is just as urgent as the restoration of tallgrass prairies. From this point of view, disabled bodies are as damaging to culture as cornfields are to nature.

Distrustful of this answer, including the easy separation of nature and culture, I turn my question inside out and ask: are restored prairies like disabled bodies? Certainly, the tallgrass prairie that my friends caretake is a diverse ecosystem that is whole but not as whole as it once was or could be, quirky and off-kilter, almost self-sustaining and entirely interdependent, imperfect and brilliant all at the same time. These descriptors apply equally well to disability communities.

I remember departing from a large disability gathering. It is late spring in the San Francisco airport, an environment as bland as a cornfield. I walk a long corridor toward the plane that will take me home. I have been in the foggy Bay Area for a long weekend with three hundred LGBT disabled people, queer crips, as

many of us like to call ourselves. I meander through the airport, people streaming around and by me. I know something is missing, but I don't know what. I let my exhaustion and images from the weekend roll over me until all of a sudden I realize everyone passing me all looks the same in spite of the myriad of cultural differences held within these walls. A gay white businessman strides past an African American woman and her grandson; a Latino man speaking quiet Spanish into his cell phone stands next to a white teen speaking twangy English with her friends; an Asian American woman pushes her cleaning cart by, stopping to empty the trash can. In spite of all these differences, everyone has two arms and two legs. They are walking rather than rolling; speaking with their lips, not their hands, speaking in even, smooth syllables, no stutters or slurs. They have no canes, no crutches, no braces; their faces do not twitch or their hands flop; they hold their backs straight, and their smiles are not lopsided. In some profound way, they all look the same.

It would be all too convenient and neat to suggest that without disability, humans re-create ourselves as a monoculture—a cornfield, wheat field, tree farm—lacking some fundamental biodiversity. Environmentalists have named biodiversity a central motivation for ecosystem restoration and a foundation for continued life on the planet. But to declare the absence of disability as synonymous with a monoculture disregards the multiplicity of cultures among humans. It glosses over the ways in which culture and nature have been set against each other in the white Western world, as if the human ferment we call culture and the wild, interdependent messiness we call biodiversity are distinct and opposing entities. It does not acknowledge how culture dictates which bodily characteristics are considered disability and which are considered *natural* variation.

At the same time, the absence of disability, even the desire for its absence, diminishes human experience and the inextricable interweaving of bio- and cultural diversity. Certainly, the desire to eradicate disability runs deep. Even the most progressive of activists and staunchest of environmentalists have for the past 150 years envisioned an end to disability as a worthy goal. But the white Western drive to eradicate *unnatural* and *abnormal* bodies and cultures has never targeted disability alone. Patriarchy, white supremacy, and capitalism have twined together in ever-changing combinations to make eradication through genocide, incarceration, institutionalization, sterilization, and wholesale assimilation a reality in many marginalized communities. It is this long-standing, broad-based desire for and practice of eradication that threaten to create human monocultures.

I return to my prompting question turned inside out: are restored prairies like disabled bodies? Ecological restoration is one powerful way to repair the damage wrought by monocultures and to resist the forces of eradication. A radical valuing of disabled and chronically ill bodies—inseparable from black and brown bodies; queer bodies; poor and working-class bodies; transgender, transsexual, and

gender-nonconforming bodies; immigrant bodies; women's bodies; young and old bodies; fat bodies—is another part of the same repair and resistance. In this way, a commitment to bio- and cultural diversity coupled with a multi-issue disability politics answers my question with a resounding yes. Simply put, the bodies of both disabled and chronically ill people and restored prairies resist the impulse toward and the reality of monocultures.

### Illogic

Both kinds of restoration—one of ecosystems and the other of health—appear to value and prioritize the *natural* over the *unnatural*, yet they arrive at opposing conclusions about disabled bodies. The contradiction and lack of logic could simply mark the point at which the analogy between cure and ecological restoration falls apart. Or they could point to the profound difference between a complex valuing of disability as cultural and ecological diversity and a persistent devaluing of disability entirely as damage. Or they could underline the multiple, slippery meanings of *natural* and *unnatural*, *normal* and *abnormal*—a fundamental illogic rooted in the white Western framework that separates human animals from nonhuman nature.

This framework has rarely valued and prioritized the *natural* world—meaning largely intact, flourishing ecosystems, some of which include humans and others of which do not. Out of these values has emerged an out-of-control greed for and consumption of coal and trees, fish and crude oil, water and land. This framework despises and destroys the *natural* when it is not human. It declares cornfields more productive than prairies, tree farms and second-growth forest more sustaining to wildlife than old-growth forest, open coal pits more necessary than intact mountaintops and watersheds. Within this system of values, the *civilized* is named and celebrated in opposition to the *savage*, the former rising above nature and the latter remaining mired in it.

The illogic grows as these values turn toward the human world, as the pairing of *savage* and *natural* collides with what is deemed *unnatural* and *abnormal*. Throughout the centuries, rich white men have determined people of color, poor people, LGBT people, women, indigenous people, immigrants, and disabled people to be *savages*, nonhuman animals, close to nature. But in the same breath this long litany of peoples has also been held up as Other, *unnatural*, and *abnormal*. The illogic names certain human bodies both *natural* and *unnatural*, using each designation by turn as justification to enslave, starve, study, exhibit, and eradicate entire communities and cultures.

I return to the word *monkey*. As a taunt, a freak-show name, a scientific and anthropological designation for human animals, this word drips with the illogic of *natural* and *unnatural*. So many disabled people or people of color (or both) have lived publicly and privately, in the spotlight and not, with *monkey* and paid

dearly. Let me pause and step into a river of names: Ota Benga, William Henry Johnson, Krao Farini, Barney Davis, Hiram Davis, Simon Metz, Elvira Snow, Jenny Lee Snow, Maximo, Bartola, Sarah Baartman, and on and on. In 1906 Ota Benga, a Batwa man from central Africa, was forced to live in the Bronx Zoo monkey house. The sign on the cage he shared with an orangutan read:

The African Pigmy, "Ota Benga." Age, 23 years. Height, 4 feet 11 inches. Weight, 103 pounds. Brought from the Kasai River, Congo Free State, South Central Africa, by Dr. Samuel P. Verner. Exhibited each afternoon during September. (Bradford and Blume 181)

This sign makes Benga's situation stunningly clear: he was imprisoned in a zoo exactly because he was considered a curiosity, a specimen, a primate. His display was neither the first nor the last, but simply one in a long, long litany. P. T. Barnum exhibited William Henry Johnson as the "What-Is-It" and the "Missing Link." Freak-show posters named Krao Farini "Ape Girl." Barney and Hiram Davis worked for decades as *savages*, the "Wild Men from Borneo." Freak-show managers sold "Maximo" and "Bartola" as the "last of the ancient Aztecs," and anthropologists studied, measured, and photographed them naked as "throwbacks" to an earlier time in human evolution. White men caged, displayed, and studied Sarah Baartman as the "Hottentot Venus." These folks—all of them intellectually disabled or people of color (or both)—became monkeys or near monkeys in the white Western framework of scientific racism.

The brutality of *monkey* arises in part precisely because it removes particular bodies from humanity and places them among animals in the *natural* world. Scientific racism of the 1800s made this removal overt. Scientists declared that "the negro race . . . manifestly approaches the monkey tribe" (qtd. in Lindfors 9). They decided that "microcephalics [intellectually disabled people with an impairment medically known as microcephalia] must necessarily represent an earlier developmental state of the human being" (qtd. in Rothfels 158). They twined racism, colonialism, and ableism together until it was impossible to tell where one ended and the other began. And this thinking has not disappeared; it has just become more subtle most of the time, more subtle until a bully hurls the word *monkey* across the schoolyard, calling upon centuries of scientific racism, whether he knows it or not.

*Monkey* categorizes the bodies of white disabled people and people of color—both disabled and not—as *savage* and *natural*. Within this categorization, these bodies become subject to the profound disconnect, disregard, and destruction with which the white Western world treats nonhuman animals and nature. Disabled painter, writer, and animal rights activist Sunaura Taylor puts it this way:

I find myself wondering why animals exist as such negative points of reference for us. . . . In David Lynch's 1980 classic *Elephant Man*, John Merrick yells out

to his gawkers and attackers, “I am not an animal!” . . . No one wants to be treated like an animal. But how do we treat animals? . . . [A]t the root of the insult in animal comparisons is a discrimination against nonhuman animals themselves. (194–95)

At the same time, these *savage* bodies, these *monkey* bodies, these *natural* bodies are also Other and *abnormal*, to be studied and gawked at exactly because of their abnormality. And in their Otherness and abnormality, these bodies also become *unnatural*. *Monkey* seamlessly engages with the illogic of *natural* paired with *abnormal* and *abnormal* paired with *unnatural*. But the illogic does not stop here.

*Natural* slides again, pairing up with what is considered *civilized*. Certain other bodies—white, nondisabled, heterosexual, male, cisgender, rich bodies—have been established as good and valuable, as the standard of both *natural* and *normal*. Corporate advertising sells *natural* beauty, *natural* strength, *natural* sexiness, *natural* skin, *natural* hair every day, as if *natural* were a product to sell. The medical establishment provides technology to ensure *normal* height, *normal* weight, *normal* pregnancy and birth, *normal* walking, *normal* breathing, as if *normal* were a goal to achieve. The pressure to conform individually and systemically to these standards of *natural* and *normal* is immense. Whether it is curing disabled bodies or straightening kinky hair or lightening brown skin or making gay, lesbian, and bi people heterosexual, the priorities are clear. In this illogic, *normal* bodies are *natural* and *natural* bodies are *normal*.

In all its arbitrary and illogical meanings, *natural* names both what is dominated and who does the dominating. *Natural* establishes some bodies as radically *abnormal* and others as hyper *normal*. The illogic holds what is *natural* and dominated as *abnormal* and *unnatural*. And it insists that those who dominate are both *normal* and *natural*. Do not try to make sense of the illogic; it is nonsensical. These four concepts—*natural*, *normal*, *unnatural*, and *abnormal*—in all their various pairings form a matrix of intense contradictions, wielding immense power in spite of, or perhaps because of, the illogic.

## Prairie

I return in early fall to the thirty acres of restored tallgrass prairie in Wisconsin. I walk, thinking not of concepts but of bodies. The grasses swish against my legs. A few swallowtail butterflies still hover. Coyote scat appears next to the path. The white-throated sparrows sing. The grasses rustle, and I imagine a white-footed mouse scurrying and a red fox pouncing. Above vultures circle on the thermals. A red-tailed hawk cries not so far away. I am one body—a tremoring, slurring human body—among many different kinds of bodies. Could it all be this complexly woven yet simple? The answer comes back an inevitable yes and no.

Right now in this moment, the prairie both contains and is made up of a myriad of bodies. But just over the rise, another cornfield turns brown and brittle.

Just over the rise are a barbed-wire fence, a two-lane dirt road, and an absence of bison. Just over the rise is the human illogic of *natural* and *unnatural*, *normal* and *abnormal*. Just over the rise, we grapple with loss and desire, with damaged bodies and deep social and ecological injustices. Just over the rise are the bullies with their rocks and fists, the words *monkey* and *retard*. Just over the rise, we need to choose between monocultures, on one hand, and bio- and cultural diversities, on the other, between eradication and uncontainable flourishing. In so many ways, the prairie cannot be a retreat but the ground upon which we ask all these questions.

## Notes

1. The idea of brilliant imperfection as a way of knowing, understanding, and living disability or chronic illness is one of hundreds of things I have learned in disability communities. In particular I want to thank Sebastian Margaret for this phrase.