

Into the Crip Universe: Crippling the Anthropocene

Season 1, Episode 3: Canaries in the Coal Mines

Guest: Mordecai Cohen Ettinger

Host: Rafi Ruffino Darrow

[slow thumping electro music]

Rafi: Welcome to “Into the Crip Universe,” a production of *Sins Invalid*. I’m Rafi Ruffino Darrow. *Sins Invalid* is a Disability Justice-based performance project led by disabled people of color and disabled queers. This season, we are discussing the present and future of climate chaos and its interactions with disabled communities. In this time some call the Anthropocene, which is the proposed name for the epoch we live in, one of human-generated change to our ecosystem, disabled people are both disproportionately affected and brilliantly thriving. Through interdependence and resistance we assert our claim to pleasure, access, and community. We are “Crippling the Anthropocene.”

[slow thumping electro music]

It was so great to get a chance to talk to Mordecai this week! They are so knowledgeable and able to draw connections from the individual to the global when talking about the causes and effects of climate chaos. They absolutely blew my mind schooling me on climate justice, the medical industrial complex, the role of environmentally disabled people as those whose bodies bear witness to the threat of synthetic fragrances and other toxins, and the ways that big pharma profits from the harms that causes. This is a pretty meandering conversation with some less accessible language so be sure to check out our show notes for more information and a glossary of terms.

[soft rush of air]

Rafi: I’m here with Mordecai Cohen Ettinger, Director of development of sins invalid. and founding director of the health Justice comments they use they/them pronouns as do I.

Hi Mordecai.

Mordecai: Hi Rafi, it's really a gift to be here with you. Thank you so much for inviting me to participate in this podcast and its beautiful and crucial vision.

Rafi: Thank you. Thank you for being here. Okay, I wanted to start with like a very like the basics kind of question is: how do you define climate chaos?

Mordecai: You know as we're speaking together, you know, my eyes are tearing and my lungs are inflamed because of the wildfires, and the Gulf Coast is being slammed by unprecedented hurricanes, and just a couple weeks ago Canada lost its last intact ice shell. So, you know, it's by the grief that I feel in witness of those things at the devastation of our planet ecosystems, their destabilization and of the devastation of the health of our communities and our bodies. And, you know, even as I speak this it's hard not to tear up because of the fires and the grief, and I think you know perhaps those are the most succinct and profound ways that we can define climate chaos. And, of course, you know, as you so eloquently conveyed in the introduction the impact on disabled and Crip communities is huge. And, you know, my body and probably yours as well tells that story very clearly today as we sit choke upon the smoke.

Rafi: So, you teach two classes on the medical industrial complex. Can you tell me about the MIC? What is its role in relationship with the pandemic and climate chaos?

Mordecai: I think a lot of people have been looking around in this moment of pandemic and have just like been really floored by how *broken* the system is. The “scarcity” of personal, um, personal protective equipment, and just like how could this happen? And, you know, it happens because scarcity and withholding, you know, power and control and exploitation and the drive for profit above all else are the foundations of this system. And that has always been the case. It's not really about the sacredness of life and healing. The medical industrial complex it never has been, so, you know, we're in this moment of opportunity where all of those things are really really being exposed by the conditions, and, you know, of course those of us who are disabled or Crip or chronically ill, communities of color, immigrant communities, low-income communities like we've been knowing this, and more and more people even even people with like more privileged, you know, have been knowing this, but the pandemic and increasing climate chaos has render this undeniable through increasing amounts of people. So, you know, there is this moment of potential, a collective determination in the collective will to create alternatives. I think the other thing that I want to say is when we look to the eugenicist history that's of course inextricable from white supremacy of the medical industrial complex — and we teach about this in-depth in our courses of the Health Justice Commons — what we also see is this kind of inextricable connection to, um, chemical

early chemical corporations and early pharmaceutical corporations that have their roots in Nazi Germany that are now huge parts of the medical industrial complex. And really have been since the beginning.

In fact, when many of the monopoly families in the early nineteenth hundreds kind of like set the course through legislation, through the creation of the Flexner Report — which was sponsored by the Carnegie Foundation — you know, when they set the course for the medical industrial complex it was essentially with the vision of creating an industry that they could have control over, not unlike the fossil industry. So, now we have a system in which a corporation like Genentech (laughs) owns Monsanto, um, which is one of the biggest corporate polluters on the planet, and because it creates glyphosate which is a herbicide that is now present in the bodies of probably not only every human being on the planet but probably all wildlife as well. And has been shown — even though Monsanto has worked very hard to suppress this evidence — it's now been, um, it's been irrefutably demonstrated to cause many different types of cancer including Hodgkin lymphoma, and so now we have the same company that creates not only, um, not only glyphosate pesticides causing cancer, but creates specialized cancer treatment for the various the selfsame types of cancer that it's causing.

Rafi: Oof, that's so dark.

Mordecai: And you would think that perhaps in the situation it's an outlier, but it's not, because almost every big chemical corporation has big pharma subsidiaries, and they're creating the pharmaceutical subsidiaries are creating treatments for the illnesses that are caused by the by the chemicals especially the herbicides pesticides that they're creating. It's just literally, it's part of the, it's part of the capitalist design of the medical industrial complex. So, I think it's important that we understand that the medical industrial complex is comprised by many entangled institutions and corporations including these major corporate polluters that are inextricably entangled with Big Pharma. And insurance— health insurance companies all of which have huge control over our bodies, our lives, and also our conceptions of what constitutes safety and health, you know, so to the extent that like we have been brainwashed to believe that certain things that aren't— that certain things that are terrifically harmful are completely benign and safe. And I think you know fragrance chemicals are unfortunately, you know, an excellent example of this.

So, and, of course, if you know people with chemical and tolerances or environmental illness or disability have been well aware of the— of the dangers of fragrance chemicals and that they're carcinogenic, that they're neurotoxins, and you know, increas— there's just increasing amounts of evidence to support this, but yet chemical corporations, um,

and the huge corporations that use their chemicals like Tide or Gain or, you know, these different corporations that utilize fragrance chemicals — synthetic fragrance chemicals — have literally spent millions if not billions of dollars, you know, through lobbying through, um, through lobbying legislators, through lobbying directly doctors and research entities, through create— through creating advertisements to suppress the evidence of the really irrefutable harm of these types of chemicals, that now actually are constituting a higher percentage — and almost a higher percentage — about it's about 50/50 percent of the air pollution in our ecosystem. So, now 50% of air pollution is created by transportation and fossil fuels, but the other 50% is actually the VOCs associated with personal hygiene fragrance chemicals and cleaning chemicals. So, you know, it's a huge percentage of the air pollution that's impacting us, but yet the general— the general population is still in ignorance about that fact, and how harmful it is for all of us, because, you know, not because we're stupid or we're ill willed because there's literally been billions of dollars spent to conceal from people these risks, and to create a hugely false sense of safety in order to basically insulate these huge interconnected entangled corporations to thrive and be completely impervious to liability so they can just basically continue to make literally trillions of dollars. The UN Chemicals Outlook report from 2019 evaluated the international chemical industry to be valued at five trillion dollars, and it will double— it is set, it is predicted by the UN to double by 2030.

And that scares the hell out of me frankly like for me one of the most important things we have to understand when we think about averting climate chaos when we think about Disability Justice, when we think about disrupting and transforming the medical industrial complex: it is that we have to we have to begin to fight for chemical moratoriums. We have to begin to have a movement for people science where our communities get the say around what new technologies are created including what types of chemicals. So, we put a complete moratorium on harmful chemicals being continued to be released into our communities, and we have to understand the chemical industry as being entangled with the medical industrial complex, and is part of the work of, you know, like I said transforming and dismantling it we really need to dismantle the chemical, the global chemical industry, because if it is allowed to double in size in the next 20 years like I truly, I'm afraid not just for the future of humanity, but for the future of our planet as a whole.

Rafi: Can you speak to me about the concept of canaries in the coal mine that you write about in the Disability Justice primer *Sins Invalid* published last year?

Just for the audience to know that primary can be found on the *Sins Invalid* website at www.sinsinvalid.org. Both in print copy and as an e-book.

Mordecai: I recommend to everyone as required readings for our times and I thank *Sins Invalid*, you know from the heart of my heart for creating the Disability Justice primer, and, you know, I thank from the heart of my heart all of the Black and Indigenous and queer Crips who have created the Disability Justice framework for us, you know, that has given me life, and sustains my resilience every day. You know, but so I speak, you know, and that includes Patricia Berne, of course, the Executive Director of Sins Invalid and many other amazing people that are referenced in the DJ primer and, you know.

But, so, getting back to like this needing to shut down the chemical industry, you know, I speak to that from this place of being a canary in the coal mine. Like my body, my body is a planetary whistleblower, you know, like my— my body is just very highly attuned to toxins and air pollution, and, you know, when my immune system is in disarray when my detox pathways are overwhelmed, you know, that's when I know, you know, that it's a high air pollution day. You know, and I have gotten (laughs) I'm such a, I'm such a fine barometer you know that I know now what the air quality is before I even look at the readings, you know, because my body, my body keeps the score, you know, my body is wise. And I think as Crip and disabled people our bodies are really bearing the burden. Our bodies are bearing the burden, our bodies are the evidence. We are the canaries in the coal mine of what, of the truth that is being suppressed. So we are— we are the walking truth. We are the evidence. We are the testament.

So, you know, I say— I claim this truth, you know, that we as part of our work for Disability Justice, as part of our work for climate justice, as part of our work for creating alternatives for the medical industrial complex, we, you know, we need to create a global movement to completely shut down and transform the chemical industry to one that's really about appropriate technologies — green technologies — technologies that honor Indigenous wisdom, and honor the demands of Indigenous communities for environmental justice, you know, as our global leaders.

You know, other examples of these interconnections that are so deep, but also so powerfully instructive is my neighborhood here in East Oakland, you know, even before the wildfires we've been choking on the poor air quality of A&I Foundry which environmental justice organizations have literally been trying to shut down for over a decade, and we've made no headway because we're a predominantly black and immigrant and low-income community. And we have higher levels than are legally acceptable of VOCs and lead in this neighborhood, because of the A&I Foundry, and, you know, many indigenous communities across Turtle Island — not unlike Flint, Michigan — also have some of the highest lead levels, and depleted uranium levels in the country, and have been hardest hit by the pandemic. And also my neighborhood

here in East Oakland has one of the highest lead levels in the country as well. So, it's like you see the entanglements of systemic ableism and disablement, environmental racism, and classism and injustice, and just like the degradation of our— of our ecosystems in our communities.

Rafi: I was also wondering if there were any new projects that you were working on that you'd want to tell me about, and also to know why they're especially important if they are during COVID-19?

Mordecai: Well, there's many things that I'm excited about, but I think one thing I would love to share with people is that the— the Health Justice Commons in community and collaboration with our DJ communities and rad healthcare workers, we are in the first stages of launching a Radical Telehealth Collective which will enable our communities who are most harmed and most marginalized from the MIC to access free healthcare during the pandemic and hopefully beyond. And so we're just getting that going now, but in the coming weeks and the coming months people will be able to go online and schedule a session with a practitioner who has an intersectional social justice lens and a DJ— a DJ grounding and be able to receive free care, and right now what we're doing actually is that we're working with DJ communities especially BIPOC and queer and non-binary, binary, and intersex, Crip and disabled communities to really help us shape the model because we really want this to be an example of— an incubator of alternatives to the MIC so, yeah. We're in our early stages and we have some amazing rad docs from across the U.S. to start us off, and we have some amazing folks from the DJ community that are consulting with us and we have amazing accomplices that are like, creating like a new scheduling app. We've brought together a network of ASL interpreters that are people of color and queer to be able to make the platform accessible. We have multilingual translators. So these are all the things that we've been putting in place. So, we are really kind of creating a model that like meets our community's needs to the highest extent possible. We're, you know, reaching out to our partners so over time we'll be able to have rad mental health workers be part of the platform.

So, and we're kind of reaching out to mutual aid networks across the U.S. as well, so we're trying to, you know, so we're trying to figure out well if someone contacts us and they have a need for durable medical equipment that they might not be able to get through their insurance or might not be covered through their insurance like to try to create a network so we can get these things for people quickly, because we know that the MIC withholds the things that we need all the time even before the pandemic. So we're, you know, we're trying to brainstorm early on the things that are community experiences that really endanger our lives and to begin to create a network to be able to

meet these needs so, and you know keep an eye out and an ear out and your heart open for news about the Radical Telehealth Collective and you know please keep it in mind and in your heart, if it would benefit you or those you love. The HJC have also been working to launch a medical abuse hotline and that is still in the works. We have probably close to a hundred people at this point who have reached out to us that want to get trained out to be hotline advocates and responders or want to get involved in some other ways.

Rafi: Amazing! It's been amazing to talk to you! Thank you so much.

Mordecai: It's been amazing to talk to you as well, Rafi! Thank you again so much and thank you again *Sins Invalid* for the gift of this podcast and participating, and thank you again to all of the listeners, I'm so grateful for all of you, and your survival and everything that you're giving every day and we're with you. Don't forget that.

Rafi: Thank you

[slow thumping electro music]

Letícia: Before we end this episode, we'd like to invite you to our upcoming performance *We Love Like Barnacles: Crip Lives In Climate Chaos* happening October 23 and October 24 at 7 PM Pacific Time, and October 25 at 3 PM and 6 PM Pacific Time.

For more information and to check out our show notes please visit our website at www.sinsinvalid.org! If you're listening to this episode after October 25th, you can find more information about our show recording there.

Don't forget to share, like, and subscribe. We hope to see you next time!

[soft echoing vocals]

Rafi: "Into the Crip Universe" is a production of *Sins Invalid*. Shani Banai is our sound engineer with concept also developed by Sofia Webster, Blair Webb, Lettie Robles-Tovar, and Patty Berne. Come visit us as sinsinvalid.org.

♪ *At least I got my pain, got my babes, got my radio.*
At least I got my pain, got my babes, got my radio.
At least I got my pain, got my babes, got my radio.
I feel like shit.
I feel like shit.

I feel like shit.♪