**TRANSCRIPT - Digging through the archive with Dr. Julia Watts Belser**

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**Áine** Welcome to Enabling Commons, a place for conversations with activists, experts and scholars at the intersections of disability and climate change. The podcast is produced by the Disability Inclusive Climate Action Research Program based at McGill University. I'm your host, Áine Kelly-Costello. Today, I talked to Dr. Julia Watts Belzer, who is a professor of Jewish Studies and Disability Studies at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C.. Julia coordinates the [*Disability and Climate Change Public Archive*](http://disabilityclimatechange.georgetown.domains), which chronicles disabled experience and wisdom, navigating climate disruption and connected crises. We talk about telling compelling stories at disability and climate intersections, making them accessible and sustaining this work through the archive. Here's our conversation.

**Áine** I'm talking with Julia Watts Belzer for Enabling Commons. Welcome, Julia. It's really great to have you here. Could you start off by introducing yourself?

**Julia** Sure. Absolutely. So, so pleased to get to talk with you today. I'll introduce myself by naming three strands that are an important part of my work, who I am and what I do. I'm a professor of Jewish Studies and Disability Studies at Georgetown University in Washington, DC, in the US. My scholarly work focuses really on questions of disability, power, ethics and inequality. And I look at those questions both in ancient Jewish texts and in contemporary culture. I focus especially on the way that queer, feminist, disability communities are doing crucial ethical work on the frontlines of liberation. So that's the first strand.

The second is I'm also a rabbi and a spiritual teacher. Of course, I work in Jewish communities, bringing feminist, queer and disability insights into conversation with Jewish tradition. But a lot of my work ends up being also with secular communities, especially communities of activists and artists. So I'm really interested in opening up spaces for folks who are doing deep social change work to grapple with questions about what sustains us and what anchors us.

And then third, I'm a longtime activist and advocate for disability and gender justice. And so I think that energy, that desire to really examine and transform the systems and structures that drive injustice is a huge part of my work. I am committed to building a world where all people can thrive.

**Áine** Thank you so much. I love the intersecting intertwining strands of your work around feminism, disability studies, Jewish studies, and I guess the other kind of big part of that has been in the environmental and climate space and connecting that with all of the, you know, the themes above and particularly from sort of a disability lens. And I wonder if you can talk about what drew you to that work and how you got started.

**Julia** Sure. Absolutely. So I think for me, the question of environmental injustice has been a core motivating part of what leads me to this work. I have been really steeped in my own... in my own life by the wisdom and brilliance of the environmental justice movement. Environmental justice is an organizing paradigm and movement led primarily by black, indigenous and other women of color in the U.S. and of course, around the world as well. I just, I know the U.S. movement work best, and those activists have been organizing and documenting the disproportionate harms that minoritized communities face. The toxic exposures, landfills in poor and minority neighborhoods, the creation of what activists call like sacrifice zones. And of course, so much of that is intertwined with interlaced with disability.

That paradigm of thinking about environmental injustice and the inequity, the disproportionate harm that some of us face has always really shaped my thinking about, and my approach to environmental work. As I began really integrating my environmental commitments with my disability work, it became, it felt crucial to ask the question not just, you know, how is disability produced or intensified by environmental harm? But also in what ways are disabled people also at the forefront of doing crucial disability work. And in what ways can we be doing that work more effectively? So one of the classes I teach at Georgetown is a class called Disability Ethics and Eco Justice. And we spend a lot of time looking at the way disabled people are disproportionately affected by climate disruption. I think extreme weather, climate intensified weather, floods, hurricanes, tsunamis, things like that. One of the most clear ways to see these kinds of impacts. But it's frustrating to me to only think about people with disabilities as like super victims. You know, I think that just really I resist that framing and want to also recognize the way in which it's social structures and political failures that contribute to a situation where disabled people face so much of this harm.

**Áine** Yeah. Thank you. That's totally true. And I think the piece that you wrote back in 2019, I think for Truthout called [Disabled People cannot be expected losses](https://truthout.org/articles/disabled-people-cannot-be-expected-losses-in-the-climate-crisis/). And the climate crisis also really speaks to this. And I know it helped me to orient as to kind of why I advocate in this space as well. And of course, the resonances now in the time of the pandemic are huge. And for our listeners who haven't read this piece, I wonder if you could just kind of walk us through the argument that you're making in that.

**Julia** Sure, absolutely. I'll start by telling you a story that really crystallized the problem for me. I was giving a talk about how disabled people face particular harms from climate change. Right. I was talking about the way that the rise of weather related disasters and emergencies lead to significant harm among disability communities. And after the talk, one person in the audience said, you know, it's really terrible what you're saying. It's awful. These are terrible stories. But you know what? What are we going to do? Some people just aren't cut out to make it. Some people just aren't going to survive. And, you know, I was absolutely outraged.

I was outraged for two reasons. First, I'm just completely unwilling to accept that as an answer. I am committed as a point of practice and principle to the claim that our societies have an ethical obligation to build a world where all of us are meant to survive. But I was also outraged because I felt the way I felt that vulnerability was being weaponized against disabled people, like we were being blamed for not being able to make it. It was a classic example of a familiar assumption that the problem is disability, the problem is disabled people. We're too sick, too weak, too vulnerable to survive.

So if we frame the problem as a problem of physical vulnerability, if we say, oh, it's disabled people's innate inherent vulnerability, that makes it more likely that we'd die in the aftermath of climate disruption, then we absolutely miss the underlying reality of structural violence. We miss the way that disabled people die in the aftermath of disaster because no one planned for our survival. We miss the fact that it happens because shelters are so often inaccessible. Because evacuation plans assume that everyone has a personal car and a robust bank account because accessible transportation systems are strained and understaffed even before the storm. So how are they going to manage when there is a huge crisis? And of course, it's not just a matter of emergency planning.

It's also the reality that so many disabled people, especially multiply marginalized disabled people, disabled people of color are already living in chronic crisis. Folks don't have enough money to put food on the table on ordinary days. So how are you supposed to have emergency food stashed away for a hurricane? These are the kinds of questions that I find myself really, really thinking. And I think one of the reasons it matters to me, particularly to hone in on the question of structural inequality is, you know, we can, we can do something about that. We built these systems and that means we have an obligation to build them differently.

**Áine** Thank you. That's such a powerful promise towards the need for, the need for advocacy, which emphasizes agency of disabled people and also like going straight to government officials and especially to members of parliament, to be able to say, actually, these systems are not working for us at a structural level. It's not our fault. How dare you blame us? How dare you imply that we are to blame somehow. And that we need to start from the basis that everyone can survive and that we have the power to make that happen.

And you've led the creation of the [Disability and Climate Change Public Archive Project](http://disabilityclimatechange.georgetown.domains), and as you've written on the website, it bears witness to the harms disabled people face amidst climate disruption and documents the wisdom disabled people bring to navigating this crisis. And it's such a rich and beautiful undertaking. I really like going in there. I'm kind of like thinking of it as a bit of like a treasure box, that you can always find something new and something kind of grounding and comforting. And I wonder, how did the idea for the archive come about originally?

**Julia** Thank you so much. I love this project so much. So it really is so wonderful to hear you describe it as going in and finding treasure, because I think that I have found so much insight and wisdom in the stories of books I am privileged to be in conversation with. The archive is at its heart, a desire, it emerges out of the desire to document the stories and wisdom of disabled folks who are working in and around climate and environmental movements. And we're also doing crucial work in disability community, to build systems of mutual aid, community care and responsiveness to, grassroots responsiveness to crisis.

One of the ways that the archive started was actually the years sort of began working on the archive in earnest in 2020. The year before, I had received some seed funding from my university to gather together a group of disabled activists, organizers, policymakers, artists, you know, folks who were doing this kind of climate work on the ground and bring folks in, come into conversations with disability studies scholars. So I worked for a year to try and bring that convening together. It was scheduled for March 2020. So as you can imagine, that did not happen. Once I got over the grief of all of that, all about work being lost and all of that, that, you know, that convening, not being able to take place. I started thinking about, What does it mean to build something different? And that's where the seed for the archive in many ways was born.

What excited me about that convening was that we weren't getting ready to do that. You know, we weren't coming together to do that academic thing where people read their pre-written papers or share their already done research. We were getting together to talk and to share and to generate ideas and knowledge together to bounce off each other in creative ways. And I wanted to capture that energy, but in a form... I'm actually so grateful that it turned out this way because now it feels like the archive is an ongoing space to host and open up these kinds of conversations. At its heart, the archive has been emerging out of a series of sustained conversations that I've been having with disabled climate activists, organizers, first responders, artists, all kinds of disabled folks who are working and thinking around disability, ecology, environment, climate justice.

And, so in the archive, I work with a small research team and we take the raw transcripts from those initial conversations and then lovingly curate short written, conversational style pieces that draw out those insights. And so… I think one of the things that feels really exciting to me about this piece is that it's also really a documentary project. So much disability wisdom is ephemeral. It's so easy to lose. And so I hope that this project is also a way of amplifying and preserving and growing disability wisdom around climate and environmental work.

**Áine** Yeah, I love that. I remember Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha has said something like, you know, when you're 40 or so, for some communities of disabled people, you're almost an elder because so many of us are lost too soon for one reason or another. And I mean there are all kinds of reasons why surviving has disabled people is so kind of full on in itself, right? That it takes like a really intentional effort to step back and actually make sure that that documenting happens, because normally it definitely doesn't.

I know that there's been a real range of those curated conversation pieces, but also Spanish translation and plain language pieces as well as audio portraits. So just a whole range of bringing it to, bringing the pieces to life in different ways so that they're more accessible to more people. And I wondered if you could talk about some of the kind of collaborative processes that made all of this happen.

**Julia** Oh, sure. This has been so much fun to think collaboratively and broadly about the process. I mean, it's been a lot of work, but it's just also been so invigorating to first really build a collaborative team. So I work with Georgetown University students, a core group of research students who have taken a course with me, that course on disability ethics and eco justice, and who then work one on one with me to help craft and refine and really curate the written pieces.

And then we've been working also to create Spanish translations. So working with Sucia Urrea, a brilliant social justice translator based in Mexico City, language access feels like a crucial part. So access feels like it's at the heart of this project, you know? And so we have been trying, I've been trying to think from the ground up, about ways to build access in so many different dimensions of the work. So Spanish translation has been a part of that, and plain language has been another really important piece.

I have been working in partnership with Reid Caplan, a wonderful autistic translator who's been developing straightforward, accessible, content rich versions, both of some of the archive pieces and also about some of the information that we have in the archive about climate change and about the intersections of climate change and disability. As Reid and I were surveying the landscape, it became clear that there was just not a lot of information out there at this nexus, that's designed for it to be accessible to readers with cognitive and intellectual disabilities. And it feels just crucial from an equity perspective, from a justice perspective, to also bring plain language into the, to the very heart of the work.

And then the third strand has been creating audio portraits. The audio portraits are designed to be evocative glimpses of the, like, invitations into the world of the conversation partners in the archives, so that you get to, so that listeners get to hear a crafted, carefully shaped snippet from some of those initial conversations. I've been working with disabled artist Claire Cunningham, based in the UK, disabled dancer and audio artist who's been helping to shape really evocative, moving portraits out of those. Some of those initial interviews with original music compositions by Matthias Herrmann. So it's been really exciting to think here also about multiple modes of access that the audio is a kind of another way to invite folks, and.

**Áine** We'll listen to one of those audio portraits now from Justice Shorter, shared with permission. Justice Shorter, she/her, is the Disaster Protection Advisor at the National Disability Rights Network in the US, where she provides expert training and technical assistance for the protection and advocacy system on disaster protection, fire safety, emergency management and humanitarian crisis and conflict. She has deployed to disaster areas across the United States and its territories and advocates for inclusive international development and humanitarian assistance. Here's just a shorter audio portrait.

Justice Shorter Audio Portrait transcript provided from the [Disability and Climate Archive](http://disabilityclimatechange.georgetown.domains/justice-shorter-audio-portrait-transcript/) shared with permission.

Audio Transcript

Racial Justice and Disaster Response: Recognizing Root Causes and the Cost of Chronic Crisis

It’s the people who show up for each other.  That’s real.

Success after disaster in accordance with like a government official

is entirely different than what I would probably consider to be successful

as a Black blind woman who lives in a community of color.

You know, success looks different to me.

Success looks like our churches back up.

Success looks like the corner store is back up.

It looks like no debris in my area.

It looks like having the different community members being back in their home.

Some sort of official who’s maybe looking at a spreadsheet or looking at the numbers,

they may see success in an entirely different way.

Black, indigenous, people of color with disabilities are more than capable—

and have been doing this work for decades.

Mr. David across the street may not be an academic.

He may not be a researcher.

He may not be, you know, involved with a particular organization.

But he damn sure knows how to help at least four people on his block

who have different types of disabilities get out during the storm,

because he’s done it for the last thirteen years.

When the rescue missions don’t show up,

when there’s no one who comes…

It’s the people who show up for each other.  That’s real.

[Read Justice’s Full Conversation.](http://disabilityclimatechange.georgetown.domains/racial-justice-and-disability-disaster-response/)

[End of audio portrait transcript]

**Áine** I really appreciate Justice letting us share that here. I think the message around showing up for each other, reinforcing that and showing the different versions of success is super powerful. On another note, still talking about the Archive, projects on this scale sadly don't happen without financial backing and you have a slate of sponsors for the archive, which is very exciting. I wonder what advice you might have for scholars or anyone really trying to get any sort of, you know, disability and climate or environmental initiatives off the ground? And how might they convince funders that these initiatives are really needed?

**Julia** Yeah, thanks for naming that. It's such a, it's such a challenge, such a struggle. I think I feel so aware of my own privilege as someone who is positioned at a university and in a place where I have easier access to some resources and to undertake a project like this. And I'd say in many respects that that recognition also helped prompt the project.

You know, I was thinking in some ways about how can I leverage some of the resources that I have available, both money but also time, to invest in and make a commitment to doing some of this archival and documenting work. So that's a big part of how I, the why of the project. In terms of thinking about making the case to funders that this is an important needed project, I guess one of the things that's been really helpful for me has been figuring out how to tell the story of that kind of that intersection of disability and climate change in a way that feels visceral, immediate and compelling.

When I first started, people were often asked the question like, okay, disability, okay, climate change, how do these things go together? And in my own experience, when I started telling that story by focusing on climate intensified disaster, on the risks and harms the disabled people face in the aftermath of extreme weather, that can, that help connect the dots for folks who wanted to understand that this wasn't just a theoretical problem. It wasn't just, you know, a 20 years from now a problem. It's an immediate, clear and crucial issue. In the present moment.

So, you know, I think of myself in many respects as a storyteller, as somebody who I, I, my work is both to analyze power dynamics, to understand the root causes and consequences of inequality and structural harm. But the other part of my job is to tell the story of how and why disability insights are also crucial for navigating the climate crisis. I think the other piece that has felt so important to me is not simply to tell a story of victimization and harm. There's an extraordinary amount of harm out there. I spend a lot of my time thinking about and documenting violence and inequality. But this project has also become such a compelling way to recognize the way that disability communities, disabled folks. We are investing in one another's survival. We are working to lift each other up, often with so few resources. And that matters to me, that is powerful.

**Áine** Absolutely. Yeah. I think it's really powerful to be making this case. As also somebody who is also a part of [the] disability community, who is a disabled person, right. And I know that is like somebody else myself who's trying to do some of this, connecting the dots and telling stories and uplifting other people's voices around disability and climate, like I think a lot about like what is my place as somebody who's disabled but also has quite a lot of other layers of privilege and terms of always living in high income countries and being relatively financially secure, being white and so on. And I think like what you were describing in terms of the time and the sort of finding of resources and bringing that to the archive speaks powerfully to like, maybe to you finding your place within that with maybe some similar dynamics to me of yeah, like how, how do you orient to that work? I wonder if you wanted to say anything else about that.

**Julia** Yeah, sure. You know, maybe I'll just confess that when you and I were first talking about this podcast, I said, You know, I don't know if I don't know if you want to feature me. I really want to keep the focus on other people's stories. And so you convinced me that we should have this conversation, which I really appreciate. But I think it speaks to that desire to in some ways really create a space where I am deliberately hoping to be able to showcase and lift up the brilliant work of so many other disabled folks who deserve to be in the spotlight for the work that they're doing. In some respects, of course, my my words, my fingers, my my heart, my soul. It's like it's on every page of the digital archive. It's in every moment of these conversations.

But on the other hand, part of what I'm really hoping to do with this project is to get out of the way, right? To use the position that I have to try and facilitate conversations and connections and to help build and support and sustain a lot of the grassroots work that is already happening and to create room for more people, more disabled folks to get in on these conversations and find their way into this work. There's a lot of barriers that disabled people face in terms of getting access to or feeling at home in traditional environmental organizations. And so I think it's been very moving to me also as I, as I talk more with other people about the, about the archive to hear from. Other disabled folks about their desire to get more connected to. Environmental work. But to do that in a way that feels organic and true and possible for who we are as disabled folks, that's crucial. Yeah.

**Áine** Totally. And I think so. I will put the link to the archive in the show notes. So I really encourage and encourage everyone to go explore it as well. And I wondered if you're happy for people to perhaps be in touch with you directly. Maybe they're, you know, wanting to collaborate or wanting to think about how how might they get initiatives off the ground or basically be in community with you.

**Julia** I'd love that. That would be marvelous. Absolutely. Absolutely huge. Huge pleasure.

**Áine** So I'll put your email address in the show notes as well.

**Julia** Wonderful. Thank you.

**Áine** Just to finish off, I wonder, what are your hopes and your visions for the archive?

**Julia** I want us to build together a more robust, disability centered climate and environmental movement, so making connections in and with the community. That's key to me. I'd say that I'm excited about. And we're in the process of of of dreaming and building and hoping for some funding that will allow us to create some more community based collaborations in partnership with the archive. Yeah, when I think about the vision, I think it really is that we're able to continue amplifying the, the, the wisdom and insights of disability communities. I like to say, you know, disability is a master class in the art of adaptation and that is something all of us are going to need. That's something our society is going to need as we live into a world that is profoundly climate affected. So I want to see disability communities recognized for our expertise and supported. In leading the way. Thank you.

**Áine** Thank you so much, Julia. Really appreciated your wisdom and insights. Please help us spread the word about Enabling Commons. Share it with a friend or link to it in your organization's newsletter. With thanks to Rose Paquet for producing transcripts and podcast promotion. The music is composed and produced by Sam Morgan. Audio production and hosting is by me, your host Áine Kelly-Costello. To find out more about the intersections of disability and climate change, visit disabilityinclusiveclimate.org.