Down to the Struts

Season 8, Episode 6: Navigating Crisis with Justice Shorter

Host: Qudsiya Naqui

Guest: Justice Shorter

Transcript by Qudsiya Naqui

For more information: [www.downtothestruts.com](http://www.downtothestruts.com)

“We can't get to the future if we can't access life here today. And life here today must be made more bearable. It must be made more beautiful. It must be made and shaped around more sunbeams of belonging.”

[music: jazzy piano and horn chords, bass and drums playing smooth R&B]

Qudsiya Naqui:

Welcome to Down to the Struts, the podcast about disability design and intersectionality where we uncover the building blocks for a more just inclusive and accessible world. I’m your host, Qudsiya Naqui. Today to wrap up our eighth season, we're delighted to welcome back past podcast guest, Justice Shorter. Justice joined us alongside Conchita Hernandez Legorreta and Melissa Lomax for the season one episode, “WOC World,” about an online community dedicated to uplifting and supporting blind women of color. If you haven't already, please do check it out.

Justice is a skilled organizer and facilitator, disability justice amplifier, and senior advisor on issues at the intersection of race, disability, gender, climate, and crisis. She is a national expert on disability inclusive, disaster protections, and emergency management.

Justice joined me for a second visit on the podcast to discuss her newly published disaster Justice guidebook for people of color with disabilities. The guidebook weaves together storytelling, practical advice, and the collective wisdom of six phenomenal people to create a roadmap for environmental crisis response, rooted in and centered on the lived experiences of people of color. Okay, let's get down to it.

Justice Shorter:

Hello everyone. I am Justice Shorter. I am the founder of Seated Ground. Much of my work resides at the nexus of disaster justice, disability justice, and racial justice efforts. At Seated Ground. We like to say that our work is lovingly wedded to world building, disabled dreams, and to fruition. I am a black, blind, lesbian woman. I typically keep my hair in flat, twist in the front, and two strand twist in the back, and I have a very bright smile that I’m always flashing because, goodness, in this world, I'm always searching and seeking out a reason to smile. Also my pronouns are she, her and hers.

[Gentle pulses of music lead us through the transition]

Qudsiya Naqui:

I asked justice about her journey to becoming a national expert on disability centered crisis planning and disaster management. She described her early experiences working on community development in Post-apartheid South Africa, and on peace and conflict reconciliation in Uganda and Rwanda as formative in terms of understanding the lived experiences and receiving the wisdom of people who had become disabled as the result of conflict and crisis, and thinking about the experience of being disabled and trying to navigate those situations. But when she thought back to the deepest roots of her interest, it really started with her grandmother.

Justice Shorter:

my concentration on crises began by noticing all of the worry that was sketched on my grandmother's face, how draining it was to have to navigate from one crisis to another. And these were crises that were born out of poverty, that were born out of insufficient healthcare. And I can remember from such a young age me wanting to wash the worry from her face, wanting to bring her a sense of peace. I lost my grandmother in 2019 and I can't say with full confidence that she is now fully at peace, but it's something that I'm always striving for because so many constructed crises that we deal with so much systemic and structural violence that we as people of color with disabilities, whether we identify with that word or not. That we are navigating, that we are maneuvering every single day. And it's exhausting. It's toxic, and it's killing us slowly and we deserve to live. And I think that is what keeps me constantly coming back to this issue of crises, and disasters, and conflict.

[Gentle pulses of music lead us through the transition]

Qudsiya Naqui:

Justice and I then unpacked the question: What is disaster justice?

Justice Shorter:

Disaster justice is a principled pursuit of fairness when faced with laws and governments that failed to prioritize life, love, and lands throughout all phases of human caused and weather related disasters. It is the practice of interdependence, the recognition of autonomy, a commitment to reparative change, and the source material for collective survival.

Disaster justice is most fully realized when reflected through the improved experiences of those most impacted. It is most embodied when multi marginalized people are positioned at the epicenter of all disaster decisions. It is most evident when we plan not for the worst outcomes, but when we devise ethical options that honor the inherent worth of each and every person.

That is disaster justice.

[Gentle pulses of music lead us through the transition]

Qudsiya Naqui:

The development of the disaster Justice Guidebook was a labor of love, born from Justice's persistence and the unwavering support of her community. We talked about the financial challenges of obtaining support for projects like this, and Justice's personal efforts to bring the work to fruition.

Justice Shorter:

I was able to secure funding for the first half of the project, which contributed to doing the interviews with the contributors and also producing the audio companions. Shout out to Thomas Reed and 1217 Compound for all of the wonderful production work that he did on each and every. One of the audio companions. So it was really a curation of wonderful people, including the contributors that I spoke to. But the second half of the project, all of the labor, all of the polishing of the documents and getting them all up online and making it freely available, all of that I paid for out of pocket.

And I did that 'cause I was no longer willing to wait. I no longer wanted our stories to be stuck in a place of stagnation, and I did not want to wait until somebody at some time at. Some unforeseen point in the future deemed this work worthy enough to give it the funding for us to finish it. I wanted to push it into the world.

It was ready and it was in me, and I just went forth and I. And I did it. And the impact that it seems to be having in community is well worth the investment that I had to personally put into bringing this about. We do nothing in this world alone. Um, there's just such appreciations to all of the people who viewed the guidebook for me, who helped me go through revisions and copy editing that real community emerged.

[Soft musical notes lead us into the transition]

Qudsiya Naqui:

as she brought together the voices and stories of the six individuals featured in the guidebook, Justice wanted to amplify their expertise in crisis management and also uplift the need for greater equity in terms of access for disabled people of color to the environment and all of its wonders.

Justice Shorter:

This guidebook is a product of what happens when you give disabled folks creative freedom and you get out the way. Everything from conceptualization to implementation and publishing and getting it out into the world, all of that. No additional limitations or oversight by an official institution or organization saying that we have to do it this way because of the grant funding. We have to do it that way because these are our priorities. The central guiding force, my compass, was constantly and only people of color with disabilities. I wanted to speak to people that you don't typically hear from when you talk about disasters. Folks who were well versed on food justice, folks who were well versed on mutual aid and advocacy and a multitude of context. I also wanted to bring in folks who really cared about being in right relation with the world, right? And having discussions about climate Were inclusive of people with disabilities having access to the world, so not just what we don't want in terms of disasters, but also people who could dream with me about what we do want, what we deserve in terms of access to the world. When we talk about environmental justice, it's not just about all of the discrimination that we endure as a result of environmental racism or environmental ableism, but it's also about justice looking like us being able to access clean air, clean water, us being able to travel to different locations to see some of the marvels of the world, right?

To experience the mist of waterfalls, to be out there and experience community gardens. For us to go out there and be able to maneuver hiking trails that are accessible for us to hang out in accessible tree houses that are sustainable that don't cause problems to the area. It was more of an internal song that I was really trying to sing aloud, and all of these different voices came together and we harmonized and my voice is woven in with all of the contributors. Six different hour long interviews. And from that we did each different section of the guidebook that was inspired by the conversations with each of those people. We checked every section of the respective contributor that inspired the section, and that is also the reason why it is as rich as it is because they also offered some additional thoughts.

[Scaling piano notes with sounds of rain falling lead us into the transition]

Justice Shorter:

I did not want to replicate a standard, this is the checklist that you need to do, and if you do this, you're going to be safe. And then kind of constantly, this is what you have to do. I also did not want to create another plea for policy makers because again, that would have made policy makers my point of center. Please push forth these recommendations. Please do this. Please make you know, please find a way to prioritize us. And that work, do not get me wrong, I want to be extremely clear. So I am never misinterpreted that work is necessary and there are some fierce ass advocates who are doing it. I am saying in addition to that, I want to be the person, who is also one of many, talking directly to our community and saying, all right, so what, what is it that I can offer us?

What is it that, that we need to hear from one another? What are the things that we are collectively learning? How are we providing collective care for one another? How are we moving towards a place of collective liberation? How can we center on each other? And that is why we created the guidebook the way we did. There's just people who I've been loving and admiring for years who I just put the call out and said hey, will you talk to me. And they graciously said, yeah. And some of these people I've been also working with for years, like Britneyy Wilson, Tin Abayomi-Paul, and , Washieka Torres I've worked with them before and I knew their voices and said, I need to have them present in this space. I, I need to have them here. They are exquisite. They speak so powerfully on their topic of expertise. I really wanna have them in this space. And then there's other folks who—I just read some of Sandra Yellowhorse's words in an article that she did for Disability Visibility—Shout out to Alice Wong—and I said, oh man, Sandra is dope. I need to talk to Sandra. I need to have this voice here. Because the way that Sandra describes, um, radical love and radical relationality, being in conversation, being in connection, being in community with the earth and what that means in connection to people with disabilities was just exceptional. And I really wanted to have that be a part of this discussion.

And Sandra did a wonderful job at doing that. Alessandra Jerolleman—extraordinary author, uh, wonderful just all around teacher and thought leader in this space. Read her work before, loved it, quoted it. You look back at several of my presentations, I direct people towards Alessandra, go read this work.

This is what Alessandra mentions here. And it was so great that she said yes to be a part of this. And then Malkia Devich Cyril is one of the most prolific voices I've ever heard speak about grief. And so they graciously agreed to speak to us and the content that they offered, uh, around media and chaos and control of resources and grief and collective pain and sorrow were not conversations that I felt like weren’t being stretched out enough, and I just wanted to give us space.

Qudsiya Naqui:

Accessibility was also central to the creation of the guidebook so that it could be a tool that communities can use in whatever ways are most useful to them. Here's justice on her approach to centering access as she and her collaborators develop the guidebook, plus a few examples of the wisdom it shares.

Justice Shorter:

A resource like this is most powerful when it’s in reach of our people, the people who need it most. It's free, it's freely available. It's available as A PDF, but it's also an interactive, accessible HTML. So you just go on the website and literally the landing page, you can just go through all of the different sections, and there's a back to the top button if you need to get back up to the table of contents to navigate it from there. But we built in all of those different layers of accessibility because we wanted people to engage with it, however, would be the most accessible for them. We also, as I said, had those audio companions. You can hear the voices of the contributors, and much of everything that we have written is also comprised within those audio companions. There's a couple of additional lessons there that you may not hear in the audio companions because, again, the sections were written in a way that was inspired and guided by those conversations, so there were some additional things we were able to generate as the result of those discussions. But I would say is that all I care about, all I ask is that you use it. There's so many extraordinary lessons in there, and one of them is that perceptions, impact protections, uh, that one of our contributors helped us come to. And it was based on the fact that how we are perceived as people of color with disabilities when we show up with our disabled body minds, how it can be perceived as a threat. How it can be perceived as noncompliant, how it can be perceived as an unwillingness to perceive with treatment or directions, and how that could be used as justification for violence, how that can be used as justification to remove us from a space where services and supports are being provided, how it can be essentially used as a reason for exclusion. Based on whether or not we stim based on whether or not we communicate verbally based on whether or not we speak the language based on whether or not we are exhibiting signs of anxiety or visual signs of anxiety or psychiatric challenges. If, if those things show up in certain, we are immediately categorized, stigmatized, stereotyped.

And perceived in ways that can be dehumanizing, right? I love this lesson that you need to always be careful about how you examine food, distribution, distance, and access, right? So it's not just about an organization is going to give out all of these free resources, but will they deliver them for those of us who can't physically get there, how often people just assume we have other people with us who can do it. Like they, their option for offering you an accommodation is just the presumption that somebody else will do it, and you're almost shamed if you don't have someone else who can do it. So when we're talking about, oh, there's a, there's a place where you can go to get clean water. If you're living in Jackson, Mississippi, or Flint and you don't have access to clean water, there's a place that's doing a bunch of water…Do…what, what is the option also for people who can't get there? Or what are the options for people who take public transportation and by the time they get there it's gone because time is often weaponized against people with disabilities. I always say that time is both a weapon in a window, right? It's the presumption that we just have the whole damn day to be on public transit trying to get back and forth somewhere, right? Or we have the whole day to sit on para transit. Waiting to get back and forth somewhere. And that there being no alternatives to that because some of those distribution centers are not placed in communities that need it most. Right? So all of that is, is really important. Another lesson, how we grow matters, right?

What and how we grow matters. This lesson was given in connection to things like food gardens, right? Community gardens, and a lot of times those emerge as a fresh, affordable, accessible food options, but how those gardens are set up, they matter. How we decontaminate those gardens after a disaster matters.

Whether or not if there's an opportunity to harvest everything in the garden before a disaster strikes, how that's going to be delivered and distributed if matters, whether or not people with all types of disabilities can maneuver in that space is important because if we're not thinking about people with disabilities, then we're not planning for everyone to have access to that element of the natural world. Right. So those are also discussions that we're having. We're talking about being mindful and learning from the ancestors, which again, you just are, you're hearing this in movement spaces. I'm not hearing this enough though, in disability spaces, and this is why we're just trying to marry the two. We're not saying that what we're producing in this guidebook is, has never been spoken before. We know everything in, in, in this life for the most part, in some way, shape, or form, typically has been experienced or echoed or expressed in previous iterations. We're just saying, we're trying to bring it to you in this way. We're trying to amplify it. We're trying to continue to advocate. We're trying to share in as many ways as we can and get the message out to people who need it. And that, that, that brings up this very.

Loving and gorgeous connection to our ancestry. What has happened before us and how did our people survive? Many of these crises are intensifying more, but their mere existence is not new. Tornadoes are not new. Hurricanes are not new. Fires are not new. Again, a lot of these events are intensifying. There's a distinction there, right? So they are intensifying, given what's happening with the climate crisis right now, but there's also something that we can learn from our people who have come before us and how they've navigated these disastrous events. And so what can we pull from their experiences, right?

How can we add that to the ways that we plan and shape? Now, there's also another lesson that a return to normalcy can be a return to violence forcing us. To comply with these superficial standards of what was pre-disaster normal, the pre-disaster normal standards, and how that forces you to zip up your emotion.

Zip up, anything that may be going on with you, zip up the fact that you still probably don't have the access to the things that you need to thrive or to work or to live or to get your kids back and forth to school. But we wanna return to normal. So you just need to get it together. And we absolutely see this.

And connection to the pandemic, right? And all of the people with disabilities who are dealing with long haul COVID. All of the folks who still need people to be masked right now, but there is such an urgency to return to normalcy. And then there is a shaming when you do not fit into those predefined parameters of what normalcy looks like. And that is problematic, right? Because that leads to additional mental and quite honestly, potentially physical violence as well.

[Gentle musical pulses conveying gravity guide us through the transition]

Qudsiya Naqui:

Justice closed out our conversation about the guidebook with some wise advice for disabled people of color navigating environmental crises.

Justice Shorter:

Believe no one who tells you that it is not for you and that you should wait until some optimal time and some fictitious future where you will then be granted the opportunity to explore and engage with the world around you. In understanding the truth of the world around you. To vast beauty. Beauty that gives us the fuel we need to fight for. Sometimes the fight begins when we start to notice its disappearance. Like when we realize that, my goodness, the air is not as clean as it used to be. What's happening with this highway that's surrounding my community now that has cut through my community now, my goodness, due to that same highway we're flooding every single time it rains.

What's happening here? That didn't used to be the case. So sometimes it's in noticing the disappearance of, of the beauty, the disappearance of the access that we get activated. And sometimes it is in the dreaming of the possibility of all of those beautiful things that you could, and at some point access if only the world would be reshaped around envisioning all of us being able to do so. I, I, first and foremost always say that I am dreaming quite deeply now about doing more. Work around bringing people of color with disabilities into more natural spaces and because again, you will have a lot of programs that focus on people with disabilities and natural environments and getting folks back out in nature.

And then you have a lot of people of color groups and black groups, folks of color who are focused on eco-friendly work and getting folks back out into community and getting nature. But again, it's the intersection of the two, it's the intersection of the two. So sometimes in disabled spaces, I'm not seeing enough people of color leading in that in those ways.

And prioritizing, getting kids who are living in low resource communities and people who are living in low resource communities out into those spaces. Being able to experience waterways, greenery, and forestry and, and in terms of the people of color spaces, I'm just not seeing enough of the people Of color with disabilities in those spaces as well. And again, it's not as if it's not happening again, but the promotion of it, the amplification of it, the prioritization and the funding around it is difficult, right? It's difficult, and sometimes it could be inconsistent and unsustained, and that's the problem. I really want to pour myself more into that because I think it is quite literally essential.

For our collective survival, and so we're talking about con conservation and preservation work of this world and the environment we have to do so with people with disabilities at the center. Listen, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna Samarasinha has this wonderful book called, it's called The Future Is Disabled, and there is a through line that essentially proclaims that people with disabilities are in the future, we deserve to be in the future. And I think that is a beautiful north star for us. We deserve to be in the future and we deserve to be here today, right? So we can't get to the future if we can't access life here today. And life here today must be made more bearable. It must be made more beautiful. It must be made and shaped around more.

Sunbeams of belonging. And I think that is how we save our world, and that is how we save each other, and that is how we save ourselves.

[Hopeful musical beats guide us into the transition]

Qudsiya Naqui:

There's a lot more in store from justice. Here she is, previewing next steps for dissemination of the guidebook, how you can get involved, and some of her upcoming projects to watch out for.

Justice Shorter:

One of the first things that we're trying to do is launch a spring in a summer speaking series, all about the guidebook. So if you would like me to come out and join your organization, or your community, or your group to talk about this guidebook, please just let us know. You can contact me directly on my website.

Again, that's simply justiceshorter.com. And so we are absolutely taking requests. To get us booked out for the spring and a summer speaking series all about the guidebook. So please let us know. We're really looking forward to speaking to more folks about this, and if you have funding, please let us know to help fund some of this work. But also in addition to that, we're hoping and we're dreaming about the global edition of this guidebook. Listen, the world is in a real tender, tragic, and in many ways terrible space right now. And a global edition of the guidebook, I think is sorely needed, and we are hoping to do one that focuses on human caused conflicts and of course, weather related disasters as well. Primarily that human caused component is really key and essential given that we're living through an era of multiple genocides taking place around this world. And we really do want to produce a guidebook that is focused on disabled people of the global majority. And so that is next up on our Dream docket. We are also hoping to launch a few new projects in coming months: When They Erase Us, which will focus on people of color with disabilities in carceral settings, and the crisis conditions that they endure while in those facilities, and then also, hopefully, ideally at some point in the future. Launching Eyewitness Accounts, which focuses on disabled folks of color who are blind or who have low vision, and all of the ways that we experience and maneuver the world. Some of those narrative nonfiction pieces will be written in ways that are whimsical and wondrous, but some of them will also comprise stories that are hard and that deal with harm because that is the truth of the realities in which we live. But I am looking forward to collaborating with a whole host of contributors for that series, and we will either produce that as a digital book that, again, will be freely available, or we'll try to produce it as a actual print edition or an online campaign. That is what I currently have on my list. Dream projects on my dream docket is what I call it for 2024.

Qudsiya Naqui:

and here's where you can learn more about justice and her phenomenal work.

Justice Shorter:

I'm on LinkedIn, of course, under Justine Justice Shorter. You can also find me on Twitter, also known now as X under JusticeShorter1, but primarily if you want to, to reach out or connect, the website is justiceshorter.com. I'm also just going to say the email addresses in case it would be easier and accessible for some people who might need it. The email addresses if you want to reach us, is seededground@justiceshorter.com. That's s-E-E-D-E-D-G-R-O-U-N-d@justiceshorter.com. I hope you'll reach out. We so look forward to connecting and building with you in the future.

[music: jazzy piano and horn chords, bass and drums playing smooth R&B]

Qudsiya Naqui:

A huge shout out to everyone who's listened in this season. Thank you for joining us on this journey to explore disability, history and culture; disabled-led science and entrepreneurship; and the power that comes from centering disabled wisdom in the face of crisis. We can't wait to bring you more important conversations from the disability community next season coming to your feeds, starting in late summer 2024. This episode was produced by AIlana Nevins and me. Our social media manager is Avery Anapol. With special thanks to Claire Shanley for designing our logo and to Eiffel Gansta Beats for our theme music. You can visit us at downtothestruts.com, on Instagram and X at Down to the Struts, and join our Facebook group.

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