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Nature Reframed: the importance of disabled perspectives

In a climate crisis, many people who experience disabilities find themselves in uniquely vulnerable positions. Yet our bodies exist in complex, multilayered relationships with the wider environments in which we live. Elspeth Wilson unpicks her relationship with ecological systems and spaces, arguing that disabled perspectives can encourage a reframing of nature, place, and society.

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The T-shirt I'm wearing is made of cotton. I watch a gaggle of geese fly in V formation outside my window. On the roof, seagulls are squawking and, in the street, they are ripping into bin bags. A spider has made its web in the corner of my window, sun glinting on its intricate design. Fungus gnats are living in my sweetheart plant and I am googling ways to save my succulents. A cork plant, a snake plant and a fern huddle together in the corner, next to a jug of water, waiting for their next drink. A wrinkled orange sits in the fruit bowl next to a glossy lemon, which has probably been waxed using shellac from a lac beetle. I'm writing in a leather-bound notebook, bought as a gift before I became vegan. Underneath my desk, I sweep up crumbs to try and stave off the mice that are endemic in tenements. My tired feet rest on a wooden floor and I snuggle my toes into woolly socks.

I'm at home and I have barely ventured beyond these same fifty square metres in weeks, yet I'm surrounded by and connected to a whole world of plant and animal life. I'm realising that I don't need to travel far or go to remote places to find nature. Wherever I am, it has always already found me.

For many non-disabled people, lockdown may have been the first time they spent extensive amounts of time staying at home. But many disabled people had experienced their own personal lockdowns prior to COVID-19, and will continue to experience them well into the future. Whether this is a result of being house-bound, or because of a fluctuating disability which sometimes means they can't get out, or because of a lack of accessible accommodation, disabled people have been engaging with nature in a different way to the mainstream idea of the 'great outdoors' since long before the pandemic.

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For me, lockdown exacerbated some pre-existing barriers, making it even harder and more anxiety-inducing to leave the house, but it also strengthened my relationship with the natural world. I began to notice small details, like the dogs I saw from my window every morning, and I began to read more too, immersing myself in nature writing. Yet so much of the genre was about big adventures or impressive feats of endurance, which – while escapist – felt totally alien to my life. Discovering the writing of Josie George was illuminating. George is the author of the memoir, *A Still Life*,¹ and also writes a blog about her home, her garden, her local area, her chronic illness and her place in the world.

On her blog, George writes 'I have always struggled to belong to spaces. Those I have belonged to, I have had to grow into stealthily, like a weed.' I felt an affinity with the way George grappled with (her) place, and her relation to the more maligned – yet hardy – aspects of nature, like weeds. Reading about George's relationship with her garden – as she resolved to persist in coaxing it back to life – took me on an emotional journey just as profound as any invoked by reading about a long geographical journey. I was also struck by how George's writing focuses on her home and immediate vicinity; it gave me permission to see nature in my domestic life and to view it as 'worth' writing about.

Thinking about nature in the home can allow us to broaden our definition of what that term includes, and break down the binary between urban and rural, wild and domestic. We are constantly surrounded by nature, natural

1 Josie George, *A Still Life: a memoir*, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021.



materials and non-human animals wherever we are. Whether we are in the countryside, a city, a suburb, indoors or outdoors, nature is not separable from ourselves – no matter how hard we might sometimes try to scour or hide it. Indeed, our homes are biodiverse and don't belong to us alone; they can also be home to microorganisms, insects, reptiles, and fungi, amongst others. 'Nature' isn't somewhere else; it isn't a distinct sphere that we can choose to go and visit for a getaway or a break. It's us, it's what we eat, what we build from, who we live alongside.

Of course, just because there is joy and insight to be found in thinking about nature in domestic places, it doesn't mean we shouldn't be fighting for increased accessibility to outdoor spaces as well. Disabled people want to go outside too, to go on walks, to enjoy all the benefits that a beautiful view or being near trees or running water can bring. As George wrote in a recent piece for *Guardian Country Diary*, recounting a trip to the local graveyard on a rainy day, 'so many of us in unwilling bodies find ourselves having to sit out these sights, these sounds. To be here at all is a gift, I see that now.' There can be times that it might be impossible for a disabled person – or indeed a non-disabled person – to get outdoors because of illness or pain, but a lot of these barriers are created by an ableist society and could be removed if disabled access were prioritised.

Some organisations are paying attention and providing information on access, such as the RSPB's guides for disabled birdwatchers, but there is still a long way to go in providing things like step-free access, viewing points for wheelchair users and accessible toilet facilities. There is no true freedom in the 'great outdoors' until it can be accessed and enjoyed by everyone – particularly when health is a temporary state and any one of us can become disabled at any time.



Disabled perspectives can allow a reframing of nature, place and society that allows increased kindness to ourselves and all kinds of others. What would it mean for conservation if we thought of the spider in our home as something to be saved, on the same par as 'wildlife'? How might cities better serve us all if green spaces had accessibility at their heart? How could our thinking be broadened by uplifting disabled voices and engaging with a movement that imagines a world where all life, human or otherwise, is supported and valued? Thinking about nature as part of our home rather than something separate allows us to broaden individual and societal conceptions of it as a general term. This perspective also invites us to reconsider our own varied personal relationships with nature and how our identity impacts this.

A world in which disabled people can thrive aligns with many environmental objectives; a shared vision of anti-capitalism and of life valued beyond 'productivity' and its potential for wage labour. Concepts like 'crip time', coined by Alison Kafer, to explain how time can flex around disabled bodies, allow for the prioritisation of rest and forgiving the body. In its rejection of punitive capitalism, with its long hours and lack of compassion for people and environment, crip theory can provide fruitful terrain for expanding ideas of planetary health and reworking our relationship with, and care for, the environment and non-human animals. The way disabled nature writing focuses on and celebrates everyday sights and small details speaks to a holding dear and a treasuring of the nature that surrounds us, and connects to these ideas of mutual care; it holds human and non-human life as something worth noting, worth saving.

So, next time you're at your window, really look. You might just glimpse a different future. •