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Cripping Disasters:
The Construction and Governance of Social Vulnerability amid Wildfires

By

Yanin Alexa Kramsky

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

City and Regional Planning

and the Designated Emphases

in

Global Metropolitan Studies

and

Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in Charge:

Professor Jason Corburn, Chair
Professor Stephen Collier
Professor Teresa Caldeira
Professor C. Greig Crysler

Spring 2024

Abstract

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By
Yanin Alexa Kramsky

Doctor of Philosophy in City and Regional Planning
Designated Emphases in Global Metropolitan Studies and Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies
University of California, Berkeley

Professor Jason Corburn, Chair

California's unprecedented firestorms of 2017 sparked a series of structural and regulatory changes that opened doors for state and corporate actors to technocratically intervene in the daily lives of marginalized individuals and communities. This dissertation analyzes how 'social vulnerability'—an ambiguous, contested, and malleable concept that indexes different aspects of personal and public life—becomes a mode of governance during disasters. I explore how social vulnerability is shaped through the interface between bureaucratic initiatives on the one hand, and the activism, advocacy, and lived experiences of 'vulnerable subjects' on the other.

The manuscript presents a comprehensive analysis of how Pacific Gas and Electric (PG&E), the largest state-regulated, investor-owned public utility in the United States, oddly became responsible for designing and delivering a series of sociomedical programs for people with access and functional needs who are severely neglected by state-led wildfire preparedness and response protocols. I begin with the aftermath of PG&E's abrupt 2019 power shutoffs aimed at preventing the possibility of catastrophic fires during high-wind days. Ironically, abrupt cuts to electricity in the name of public safety left individuals who rely on durable medical equipment and assistive technologies with uncharged essential devices (e.g., oxygen concentrators, refrigerators storing insulin, power chairs, and so forth). My research illuminates the decentralized 'riskscape' that positioned PG&E to coordinate the response to wildfires *and* become a leading player not only in provisioning energy, but in perpetuating forms of medical dependency: people who had been dependent on electric service were now dependent on the distribution of portable backup batteries, a key feature of the company's sociomedical programs. The case study reveals (1) the types of subjectivities that emerged as an array of actors with diverse social positions, claims to expertise, and interpretations of vulnerability attempted to implement the utility's fledgling programs amid intolerable circumstances; (2) how different stakeholders—from activists, community and advocacy groups, governmental institutions, to PG&E itself—were either permitted or restricted from officially engaging in the discourses surrounding each program, thereby reifying or disrupting dominant perceptions of vulnerability; and (3) the rhetorical strategies PG&E mobilized through speech, text, and visual artifacts to forefront, codify, and circulate notions of social vulnerability that enhanced the company's public image while diverting attention away from its malfeasance.

Ultimately, I employ political, linguistic, and visual modes of analysis to identify what is at stake for individuals with access and functional needs who are differentially valued according to mental and bodily capabilities and capacities as the techniques, strategies, and rationalities of wildfire governance unfold. This research provides implementable findings for planners and policy-makers as the scale, frequency, and volatility of wildfires increase and additional vulnerable populations attempt to navigate the maze of official guidance, ad hoc governance, and self-directed resilience measures.

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Conducting fieldwork and writing amidst the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic presented significant challenges, exacerbating various mental health concerns. What propelled me through these hardships were the encouragement and accountability fostered by writing groups, along with the generosity of my research participants, who graciously opened their virtual and physical doors, offering me a glimpse into their lives. Each morning at 8 a.m., armed with coffee, I convened on Zoom with the Feminist Geographies Writing Group of the American Association of Geographers to compose the majority of this dissertation. The wealth of tacit knowledge shed by feminist scholars at various stages of their careers has been empowering. My second accountability group was formed with my dear friends Ian Anderson and Bhumi Patel. Here I found the drive to continue writing each day, sometimes even extending into full weekends. Their companionship and editing assistance were

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and Lionel Lints, lifelong friends and skilled writers and editors, have played an integral role in helping me shape and make sense of my own narrative. Over the years, we have amassed a treasure trove of shared memories, punctuated by their witty humor, light-hearted approach to life, and dedication to meaningful and artful work. I am truly fortunate to have a vibrant, talented, deeply caring, and longstanding circle of friends who have individually and collectively inspired me to champion environmental and social change and persevere through the fatigue that accompanies moving against the normative grain. Among them are Aditi Bahri, Elijah Barnard, Wren Brennan, Marcus Chen, Mitch Cramond, Elizabeth and Elliana Creech-Thomas, Emil Evans, Ossian B. Freigh, Genora Givens, Emma Greenbaum, Lauren Griffith, Em Kane, Jessie Kawata, Anya Kazimierski, Allyza Lustig, Alex Marquardt, Samantha Meysohn, Emily Ritchie, Chase Saunders, Sara Schwartz, Becca Shively, Samudra Sol, Dannie Twinkly, Eli Vickery, Hannah Walchak, and Finn Ware. I am certain there are others I might have accidentally overlooked, but they are no less important!

While working on my dissertation, I was fortunate to cultivate queer and trans joy through various communities grounded in the San Francisco Bay Area; a region that rests upon the territory of Huichin, the ancestral and unceded land of the Chochenyo Ohlone who have stewarded this landscape for countless generations. Run through the Oakland LGBTQ Community Center, the 30+ Transmasculine Support Group provided me with a refuge among peers who share similar experiences. Within this supportive environment, I navigated the personal obstacles hindering my self-expression. Doing so built my confidence and enabled me to find my distinct voice as a writer. Through our collective sharing, I discovered what a nurturing environment truly feels like—a space we fondly refer to as "trans basking"—and how essential it is to my growth in all facets of life. Since its inception, I have had the privilege of participating in TransCamp. While camping along the Pacific coast and its rocky shores, the conversations I had with dozens of participants carried through an atmosphere shared with harbor seals, monarch butterflies, and redwoods, accentuated by the earthy scent and comforting warmth of the campfire. In a political climate where the basic rights of trans people are persistently under threat, here, I have been able to take deep breaths of clean air and dream a different world into existence. One month prior to submitting this dissertation, I completed my first relay triathlon with Team Mid-Life Queers. Overcoming the challenge of swimming long distances in open water required leaning on the camaraderie of my peers, which helped drown out my fears. Nurturing my inner voice of encouragement, rather than succumbing to discouragement, proved invaluable in the final stages of completing this dissertation. Additionally, the act of swimming not only provided a welcome respite, but also offered relief from the chronic pain resulting from the repetitive motions of writing. Ultimately, these groups broadened my perspective, provided solace during moments of immense uncertainty, and deepened my bond with the places that inspired this writing. I hope that we care for this landscape by embracing the longstanding Native American practice of controlled burning, among others, and shifting away from the Western fire exclusion paradigm and unchecked development, in order to nurture better relations with the more-than-human world. May we allow biodiversity to flourish in its myriad forms.

I am forever grateful to those who continuously push me to critically examine the value systems driving environmental change and to envision and materialize a future in which all marginalized beings can thrive.

Acronyms

ADA: Americans with Disabilities Act

AT: Assistive Technology

CAL FIRE: California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection

CBO: Community-based Organization

CDA: Critical Discourse Analysis

CFILC: California Foundation for Independent Living Centers

CPAP: Continuous Positive Airway Pressure

CPUC: California Public Utilities Commission

CWPP: Community Wildfire Protection Plan

DDAR: Disability Disaster Access and Resources

DME: Durable Medical Equipment

EOC: Emergency Operations Center

FEMA: Federal Emergency Management Agency

FHSZ: Fire Hazard Severity Zone

ILC: Independent Living Center

PG&E: Pacific Gas and Electric

PSPS: Public Safety Power Shutoff

WUI: Wildland-Urban Interface

Dissertation Introduction

FRAMING THE CASE

> *"Gender reaches into disability; disability wraps around class, class strains against abuse; abuse snarls into sexuality; sexuality folds on top of race … everything finally piling into a single human body."*
>
> *"…woven through and around the private and intimate is always the public and political."*
>
> *~ Eli Clare (2015, 143, 149)*

Governing social vulnerability

Discourses surrounding 'social vulnerability' have proliferated in planning and policy-making spaces in recent years, drawing increased attention from practitioners to the intersection of environmental and social dynamics. This heightened focus coincides with the escalating impact of anthropogenic climate change, which along with governance practices magnifies the scale, volatility, and frequency of disasters. These disasters not only reveal and exacerbate social inequalities, but also open doors for politicizing and technocratically intervening in the daily lives of marginalized individuals and communities. Although experiences of vulnerability are complex, nuanced, embodied, and situated, social vulnerability, as commonly conceptualized by social scientists, correlates with limited access to resources, reduced political agency, and place-based disparities, such as those influenced by urbanization, population density, and infrastructural characteristics (Cutter, Boruff, and Shirley 2003). That said, there is still a dearth of consistent metrics for assessing vulnerability to environmental hazards and determining the governance techniques most adept at mitigating it. Despite the efforts of planners and policy-makers to identify and reduce risks for those most vulnerable to the effects of climate change through tailored interventions, ideas about social vulnerability remain ambiguous, contested, malleable, and index different aspects of individual and collective life. Given the unpredictable nature of climate change and the seemingly permanent condition of planetary emergency, marked by a convergence of disasters ranging from wildfires and hurricanes to global pandemics, an array of actors from state and corporate institutions are working to unify understandings of social vulnerability through novel management, planning, and policy-making schemes. Rapidly developing alongside climate change-related disasters is the piecemeal emergence of fragmented mitigation and adaptation programs that center social vulnerability, as well as a contemporary discourse of the 'vulnerable subject,' which has very real material consequences. This dissertation analyzes how 'social vulnerability' becomes a mode of governance during disasters, shaped through the interface between bureaucratic initiatives on the one hand, and the activism, advocacy, and lived experiences of vulnerable subjects on the other.

Every chapter of this dissertation employs different registers and scales of analysis to explore how public and private sector bureaucrats along with community activist and advocacy groups, each

with their own understanding of social vulnerability, navigate this new mode of governmentality politically, linguistically, visually, and physically, as well as what is at stake. By crafting precise articulations of social vulnerability, actors generate organizing strategies and biopolitical governing practices to legitimize, empower, and ultimately meet the distinct needs and ensure the safety of their constituents. More precisely, this case study reveals how a set of community groups, representing individuals with non-normative[1] 'bodymind'[2] capabilities and capacities, constructed (i.e., negotiated, circulated, and reified) the meaning of social vulnerability through key initiatives that emerged, or significantly evolved, in the years following California's unprecedented 2017 firestorms. My fieldwork zeroes in on the broader San Francisco Bay Area, a complex multi-layered site comprising varied topographies, ecologies, development types, population densities, and socioeconomic strata, co-produced with a multi-century history of federally-funded fire suppression and building along the wildland-urban interface (WUI). Such factors converge with longstanding activism, from critical disability and transgender justice to the Black Panther Party and Civil Rights Movement, rooted in the region. It is also a site where Pacific Gas and Electric (PG&E), the largest state-regulated, investor-owned public utility in the United States, oddly became responsible for designing and delivering a series of sociomedical programs for people with non-normative bodyminds who had been severely neglected by state-led wildfire preparedness and response protocols.

My analysis begins with the aftermath of PG&E's abrupt 2019 power shutoffs aimed at preventing catastrophic fires during high-wind days. Ironically, unexpected cuts to electricity in the name of public safety left individuals who rely on durable medical equipment and assistive technologies with uncharged essential devices (e.g., power chairs, defrosted refrigerators storing insulin, oxygen concentrators, and so forth). By synthesizing dozens of narratives shared by my interlocutors and found in publicly available transcripts, my study illuminates the decentralized 'riskscape' that positioned PG&E to coordinate the response to wildfires that it caused and become a leading player not only in provisioning energy, but in perpetuating forms of medical dependency: people who had been dependent on electric service were now dependent on the company's delivery of backup batteries, a key feature of its programs. The following initiatives are the locus of my observations and inquiry: PG&E's (1) Medical Baseline Program, (2) Portable Battery Program, and (3) Disability Disaster Access & Resources Program, in partnership with the California Foundation for Independent Living Centers. These initiatives have been central points of discussion among community activist and advocacy groups, sometimes collaborative and sometimes contentious, from 2020 onward. As groups form around each program in an attempt to mold it to recognize the depth of their members' vulnerabilities, they reconstitute not only what social vulnerability means, but also themselves as subjects who are empowered (or not) to shape the political terrain and technical practices of wildfire governance at state, county, and neighborhood levels.

In this dissertation, I shed light on three key processes. The first is the emergence of two distinct subjectivities, namely 'moral intermediaries' and 'em-powered subjects.' These identities

[1] I use 'non-normative' throughout this dissertation because it is a capacious term that draws attention to bodies and minds that are perpetually at odds with what is considered normal. A loss of agency and fear of state abandonment and dispossession accompany those whose lives do not neatly map onto existing norms surrounding ability, gender, and other markers of difference.

[2] 'Bodymind' is a term used in crip literature to challenge the dualism of body and mind.

surfaced as various actors, each with their own social position, claims to expertise, and interpretations of vulnerability, grappled with implementing the utility's fledgling programs amid intolerable circumstances. Second, I demonstrate how community activist and advocacy groups, governmental bodies, and PG&E itself influenced public discourses surrounding each program. Their impact, whether reinforcing or challenging prevailing interpretations of vulnerability, depended on factors such as their political orientation, ability to navigate conflicting subject positions, and willingness to share private experiences. Those advocating for changes that address interconnected social issues and underlying structural injustices frequently encountered obstacles or limitations in their efforts. Finally, I analyze the rhetorical strategies mobilized by PG&E. Through speech, text, and visual artifacts, the utility sought to generalize the concept of social vulnerability, foster trust by emphasizing sociospatial proximity, and commercialize care services. These strategies aimed to promote a favorable public image for the company while diverting attention away from its malfeasance. By attending to how individuals who are overlooked by state and corporate interventions exercise agency amid such risky and unpredictable circumstances, this research aims to provide implementable findings for decision-makers. These insights will be particularly valuable as additional vulnerable populations attempt to navigate the maze of official guidance, ad hoc governance, and self-directed preparatory measures. The structure outlined below expands upon the ideas that are integral to this project.

Dissertation structure

The first chapter, "Governing through 'Moral Intermediaries' and 'Em-powered' Subjects," details the political subjectivities, 'moral intermediaries' and 'em-powered subjects,' that formed among actors who were tasked with negotiating between the needs of their clients and each program's offerings as well as those requiring aid due to the dire consequences of egregious mismanagement. I demonstrate how moral intermediaries who are responsible for carrying out PG&E's fraught programs make urgent, conscience-driven decisions about which battery deliveries to prioritize; choices that are underpinned by biopolitical assessments of risk and therefore differ from PG&E's understanding of vulnerability that is based on an algorithmically-driven evaluation of hazards. Most importantly, moral intermediation involves navigating ethical dilemmas and political claims *through* the acquisition and dissemination of technical artifacts (i.e., batteries). The decision to grant someone access to a battery essentially determines life or death, security or vulnerability. It is worth noting that this phenomenon primarily occurs along the edges, where discrepancies in administrative and geographic interpretations of vulnerability are most prominent. Em-powered subjects[3] are those who depend on electricity for survival and are entangled with precarious backup batteries. They are forced to conduct embodied research to prolong battery—and thereby their own—life. I end by examining the complex interplay between humans and the more-than-human[4] world of technical artifacts to

[3] My wordplay, 'em-powered,' suggests that individuals with non-normative bodyminds are *brought into* a position where they must persistently search for backup power. Other examples that use the prefix em- in this way include the following: embed*, bring into* a context; employ, *bring into* a workforce; empathize, *bring into* another person's emotional state. Empowerment then stems from personally developing the skills necessary to successfully maneuver mid- to large-scale portable batteries.
[4] This term is used to emphasize the interconnectedness between humans and the rest of the natural world.

unveil how batteries came to figure so prominently in determining the type and degree of bodymind suffering em-powered subjects face during power shutoffs.

The second chapter, "Forms of Participation: Shifting Subject Positions and Public Disclosure," illuminates why, how, and to what effect some groups work with while others work against the power structures embedded in this public-private energy provisioning system. I study a gamut of responses to PG&E's initiatives that are mediated in public, from trust and ambivalence to an outright rejection of programs that medicalize social issues. The participation forms I investigate range from protests, community and multi-scalar governmental meetings, panel discussions, webinars, town halls, and publicly broadcast videos. I land on three key arguments. The first is that only liberal, that is, rights-based and single-issue modes of public participation are recognized and normalized within the landscape of *neo*liberal wildfire governance. Special interest groups that comprise individuals with established roles (e.g., civil rights advocates) that are legible to PG&E, the State of California, and local governments—rather than those with explicitly intersectional politics aimed at structural transformation—are the ones who receive the benefit of a consultation. Secondly, actors strategically navigate multiple, shifting, and at times contradictory subject positions in public to appeal to their constituents, political affiliates, and funders simultaneously. In other words, individuals who have cross-agency rapport are persistently called upon to amplify or mediate between messages that serve the interests of different—at times incompatible—parties via multimedia platforms. In effect, they tactfully secure steady flows of funding and resources, but often forfeit their own agency to express personal opinions and desires. My third argument concerns power-dependent individuals who perpetually negotiate the boundary between private and public life and must continuously reposition themselves along this threshold to gain protections. They share personal, private vulnerabilities during public meetings to build traction around their own needs in order to formally elevate their concerns to governing bodies as collective demands. Ultimately, this chapter reveals how agency is mobilized and to whom it is afforded as well as how vulnerability discourses circulate within and across public meetings, thereby amplifying or concealing power differentials.

The third chapter, "Discursively Analyzing the Gradient from Health and Normativity to Vulnerability and Marginality," offers a linguistic analysis of a key segment of PG&E's virtual Community Wildfire Safety Town Hall, the company's primary platform for communicating the features of its programs. I attend to how normativity and marginality are rhetorically constructed, both overtly and tacitly. Here, macro-scale sociopolitical and economic forces are examined alongside granular speech situations and the promotional imagery adjoining the company's sociomedical programs. Three strategies—a generalization of vulnerability, trust-building through sociospatial proximity, and the market-driven commodification of care services—that PG&E mobilizes during their town hall play a critical role in the operation of bodily normativity. My analysis shows that PG&E reduces vulnerability to two categories, 'most impacted' (i.e., individuals who are medically reliant on power) and the 'generally impacted' population. The utility's moral work of moving the most vulnerable group to the normative generally vulnerable tier by way of its programs unifies bodily experience. In order for the normalization of bodily vulnerability to occur in this way, trust must also be built through social and spatial proximity. Shared bodily risk is constructed through the sociospatial connections speakers make between PG&E and their customer base. Through expressions like "we

are all neighbors," not only are spaces stripped of their sociocultural, political, and economic meanings, the process of unification strips bodies of these markers as well. Unruly[5] bodies that disrupt these norms are not granted access to the institutional spaces where vulnerability is normalized (e.g., the town hall). Their voices, conditions, needs, perspectives, desires, and so on can, therefore, only be animated by predetermined speakers. The construction of a unified vulnerable body crumbles and differential bodily conditions are exposed as PG&E's offerings are taken up by those who can navigate its sites and afford its electricity financing options and those who are effectively left to fend for themselves. The consequences of these differences, however, materialize in private spaces during wildfire events; spaces that remain outside the purview of the company.

Ultimately, I employ political, linguistic, and visual modes of analysis in each of the three chapters to address a specific facet of what is at stake for individuals who are differentially valued according to bodymind capabilities and capacities as the techniques, strategies, and rationalities of wildfire governance materialize. In the concluding chapter, emerging arenas of knowledge production, meaning-making, and power formation are pinpointed, all of which are shaped by actors' divergent perceptions of vulnerability and socioeconomic positioning. I guide planners, policy makers, emergency responders, and institutional affiliates toward recognizing the tensions, contradictions, misalignments, and disparities present within this multi-layered context. Potential sites of intervention—improving collaboration, upholding diverse perspectives, integrating feedback, and engaging technologies—are subsequently identified where imaginative and transformative, rather than solely reformist, strategies are critical.

Scholastic underpinning

Perspectives on the meaning of social vulnerability and approaches toward addressing it vary across social scientific disciplines and bodies of scholarship as well. Understanding these divergent viewpoints is crucial as they inform the efforts of both public and private sector practitioners, as well as the community advocacy and activist groups that are central to this study. For example, databases like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Social Vulnerability Index (SVI) rely on United States census-based sociodemographic variables or 'access and functional needs' classifications that list populations in need of assistance. In these quantitatively produced indices, some populations are pre-classified as vulnerable according to vectors like race, age, and ability. Interpretations of sociodemographic variables and the extent to which they are utilized vary widely. Environmental justice scholars and activists have mobilized for decades to show how the single sociodemographic category of race—a key indicator in the SVI—underlies the distribution of environmental benefits and burdens, fairness of decision-making processes, and recognition (or lack thereof) that sociocultural differences inform environmental knowledge and experiences (e.g., Bullard 1990). This includes issues ranging from exposure to pollutants from toxic waste facilities to wildfire smoke (Thomas et al. 2022). Their efforts have predominantly been geared toward changing state- and federal-level policies, and have also been a key orienting point in activism around social vulnerability.

[5] My use of 'unruliness' stems from the field of queer ecologies where the term is used to describe relationships and expressions of human and non-human life—as well as the ecosystems in which they are situated—that disrupt normative expectations.

Subsequent researchers highlight the importance of incorporating additional analytical factors like ethnicity and gender (e.g., Pulido 1996).

For others, social vulnerability is thought to operate at the intersections of sociodemographic variables, which are structurally and representationally entangled in ways that are not captured by single-axis analyses nor considered by governmental institutions (Crenshaw 1991). Changing the very nature of organizing to move beyond single-issue identity politics toward more expansive frameworks that dismantle interlocking oppressions is the goal of this work (Combahee River Collective 1977). Proponents of *critical* environmental justice have adopted a similar stance, emphasizing the transformation of entrenched state power rather than advocating for reform. Their aim is to reconceptualize human and more-than-human populations that are deemed disposable as indispensable. They achieve this by exposing how macro power dynamics, such as racism, classism, patriarchy, heteronormativity, ableism, and speciesism, manifest from cellular to bodily and global scales (e.g., Agyeman et al. 2016; Pellow 2017; Schlosberg 2013). Crip[6] scholars and activists investigate how the dualistic hierarchies embedded in sociodemographic groupings (e.g., able-bodied vs. disabled) produce bodymind norms that pervade physical spaces and cultural practices (e.g., Clare 2015, 2017; Kafai 2021; Kafer 2013; McRuer and Bérubé 2006; Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018; Taylor 2017). Individuals with non-normative bodyminds who cannot seamlessly navigate the physical and cultural status quo are rendered vulnerable. The purpose of such analyses is to reimagine and create worlds for humans and non-human animals that not only account for, but also celebrate differences in bodymind capabilities and capacities often outside the purview of formal institutions. To the contrary, governmental agencies like the California Public Utilities Commission and the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE) correlate social vulnerability with spatial delineations of High Fire-Threat Districts or Fire Hazard Severity Zones, respectively, in order to rapidly direct resources to the most at-risk populations and landscapes.

I interlace these perspectives with additional strands of literature to offer fresh insights on abject embodiment (i.e., how social, cultural, and psychological marginalization is experienced within one's physical body) in the context of climate change-related disasters. This is especially pertinent when trying to understand the material experiences of individuals with non-normative bodyminds as they navigate PG&E's sociomedical programs. For instance, explorations in science, technology, and society (e.g., Aizura 2018; Clarke et al. 2003; Haraway 1985; Jasanoff 2004; Subramaniam et al. 2017), coupled with insights from material feminism (e.g., Alaimo 2010; Bennett 2010; Davis 1997), shed light on the intricate relationships between humans and the more-than-human world of technical artifacts (i.e., portable batteries). These interactions require specific forms of moral intermediation from those implementing PG&E's initiatives, while em-powered subjects are left to navigate the intended and inadvertent consequences. Incorporating queer and transgender theory (e.g., Butler 1993; Sedgwick 1990; Spade and Willse 2015; Urbach 1996; Warner 2002; Hazard 2022) alongside necropolitics (e.g., Haritaworn, Kuntsman, and Posocco 2013; Mbembe 2019) reveals how institutional logics enable the devaluation of certain lives over others, stratifying individuals according to their deviation from societal norms. Finally, social studies of medicine (e.g., Bhugra 2014; Clarke et

[6] The expression 'crip' stems from the derogatory word 'crippled,' but has been reclaimed in many disability circles as a term of empowerment.

al. 2003; Epstein 2004; Foucault 2004; Porter 2011; Stonington and Holmes 2006) provide context for PG&E's position within the continually shifting terrain of private healthcare, facilitating the corporation's establishment of dependencies between their products and em-powered subjects.

Before discussing the specifics of my research design, I next delve into the structural landscape of wildfire governance in the San Francisco Bay Area, including institutional relations and the resulting nexus of social vulnerability and wildfires. As previously noted, the Bay Area has not only undergone immense losses of lives and structures due to wildfires, but the economic, political, and social dimensions of wildfire governance are amplified here as well. In this context, social vulnerability not only manifests in diverse forms and holds different meanings, but is also the basis for organizing, coalition building, collective action, and reconfiguring disaster governance strategies with immediacy.

INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

The political ecology of wildfire governance in the United States

To offer a brief history, contemporary wildfire governance in the United States is situated within a political-economic triangle comprising longstanding forest institutions, private forestry, and commodified forests, in addition to real estate development along the WUI. What underpins this triangle is a multi-century history of federally-funded fire suppression whereby land was usurped for timber preservation, agriculture, stock-ranging, and mining. These Euro-American practices replaced Native American traditions of systematically igniting ecologically necessary fires. In the broader San Francisco Bay Area, Ohlone (Costanoan), Pomo, Miwok (Coast, Lake, and Plains), Patwin, and Wappo peoples deliberately burned small patches in addition to extensive tracts of vegetation. Across California, regular fires proved to be the most efficient and effective form of land stewardship. Controlled burning promoted new growth, enhanced biodiversity, and sustained essential plant communities (e.g., coastal prairies and montane meadows). In short, the five and a half to thirteen million acres that burned annually across the state—due to both Indigenous fire regimes and lightening—yielded vital practical and cultural benefits that have all but disappeared (Anderson 2005).

The 'fire exclusion paradigm' that is still in effect today has led to fuel buildup in now highly flammable, homogenized forests encroached on by invasive plant species. Previously, fires on California's south-west-facing slopes blanketed in sugar pines returned in intervals of five to ten years. "When used appropriately . . . fire becomes the instrument for its own subduing," Anderson writes (2005, 359). Simon (2017) shares a similar sentiment: "Firestorms are social constructs that we have for many decades now defined, classified, suppressed, created, feared, and managed. If it can be said that humans mastered fire, then modern humans have surely mastered the invention of firestorms" (111). Nowadays, widened roads lined with private homes have overshadowed Indigenous plant interactions and intentionally set fires.[7] In the western Unites States, 95% of the U.S. Forest Service's fire suppression budget is allocated toward expanding and densifying WUIs. These processes have been documented at length by Abrams et al. (2016), Charnley et al. (2015), Drews et al. (2014), Evers

[7] Although with looming wildfires, controlled burns are regaining traction today.

et al. (2019), Fu (2012), Hudson et al. (2011), Ingalsbee (2017), Moritz et al. (2014), Schoennagel et al. (2017), and Stephens et al. (2009).

The nexus of social vulnerability and wildfires

The susceptibility of individuals to this highly flammable landscape varies significantly. Persistent disparities, both visible and invisible, exist concerning increased wildfire exposure, health impacts, proneness to housing and infrastructure damage, economic barriers, limited representation in decision-making processes, and reduced capacity for adequate response and recovery. To begin, to cut costs the State of California utilizes incarcerated laborers who receive $1 per hour and a daily base rate of $2.90 to $5.12, depending on their skill level. This form of social vulnerability, whereby people are positioned on the frontlines for minimal compensation, working 24-hour shifts in temperatures upwards of 110 degrees, effectively occurs outside of public view. When severe wildfires struck in 2019, the state saved $90 to $267 million—that is approximately three to eight percent of CAL FIRE's wildfire protection and suppression budget for 2022 to 2023—by dipping into this underpaid and undervalued labor pool of 3700 inmates residing in fire camps across 27 counties. These fire camps, previously referred to as road camps, date back to 1915 and were part of the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation's Conservation Camp Program to augment firefighting teams with inmates (Remijas 2021; Scharffenberger 2022; State of California Legislative Analyst's Office 2023). In 2020, Governor Gavin Newsom enacted Assembly Bill 2147, which enables formerly incarcerated 'nonviolent offenders' who were involved in the program to become career firefighters (Office of Governor Gavin Newsom 2020).

Further, land use decisions based on potential wildfire exposure persistently confront growth-based economic incentives to develop dense, expansive suburbs. Individuals are thereby housed in precarious fire hazard zones. Yet Simon (2017) reminds us to step back from thinking solely in terms of the WUI, as this framing—which largely guides wildfire plans and policies—conceals the political forces underpinning its spatial production. Instead, he calls for a conceptual shift by way of adopting an 'affluence-vulnerability interface' (AVI) that reveals the socioeconomic and environmental drivers that lead to the development of WUIs (24, 25). In other words, the AVI zeroes in on socioecological *processes* as well as the co-production of risk and profit.

As a case in point, neoliberalism, with its flexible governance structure, has enabled private companies to infiltrate wildfire management and planning. This means that wealthy individuals can purchase their own protection while others rely on public services. Taken together with unevenly distributed insurance coverage, wildfire exposure and recovery are socioeconomically stratified and fragmented processes from the home and street to neighborhood level (ibid.). Individuals residing in economically disadvantaged areas face disparities in accessing emergency services, evacuation assistance, and recovery support. My interlocutors indicated that language barriers are also a contributing factor, further heightening vulnerability. Moreover, monetary barriers often lead to homes being constructed with substandard methods and materials, inadequate maintenance, and individuals lacking the resources to independently apply fire-resistant measures. To illustrate, pollutants can infiltrate older buildings with ill-fitted windows and doors, which landlords in low-

income neighborhoods are less likely to repair. Such housing is also less likely to comply with current building codes aimed at fire protection, including the construction of non-flammable roofs. These factors prevent people from sheltering in place. Furthermore, their exposure is only heightened when they cannot afford hotel accommodations or gas for their vehicles at the onset of a fire. In the case of California's 2017 wildfires, rental price gauging amplified the housing crisis. Hence, the aftermath of wildfires, including housing loss, financial strain from property damage repair, and displacement, compounds pre-existing vulnerabilities (Scharffenberger 2022). And still, the ethical question remains whether there is more or less incentive to develop in fire-prone zones.

Additional challenges of privatization in the wildfire sector are manifold. Private firefighting crews who have no standardized training and are unfamiliar with the intricacies of local terrains use their own devices like drones to locate individual homes amid fires. This enhances the risk of literally colliding with tools and strategies deployed by public response agencies, such as water and fire-suppressant airdrops. Other private corporations market foam and gel application technologies to individual homeowners residing in High Fire Risk Zones; an illusion of security according to high-ranking fire officials. Such gels only last four to six hours, while foams for eight to sixteen. In addition, the perfluorochemicals released by these materials come with their own health and environmental impacts (Simon 2017). It is important to acknowledge that wildfires already emit pollutants, including particulate matter and toxic gases, which can have serious health consequences, from respiratory and cardiovascular problems to premature death, particularly for vulnerable populations such as children,[8] older adults, and individuals with pre-existing health conditions who may also lack medical insurance. Three to five months following the Sonoma County Tubbs fire of 2017, to which I will return, lung and heart problems peaked (Scharffenberger 2022; Thomas et al. 2022). Populations that have no choice but to spend prolonged hours outdoors, such as undocumented agricultural laborers, are especially vulnerable to smoke-related health issues. To underscore the magnitude of the problem, California has between 500,000 and 800,000 predominantly Latinx farmworkers. Approximately 75% of them are undocumented and thereby lack access to healthcare. They continue working through agriculturally-productive sweltering weather out of necessity, when pesticide exposure is compounded by pollutants from wildfire smoke (Scharffenberger 2022). This reality also applies to LGBTQ+ houseless youth, particularly transgender or gender non-conforming individuals, who are overrepresented in the broader houseless youth population, often as a result of family rejection. LGBTQ+ youth in the United States account for approximately 20 to 45% of the houseless youth population, despite comprising only about six to eleven percent of the overall youth population (Romero, Goldberg, and Vasquez 2020). Chest binding, a common practice among transgender and nonbinary individuals, may heighten the risk of respiratory issues caused by air pollution. LGBTQ+ individuals are, at the same time, less likely to seek medical care due to fear of discrimination and lack of health insurance (Goldsmith and Bell 2022). Even still, new enterprises marketing novel products that produce their own health risks through the emission of toxins, which exacerbate challenges pertaining to wildfire smoke, continue to emerge (Simon 2017).

Finally, it becomes crucial to recall a fundamental principle of environmental justice, namely procedural justice, which emphasizes the significance of inclusive and transparent decision-making

[8] Black children are already twice as likely to have asthma compared to those who are white.

processes that engage disenfranchised communities in environmental planning and policy-making (Bullard 1990). During the public meetings I attended, it became evident that predominantly white, economically stable individuals—despite their non-normative bodymind experiences—typically represented community groups, revealing a notable imbalance. Taking into account this historical and contemporary context, my investigation commences in 2017, a pivotal year in wildfire governance in California and the United States at large.

Structural changes

The concurring hurricane and wildfire incidents of 2017 yielded many insights from which new approaches toward disaster governance transpired. In general, emergency managers must now be prepared to confront overlapping disaster cycles that occur at different stages, paces, and scales. Disaster planning, therefore, can no longer follow a sequential trajectory from mitigation to preparedness, response, and recovery. Manifold lessons have emerged at smaller state and county levels as well. Sonoma's after-action review following the 2017 Complex fires shed light on gaps in emergency preparation. While emergency managers were equipped to deal with smaller-scale disasters in-line with those of past decades, they were greatly unprepared for the extent of the Complex fires. Sonoma County, among others in California, did not have complete or up-to-date plans to guide efforts in alerting, evacuating, and sheltering individuals. Because these fires occurred in the middle of the night as essential communication infrastructure was increasingly damaged—77 cell sites were destroyed and 9-1-1 lines were overwhelmed by calls—alerts and evacuations became harder without redundant systems in place. Furthermore, the access and functional needs of communities across the county were not assessed prior to these fires and led to inadequacies such as English-only warnings. The importance of tightly-knit neighborhood networks and community knowledge sharing surrounding wildfires became increasingly evident. In regard to the built environment, the Complex fires illuminated that flying embers, rather than flames and radiant heat, ignited homes and structures, and that strategies such as hardening buildings and creating defensible space needed to be implemented without delay (Auditor of the State of California 2019; City of Santa Rosa 2020; FEMA 2018; Sonoma County 2018; Sonoma County 2021; United States Department of Homeland Security 2021).

Numerous changes, based on the learnings noted above, have been enacted during the years following 2017. Federal augmentations to emergency management have been captured in the Disaster Recovery Reform Act of 2018, the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) most comprehensive reform following the Sandy Recovery Improvement Act of 2013. In addition to improving preparedness, response, recovery, and mitigation strategies, this legislation brings transparency to processes connected with receiving federal assistance, including eligibility requirements. It also tasks federal agencies with conducting research to improve operations along WUIs. Accordingly, once a Presidential Disaster Declaration was issued at the start of Sonoma's Complex fires, the county became eligible for federal funding from FEMA, such as a Hazard Mitigation Grant and Community Development Block Grant.

New state legislation was also written, such as California's Assembly Bill 38 (California State Legislature 2019) that calls for comprehensive and collaborative wildfire prevention strategies and

vegetation management schemes that are area-specific. State agencies and departments are now tasked with collaboratively developing short- to long-term actions that not only prevent catastrophic wildfires, but focus on vulnerable communities. Neighborhood-based Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPPs) are regularly produced to inform hazard mitigation planning. Though the federal Healthy Forests Restoration Act has since 2009 financially supported residents living along WUIs in developing these local capacity-building CWPPs to become 'fire-adapted,' their proliferation has increased significantly since 2017. Receiving funding is contingent upon meeting three requirements that prioritize fire suppression: plans must be collaborative, designate fuel reduction areas, and recommend actions to decrease structural ignitability. This has led to contrasting outcomes. On the one hand, these limited general requirements give communities flexibility in tailoring CWPPs to local assets. On the other, communities receive minimal guidance on implementing CWPPs across divergent contexts. As quoted in the *Upper Mark West Watershed CWPP*, sometimes we are "on our own." Sonoma County's CWPP was completed and amended to the county's formal *Multi-Jurisdictional Hazard Mitigation Plan* in 2023. These lessons are also incorporated into long-range plans, including the regional *Plan Bay Area 2050,* through land use and management principles. In response to the 2017 fires, new county-level offices have sprung up, such as Sonoma's Office of Recovery and Resiliency that fosters relationships among stakeholders working in the wildfire arena (CAL FIRE 2019; City of Santa Rosa 2020; Sen. Johnson 2018; Sonoma County 2018; Sonoma County 2022).

Some of the most notable changes have occurred at a grassroots level. Active groups such as Communities Organized to Prepare for Emergencies (COPE), Fire Safe Councils, FireWise® Communities, Community Organizations Active in Disaster (COAD), Community Emergency Response Teams (CERTs), and the Disability Disaster Coalition for Independent Living Centers, have surfaced across California. The impact of these groups is evident in the sentiments shared by James Gore, Supervisor of Sonoma's 4th and 5th Districts, during a public input workshop: "I've never seen the kind of widespread engagement as I've seen with COPE since 2017 . . . [After the 2017 fires] it was an honor to work with block captains."[9] Block captains are neighborhood leaders who are connected to county staff and disseminate relevant information to fellow residents. One shared, "coming from that terrible fire in 2017 that left us all feeling very scared and isolated . . . this has been a way for us to come together and have each other's backs."[10] COAD, on the other hand, was in formation prior to 2017, but its foundation was tested during the Tubbs fire and subsequently strengthened. Members of the coalition are now embedded in the County's Emergency Operations Center and activate affiliated groups at the onset of an emergency to distribute critical resources.[11]

While some focus on the general public, roughly half of the aforementioned groups concentrate their meetings and efforts on at least one aspect of access and functional needs or a specific marker of social vulnerability that unifies their members, be it age or disability. That said, overlap across groups is quite common and membership is dynamic, with active individuals often participating in multiple collectives. This rings especially true for national initiatives like the establishment of FireWise® Communities, where individuals from neighborhood-scale groups tap in

[9] 2021 Sonoma County CWPP Public Input Workshop, 4th District
[10] 2021 COPE meeting
[11] 2021 COAD general meeting

to varying degrees. Although a number of these community groups are characterized by indicators of vulnerability, their positions vary significantly, especially in terms of financial well-being. Their socioeconomic status not only determines their geographic location, but also influences their approach. For instance, groups comprising financially stable members, many of whom are homeowners, prioritize landscaping projects to safeguard their property. They possess the resources, such as language skills, institutional knowledge, and time, to effectively navigate bureaucracy, engage government officials, and secure physical and financial assistance to mitigate wildfire exposure in their neighborhoods. Even when members face increased health risks from inhaling pollutants emitted during wildfires due to pre-existing conditions or age alone, they have the means to access assistance.

On the other hand, in groups where members encounter compounding barriers such as income and language, which in this case are often correlated with race, the emphasis shifts toward advocating for structural changes beyond the individual level. This may involve efforts to gain support from building managers or nursing home staff to establish accessible evacuation routes where crowding occurs. Additionally, as mentioned earlier, representatives may strategically carve out positions in public offices to ensure procedural justice, particularly for the most affected members, such as Spanish-speaking undocumented laborers who prefer to steer clear of interactions with government officials. Individuals facing multiple forms of marginalization not only receive inadequate or sometimes no care at all, particularly depending on their legal and financial status, but, as my conversations with interlocutors have revealed, healthcare providers also fail to cover the expenses associated with potentially life-saving devices like backup batteries, which can offer some level of protection during wildfires. This concern is frequently raised during meetings, particularly within less monetarily secure groups, whereas it is not as prevalent in more affluent community gatherings. Despite economic differences across groups, those advocating for individuals with non-normative bodyminds continuously find themselves with limited resources for effective response and recovery, even with the array of improvements following 2017, and much of their meeting discussions revolve around how to secure additional support from various institutions.

Alongside the formation of community groups, infrastructure has significantly transformed as well. Efforts to harden homes and create defensible space are well underway as well as vegetation management strategies to reduce fuel buildup. Insurers have significantly increased prices to disincentivize building along WUIs. Redundant early warning, real-time incident information, and alert systems have been developed, from Hi-Lo sirens to social media updates in English and Spanish. Community evacuation drills have accompanied the creation of Temporary Evacuation Zones and new shelters. Novel camera technologies help firefighters and first responders monitor fire spread and behavior. In 2021 PG&E implemented another feature to supplement its Public Safety Power Shutoffs, Enhanced Powerline Safety Settings, a new technology that enables powerlines to instantaneously shut off if a hazardous object like a falling tree branch is detected. Therefore, both scheduled and unscheduled deenergization events have emerged as a significant facet of California's wildfire risk management strategy (City of Santa Rosa 2020; PG&E 2020; PG&E Corporation 2022; Sonoma County 2021; Sonoma County 2022).

This course of action, though, is not only attributable to PG&E's present-day infrastructural capacity, but largely stems from the utility's past liabilities related to infrastructural negligence, a topic

I will turn to in the following chapter. Bearing the retribution of years of mismanagement and resulting wildfire-related damages has placed PG&E in a central position within the political terrain of wildfire governance. This includes taking responsibility for tasks beyond its usual scope, like the development of sociomedical programs. Following California's 2018 Camp fire, Assembly Bill 1054 was passed to incentivize utilities to invest in fire prevention measures, rather than response, by tapping into a $21 billion Wildfire Fund to pay claims stemming from wildfire-related damages. Utilities like PG&E are required to spend $5 million over the course of three years on wildfire risk reduction to access the fund. It should come as no surprise that the fund is paid for by customers themselves. An inequity arises when considering that *all* customers share the financial burden of supplying electricity to fire-prone areas. Stated plainly, low-income households subsidize the electricity costs of predominantly white, higher-income neighborhoods along WUIs (Scharffenberger 2022). My dissertation illustrates how the broader social decision of positioning PG&E at the forefront of wildfire governance has infiltrated and shaped the everyday lives of thousands of individuals with non-normative bodyminds and the communities to which they belong. After discussing my research design, the following chapter dives into their narratives.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Designing the study

In arriving at my findings, I followed a queer and feminist epistemology that regards all scientific observations as located, partial, and embodied (Banks, Cox, and Dadas 2019; Brim and Ghaziani 2016; Haraway 1988). This feminist perspective also encompasses a reflexive approach, enabling me to position myself in relation to this research and critically examine my interpretations. The idea for this project emerged from my own activism in the area. As someone who is both non-normatively bodied and minded—in addition to living in California for decades and PG&E's service area in the San Francisco Bay Area for over a decade—wildfire-related challenges are both personal and academic. Although I was not enrolled in the specific programs around which I center my analysis, at the time of this writing I am registered in PG&E's adjacent Energy Bill Assistance Program, which provides insights into how the utility plans for and manages customers in lower socioeconomic brackets. Therefore, I paid close attention to the ways in which my own experiences diverged from as well as overlapped with those of my interlocutors. Furthermore, I am particularly attuned to how my own non-normative bodymind conditions informed my understanding of this political arena, while at the same time acknowledging the vast and nuanced differences between my circumstances and those of my research participants; individuals who I am ever grateful for in trusting me with their breadth and depth of knowledge and personal accounts.

Between 2019 and 2022, I employed a variety of qualitative ethnographic methods at my study site comprising (1) discursive analyses of cross-scalar, multi-hazard policy and planning documents as well as public meeting transcripts; (2) recorded interviews with governmental actors, wildfire experts, and community leaders; and (3) participant observations of government-facilitated workshops and webinars, neighborhood-based panel discussions, activist-organized protests, and utility-led town

halls.[12] This data was supplemented by editorial articles, community mutual aid spreadsheets, social media postings, and other sources that provided timely information regarding the circumstances of populations with non-normative bodyminds and the groups they are affiliated with. Importantly, drawing together political and discursive analyses enabled me to elucidate the distinct social worlds of stakeholders, as well as the material effects of how they derived meaning from and built knowledge around 'vulnerability' in the multiscalar context of fire-prone California. This approach illuminated how preparatory measures, real-time official directives and assistance, and physical environments were influenced by the moral judgments of those implementing PG&E's sociomedical programs. Their intermediation either hindered or enabled individuals with non-normative bodyminds to navigate wildfire events safely. Furthermore, utilizing *critical* discourse analysis (a la Fairclough 2015), focused on the micro scale of language in use, to interpret the political terrain of wildfire governance and institutional meetings therein, shed light on the construction, interpellation, and negotiation of vulnerable subjectivities. Exposing such processes is a first step toward addressing and ultimately transforming the macro, asymmetric power relations operating in this arena. The nuances of my methodology are outlined below.

Technical details

Data collection and analysis accompanied each phase of my research. I employed non-probability, purposive sampling techniques to find and build rapport with relevant stakeholders and members of their social networks. Wildfire experts from governmental agencies were selected through expert sampling. Activists and members of community groups that represent the interests of vulnerable populations were located through the events they posted on various online platforms (e.g., Facebook). Joining certain meetings required approval from the entire group. Initially, I solely contacted people with non-normative bodyminds who have been vocal through physical or virtual channels about their political stance due to experiences of governmental neglect. Snowball sampling was then utilized to pinpoint additional interviewees, as identifying them without making assumptions posed a challenge (Schensul, Schensul, and LeCompte 1999). I continued with my interviews and participant observations until saturation was reached (Small 2009). The texts I reviewed provided an 'extralocal' context to my interviews and case more broadly (Burawoy 1998).

Audio-recorded, transcribed, and anonymized interviews along with narrative fieldnotes produced during site visits were hierarchically coded using the MAXQDA software to locate emerging patterns, themes, and concepts. This was preceded by 'pre-coding,' a process in which I highlighted significant words and phrases in the field and iteratively refined them to capture the values, beliefs, attitudes, and experiences of participants. In addition, I maintained a reflexive journal to record speculative insights and other factors influencing the study. Textual data was systematically reviewed to triangulate my findings. 'Member checks' by way of follow-up conversations with participants were conducted to review my interpretations of data for any inconsistencies. For example, members of a community group reviewed a broad section of a core chapter to provide feedback on my analysis and

[12] Given the Covid-19 pandemic that hit at the onset of my fieldwork, the majority of these meetings occurred virtually.

theoretical contribution (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011; Finlay 2002; Lincoln and Guba 1985; Saldaña 2009; Sayer 1984; Smart 2009; Yin 2013). In what follows, I describe these interlocutors.

Research participants

To protect the confidentiality and anonymity of research participants, I used pseudonyms for all interviewees as well as for names listed on transcripts of meetings I could not attend in real time. In several instances, the pseudonyms I used for individuals with prominent positions changed between chapters. This was aimed at dissociating interview data from public-facing interactions, which might have otherwise revealed their identities. In addition, my interlocutors—particularly individuals in leadership roles—asked that I do not disclose the name of the group they are affiliated with, but rather provide a characterization of it. With the exception of governmental and corporate agencies, I did this consistently. Therefore, I used descriptors such as 'disability-focused group,' 'community group focused on neighbors helping neighbors,' and so on. Some groups came up with descriptors themselves. Others asked me not to specify the county they reside in but to refer to their location as a county in Northern California instead. Nevertheless, the San Francisco Bay Area Region remains the focal point of this study.

Drawing from general demographic characteristics, here is what I can offer. Across all community groups and agencies, the predominant demographic of people in leadership roles was white, normatively gendered older adults with diverse access and functional needs. Consequently, only a handful of interviewees were people of color. These racial differences are important to consider given that the goal is to try to reach minoritized populations, and because they reflect the demographic makeup (i.e., white and higher income) of those exposed to wildfires in California and other states (Thomas et al. 2022). The gender distribution among my interlocutors was relatively balanced, although certain groups had more women in leadership roles who were inevitably tasked with emotional labor. Later, I will delve into how the implementors of sociomedical programs mediated the needs of various parties, exploring differences across genders. My interviewees entered their roles out of a desire to help vulnerable populations within their own communities and/or to advocate for the challenges they themselves face due to being non-normatively bodied and minded. While their socioeconomic status varied, many had graduate degrees; some were related to their own identities, others to disaster planning. The activists I observed during performances, panels, and one-off protests were frequently multigenerational people of color with disabilities who also openly identified with non-normative genders and sexualities. Similarly, the informal conversations I had with people in my own broader social network who are enrolled in the programs of study were non-normative in regard to gender and sexuality as well.

Concluding thoughts

To close, we find ourselves today in a pivotal moment from which lessons about social vulnerability can be drawn from the implementation of PG&E's fledgling programs—as well as how people facing the highest levels of risk navigate them—and extended to other sites and forms of disaster. In addition to providing actionable insights for individuals and groups working on climate

mitigation and adaptation, or more precisely wildfire preparedness and response, my aim is to make a substantive contribution to the ethical frameworks, relational values surrounding Nature,[13] and multi-disciplinary forms of knowledge production driving the environmental field.

[13] Nature is capitalized here to underscore its agency.

Chapter 1: Governing Through 'Moral Intermediaries' and 'Em-Powered' Subjects

INTRODUCTION

Lights out

Between October and November of 2019, California's largest investor-owned public utility, PG&E, carried out waves of 'Public Safety Power Shutoffs,' referred to as PSPS events, that abruptly cut electricity for hundreds of thousands of people in the North Bay Area in order to prevent the possibility of catastrophic fires during high-wind days. The company had already faced several years of intense public scrutiny concerning its role in the Sonoma Complex Fires of 2017 when faulty electrical equipment strung along a multi-decadal buildup of drought-stressed vegetation laid the foundation for the state's most volatile firestorms to date. These multi-day preventative power shutoffs were aimed at averting crises like that of 2017, when older adults listed under the generic sociodemographic category of 'access and functional needs' in planning documents slipped through the cracks of emergency preparedness and response and lost their lives in the fires.

Ironically, suddenly cutting power as a 'public safety' precaution resulted in uncharged essential devices like power chairs, defrosted refrigerators storing insulin, and other unplugged critical machinery belonging to individuals with non-normative[14] bodymind capabilities and capacities; individuals who already confront everyday disasters due to structural injustices embedded in physical and cultural landscapes along all points of the region's rural-urban gradient. Put differently, their ordinary worlds were already characterized by what Anderson et al. (2020) refer to as 'slow emergencies' and Nixon (2013) as 'slow violence,' that is, gradual and overlooked conditions of harm and suffering that are not registered as extraordinary events. When enacted, the techniques, strategies, and rationalities of wildfire governance—in this case, preventative power shutoffs—demonstrated a reduced valuation of these individuals' lives according to degrees of dis/able-bodiedness and neurodivergence/typicality, dualistic qualifiers that are inevitably compounded by racialized, classed, gendered, and sexual identities. In effect, they were unevenly positioned in relation to wildfire-related exposures and existential threats (Mbembe 2019). For some (e.g., those who are white and able-bodied), a desired and recognizable preexisting order was quickly restored and life progressed amid electrical interruptions. But for others (e.g., people of color who are disabled), the future remained insecure and uncertain, with possibilities for new development trajectories that attend to the roots of socioenvironmental precarity foreclosed.

As fingers increasingly pointed toward PG&E's irresponsible financial practices and infrastructural and social oversights—in connection with both the wildfires and power shutoffs—on the ground and in the media, the company took strides to repair its public image. Among these efforts

[14] To elaborate on my footnote in the introductory chapter, "[N]orms and codes of behavior reach into the minute details of our bodies, thoughts, and behaviors," Spade and Willse remark (2015, 3). For instance, compulsory norms of able-bodiedness emanate from everywhere, yet no one is held accountable for their proliferation or effects (McRuer and Bérubé 2006). Ultimately, disaster recovery efforts attend to spaces and people that are legible and "normal" (Agamben 1998; Olson and Worsham 2000).

was the rebranding and increased advertising of its longstanding Medical Baseline Program that assists medically vulnerable customers through reduced energy bills and targeted alerts in preparation for PSPS events. Newer, adjoining programs additionally provide portable backup batteries for customers to power durable medical equipment (DME) and assistive technologies (AT).

In this chapter, I describe the emergence and operation of PG&E's Medical Baseline, Disability Disaster Access & Resources, and Portable Battery programs. Central to this discussion is an analysis of the governmental techniques state, state-regulated, and private institutions deployed in order to plan and manage these interventions. In other words, I investigate the anomaly of how an investor-owned utility became responsible for designing and delivering sociomedical programs for people with non-normative bodyminds. My analysis continues with the political subjectivities that formed among actors who were tasked with mediating between the needs of their constituents and provisions of each program as well as those receiving aid and holding on to their lives amid intolerable circumstances. I land on an examination of energy-storing technical artifacts (i.e., portable backup batteries) and how they came to figure so prominently in determining the type and degree of bodymind suffering individuals faced during power shutoffs.

I draw several arguments from my research on this evolving 'riskscape' of wildfires that now comprises an array of institutions with novel, unconventional roles as well as actors with diverse sociopolitical positions, bodymind experiences, forms of expertise, and interpretations of vulnerability. To ensure the safety and security of people who rely on DME and AT, 'moral intermediaries' and 'em-powered subjects' necessarily emerged as the electrical company perplexingly rolled out this series of fragmented sociomedical programs that center the provision of portable backup batteries. They each negotiated their political and embodied claims by way of batteries. It is through the acquisition and circulation of these technical artifacts that moral dilemmas surrounding access erupted and vital life-and-death decisions were made. Importantly, this phenomenon occurred along the edges where discrepancies in the administrative and geographical conceptualization of vulnerability were most pronounced.

Chapter structure

This chapter is organized as follows. I begin with an overview of the decentralized riskscape that enabled PG&E to become a leading actor in provisioning not just energy, but critical public health resources. To lay this groundwork, I bring in two bodies of literature: environmental and disaster governance (e.g., Agrawal 2005; Lakoff ed. 2010; Collier 2014; Grove 2014; Gaillard 2022) and risk (e.g., Beck 1986; Müller-Mahn, Everts, and Stephan 2018). Next, I briefly present two forms of subjectivity that are produced and shaped by this riskscape: 'moral intermediaries' and 'em-powered subjects.' My introduction concludes with a comparison between PG&E's and moral intermediaries' interpretations of vulnerability that drive their practices. What follows are three substantial sections through which I weave illustrative vignettes and draw together additional bodies of scholarship to bolster my arguments.

In the first section, 'the formation of a partnership,' I discuss a key relationship between PG&E and a prominent disability advocacy group that gave rise to the three programs I analyze. In addition to delineating each program, the initial difficulties of carrying out a fledgling contract between

the two parties—from extending subcontracts to unaffiliated actors and resolving hierarchical tensions to facing the dire consequences of egregious mismanagement—are described. Folding in literature on 'necropolitics' (e.g., Haritaworn, Kuntsman, and Posocco 2013; Mbembe 2019) and abject embodiment (e.g., Butler 1993; Agamben 1998; Spade and Willse 2015) is vital here because it illuminates how institutional logics permit the devaluation of some lives over others, differentially positioning people for death.

Secondly, the section 'moral intermediaries' expounds on the construction of this first type of subjectivity. I detail the daily lives of moral intermediaries, including the urgent, morally-driven decisions they must regularly make and the emotional toll such choices take. Their processes of deliberation, prioritization schemes, and the significance of any miscalculations are also recounted. Here, literature on one's right to be recognized (e.g., Petryna 2003; Von Schnitzler 2016; Zeiderman 2016) and rescued (e.g., Weibgen 2015), as well as the transfer of responsibility onto individual actors (e.g., O'Grady and Shaw 2023), comes in handy.

My third major section, 'em-powered subjects,' covers how this second type of subjectivity is formed and the entanglement of non-normative bodyminds with precarious backup batteries that power DME and AT. The technical specifications and difficulties of maneuvering these devices as well as challenges pertaining to their distribution are addressed. In addition, I elucidate the kinds of embodied research individuals conduct and critical decisions they make to prolong battery—and thereby their own—life and avoid complications. I continue by discussing the pitfalls of technological optimism within a free market economy and conclude with the importance of interdependence, as expressed by my interlocutors and the field of crip theory (e.g., McRuer and Bérubé 2006; Kafer 2013; Clare 2017; Taylor 2017; Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018). This final section interlaces several additional strands of literature that, together, shape my argument. Writing on social medicine (e.g., Clarke et al. 2003; Foucault 2004; Epstein 2004; Stonington and Holmes 2006; Porter 2011; Bhugra 2014) situates PG&E within the ever-evolving landscape of private healthcare, which enables the corporation to create dependencies between their products and em-powered subjects. Literature on material feminism (e.g., Davis 1997; Alaimo 2010; Bennett 2010) alongside critical environmental justice (e.g., Agyeman et al. 2016; Pellow 2017) and science, technology, and society scholarship (e.g., Haraway 1985; Jasanoff 2004; Subramaniam et al. 2017; Aizura 2018) highlight the complex interplay between humans and the more-than-human world of technical artifacts (e.g., portable batteries) that em-powered subjects must navigate. I conclude this chapter by summarizing each of these core sections and how they work in conjunction to frame present-day wildfire governance.

EMERGING SUBJECTIVITIES IN A RISKSCAPE

The anomaly of a utility turned medical provider

Public-private partnerships that emerge out of the deregulated landscape of wildfire governance necessitate distinct subjectivities to keep fledgling programs afloat and individuals safe during disasters. Numerous scholars working at the junctures of land, resources, hazards, and social vulnerability (e.g., Agrawal 2005; Collier 2014; Daniels 2009; Gaillard 2022; Heynen et al. 2007; Koontz et al. 2004; Pincetl 2010; Zeiderman 2016) have commented on the impacts of free market

ideologies and practices to environmental programs. Their insights, which are illustrated in broad strokes below, are critical to understanding the political terrain[15] of wildfire governance that underlies this case.

The Reagan-era neoliberal turn toward decentralized 'governance,' retrenched public spending, private enterprise and entrepreneurialism, and regulatory flexibility of the 1980s brought with it a backlash against New Deal-era centralized and hierarchical governmental command-and-control mechanisms that were isolated from market-based logics. Instead, governmental institutions and actors came to be perceived as equal players—rather than exclusively experts, managers, or enforcers—in environmental decision-making. Even still, in the realm of wildfires, state engagement has not only expanded but also persisted over time. Present-day environmental governance relies on stakeholder collaboration where diverse groups—from the public sector to non-governmental organizations, private entities, nonprofits, and community-based organizations—initiate, create, and implement plans collectively. To some extent, a massive increase in state expenditure on wildfire risk reduction and emergency management has been implemented through decentralized mechanisms in order to effectively define issues; allocate human, technical, and financial resources; and structure groups and bureaucratic processes. That said, outcomes from the 'hybridization' of neoliberal orthodoxies with environmental planning are markedly influenced by material conditions, cultural factors, and circulating discourses, especially as relations between risk, responsibility, and security perpetually shift.

Questions still resound concerning who *should* provide protections during disasters, tradeoffs between such protections and economic rationalities, and values underpinning public policies (Collier 2014; Lakoff ed. 2010). Furthermore, it is important to consider to what degree 'neoliberal citizens' who are prepared to deal with future uncertainty by way of market mechanisms have replaced 'social citizens,' as well as social solidarity, of the welfare state. What is at stake when individuals are free to protect themselves from natural hazards rather than being a priority of state protection (Beck 1986)? Aizura (2018), for example, argues that neoliberal *racialized* citizens are governed in ways that value those who produce capital and devalue those who do not. Within a neoliberal context, new 'conditions of possibility' emerge for intervening in the lives of those deemed vulnerable. Yet, such "novel forms of interventionism are demanded based upon the premise that being resilient is to accept the responsibility for one's individual position in a complex social fabric that is insecure by design" (Evans and Reid 2014, 47). To be resilient, people are expected to continuously adapt and "thriv[e] in times of unending chaos without losing the faculty of neoliberal reason" (41). Kaika (2017) claims that we have been engaging in a practice of 'immunology' that vaccinates people and environments to take longer doses of inequality, suffering, deprivation, and environmental degradation, rather than shifting the focus toward actors and processes that produce the need for 'resilience' to begin with. Caregiving, too, enters the fold of public-private partnerships where experts rule and piecemeal social welfare provisions are delivered by way of the market.

It is against this historical and political backdrop that PG&E, the largest state-regulated investor-owned utility in the United States, developed and expanded a variety of social programs that

[15] Here I use Von Schnitzler's (2016) definition of political terrain: "both the discursive and the semiotic-material modalities in which certain political languages are rendered legible and come to resonate, whereas others cannot" (173).

offer rebates to homeowners for energy-efficient upgrades, provide community grants for environmental education and conservation initiatives, assist low-income customers, develop renewable energy, and support disaster relief and response efforts. But what distinguishes this final category is that preexisting pressure from state and disability advocacy groups to proactively address disaster-related challenges became particularly pronounced following the 2017 wildfires and, notably, the 2019 power shutoffs, during which the issues that had been previously voiced were magnified on a massive scale. In being perceived as the main source of detrimental impacts to people's health, PG&E was required to *immediately* remedy these challenges, even though doing so would require entering the medical arena, an area significantly beyond its usual expertise or focus. What resulted was the company developing a set of socio*medical* programs for customers who rely on DME and AT and thereby becoming a key player in the public health field, which falls vastly outside its wheelhouse.

In 2020, PG&E entered into a contract with a statewide disability nonprofit, entrusting them with control to implement its programs on the ground. Simultaneously, the utility extended subcontracts to a multitude of community-based organizations (CBOs), leveraging their existing rapport with locals. It also did so to keep its burgeoning programs from folding, because the corporation was and continues to be liable for damages—to customers and property—resulting from power shutoffs. During the wildfires of 2017 and 2018 alone, PG&E accumulated approximately 750 individual and class action complaints by wildfire victims in civil court as well as upwards of $30 billion in liabilities, which ultimately led to them filing for bankruptcy in 2019 (Schmidt 2023). Despite entering into a mutually beneficial partnership with the statewide disability nonprofit, to whom PG&E granted authority over disability-related matters, the precarious structure of the utility's new sociomedical programs and accompanying insecurities ultimately translated into a limitless search for 'experts' to fill any potential adaptation gaps. The result was a boundless, loose, and thereby unmanageable patchwork of actors and institutions who carried out redundant tasks without guided coordination or effective oversight. Rocky leadership coupled with a network of players operating in accordance with their own interpretations of vulnerability engendered continuous modifications to programs. When governance and skilled labor are offloaded onto hundreds of organizations in this way, responsible parties get lost in the shuffle and accountability is all too easily deflected (Papadopoulos 2018).

This presents an important question that I tackle in this chapter: what happens *on the ground* when such a vast array of disparate actors are left to spontaneously develop, adjust, and mediate between divergent governing techniques in order to successfully implement PG&E's programs? The answer here contrasts the movement in wildfire governance following 2017 toward diligent and strategic cross-scalar and cross-institutional collaboration. Instead, the individuals executing PG&E's initiatives as well as those receiving aid needed to deploy specific biopolitical (a la Foucault 1976) rationalities, strategies, and techniques as well as develop distinct subjectivities in order for the programs they initially advocated for to flourish in their localities and to ensure their own survival, all the while steadying the utility's internal fault lines.

Characterizing a riskscape

Understanding the cross-scalar riskscape of wildfires involves attuning to not only its physical and spatial dimensions, but also to the dynamic social relations and practices, multiplicity of subjective perspectives, and plurality of overlapping risks that exist within the same area (Müller-Mahn and Everts 2013). Necessarily, scholars have appended analyses of power relations and temporality to the concept (Müller-Mahn, Everts, and Stephan 2018). These are elements that are entangled with people's everyday lives and the material arrangements of the non-human world. Riskscapes are culturally produced through the complex, multiple, and fluid ways people make sense of and represent risky settings. Such imaginings, in turn, produce social relations and practices. Importantly, different perspectives surrounding riskscapes are not evenly considered. Power relations determine the networks and actions that are mobilized to address a given risk. People are then afforded different capacities to interact with and shape spaces. Discourses, calculations, and visual representations of risk are oftentimes determined by experts who dominate political agendas. For instance, state maps visually display and temporally ground specific risk research, which reflects one interpretation of a riskscape that is subsequently acted upon. All the while other groups' discernments of riskscapes have no bearing on institutional decision-making and public opinion. Overall, grasping the complexities of a riskscape involves a context-sensitive, practice-oriented, and sociospatial analysis (Neisser and Müller-Mahn 2018).

In an atmosphere of climate change-driven emergencies and proliferation of riskscapes, novel political subjectivities—with new values, behaviors, concerns, and practices—arise from a desire to protect vulnerable, 'at-risk' populations (Grove 2014; Gaillard 2022). The formation of subjectivities is a complex phenomenon that grapples with when, how, and why—as well as why not—specific norms and practices are adopted during a given point in time. As Agrawal (2005) explains, this results from "variable combinations of politics, institutions, and existing subject locations, of technologies of government" (221). In this blurred delineation between the administrative and political, people's needs, desires, senses of belonging, and claims are hashed out. Their concerns and struggles are "expressed at a variety of material and symbolic, [embodied,] and affective registers" (Von Schnitzler 2016, 199).

As individuals engage with the evolving riskscape of wildfires, I trace how new forms of subjectivity, with novel perspectives surrounding vulnerability and political claims, emerge. Claiming rights to state—and I add corporate—provisions and becoming a legitimate or illegitimate recipient of protection requires making critical choices about how to position oneself. This may involve demonstrating vulnerability or exposure to risk in ways that are predictable, recognizable, and legible to the verification systems in use (Zeiderman 2016; Petryna 2003). What is unique about claim-making in this case is that it is mediated through the provision of technical artifacts—backup batteries—that are connected to, oddly enough, sociomedical programs operated by a utility. Subjectivities are shaped by the acquisition and distribution of these life-saving batteries, including decisions about who receives access and when. Inconsistencies arise as individuals carrying out PG&E's programs on the ground and aid recipients conduct qualitative risk assessments that, at times, contradict how the state quantitatively evaluates hazard severity and the utility demarcates boundaries of programs according

to its service area. While I will return to this topic, what is important to say here is that such perceptual, experiential, geographical, and temporal discrepancies provide fertile ground for subject formation.

In these convergence points, individuals grapple with moral dilemmas associated with the timing of battery allocation, determining access privileges, deciding when and how to intervene in efforts to extend battery capacity and life, positioning themselves for effective negotiation with the company, and navigating the broader sociopolitical and material landscape of wildfire governance. In other words, as the most "intimate recesses of life" (Grove 2014, 206)—traditionally the domain of kin and healthcare professionals—are subjected to scrutiny and involvement by corporate actors and their affiliates, new forms of subjectivity inevitably materialize. While doctors are conspicuously absent from this equation, scientists and experts from divergent fields (e.g., public-private electrical utilities) are now thoroughly woven into the loosely knit fabric of life and death decision-making.

In addition to exploring the aforementioned processes, several related questions regarding the formation of subjectivity could be applied to this riskscape: How and why do locals choose to self-regulate and enlist in neoliberal environmental schemes amid such risky and unpredictable circumstances (Spade and Willse 2015)? How and why do they commit to what Foucault terms 'technologies of the self' and tether their own bodies, identities, and consciousness to external power structures (Agamben 1998)? How do individuals overlooked by state interventions exercise agency and shed light on how deep their vulnerabilities truly lie? These questions are critical to ask because the line between who *must* live and who *must* die (Mbembe 2019), or whose lives *should* or *should not* be protected during both banal and extraordinary emergencies (Anderson et al. 2020), "no longer appears today as a stable border dividing two clearly distinct zones" (Agamben 1998, 122). It is this unstable border that the subjectivities unfolding in this specific riskscape are positioned to navigate. To prevent premature death, that is, an avoidable death that comes too early due to structural inequalities (Gilmore 2007), two types of fraught subjectivities emerged from the sociopolitical and spatial conditions of this case, which I elaborate upon below.

Emerging subjectivities

Moral intermediaries

PG&E's primary contractors can be thought of as 'moral intermediaries' who act as liaisons, implement their programs, and should be but are not always the first point of contact for individuals reliant on DME and AT. They bear the brunt of the utility's uneven labor distribution because they are morally committed to their clients. In other words, they help without pause because it is the *right* thing to do, even when they too lack medical expertise. PG&E takes advantage of this altruistic impulse and permits flexible self-governance in order to further remove itself from the management equation, particularly social service provisioning. Wanting to mitigate this liability is understandable given that the utility has been, for decades, blamed by the State of California for absurd development strategies, fire mismanagement, and being a significant contributor to anthropogenic climate change.

Through their unique perceptions of risk and vulnerability as well as continuous modifications of the material environment within which they are embedded, moral intermediaries simultaneously produce and are produced by local riskscapes. They conduct disaster risk assessments (i.e., tasks of

biopolitical accounting and prioritization) in order to illuminate the capacities of the households they serve and subsequently supply resources. In other words, moral intermediaries employ their disability-related expertise to inventory, distribute, and track resources like portable backup batteries, prepare in-home assessments, and make critical decisions about the order in which to assist people during an emergency; decisions that rely on spatial and temporal qualitative analyses of risk. As mentioned in my characterization of this riskscape, their perspective differs from the utility's interpretation of vulnerability, which is based on an algorithmic, quantitative assessment of hazards. A key part of composing this local riskscape is organizing time and space as well as directing bodies and behaviors in ways that alleviate harms during emergencies (Gaillard 2022). Consequently, moral intermediaries become the sole human faces that people who depend on electricity-powered medical devices encounter when navigating wildfire-related risks. Complaints about the shortcomings of each program and problem-solving are therefore directed at them, which enables PG&E to deflect accountability for any maltreatment.

Em-powered subjects

'Em-powered subjects,' who are referred to as 'customers' by PG&E and 'clients' by moral intermediaries, rely on life-saving and -sustaining DME and AT. As the prefix 'em' connotes, individuals with non-normative bodyminds are *brought into*[16] a position where they must persistently search for backup power. Their survivability depends on successfully proving reliance on electricity-powered medical equipment, neatly fitting into the parameters of each program, navigating an ever-growing labyrinth of actors and institutions, and speedily conducting embodied research while exchanging findings with peers. They mobilize on the basis of shared experiences, hopes, fears, and fates (Petryna 2003) and subsequently empower—as my wordplay suggests—themselves by building a collective scientific knowledge base and deploying political strategies. Their meetings, for example, involve learning about the specifications of technical artifacts like mid- to large-scale batteries as well as what to do with such energy storage devices at the onset of an emergency. The technological know-how needed to test the limits of batteries—with which people with non-normative bodyminds are intimately entangled—determines not just who is and can be em-powered, but who lives and dies during an outage, regardless of personal circumstances and actual bodymind capabilities and capacities. Put frankly, the duration of a backup battery's charge determines and temporally parallels the duration and quality of one's life.

Divergent interpretations of vulnerability

The examples threaded through this chapter demonstrate what is at stake for people with non-normative bodyminds and for those in supportive roles when misaligned understandings of vulnerability are acted upon. Mbembe (2019) raises three questions that are crucial to consider as I proceed with distinguishing between PG&E's technocratic calculations of hazards and moral

[16] As indicated in the introductory chapter, other examples include the following: embed, *bring into* a context; employ, *bring into* a workforce; and empathize, *bring into* another person's emotional state.

intermediaries' on-the-ground dealings with the material qualities of life at risk: How can we integrate life and matter into algorithmic reasoning? How are we to get to the reality of reality when dominant abstract calculations present one world among many possible worlds? Simply stated, how do we *know* in the face of uncertainty?

As previously noted, PG&E algorithmically defines vulnerability based on inputs of quantitative data aggregated by company employees as well as the State of California. Once the company's service area is delimited, it is overlaid with the Office of the State Fire Marshal's Fire Hazard Severity Zones (FHSZ) map, which is rated according to three broad tiers: Moderate, High, and Very High. Only PG&E customers residing within this bounded landscape's High or Very High FHSZ who have also experienced PSPS events and rely on electricity-powered DME and AT can attempt to make a case that they qualify as 'vulnerable.' The model driving the FHSZ map is described as "science-based and field-tested" (Office of the State Fire Marshal 2023). An important distinction is that its 30- to 50-year wildfire predictions depict *hazards* rather than *risk of impact*. Zone edges are the result of an accumulation of historical contradictions (e.g., urban encroachment onto the wildland-urban interface) and resemble intricately torn paper, as shown in Figure 1. Micro-scale changes due to various fuel reduction efforts like home hardening, however, are not captured in these irregular boundaries. Ironically, it is along such fluctuating micro- or human-scale edges that people are afforded—or not—the status of 'vulnerable' and where program implementors must make critical decisions about who or what to prioritize. Moreover, other vulnerability mapping tools, such as CalEnviroScreen, that make environmental injustices within specific populations visible are not used here.

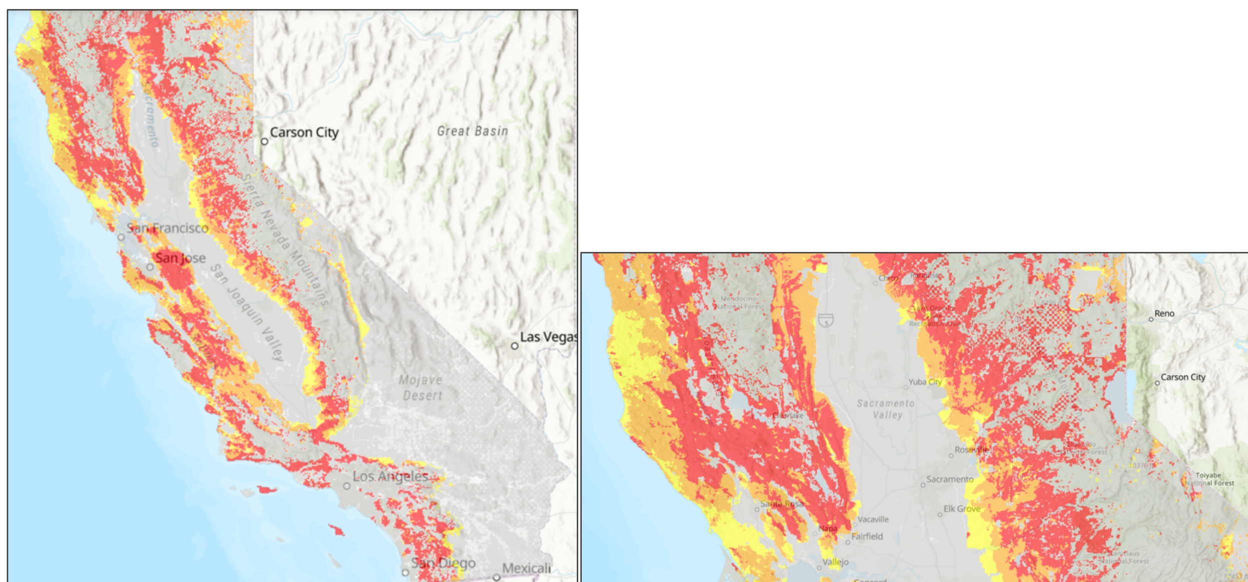

Figure 1: Color-coded map of Fire Hazard Severity Zones in state responsibility areas: statewide (left); Northern California (right). Osfm.fire.ca.gov, accessed June 15, 2023.

Such visualizations of delimited zones based on aggregate data harken back to what Collier and Lakoff (2008) call 'distributed preparedness,' which characterized Cold War civil defense

programs in the United States. During this time, unpredictable, potential targets and vulnerabilities were spatially mapped onto territorial administration. This approach toward modeling threats bolstered coordinated planning, while reducing federal intervention in everyday life. Distributed preparedness comprised 'emergency federalism' (i.e., regular coordinated planning efforts among local, state, and federal governments and unified command at the onset of emergencies) and 'vulnerability mapping' (i.e., techniques and procedures employed to map urban areas that are exposed to potential threats). The aim was to strategically develop mitigation measures, pinpoint resource needs, and delegate responsibility across public and private agencies based on their proximity to targets, evoking contemporary approaches. Emergency supports and services were provisioned during instances that overwhelmed the capacity of individuals and families to sustain their own well-being (Dauber 2012). Distributed preparedness not only produced new knowledge about urban life, but also opened up the fields of 'emergency management' and 'all-hazards planning' as it extended to other disasters such as hurricanes, earthquakes, floods, and as evident here, wildfires. Essentially, residual traces of this prior system continue to operate today, though in an altered form that usefully breaks down the dichotomy between state intervention and neoliberalism. This is evident when considering the ongoing involvement of FEMA in disaster relief, as it funds numerous neighborhood-led projects, while the State of California regulates the investor-owned public utility, PG&E, which collaborates with hundreds of non-profits and other community-based organizations (CBOs).

Present-day manifestations of distributed preparedness highlight the entrenched influence of Western scientific prediction, technocratic rationality, and bureaucratic reductionism in institutional thinking. However, these approaches often falter when applied to events or scenarios that defy forecasting or calculation, such as climate change-related disasters or the complexities of life itself. Cultural values are invariably integrated into the methodologies by which societies assess hazards as well as risks. For instance, such Western scientific understandings *of agency* presume that risk originates in an inanimate world, or *of causation* presume that risk is a linear phenomenon (Jasanoff 1999). By advancing a uniform perception of risk across disparate contexts, Western science eclipses alternative cultural and political factors shaping relationships with local environments. What's assumed is that science can ultimately teach people how to read environmental threats and challenges (Gaillard 2022). Vulnerability is too often interpreted by risk analysts who consider 'at-risk' individuals and populations as passive objects along the trajectory of a given hazard, rather than by affected people's self-perceptions that are rooted in distinct histories, places, and forms of social connectedness (Lakoff ed. 2010). This is the very discrepancy that arises within a neoliberal context when individuals are expected to fend for themselves and their communities, as they are best positioned to assess and communicate their unique circumstances. Yet, these circumstances may not always align with data generated by governments or corporations concerning hazards, risk, and vulnerability, which inform decisions regarding the allocation of resources and services. Postmodernist theory and feminist environmentalism have long criticized the so-called 'objectivity' and 'neutrality' of this interpretation within environmental science (Agrawal 2005), along with numerous other thinkers across fields, such as Hayek in the realm of economics.

On the flip side of statistical reasoning, PG&E's moral intermediaries define vulnerability flexibly by focusing their attention on the risk of impact to their specific clients. The mapped FHSZ

boundaries coupled with PG&E's program divisions and eligibility parameters may direct their attention, but do not restrict their efforts. Instead, they deem *any* person 'vulnerable' who depends on electricity to sustain DME or AT, regardless of whether or not their residence maps neatly onto official service areas. The actions of moral intermediaries are driven by their own qualitative interpretations of vulnerability and degree of risk, which are also rooted in expertise and take into account both spatial and temporal factors such as people's geographic distance from evacuation routes and essential facilities as well as the capacity of their life-saving DME and AT to function with dwindling power. Some markers of difference such as race and gender seldom enter this prioritization equation. Other socioeconomic categories that are typically associated with vulnerability like class, though, are purposely left out because they do not account for nuances such as out-of-pocket disability-related expenses. Put another way, one's reported income might not adequately reflect their financial in/stability.

To policy-oriented disability rights advocates (e.g., individuals affiliated with statewide nonprofits), vulnerability is contingent upon one having the resources one needs to safely and comfortably navigate *everyday* life. The way people shift in and out of vulnerability temporally, or *become* vulnerable, parallels the provisioning of life-sustaining and -saving resources. Here, service and resource provisions are considered in the context of deeply-rooted systemic issues and social norms. Each of these approaches toward defining, negotiating, and reifying what vulnerability means creates unique affordances and constraints in practice that affect the lives of individuals with non-normative bodyminds who rely upon DME and AT. The remainder of this chapter offers an analysis and series of illustrative vignettes from interviews and conversations that shed light on the way such aligned and mismatched understandings of vulnerability differentially produce landscapes of suffering—or thriving—among individuals whose lives are most at stake during wildfire and PSPS events.

THE FORMATION OF A PARTNERSHIP

An emergence of three programs

"People with disabilities, they are gonna be hurt really bad"
~Independent Living Center Program Director

In August of 2022, I spoke with Heather, an older white adult who relies on battery power and is a national disability rights advocate, about PG&E's 2019 PSPS events and efficacy of the Medical Baseline Program. "They [PG&E] were blamed, rightly so, for not mitigating the things that they've been asked to mitigate for over 10 years or more," she began, "you can read all of this in CPUC [California Public Utilities Commission] testimony." Indeed, in May of 2021 the CPUC ruled that PG&E violated Public Utilities Code Section 451 during their 2019 power shutoffs (State of California Public Utilities Commission 2021). The report states the following:

> We find violations with respect to the failure of PG&E's website, which was unavailable or non-functional during the majority of the duration of the PSPS event, inaccuracy of its online outage maps, inaccessibility of its secure data transfer portals to its public safety partners, and PG&E's failure to provide advanced notification of

de-energization events to approximately 50,000 customers and 1,100 Medical Baseline customers during the three PSPS events in Fall 2019.

The CPUC charged PG&E $106.003 million, 81% of which was credited to customers, leaving a net penalty of $20.003 million. PG&E shareholders were required to credit $6.4 million to impacted Medical Baseline customers and contribute $1.418 million to the company's Disability Disaster Access & Resources Program to which I will return.

Even still, Heather found this penalty inadequate to cover over a decade's worth of grievances. This is because PG&E had contracted with the California Foundation for Independent Living Centers (CFILC), a non-profit corporation that promotes access and integration for people with disabilities and coordinates across regional and local offices of emergency services and planning, in 2018. PG&E attended numerous meetings with their Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) coordinators prior to the shutdowns and was forewarned of the ramifications people with disabilities would undoubtedly face. An interviewee who holds a leadership position at an Independent Living Center (ILC)[17] clarified, "Back in 2018, when they [PG&E] basically said, 'oh, yeah, we're going to be doing this [PSPS event] that makes sure that we don't have any wildfires,' we raised our hand up and said, 'wait a minute, we work with people with disabilities, they are gonna be hurt really bad.'" "So when they started doing that," another ILC program lead shared, "people who were dependent on, say they had oxygen concentrators to pump oxygen in them, and without that power they can't run the oxygen concentrator. People were havin' a hard time, suffering, and so then they [PG&E] had to address 'well, this was a great idea in one way, but now these people were negatively impacted.'" Put bluntly, the so-called inadvertent social consequences of this technocratic fix were perceptible all along, and yet nothing was done. This dissertation takes these advocates' diagnosis seriously, as both political claims and an analytical lens.

In 2019, CFILC used their annual policy and education event for people with disabilities, held at the state's capital Sacramento, as an opportunity to survey over 400 people about disaster-related challenges and critical needs. Access to backup generators or batteries during power losses emerged as a key priority.[18] The costs associated with maintaining and continuously running a propane generator as well as restricted hours of use due to loud noise emissions, especially in denser neighborhoods, dissuaded CFILC from investing in this option.[19] Solar panels, another possibility, were also deemed too large, heavy, expensive, and unreliable.[20] In their negotiations, CFILC and PG&E determined that portable backup batteries, which could be transported in bulk, were the most financially feasible option. This choice also allowed individuals to receive batteries sized to their specific needs, given the variety available on the market. Following major power shutoffs later that year, CFILC began building relationships with battery vendors to explore options for securing backup power during unavoidable future de-energization events. They conducted user research on how well various batteries worked with *generic* DME and AT. These studies were not yet codified in CFILC's

[17] The California Foundation for Independent Living Centers comprises representatives from ILCs. While the foundation provides services to and builds the capacity of these centers, they are separate entities. 28 ILCs operate across California and are run by and for people with disabilities.

[18] 2020 meeting of a statewide disability advocacy group

[19] 2020 meeting of a nationally-funded, disability-focused group

[20] 2022 meeting of a group focused on people with disabilities during disasters (2)

contract with PG&E. Rather, the process was informally jumpstarted to ensure that the disability community's immediate needs were being met by the organizations they trust most.[21]

It wasn't until 2020 that CFILC formally partnered with PG&E to thoroughly survey over 500 people with disabilities—from the Deaf community, individuals who are Blind or have low vision, those who experience chronic health conditions and other sensory and mobility challenges, to individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities—about disaster preparedness, including PSPS events. 53% of survey respondents relied on DME or AT that require electricity. Among them, 40% were enrolled in PG&E's Medical Baseline Program, 32% were not, and the rest were unsure or left the question unanswered. Upon reviewing survey results, disability rights advocates proposed a program that would involve PG&E purchasing portable batteries and distributing them to individuals by way of ILCs. "Anybody with a disability who was power-dependent," they suggested, "could ask for [a battery] and they would get it free." By May of 2020, 250 batteries were purchased and distributed. But "that's a drop in the bucket considering the population," Janene, a CFILC representative, explained[22]

Ultimately, a cluster of overlapping programs—(1) Medical Baseline Program, (2) Portable Battery Program, and (3) Disability Disaster Access & Resources Program—were piloted or rebranded, which left liaisons between PG&E and ILCs responsible for detangling and supplying the provisions of each program to electricity-dependent customers.

Despite the careful delineations PG&E drew between these programs, liaisons had to act on their own determinations of what constitutes vulnerability. "I don't expect we're going to be able to help everybody who applied [for the Medical Baseline and Disability Disaster Access & Resources Program]," says Janene. The aim is to have statewide consistency coupled with local expertise and peer-to-peer knowledge.[23] While PG&E set eligibility parameters for each program based on geographic location, fire threat severity, exposure to PSPS events, and *proven* reliance on electricity-powered technologies,[24] liaisons—or moral intermediaries—felt ethically responsible for providing services to *all* power-dependent individuals with whom they crossed digital or physical paths. In other words, they blurred the boundaries of each program using their own discretion and prioritized the allocation of resources based on who they deemed most vulnerable both spatially *and* temporally—rather than using other predictors of vulnerability such as race, gender, and class. Their impulse to *help* vulnerable individuals meant working extended hours to bypass bureaucratic hoops, and in some instances, even strategizing how to limit their financial reliance on PG&E in order to more efficiently and effectively carry out their work.

What's the difference?

Based on these interactions, I analyze how the need for moral intermediation emerged from the political terrain of wildfire governance. But before delving into the specific ways these liaisons

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[21] 2020 meeting of a statewide disability advocacy group

[22] 2020 meeting of a nationally-funded, disability-focused group

[23] Ibid.; 2020 meeting of a statewide disability advocacy group

[24] 2020 Community Wildfire Safety Program of a Northern California-based county; March 3, 2021 Virtual Wildfire Safety Town Hall of PG&E for communities in Sonoma and Marin Counties PG&E

navigated a slew of parallel programs, it is important to distinguish each one according to PG&E's 2023 terms. In the following section, I differentiate the three programs and also outline their parameters in Table 1.

PG&E's customers who are dependent on electrically-powered medical or assistive technology devices qualify for the **Medical Baseline Program**. This program is entirely administered by PG&E, from the online application to soliciting proof from doctors that individuals in fact rely on medical equipment.[25] After grappling with the challenges of navigating to the appropriate channels—a task demanding some degree of resourcefulness and technological proficiency—those who qualify, 'the most impacted customers,' receive discounts on energy bills and early emergency notifications for *planned* PSPS events. Discounts are meant to address the issue of certain devices like continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP) machines requiring additional energy. Although a three day early warning is optimal,[26] alerts are not received if power is shutoff automatically by an Enhanced Power Setting System, a sensor positioned on a telephone or power line that detects heavy, fast-moving winds. These sudden shutoffs do not give people who use DME or AT enough time to adapt. This is especially dangerous if their battery has been out of use for a prolonged period and has therefore lost charge.

PG&E contracted with hundreds of CBOs to bolster participation in the Medical Baseline Program and extend its reach from medically sensitive customers to other Access and Functional Needs populations like limited-English speakers. According to their reports, the company also contacted tribal governments (Pacific Gas and Electric Company 2020). To secure a population of hundreds of thousands—enrollment in the Medical Baseline Program jumped to over 240,000 in 2020 (Pacific Gas and Electric Company 2021)—reaching out to so many parties might very well have been a means for PG&E to manage the set of expectations suddenly placed on it: demands to oversee a medical program that was misplaced to begin with. However, the involvement of scores of organizations providing community services, despite lacking expertise in battery technology, resulted in a tangled network where individuals struggled to distinguish their own roles from those of other entities. Moreover, uncertainty about where to seek help had detrimental effects on em-powered subjects in critical need of batteries. Moral intermediaries emerged out of this maze, for these were the very individuals who single-handedly rectified the inevitable deficiencies of the Medical Baseline Program, among others, across multiple counties.

Individuals who qualify for the Medical Baseline Program *and* live in a High Fire-Threat District or have experienced two or more PSPS events since 2020 also qualify for PG&E's **Portable Battery Program**, which was launched in August of that year. Customer prioritization is based on a data-driven analytical model that takes into account eligibility parameters for the program, energy assessments of medical equipment by way of scoring sheets, and 30-year historical weather data. PG&E formally contracted with even more CBOs, not including CFILC, to implement the Portable Battery Program and provide customers with fully subsidized, charged batteries that match their specific needs. As can be imagined, it was moral intermediaries who would later find themselves

[25] Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, a licensed medical practitioner needed to certify that an individual is in fact reliant on AT or DME that requires electricity. This requirement has since been waived.

[26] 2020 meeting of a statewide disability advocacy group

troubleshooting these unfamiliar batteries that were distinct from the models they were trained to jumpstart and the source of which remained unknown. As a reminder, the qualitative decision-making schemes employed by moral intermediaries to address arising hurdles associated with the program contrasted the official customer prioritization model generated by the company. When em-powered subjects residing in ambiguous zones of decision-making—where different understandings of vulnerability do not geographically or administratively neatly align—sought their assistance, moral intermediaries did whatever was within their means to help. Frankly put, despite it not being their official role, they instantly performed this supplementary, uncompensated labor of care.

Relatedly, this mixed batch of batteries came with instructional text that, due to its size, was inaccessible to people who have low vision, are Blind, or experience other sensory disabilities. These instructions were also not written in a way that could be easily understood by individuals with limited technical skills. Hence, the inability to locate the battery's source, even though a CBO had ostensibly delivered it to their doorstep, necessitated resolving any problems through embodied, trial-and-error methods. By 2021, 6000 of these assorted batteries had been delivered, accompanied by 11,000 completed energy assessments. However, unbeknownst to em-powered subjects, they would be responsible for covering the costs of charging batteries once the initial subsidized charge was depleted (Pacific Gas and Electric Company 2021).

The program moral intermediaries are actually contracted to operate is the **Disability Disaster Access & Resources (DDAR) Program.** Individuals who do not qualify for the Portable Battery Program are eligible for this one if they meet the following criteria: (1) live in a Tier 2 or 3 High Fire-Threat District *or* have experienced two or more PSPS events since 2020, *and* (2) rely on assistive technology or durable medical equipment *or* the power needs of their medical device/s exceed portable battery capabilities. Like with the Portable Battery Program, CFILC argued that income should not be a criterion because although people might appear to have higher incomes, their out-of-pocket, disability-related expenses are not always factored in.[27] The DDAR pilot program, which covers PG&E's entire service territory in California, was launched in April 2020.[28] It is funded by PG&E and administered by CFILC and partnering ILCs. Once the DDAR application is filled out, for example, it is channeled through CFILC's state-wide office and rerouted to the appropriate DDAR center (i.e., ILC). In other words, moral intermediaries are stationed at and conduct their work from ILCs. Although they are oftentimes the sole DDAR employees, their work covers multiple counties. As the program expands with an increasing number of participants—over 1700 energy assessments and 1000 battery deliveries were completed during the pilot run (Pacific Gas and Electric Company 2021)—a challenge arises: the DDAR offices do not expand proportionately. What was once a two- to three-day-long sign-up process has now been elongated with the significant rise in applications. In addition to handling this increase, moral intermediaries assisted over 1000 people in signing up for the Medical Baseline Program simultaneously (Kailes 2021). Among other resources such as hotel, transportation, and food vouchers, as well as individualized emergency plans, the DDAR Program provides portable batteries through options such as grants, lease-to-own, and low-interest loans

[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid.

(CPUC 2021).[29] The question left unanswered is how people with non-normative bodyminds—especially those facing multiple forms of socioeconomic marginalization—afford paying off such loans and leases, or refueling batteries provided by way of grants.

While enrollment criteria are distinct, the overlapping features across programs cause confusion regarding eligibility during moments of crisis. This is critical because each program directs where and to whom resources should be distributed during moments of urgency. Moral intermediaries face ethical dilemmas when deciding how to allocate limited batteries on the fly. For instance, when they confront individuals who are signed up for adjacent programs like the Medical Baseline Program, but not their own, do they provide the potentially life-saving battery at the onset of an emergency? Or do they redirect it to someone signed up for the DDAR program who is not in their immediate vicinity? With thousands of people reliant on and laying claim to batteries across these three related programs, the role of moral intermediaries becomes not only defined by handing out pre-assigned batteries, but also by negotiating the blurred boundaries resulting from divergent personal and institutional interpretations of vulnerability. This negotiation involves decisions about where batteries should go and when, thereby influencing the fate of em-powered subjects.

To distribute the services and provisions associated with each of these programs, PG&E set up nearly 250 Community Resource Centers serving over 50,000 residents across counties and tribal areas.[30] Though these centers remain open for the entirety of de-energization events, their hours of operation are limited to 8 am to 10 pm (Pacific Gas and Electric Company 2021). Participants in public meetings repeatedly voiced the same feedback: centers should (1) remain open overnight as some devices require longer or more frequent charging; (2) provide a safe means to deliver and pick up durable medical equipment once it is charged, without needing to stay on-site while it charges; (3) allow people to charge multiple devices at once; (4) address issues of privacy so that individuals do not feel like they are on display while using devices such as nebulizers; and (5) include spaces for children to play.[31] In sum, the issues being politicized extend beyond receiving immediate support and staking claims to batteries. They also encompass convenience and comfort in all facets of battery usage and maintenance, including for people who are kin to battery users.

Table 1. PG&E's program eligibility for power-dependent customers

Program Parameters	**Medical Baseline Program**	**Portable Battery Program**	**Disaster Access & Resources Program**
Who funds the program?	PG&E	PG&E	PG&E
Who administers the program?	PG&E	Local partners (e.g., CBOs)	CFILC and ILCs
What is its geographic reach?	PG&E's service area	PG&E's service area	PG&E's service area

29 Individuals who could purchase a battery on their own are encouraged to do so, but in the meantime will receive one through a short-term loan.

30 March 3, 2021 Virtual Wildfire Safety Town Hall of PG&E for communities in Sonoma and Marin Counties

31 2020 meeting of a nationally-funded, disability-focused group

Which Fire-Threat Districts are covered?	-----	CPUC-defined High Fire-Threat District	CPUC-defined Tier 2 or 3 High Fire-Threat Districts
How many PSPS events must individuals experience in order to qualify?	-----	Two or more since 2020	Two or more since 2020
How are individuals' power needs assessed?	Must be verified by a physician (prior to the COVID-19 pandemic)	Must be verified by a physician (prior to the COVID-19 pandemic)	Must rely on DME or AT, or the power needs of medical devices exceed portable battery capabilities
What services does the program provide?	1. Discounted energy bills 2. Early PSPS alerts	1. Fully subsidized portable batteries	1. Granted, leased, or loaned portable batteries 2. ADA-accessible car rides and hotel stays during a PSPS 3. Food replacement during a PSPS

Source: Data for this table was retrieved from pge.com on January 31, 2023.

Arising challenges

A jumble of partners

Even if the criteria for each program are distinctly outlined on paper, actors executing program goals on the ground and individuals in need of services find these divisions obscure and unsteady. While each program is seemingly assigned to different institutional actors, it is DDAR program implementors who bridge the gaps, take up the slack, and informally make decisions about how to redistribute resources across programs. "Medical Baseline has been around but every utility has been doing it differently," Heather explains, "So, even that's not uniform." Cross-enrollments, renegotiations of responsibilities, referrals, and resources like portable batteries perpetually circulate through state and state-regulated institutions, such as PG&E, in order to get the right resources to the right individuals at the right time. These individuals too must navigate a sea of phone numbers, websites, and personnel to legitimate their reliance on power in a timely manner in order to avoid premature death during a PSPS or wildfire incident. At the end of the day, a growing number of power-dependent individuals are funneled through ILCs and land within the purview of overburdened DDAR program implementors who single-handedly keep their program afloat and others from breaking apart. They continuously show up because their sense of moral obligation to their clients, ethics of care, and claims to expertise are tightly intertwined.

My conversation with Camille, a DDAR program implementor who is white and holds a graduate degree related to vulnerability in the context of disasters, illustrates the web of agencies and actors she regularly mediates between. Camille is frustrated with the jumble of partners PG&E has

enlisted over time: "The utilities . . . started giving contracts to all kinds of organizations, to do the planning with people who really didn't have the same kind of expertise that some of the disability-led organizations had. So that's kinda muddied a lot of the waters here." Over the course of 2020, PG&E partnered with 61 CBOs, from food banks and Meals on Wheels to ILCs, to support customers with Access and Functional Needs throughout PSPS events.[32] The company currently partners with over 250 CBOs.[33] Five providers ranging from CBOs to local energy suppliers, for example, administer the Portable Battery Program. Their lines of communication and service offerings (i.e., assessing the power needs of medical equipment and delivering correctly-sized batteries) directly overlap with those of DDAR program implementors. Moreover, some partners are affiliated with *income*-based energy programs, such as the federal Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program or PG&E's CARES program, which causes additional confusion about eligibility criteria.[34] In May of 2020, CFILC found that the majority of people who use electricity-powered DME or AT did not know whether or not they qualified for the Medical Baseline Program or about it at all.[35] It is no wonder that individuals who are eligible for multiple programs have difficulty tracking down the correct providers for support. While this maze of confusion is quite typical in the American system for support and aid provisioning, paying attention to the intricacies here, given the immense scale of what is at stake due to the severity and unpredictability of disasters, along with the cascade of issues that ensue, is vital.

Camille underscores this point with an example. She brings up an agency whose name she does not recall that helps low-income individuals by reducing energy bills. If these individuals use DME or AT they are passed on to her too: "Sometimes they [the agency] give out batteries, but they only have certain sizes so a lot of times they refer those clients to me. And even if they give them a battery they'll often refer them to me so I can help them with emergency plans and backpacks and supplies and other supports that they don't have." As Camille signs her own clients up for the DDAR Program she, on her own accord, makes sure that they also enroll in the Medical Baseline Program. And if they don't qualify, she signs them up for "vulnerable population notifications" so that they receive early PSPS alerts. Sierra, a liaison between PG&E and the DDAR program, provides a related anecdote. Through her conversations with users of DME, Sierra learned that one individual had to recertify their medical eligibility for a second backup battery through their DME provider—regardless of already being certified through their utility company—and then wait five months for it to arrive. She considers this a policy concern.[36] Heather agrees, "We would all hope that the DME providers would just do this of their own good, but we . . . know that the state is probably going to have to get involved."[37] California could be a test case for this kind of partnership, but backup batteries would need to be classified as necessary for DME in order for such a change to be enacted.[38]

Cory, a person of color with unknown disabilities or lack thereof and who operates the DDAR program at a different ILC, reminds me of the other side of the coin: collaboration and communication

[32] This support is also offered to "customers who come from indigenous communities that occupy significant roles in California's agricultural economy" (Pacific Gas and Electric Company 2021, 915).

[33] March 3, 2021 Virtual Wildfire Safety Town Hall of PG&E for communities in Sonoma and Marin Counties

[34] 2020 meeting of a nationally-funded, disability-focused group

[35] Ibid.

[36] 2021 meeting of a group focused on people with disabilities during disasters (1)

[37] 2021 meeting of a group focused on people with disabilities during disasters (2)

[38] 2021 meeting of a group focused on people with disabilities during disasters (1)

across partners, especially among emergency managers, is vital in order to avoid operating in siloes and circulating misinformation. He stresses, "We've got people with disabilities . . . Then we've got seniors. It's the community! Why aren't we talking!?" To enhance the efficacy of such partnerships, leaders in the field have offered numerous suggestions. These range from training county staff on access and functional needs and creating functional assessment service teams or 'fast teams' to developing 'memorandums of understanding' for cross-agency, public-private collaborations (e.g., with county and transportation partners, hospitals, managed healthcare plans, shelters, and so on).[39] Organizers must be nimble, one public meeting participant expressed.

While numerous institutional relationships have been forged in recent years from federal to local scales, as outlined in the introductory chapter, a failure of PG&E is not incorporating feedback like that listed above from different players nor helping them collaborate, Camille tells me. Like mentioned previously, given the utility's inexperience in domains related to public health and disability, coupled with its current legal entanglements, it is worth asking whether it is actually plausible for PG&E to manage this new set of expectations; demands that concern the security of an entire power-reliant population and are being struggled over through the procurement and circulation of batteries. Although group dynamics are the focal point of the following chapter, it is important to underscore here that some progress *is* being made. FEMA, for example, works directly with local Red Cross regions and chapters that now have Disability Integration Leads.[40] The California Department of Aging collaborates with the state's Office of Emergency Services and persistently seeks connections to disability resources "to make sure that there's no wrong door for emergency information."[41] A goal of the state governor's Office of Access and Functional Needs is to identify and subsequently integrate people's needs into every facet of California's emergency planning and management.[42] CFILC representatives have set up their own collaborations with smaller-scale utilities, medical companies, funders for additional batteries, and other instrumental facilities.[43] Not long ago, Sierra built a relationship with Holiday Inn Express to establish a single rate for incoming clients.[44] Conversations about partnering with senior centers also transpire during neighborhood-based public meetings.[45] Cory recently learned that someone had a fleet of accessible buses that could be used for a full evacuation. For these reasons, he emphasizes the importance of making such connections.

Yet not all potential partners play nice. Certain critical players like healthcare plan providers have succeeded in staying under the radar of institutional collaboration. Conversations abound during public meetings about the role of managed healthcare plans in ensuring that members who are reliant on electricity are met with care during disasters.[46] Heather is a proponent of de-siloing healthcare plan providers and offloading some of the responsibilities associated with provisioning batteries onto

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[39] 2020 webinar of California Governor's Office of Emergency Services (CAL OES), Department of Aging; 2020 meeting of a nationally-funded, disability-focused group

[40] 2021 stakeholder call of FEMA, Office of Disability Integration and Coordination (1); 2022 meeting of a group focused on people with disabilities during disasters (2)

[41] 2020 webinar of CAL OES, Department of Aging

[42] Ibid.

[43] 2022 meeting of a group focused on people with disabilities during disasters (2)

[44] These costs are covered by the program. 2021 meeting of a group focused on people with disabilities during disasters (1)

[45] 2022 meeting of a community group focused on neighbors helping neighbors

[46] 2020 webinar of CAL OES, Department of Aging

them.[47] This too is a policy matter. Heather advocates for changes in state contracts with public healthcare plans in order for them to include emergency preparations, from evacuations to transportation services.[48] So far, Sierra has had no luck in convincing medical providers to obtain and deliver additional backup batteries.[49]

During cycles of power outages and surges, communication wires cross not only between CBOs and customers, but CFILC representatives also have a hard time exchanging messages with PG&E itself. "Because everything is happening so quick, the power is going off, not going off, it's going off for this long," one representative explains, "and then . . . we started getting feedback [that people] weren't listening because there was so much messaging and they didn't even know what to believe anymore."[50] Individuals began discounting PG&E's messages and those of partnering organizations even as intermittent power surges caused problems with critical devices, such as oxygen concentrators.[51] In parallel with power outages, information flows were also short-circuited. What this elucidates is that those with non-normative bodyminds are perpetually teetering on the brink of entrusting their lives to a profit-driven utility (i.e., PG&E) that is overridden with half-baked partnerships and perpetually playing telephone, *or* disengaging.

"When they don't have things flowing well at the top . . .
it kinda makes us suffer at the bottom" ~Camille

Overlaps and gaps across programs, reorganization, and contract changes have become more prevalent in recent years as people who hold leadership positions at PG&E have left the company. This perception of failure must, however, be considered alongside the normative rationalities (i.e., decisions and practices) that legitimated PG&E's spearheading of programs aimed at resolving sociomedical challenges to begin with. Shaky leadership hinders the ability of DDAR program implementors to deliver supports to clients, and requires them to complete dozens of trainings. "When they don't have things flowing well at the top and they have turnover and new players and new ideas, it kinda makes us suffer at the bottom trying to do our job," Camille points out. For instance, the company took longer than expected to revamp their contracts with ILCs, she tells me. Camille discovered this delay after handing out the last of her tangible resources. As a result, people had to wait months to receive the supplies they needed. "Each year it's like a different program . . . and different rule for how they [PG&E] give the batteries and what they do," she complains, "and it seems like a different person running it every year." Camille offers another example:

> Out of the blue all of a sudden they'll say, "Okay stop [giving] out batteries all together" and I'm on my ramp to board and deliver batteries and I have to tell my client, say "I have to wait." And then all of a sudden, "Okay you can start handing out batteries again." And then when I'm able to finally get supplies, I started ordering

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47 2021 meeting of a group focused on people with disabilities during disasters (1)
48 2021 meeting of a group focused on people with disabilities during disasters (3)
49 2021 meeting of a group focused on people with disabilities during disasters (1)
50 2020 meeting of a nationally-funded, disability-focused group
51 Ibid.; 2020 webinar of CAL OES, Department of Aging

supplies in August, have to have everything spent by September [she laughs ironically].”

It’s crucial to note that this wait can significantly increase the risk of suffering and death for her clients, especially during back-to-back PSPS events that can extend beyond a week’s time and are already accompanied by supply crises that impact more than just batteries. In past cases, deliveries of oxygen to replenish tanks in residential as well as medical facilities like nursing homes were halted. In some instances, only a single pharmacy was in operation, which made it extremely difficult for individuals to obtain critical medication.[52] These compounding resource shortages underscore the need for programs like DDAR to run as seamlessly as possible.

The dire consequences of inaction

“For some electricity is a matter of life and death and for others it’s a matter of quality of life” ~ Janene

To begin this section, I turn to Agamben’s (1998) distinction between bare life (Homo Sacer) and sacred life (Zoe). ‘Bare life’ refers to those who could be killed without legal or political ramifications, whereas ‘sacred life’ to those who hold political and ethical significance and are valued as such. “Every society sets this limit; every society,” states Agamben, “decides who its ‘sacred men’ will be” (139). In other words, this demarcation is not fixed. While a sacred life cannot be sacrificed, it could nevertheless be killed. When emergency becomes the rule—as I argue it has in this case—“the so-called sacred and inalienable rights of man show themselves to lack every protection” (126). Decisions about the value or non-value of life are made in both profane and banal ways, and to an unprecedented degree, without retribution. Put differently, some bodies are deemed ‘worthy’ of life while others are ‘disposable’ to death. In his theory of ‘necropolitics,’ Mbembe (2019) states that bodies are valued according to these dualistic qualifiers and, thus I add, positioned in relation to hazards. In their research on the construct *and* reality of ‘embodiment,’ Krieger and Smith (2004) point out that such social influences are literally manifested in physical characteristics, thereby impacting health outcomes and contributing to societal health disparities. In this way, the body becomes a cultural artifact and political entity that gathers and absorbs experiences structured by various interconnected elements of social positioning and inequality on a daily basis. “Neoliberal capitalism has left in its wake a multitude of destroyed subjects, many of whom are deeply convinced that their immediate future will be one of continuous exposure to violence and existential threat,” Haritaworn, Kuntsman, and Posocco concur (2013, 115).

Butler (1993) and Spade and Willse (2015) describe how regulatory norms sort populations into those that matter and are therefore protectable and those that are abject and therefore consigned to ‘uninhabitable’ zones of social life. They produce ways of living that count as life in contrast to ways of living that are unintelligible and unworthy of being saved. Jampel (2018) too argues that ableism, a system that oppresses people with non-normative bodyminds, perpetually positions

[52] 2020 meeting of a nationally-funded, disability-focused group; 2020 webinar of CAL OES, Department of Aging; 2020 meeting of a statewide disability advocacy group

individuals who are considered deviant, unproductive, and invalid as 'out of place.' Even the environmental justice movement conflates the desire for healthy environments with a desire for healthy, idealized, 'normal' bodies. The act of naming 'ableism' pushes against this normative rationality, thereby politicizing bodymind differences and serving as a basis for making claims to protections and resources. Questions of life and death sit at the forefront of disasters. When emergency planners convey the impossibility of accounting for everyone during disastrous times, the subtext of this sentiment, Weibgen (2015) argues, is that it is okay to value lives differently. Keeping the necropolitical in mind, below I describe how people with non-normative bodyminds who necessitate DME and AT are passed on from agency to agency when seeking support services. Those who are persistent, bureaucratically and technologically resourceful, and have time to spare, might get hold of tangible aid. Those who do not possess these qualities are essentially left to die in the hands of a system where accountability is so diffused, it is rendered invisible.

Countless individuals who are critically reliant on power wind through a multitude of channels before arriving at PG&E's programs. On many occasions, they are unaware of the company's offerings when first seeking help, despite all promotional efforts. A white, national disability rights advocate who I'll call Dane puts it bluntly: "I don't know [about how DDAR and Med Baseline are connected]. If I don't have power for an hour or four hours or a day, I'm not gonna die. Some people will, and that's who they need to make sure gets power in those situations." It is important to note here that "they," the responsible party, remains undefined. Janene echoes this point during a public meeting: people *become* vulnerable when they don't have what they need for everyday life. "For some, electricity is a matter of life and death and for others it's a matter of quality of life," she pointedly states. "The second you take away our ability to use [AT and DME] by turning off the power," Janene continues, "that's what makes us vulnerable."[53]

To bypass the maze of unrecognizable organizations, individuals with non-normative bodyminds often make themselves known through familiar national-, state-, and county-wide resources such as 2-1-1, a phone number designated by CPUC that connects people to essential community services. Due to the influx of calls in recent years, PG&E formally partnered with 2-1-1. Now ILCs and 2-1-1 use the same screening questions and share a database.[54] Both Camille and Cory consider this a great move on the company's part, but at the same time recognize the pitfalls of not communicating emerging collaborations with all of the players involved—a seemingly constant problem. "[This partnership] hampered people in another way," Camille says, "because they're [PG&E] communicating with 2-1-1 what they want them to do, not realizing they're replicating what we already do and not sharing with us that they're introducing 2-1-1 to do the same thing."

Janene explains that many people who claim to have a plan also rely on calling 9-1-1, the universal emergency phone number in the United States. "We had to say, again and again, that's not a good plan," she resolutely states, "One, we're in the middle of fire season. So if your plan is to call 9-1-1 and then a major fire breaks out, and those ambulances or first responders are busy fighting fires, you're not going to get your needs met." Meeting those needs might mean not only evacuating to a hotel room, but also—to the degree possible—recreating the accessibility features integrated into

[53] 2020 meeting of a statewide disability advocacy group

[54] 2020 meeting of a nationally-funded, disability-focused group

one's home environment, such as a properly adjusted bed height that enables getting in and out independently.[55] Moreover, the availability of hotel rooms isn't always known or communicated in advance. These rooms can be limited because first responders, including PG&E employees who fix powerlines, are housed there as well. During a public meeting, Camille comments that most of the local motel and hotel rooms where she wanted to take her clients were already reserved for PG&E crew members fixing power lines.[56] Cory informs me about the uncertainty of hotel rooms, in terms of supply and demand. When there is indication of an upcoming PSPS, he asks clients to notify him immediately about any lodging needs. "Let me know right away so we can get you into a hotel room before the nighttime," he tells people, "we don't want to do that during the night, and we've done it . . . It's not fun." Not only are hotels and motels packed during evacuations, animals are not always permitted on the premises, which prevents people from wanting to leave their homes. It's restrictions such as this that individuals remain unaware of in their attempts to navigate a labyrinth of familiar, yet ultimately incorrect channels.[57] Checking the availability of hotel rooms, surveying and aligning accessibility features, and so forth are critical services that neither 2-1-1 nor 9-1-1 operators can provide.

Individuals also self-identify and voluntarily sign up for national emergency registries for people with disabilities in order to receive targeted assistance during emergencies and disasters from city and county personnel (United States Department of Homeland Security 2024). Heather has been an outspoken critic of such registries. "A lot of jurisdictions feel the only thing they need to do is create an emergency registry," she explains, "Don't create these magical things with their empty promises!" While they're easy to create, jurisdictions don't use them Heather tells me, "they don't have the resources for the so-called response they say they'll provide." People are convinced to sign up for registries and think, "'Oh, I've solved the problem . . . I've signed up for help . . . I don't need to do anything else . . . no planning, nothing . . . they're gonna come get me and take care of it.'" "Well I think what they do is they divert people's attention," she pointedly states.

To steer individuals in the direction of their programs, PG&E aims to get marketing materials into the hands of difficult-to-reach populations, an issue and set of conversations I will revisit in subsequent chapters through the lens of critical discourse analysis. Their success in doing so, however, has been unsteady.[58] At a neighborhood-scale public meeting, for example, a participant mentions passing a booth promoting the Medical Baseline Program: "The community didn't seem to understand what you [the person manning the booth] were offering."[59] Another participant contributes to the conversation, "We can help amplify your message. Again we're trying to reach folks who are most vulnerable." Medical Baseline Program marketing does not reach folks with disabilities well, participants agree.[60] To expand PSPS communications to non-English languages, including Indigenous languages, and American Sign Language, PG&E has partnered with multicultural media organizations and in-language CBOs (Pacific Gas and Electric Company 2021).

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[55] Ibid.
[56] 2022 meeting of a group focused on people with disabilities during disasters (1)
[57] Ibid.
[58] 2021 meeting of a network focused on people with disabilities during disasters
[59] 2022 meeting of a community group focused on neighbors helping neighbors
[60] Ibid.

In a perfect world, each program (i.e., Medical Baseline, Portable Battery, DDAR) matches and channels individuals to appropriate personnel and resources. However, in practice people are routed and rerouted through a loosely structured network of actors and institutions in order to draw attention to their circumstances. The effects of extreme and complete decentralization are driven by PG&E's desire to accumulate capital, yet even that operation is malfunctioning. The path individuals take depends on their entry point. In other words, the information they have access to determines who receives their call or application first. The speed at which they receive critical aid is determined by how neatly their needs, and expression of those needs, fit within the parameters of each program. Some power-dependent individuals find themselves on a circuitous path that may or may not lead to the resources they need to survive. If they are lucky, though, and a DDAR program implementor is on the other end of the line, they will receive adequate supplies in a timely manner, whether or not they are formally recognized as eligible.

MORAL INTERMEDIARIES

The construction of moral intermediaries

What the examples above, and those below, demonstrate are the ways in which a state-regulated institution, PG&E, mobilizes not only the expertise but also altruism of individuals operating the DDAR program. By offloading their governing techniques and bureaucratic operations onto people like Camille and Cory who are already morally driven and personally accountable to power-dependent individuals, PG&E can take a laissez faire approach toward inspecting the legitimacy of hundreds of applications. While this enables the company to deflect responsibility for any shortcomings of their initiatives, it also gives DDAR program implementors the freedom of flexibility. The company's goal—which, according to Cory, they achieved—is to have one full-time employee running the DDAR program in each ILC. PG&E explicitly states that customer prioritization ultimately falls in the hands of these employees in order to ensure "a simple, streamlined customer experience that meets local community needs and does not require capital outlay from participating customers" (Pacific Gas and Electric Company 2021, 875). In other words, governing techniques can be molded to fit individuals' needs, regardless of application status, eligibility, and program divisions. The differences between each program are not fixed.

PG&E can rely on moral intermediaries to self-govern because of the generosity they display toward their clients and severity of the stakes at hand, despite problems such as understaffing. Time and again moral intermediaries attempt to increase their personal capacity to address the needs of *all* locals who require assistance within their purview. Rescuing people with disabilities, or 'the right to be rescued,' during emergencies is not just a moral imperative, but one that is legal as well. With wildfires and PSPS events on the rise, moral challenges will *need* to be met with such altruistic actions. Lawsuits (e.g., those acquired by PG&E) should not be the sole motivators of doing what is right, Weibgen (2015) argues, as they cannot replace our own consciences. The type of on-the-ground emergency response—which is infused with the language of community and participation—deployed by moral intermediaries, upholds existing power structures. For example, DDAR program implementors are *self*-organized, *self*-reliant, and *self*-sufficient. While it is imperative to gauge residents'

ability and readiness to adapt to disasters, the illusion of complete autonomy and independence also becomes a justification for state austerity measures. As governments transfer their own responsibilities as well as resource and service provisions onto non-governmental actors, they provoke complaints about state abandon (O'Grady and Shaw 2023), which too are shouldered by moral intermediaries who become the local face of their respective ILCs, CFILC, and PG&E. The results are compartmentalized roles among stakeholders and 'responsibilized' citizens [here I include DDAR program implementors] left to fend for themselves" (Zeiderman, 2016, 205). That said, O'Grady and Shaw indicate that actors who feel abandoned are oftentimes working with many state resources that they do not recognize as such. In the context of wildfires, these resources span emergency alerts and warnings, evacuation routes and shelters, firefighting crews, financial assistance, and even community-based programs like Fire Safe Councils.

Moral intermediaries act on their own perceptions of vulnerability and administer resources accordingly. They cast their net widely, even if it falls outside of a Tier 2 or 3 High Fire-Threat District or PG&E's service area, because any mishap could cost a client their life within minutes—whether a doctor has verified their reliance on an electricity-powered medical device or not. In other words, they alter the governing rationalities they operate within. Even still, many power-dependent individuals fall under the institutional radar. "If I don't know about them I can't help them," Camille reminds me. A crucial role of DDAR program implementors is deciphering who will be a recipient of their altruism––their affective labor and caregiving—at any given time; whose dignity they will prioritize and why; and through what moral calculations of risk they will make decisions about supplying basic needs. These determinations, or 'play of probability' at the border with death, are made quickly in the most mundane spaces (e.g., the home, the shelter, on the road, on the phone) where suffering is evident, codified, and thus addressed. At the same time, those on the receiving end of aid are obliged to correctly position themselves as well as take stock of and emphasize specific categories, symptoms, grammars, technical knowledge, and legal criteria in order to be recognized and prioritized as welfare is provisioned (Petryna 2003; Von Schnitzler 2016; Zeiderman 2016).

"The thing that's tricky," Camille expresses, "is that PG&E just doesn't look at all those details when they plan it out. They're just trying to show how they're getting batteries out there." Alongside the moral impulse of DDAR program implementors, PG&E presents itself as an equally benevolent player, albeit one that circumvents the arduous and exploitative tasks of intermediation. These tasks include spending off-work hours catching up on paperwork, delivering batteries, and transporting clients, all while lacking the time necessary to request overtime pay. These seemingly mundane tasks shift the political terrain upon which moral intermediaries operate and claims are made, as well as produce novel assemblages (a la Deleuze and Guattari 1987) comprising bureaucratic processes, techniques of caregiving, risk groups, forms of suffering, and so on. As Clarke et al. (2003) note, such assemblages can bring about new forms of "agency, empowerment, confusion, resistance, responsibility, docility, subjugation, citizenship, subjectivity, *and morality* [my emphasis]" as well as new sites of negotiation (185).

The following vignettes illustrate the typical tasks Camille, Cory, and others in similar positions carry out before, during, and after wildfire and PSPS events. In these vignettes, I underscore the

decision-making criteria, altruistic impulse, and moral imperative to act that these DDAR program implementors share, in spite of funding uncertainty and inconsistent top-down directives from PG&E.

Working amid chaos

"I'm operating like my own little miniature Emergency Operations Center" ~Camille

From 2019 onward, multiple CFILC and ILC employees described the transformation of their office into a full-on Emergency Operations Center (EOC) during PSPS events; an expansion of labor for which they were and are not adequately compensated. To understand the gravity of the situation, CFILC has under 20 employees with one DDAR Program Manager and three Program Coordinators that serve PG&E's entire service area across California. ILCs, too, typically serve multiple counties but comprise less than 20 staff members. Many do not have Emergency Preparedness Coordinators at all, while others—sometimes staffed by as little as four people—have vacancies listed for this critical position. This means that when these offices were transformed into EOCs, only a single person was directly trained in emergency management, while the rest possessed an entirely different skillset such as coordinating technology, housing, youth, community health, and so on.

Throughout four PSPS events occurring in a single Northern California county in October 2019, vast numbers of local government employees dedicated their time and energy to medically fragile residents. During the first PSPS event, 4000 (6%) of the 66,000 impacted residents were considered medically fragile; during the second, it was 1200 (4%) of 28,000; during the third, 3300 (3.5%) of 93,000; and the fourth, 2900 (3%) of 87,000. "I want to bring that up," a government employee states, "because we ended up diverting approximately eighty members of our staff to work with making phone calls and responding to clients [needing In-Home Support Services] . . . and other individuals who are medically fragile, and that was quite a bit of work on our part."[61] This overflow of work inevitably trickled down to CFILC and ILC employees as well.

Janene recounts the 2019 power shutoffs. Once the CFILC phone number—as well as numbers of specific ILCs—was distributed, over 1000 calls came in from people in need of support and resources across the state. In the midst of setting up another contract with PG&E earlier that year they had, thankfully, already purchased and distributed 250 batteries, as previously mentioned. "It wasn't something that was planned outside," Janene explains, "I didn't write, you know, how it was going to be done. We just made it happen simply because it was the *right thing to do* [my emphasis]."[62] Under these chaotic, unprecedented circumstances, ILCs received debit cards to pay for items they could not immediately afford, such as groceries, transportation, and hotel rooms.

Daniela, who is white with mobility impairments and holds a leadership role at an ILC serving multiple counties, also recounts the conditions at her office during a week-long power shutoff in 2019 when staff put in significant overtime hours:

> We kind of developed our own Emergency Operations Center where we had designated staff doing intakes for arranging hotels and transportations for distributing

[61] 2020 webinar of CAL OES, Department of Aging

[62] 2020 meeting of a nationally-funded, disability-focused group

> batteries, and then we also worked with volunteers for moving those batteries and dropping them off at people's homes. And then we had to do a sense of follow-up with people while they had the batteries during the PSPS events, including home visits to ensure they could utilize the stations properly.[63]

When Camille began her work in August 2021, less than 100 clients had enlisted in the DDAR Program, since its inception. In one year's time, her clientele increased to 400 and only keeps growing. Camille has over 300 individual emergency plans to finish. Cory, too, had 100 applications come through in a single month. "I'm operating like my own little miniature EOC," Camille exhaustedly states, "Really, whereas I'm in charge of the operations, the logistics, I mean everything. It's just me! . . . and then I have all the paperwork." What becomes clear is that the circumstances brought on by wildfires and PSPS events require substantial staff support that is unrealistic for a single DDAR program implementor to take on; yet, Camille persists.

A typical day

I ask Camille to recount a regular day's work. Her exhaustive list includes creating individualized emergency plans, handing out backpacks with emergency supplies, conducting in-home assessments and risk reductions, providing food vouchers, transporting people to hotels, delivering portable batteries, feeding people's animals, demoing how to build makeshift air purifiers, and responding during events when clients need assistance. With the inrush of client referrals, only a handful are entered into her computer system. Each file takes 20 minutes to two hours to enter and Camille feels perpetually behind; so much so that she has no time to reach out for support or make a contingency plan for when program funding runs out, which is uncertain. Whether or not government funding will be issued to support the DDAR program—the first of its kind in the United States—long-term remains to be determined.[64] As larger counties receive increased funding and staff support, individuals like Camille who work in smaller rural counties that may not receive DDAR funds for every large-scale PSPS event are strapped to do more with far less. "It's a set budget and that's gotta include storage for the batteries, my salary, you know, the travel, miles on the van, the equipment that they give out, all of those things have to come out of that same budget," Camille expresses. On multiple occasions, Camille mentions how much she'd like to hire and train another employee or intern to step up if needed. "They [PG&E] need to reorganize what it takes to run [a growing] program," she continues.

Camille offers a vivid snapshot to ground my understanding of the order of things during a widespread PSPS event:

> We had the power outage that lasted for a couple of weeks this last winter, the first half of the day I get to my office and I'm just taking the PG&E escalations or clients that are calling in, texting, emailing whatever. And then I'm loading the wheelchair van, which can take an hour or two depending on what I'm taking out there. And then I spend the mid-afternoon till late at night out there distributing things and helping

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[63] Ibid.

[64] Ibid.; 2020 meeting of a statewide disability advocacy group

> people. It takes a while just to get all your stuff organized . . . And sometimes I'm stopping at the Red Cross shelter to check on the clients [she makes sure to refer to the individuals she works with as 'clients,' rather than 'customers,' the term used by PG&E] or to pop up a table on the spot and sign people up for things. Sometimes I'm checking on my clients in hotels.

Camille strives to keep her clients with family members who understand their needs during a wildfire or PSPS event rather than transporting them to a Red Cross shelter, which she considers a last resort that induces additional trauma. To reduce clients' vulnerability, Camille prioritizes the following drop-off routes: (1) take the client to a trusted person who lives locally; (2) drive them to a friend or relative who lives at a further distance; (3) put them up in a hotel; and (4) bring them to a shelter.[65] Making such determinations takes not only a physical, but also an emotional toll because people's livelihoods are in Camille's hands. Her decision-making criteria, as well as that of others carrying out the program, is the topic of the next section.

Previously employed as a social worker, Camille also refers former clients to the DDAR and Medical Baseline programs on her own volition. It should be noted that while salaries for DDAR Program Managers are not currently posted on CFILC's website, which is the platform for job advertisements, DDAR Program Coordinators typically earn significantly less, approximately $43K to $57K, compared to social workers in California whose average salary ranges from $60K to $94K, as reported on glassdoor.com. In the open listing for a DDAR Program Coordinator, the stress level is listed as moderate, which greatly contrasts the levels of stress experienced by Camille. Similarly, although California's ILC websites do not currently display salary ranges for Emergency Preparedness Coordinators, glassdoor.com approximates this number to be $50 to $80K. Taken together, it is difficult to pinpoint the appeal; perhaps it lies in the autonomy, or, in Camille's case, her graduate degree in the disciplinary arena. In her work, Camille identifies individuals who could benefit from either program by setting up tables at emergency preparedness and other community outreach events. In addition, she pairs up with medical clinics. Building relationships with physicians and nurses directly—outside of PG&E's formal partnerships—enables her to further spread the word about each program. Visiting sleep study centers to locate people using CPAP machines is her next personal goal. In other words, Camille independently fills the promotional gaps left open by PG&E's marketing team. Cory amplifies involvement in the DDAR program as well by conducting and completing trainings. On top of such tasks, he helps modify congregate spaces, like shelters, that were shut down due to the COVID-19 pandemic. These spaces, along with transit vehicles, must now be not only ADA accessible, but allow for social distancing, says Janene. The list of modifications is endless.[66]

[65] 2021 meeting of a network focused on people with disabilities during disasters

[66] 2020 meeting of a nationally-funded, disability-focused group

Critical decision-making

Who gets what first?

Carrying out each program requires making difficult decisions about who gets what first. To offer an example, PG&E only opens up DDAR funds when at least 2000 people lose power. Spending for the DDAR program gets tracked in the Wildfire Mitigation Plan Memorandum Account, set up after California Senate Bill 901 passed in 2018 to regulate utilities liable for wildfire damages. CPUC not only monitors the account, but also determines whether PG&E's expenditures will be recovered, or alternatively, rejected. PG&E's approximate budget for the DDAR program is $4.5 million. It is therefore understandable that the company is cautious about when to tap into these funds because they will ultimately have to provide a solid rationale for why they should get reimbursed (Brekke 2019; Lee 2023). But while this approach may seem sensible from a broader perspective, it can lead to preventable hardships during smaller-scale incidents. During one wildfire event that Camille experienced, only 800 to 1000 people lost power. "They're way more vulnerable to the fires and being impacted but they're still spread out, not enough people lost power for them to open up this funding," she explains, "so is that fair!? It's just weird rules like that." Camille begins with the most outlying high fire threat areas and works her way back, "cause they're the ones most at risk." "I also prioritize people on home dialysis 'cause if the power goes out for them and they don't have a Yeti [battery] to plug into right away they have basically two minutes . . . to keep things running again," she explains. Next come people reliant on oxygen concentrators. When a PSPS or wildfire event occurs, Camille reallocates resources (e.g., batteries) accordingly. To address issues with program eligibility and resource distribution, she wants to pivot away from her financial reliance on PG&E entirely. She aims to take a series of courses on grant writing in order to purchase additional supplies and help *even more* people. During a meeting of a community group oriented toward neighbors helping neighbors, a participant echoes Camille's sentiment: "we need to have a priority plan in place to say 'this is what we should be doing as a community with our money,' not begging PG&E each year to take care of critical infrastructure."[67]

Cory confronts the issue of prioritization as well, especially when people live in areas where powerlines are impacted by Enhanced Power Setting Systems and can automatically shut down. "I will do everything I can to get them batteries, because the batteries will last four to six hours. Not a problem," he says. Cory asks himself whether people should be helped by his program who have not experienced a PSPS or live outside of a tier two or three wildfire area—the eligibility requirements to receive PG&E-funded resources. "The CPUC wildfire map has no straight lines," he reasons, "you might have a Tier 2 qualified area right around this neighborhood. And this [an adjacent] neighborhood is not a Tier 2. I've had people in those areas that are like 100 yards, 200 yards away from the line." The answer seems rather obvious; his moral stance is firm. "'Sorry, you guys don't live in a tier two area, I can't [help],'" he chuckles ironically, "I'm not gonna do that." For Cory, making the DDAR program flexible enough to account for people who reside just outside of CPUC-defined borders makes more sense. Camille agrees that many people are left out due to PG&E's constraints:

[67] Quotation drawn from fieldnotes taken during 2021 meeting of a community group focused on neighbors helping neighbors

"That's really nice that you [she references herself] help these people but . . . the neighbor next door doesn't qualify for any support." "Things like that are just not okay with me," Camille resolutely states.

Cory provides a different vignette, which illuminates how he prioritizes people in need of critical resources and services over himself by continuously taking on additional work despite an already packed schedule. While manning phones during a PSPS event, he received a call from PG&E asking him to contact a resident about their power needs. When Cory connected with this person, he learned that they did not live in his area, but offered his assistance regardless. This guy insisted on having his power turned back on, Cory tells me. He made a promise to check back with PG&E about this resident's power, but mentioned that it can take up to four hours. After Cory requested that PG&E turn the electricity back on, he reconnected with the man. Soon after PG&E sent a helicopter out to investigate the powerlines. This man had been trying to get a hold of PG&E for a very long time. Cory's help significantly sped up the process, even though he resided outside of the area that Cory oversees. The guy asked for Cory's direct line and expressed, "I don't care where you're at . . . you're gonna be my first phone call." "It's nice to have that," Cory admits. He reenacts another typical scenario for me, first speaking in the voice of a partner organization: "'They're [batteries] just enough to get them [clients] over that little hump. But they're going to be needing a hotel, can you work with them?'" Cory answers in his own voice, "Not a problem, we'll put them on our list if they have to evacuate, we'll get them in." Disasters don't have room for "no, no, that's my guy" kind of thinking, he expresses. Camille shares a similar sentiment: "This guy's utility provider is this guy and this guy has PG&E and they live across the river. They're both impacted. I can help one but not the other? That doesn't seem *right* [my emphasis] to me."

As I have shown, DDAR program implementors, or moral intermediaries, immediately employ a multitude of qualitative risk assessments and biopolitical governing strategies—from charting priority routes to deciding who will receive help first, surveying homes, inventorying DME and AT, enumerating and indexing batteries and other critical resources, and so forth—because they recognize that what is at stake are people's lives. When out in the field, moral intermediaries blur the rigid boundaries of FHSZ maps that PG&E uses to both quantitatively assess hazards and determine who fits within the eligibility criteria of their programs. Moral intermediaries, as I discuss next, also address the hurdles that arise when clients with non-normative bodyminds navigate the technical energy-storing artifacts (i.e., portable backup batteries) on which they depend.

The formation of em-powered subjects

Figure 2: Photo series of em-powered subjects in their homes with portable backup batteries distributed through the DDAR program. Individuals, some with kin, are photographed sitting or standing beside a Yeti battery. The people featured encompass a broad range of disabilities; some have tubes strung below their nose, while others use a power chair. They are predominantly older adults, of a variety of races and genders, facing forward smiling. ilrscc.org, accessed April 8, 2024.

The prefix 'em-' means bringing someone or something to a certain state. I use the wordplay *em*-powered subjects to connote how people with non-normative bodyminds are brought to a state, during wildfires and PSPS events, where they must continuously seek electric power in order to survive (fig. 2). At the same time, they are constantly put into a position where *empowerment* necessitates quickly learning about the technical specifications of portable backup batteries that run critical DME and AT. In other words, empowerment can only occur when the life-saving and -sustaining devices with which people are intimately entangled are em-powered. Getting there, though, requires navigating complex networks, peer-to-peer learning, trial-and-error experimentation, technological savvy, and ingenuity. The irony here is that this occurs outside the purview of formal institutions like utility companies whose main area of expertise is energy provision, rather than medicine (i.e., the Medical Baseline Program). Instead of addressing specific energy concerns related to the batteries they supply—a skill set that PG&E employees possess—the company oversees a sociomedical program—a skill set they *do not* have—and leaves troubleshooting up to people who rely on accessible products to stay alive. Understanding how this came to be requires briefly teasing apart the specific entanglements between medicalization, normative behavior, social sciences, economics, and public policy that emerged during the mid-twentieth century.

Foucault (2004) offers an illuminating lens into the 'new economy of the body' that circulated through Western nations following the Second World War when caring for individual bodies became a priority of the state. The politico-economic and sociocultural milieu of medicine shifted along with the technical, informational, organizational, and institutional infrastructures of health (Clarke et al. 2003). Medicalization—bolstered by biopolitical calculations and techniques—seeped through every avenue of life as a means toward re/producing a healthy and limitless labor supply. "The promotion of the healthy lifestyle [and the medical interventions needed to bolster it] became a rearguard action to reduce the exponentially increasing costs of redeeming chronically broken bodies in an ever-ageing demographic structure," Porter writes (2011, 214). People, therefore, had to accept and take part in this reconceptualization and reconfiguration of medicine and play their respective roles. Foucault's notion of 'somatocracy,' or a given regime that takes care of bodies and mediates between health and illness, can be used to describe contemporary assemblages of public-private agencies (e.g., PG&E) that have newly entered the medical field because of their liabilities for effective emergency management. Most notably, medical regimes have been corporatized, with private entities increasingly entering the healthcare sector. Yet despite the present-day involvement of countless stakeholders, the bulk of responsibilities for assuring well-being are still shouldered by individuals. Health, Clarke et al. state, is an individual moral responsibility that is bound up with access to knowledge and complex regimens surrounding self-surveillance, risk assessment, and so forth.

Important to note is that the provision of medical services—which now involves the delivery of portable batteries—is not only a matter of safeguarding individuals, but also a facet of entrenching societal norms and weeding out abnormalities and pathologies (Foucault 2004; Bhugra 2014). Health governance defines problems (Clarke et al. 2003). Crip[68] scholars, for instance, continuously challenge dominant models of disability such as medical and deficiency models. The *medical model* of disability,

[68] As noted in the introductory chapter, while 'crip,' which is an abbreviation of cripple, has historically been used to stigmatize people with disabilities, it has been reclaimed (by some) in recent years as a term of empowerment.

which is authorized by health care providers, case managers, government bureaucrats, and so on, considers atypical bodies as deviant, unhealthy, pathological, defective, and perpetually in need of classification and cure. Individuals rather than social conditions are treated (Kafer 2013; Taylor 2017). Relatedly, the *deficiency model* considers only what people with 'abnormal' bodyminds lack and how to return them to 'natural' states of being. "As a multifaceted and contradictory practice," Clare (2017, 76) notes, "[cure] multiplies into thousands of different technologies and processes. Each variation comes with its own cluster of risks and possibilities."

The aim of crip scholars, among others interested in the social determinants of health (e.g., Epstein 2004; Stonington and Holmes 2006) and 'dividing practices' that stratify risk groups (e.g., Clarke et al. 2003), is to expand how differences in bodymind capabilities and capacities are conceptualized. Their goal is to disrupt existing power relations where people who are classified as disabled are segregated and governed as subordinate citizens. 'Disability' is a fluid category embedded in systems and structures of power across scales. It is "a set of practices and associations that can be critiqued, contested, and transformed" (Kafer 2013, 9). Its problems are rooted not in individual bodyminds, but rather exclusionary sociopolitical dynamics and built environments (Taylor 2017). Hazards such as wildfires, and the biophysical and technical risks they engender, shed light on how vastly different impacts to individuals can be. Those who are unable to conduct embodied research and build adequate knowledge and competency in these arenas, for example, are not just *dis*empowered, but suffer great losses that are sometimes their lives.

In the following sections I illustrate how *flexible,* orderly subjects successfully manage, adapt, and perform wholeness amid recurring crises. Those who are *inflexible*, however, call attention to uneven circumstances in a public sphere where full participation is contingent on a normative body (McRuer and Bérubé 2006).

Technical artifacts, an intimate entanglement

To begin, bodyminds, batteries, and the devices they power are deeply intertwined and mutually dependent; they form an intricate entanglement of human and more-than-human worlds that must work together seamlessly during disasters when external supports are in short supply. Environments are corporeally bound (Agyeman et al. 2016; Pellow 2017). Material feminists note that the same bodily norms that can enable or inhibit a person's agency, influence relationships with the more-than-human world. In other words, "sexual, 'racial' and other [I add cognitive and physical ability] differences intersect and give meaning to [individuals'] interactions with their bodies and through their bodies with the world around them" (Davis 1997, 14). The body becomes a site for the complex interplay between social power and perceptible as well as invisible material agencies. Alaimo's (2010) theory of 'trans-corporeality,' where 'trans' refers to a movement across sites, is aimed at analyzing the inseparable contact zone between human flesh and more-than-human nature. The human is "always the very stuff of the messy, contingent, emergent mix of the material world," as well as of economic, political, cultural, and scientific networks (11). Bennett's (2010) notion of 'thing-power' similarly refers to the agency and vitality of non-human entities. Things affect bodies and social structures by supplementing or reducing their power. In other words, the material world is not a passive backdrop against which life unfolds. Rather, dynamic relationships form between humans and

the more-than-human world. This perspective ultimately challenges the deep-rooted human/nature binary. While acknowledging such entanglements is an epistemological and ethical turn in the Western world, Indigenous peoples have long since recognized that nonhumans (e.g., stones, thunder, stars) shape human lives (Subramaniam et al. 2017).

The field of 'somatechnics' further investigates the interconnections between embodiment and technology. "To think with somatechnics," Aizura (2018, 56) explains, "means understanding that the 'material intelligibility of the body (soma) [is] inseparable from the techniques and technologies through which bodies are formed and transformed.'"[69] Multiple fields can inform our understanding of somatechnics, from cyborg theory (a la Haraway 1985) that blurs the delineation between humans and machines and critical disability studies that explores how technologies shape and are shaped by non-normative embodiments to posthumanism, transgender studies, and so forth. A key lesson here is that bodies are not fixed; they can be reconfigured and reconstituted for different ends through the application of science and technology. Furthermore, these processes give way to a multitude of 'technoscientific identities' (Clarke et al. 2003). Technoscientific practices, though, are unequally distributed around the world (Subramaniam et al. 2017).

Through entanglements with technical artifacts like portable batteries, new intimacies are formed. This is especially evident in the context of emergencies where, in order to safeguard lives in the midst of future uncertainty, power must operate at a more intimate level (Grove 2014). Agrawal (2005) refers to such flows of power that make sites and behaviors more legible and manipulatable as 'intimate government,' while Petryna (2003) suggests that marginalized people are locked into an intimate relationship with authority figures. Following the Chernobyl accident, people continuously reengineered their bodies by trial and error to be legible and thereby protected by a post-Soviet biopolitical regime. Von Schnitzler (2016), too, comments that techno-politics are evident in more and more intimate spheres. As she discusses the social life of a prepaid electrical water meter in South Africa, it becomes apparent that this small technical artifact was a 'conduit of power' that shaped subjectivities and embodied practices. It mediated between locals' needs, desires, discontents, and the hovering political regime. "[P]repaid meters, like most technologies, are co-constructed with their users, that is both are adapted and produced in the process," Von Schnitzler writes (152). At this administrative micro-level, politics were materially, sensorially, and affectively registered.

At any given time, a vast array of multi-directional relationships between humans and more-than-humans are at play (Subramaniam et al. 2017). It is through these sociotechnical and socionatural entanglements that knowledge, representations, and ways of living in the world are co-produced. Put simply, science and society mutually constitute one another. Through the lens of co-production, power is conceptualized in ways that capture technical practices and material agencies. Co-production doesn't solely revolve around ideas, though, it is to the same extent about concrete physical things, Jasanoff (2004) argues. What's important to note, is that co-production could also amplify social inequalities, especially when some ways of knowing, doing, and being in the world are privileged over others. The intimate connections between humans, batteries, DME and AT, and wildfire-related institutions and events, as well as the inequities they generate, are highlighted in the vignettes that follow.

[69] As cited in Stryker, "Call for Papers" n.d.

People with non-normative bodyminds are tasked with handling the materiality of batteries, oftentimes on their own, which are susceptible to glitches, corrosion, damage, aging, and burnout, and necessitate endless technical maintenance and repairs. Despite the complex interconnections and dependencies between these individuals and energy-storage devices, batteries—PG&E's main solution—are considered a mere Band-Aid, planning recommendation, a tool for peace of mind that offers only *intermittent* relief, and are barely accessible at that. And still, the speed at which one can prolong a battery's charge and lifecycle, mend electrical faults, make modifications, and physically lift and relocate the object corresponds to the quality and duration of one's livelihood and suffering. Put bluntly, batteries are critical; yet, they are subject to fluctuating provisions and rendered useless if individuals without technical expertise cannot operate them on their own.

In order to study and secure a battery's functioning, institutional actors in the energy sector (i.e., PG&E) urge people with non-normative bodyminds to conduct embodied research prior to major wildfire and PSPS events and tap into networks that hold technical expertise on their own. These strategies are meant to empower people, but seldom do. Identifying which 'experts' to turn to and reaching them in a timely manner proves to be a challenge time and again; as does testing the capacity and limitations of batteries, and thereby bodies. More effectively, individuals empower themselves by turning to existing support networks at public meetings to learn about processes like setting up, running, and troubleshooting batteries. As I will describe later and in the following chapter, groups that focus on disability-related issues in the context of disasters hold regularly scheduled public meetings during which em-powered subjects can share grievances, consolidate and amplify collective demands, and learn hacks, such as how to make small and technical text on batteries legible. Such meetings comprise people with experience using batteries and adjusting them to deal with personal needs, who are not necessarily *formally* trained in their technical specifications and safety precautions. An important outcome of embodied technical research is learning to efficiently prioritize between bodymind faculties and their supportive devices, accordingly. The information exchanges that occur during public meetings aid people in making such critical choices by *informally* training them how to intermittently power as well as stagger charging different devises in order to prolong the life of a battery, and in effect their own.

Although individuals contribute to their peers' embodied knowledge base, the continual sharing that ensues in these spaces leaves many gaps unfilled, even for those with technological savvy and ingenuity. People with non-normative bodyminds are, in fact, so accustomed to being left to their own devices—literally and figuratively—due to institutional neglect, that creativity, adaptation, and innovation are skillsets they master out of necessity, and not just for self-empowerment. Gaillard's (2022) concept of 'capacities' recognizes the unique knowledge, skills, and resources people possess, circulate among kin, and deploy during emergencies. Wisdom, not just vulnerability, stems from marginalized embodied and cognitive experiences (Kafer's 2013). It emerges from non-normative ways of perceiving and interacting with the world, collectively reimagining environments, making intellectual connections, challenging Western notions of efficiency and progress, and forming activist coalitions. Cripping something, Taylor (2017, 12) writes, means to "radically and creatively invest it with disability history, politics, and *pride* [my emphasis] while simultaneously questioning paradigms of independence, normalcy, and medicalization."

Batteries are a Band-Aid

The sentiment that batteries are merely a Band-Aid echoes from public meetings to interviews and is shared across DDAR affiliates. Partnering organizations, like those mentioned above, continuously request support and send referrals to Cory because they consider Band-Aid solutions, such as handing out batteries, only effective intermittently. Backup batteries are classified as a *short-term* solution for customers who rely on *low voltage* DME and AT, rather than a long-term fix for those who need continuous power. This is why eligible customers receive short-term battery loans for 30 days or less. Long-term battery loans, or "grants," are reserved solely for those who reside in the highest fire threat areas and need not be returned (Pacific Gas and Electric Company 2021).[70] "[Batteries] are a resource to have in your disaster toolkit," says Clyde, an emergency response coordinator who previously worked for the DDAR program.[71] Redundancy is paramount because batteries could fail as a technology, he stresses. This point is made apparent when Cory attempts to demo a small battery at a public meeting and blows it out. This is a "perfect example of how it could fail," Cory says. Another meeting participant comments that this happens often.[72] Roxanne, who works with a DDAR team, reiterates: "Batteries are not a permanent safety solution. They are a tool, a resource. They are an overall planning recommendation." "These batteries are more for peace of mind than anything," she continues, "This is a small part of an overall safety and care program for yourself."[73] Sierra concurs that batteries are meant to buy time more than anything else.[74] "Batteries are a great solution for some but they're also a Band-Aid," says Janene. "What I continued to stress to everybody," she continues, "is that . . . we are not doctors and we are not first responders, and our program [DDAR] is simply a Band-Aid.[75] Although batteries are *the* key provision of every program, they are repeatedly described as an unreliable Band-Aid; and yet, this Band-Aid must hold strong in order to alleviate the suffering individuals with non-normative bodyminds endure, at times preventing death.

Technical specifications

"They're not your typical Duracell battery" ~Cory

Camille, Cory, and other DDAR program implementors face a number of roadblocks that they must quickly navigate surrounding the materiality of batteries and the complex interconnections between these technical artifacts and non-normative bodyminds. In the following sections, I describe the capacity and circulation of Yeti portable batteries, as well as how the lifecycle of a battery and duration of its charge parallel the length of time it can preserve and prolong human life. A continuous

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70 Individuals who want to purchase a backup battery can apply for a payment plan, such as the Freedom Tech Financial Loan program.
71 2022 meeting of a group focused on people with disabilities during disasters (2)
72 Ibid.
73 Ibid.
74 2021 meeting of a group focused on people with disabilities during disasters (1); 2021 meeting of a group focused on people with disabilities during disasters (2)
75 2020 meeting of a nationally-funded, disability-focused group

negotiation ensues among DDAR program implementors, their clients, and these technical artifacts (i.e., Yeti batteries), which pushes the limits of each.

"These batteries are not small. They're not your typical Duracell battery," Cory, who has become a sort of expert on Yeti batteries, explains. As shown in Figure 3, they range from approximately 1500 to 6000 watts, from 45 to 100 pounds, and can be priced as high as $6000.[76] "For somebody with a disability or senior to try to lift up 100 pounds, and trying to get that to a location where you can charge it. It's not going to work," Cory states plainly. Figure 4 depicts a battery's scale within an interlocutor's home. She tells me that rolling it out from the closet, where it has been sitting unused, to photograph was difficult. At one point, she thought, "A neighbor might need it more for the time being," but when she asked her husband if he'd be willing to transport it, he exclaimed, "I can't carry that thing!" At a public meeting, a participant similarly describes his attempt to pick up a Yeti 3000X battery. To charge the battery, he writes in the chat box, "I would need to get it to the PG&E charging station over 30 miles away! I have my own transportation but couldn't physically get the battery into my van by myself." He urges utilities to either provide accessible transportation or deliver and replace uncharged batteries with those that are fully charged.[77]

In some instances, residents with very high energy needs receive batteries that weigh upwards of 300 pounds (Pacific Gas and Electric Company 2021). Carrying the larger batteries up and down a stairway requires two or more people. Lugging batteries from room to room is yet another hurdle. In cases where devices located in different rooms need to be simultaneously charged, Sierra and her team try to distribute two batteries per household.[78] "There is no battery on the market right now that is portable and easy to use in an individual's home who uses multiple pieces of assistive technology or durable medical equipment," she states.[79] Whole house systems will be critical moving forward, Daniela adds.[80] "In a disaster when you have to do an evacuation, are people really going to be thinking, 'Oh, I should take my battery?'" Cory says sarcastically, "No, probably not. They're gonna leave them there. And they're gonna have to go to a place that has power that they can plug in[to]." It's not just batteries that need to be transported, he reminds me. Oxygen concentrators also need to be lifted and carried out of homes, at times down flights of stairs if elevators stop working, and into shelters or hotels during PSPS or wildfire evacuations. A greater challenge arises when elevators go out because wheelchair users must then rely on stairlifts to get out of buildings, and only one exists per flight of stairs. The entire operation "in itself is a feat!" Cory exclaims.

[76] 2022 meeting of a group focused on people with disabilities during disasters (2)
[77] 2022 meeting of a group focused on people with disabilities during disasters (1)
[78] 2021 meeting of a group focused on people with disabilities during disasters (1)
[79] 2020 meeting of a statewide disability advocacy group
[80] 2020 meeting of a nationally-funded, disability-focused group

Figure 3: Size variation of Yeti batteries: 6010 watt hours, 106 lbs. (left); 1516 watt hours, 45 lbs. (right). REI.com, accessed February 6, 2023.

Figure 4: Battery in em-powered subject's home beside their bed. Photos taken by research participant.

Preparedness is a continuous cycle of recharging batteries

At public meetings focused on disaster preparedness for people with disabilities, battery specification is a common agenda item. Put plainly, battery specs—including charging time—and usage determine vulnerability. PG&E provides a monthly 'Baseline Allowance' to individuals enrolled

in their Medical Baseline Program. This allowance allocates additional energy that can be utilized to charge backup batteries at the lowest rate offered under the customer's plan. Alternatively, qualifying customers could apply for a FreedomTech (Lee 2024) loan to cover extra energy-related costs. Once a device is plugged in, Yeti batteries analyze and show the draw of that piece of equipment, but it is not 100% accurate.[81] Furthermore, the wattage requirements of different devices remain obscure and can change based on product manufacturers.[82] Roxanne, the DDAR affiliate, encourages people to test how long a battery will take to drain with their DME or AT plugged in prior to an emergency because every situation will be different. This trial run, an embodied form of research, also enables individuals to identify and address problems preemptively, such as if too much power is pulled in an older home leading to a blackout.[83] "Testing, testing, testing! If it's a fire, the smoke could be hitting you, so you might need the power for longer for breathing devices," Clyde, the emergency response coordinator, presses the point. He offers an analogy: "It's like when you have allergies and eliminate everything and then introduce things back. So do the same when testing batteries. Turn it all off and introduce things back one [by] one." He also encourages individuals to track the results, to "really be scientists." These events are stress and anxiety inducing, especially at the time of their occurrence. Clyde therefore emphasizes that self-care, along with persistent trying and testing, is a critical part of the emergency preparedness equation. "We are all in this together, we may have different seats in this boat, but we are all in the same boat," he believes.[84]

Preparedness also means constantly recharging batteries. Upon receiving a Yeti, some individuals attempt to power their entire house during a multi-day outage and are surprised to find their battery dead within ten or so hours, leaving their critical devices uncharged. Others simply forget about them during moments of calm. "People, when they get the battery, they're so excited. And after a month they forget about them," says Cory during a public meeting, "Each month these batteries are draining power."[85] Batteries that have been sitting unplugged on a shelf at home or in a warehouse over a prolonged period of time lose their longevity. Keeping Yeti batteries with lithium-ion cells partially charged and storing them in moderate temperature conditions is crucial to preserving their capacity. This maintenance requirement adds to the overall expenses related to battery care. If a battery is fully depleted, it can take up to 25 hours to fully recharge, which can pose a significant challenge during a multi-day outage. Nadine, a CFILC representative involved in the DDAR program, describes a scenario where an affiliated warehouse group took out the power in their entire building when attempting to fully charge the batteries they stored.[86] Even a 12 lb. battery takes a substantial amount of time to charge; not just an hour or two like a cell phone battery, Cory explains.[87] People also forget about *all* of the devices they need charged. For these cases, Daniela keeps extra charged batteries in

[81] 2021 meeting of a group focused on people with disabilities during disasters (2)
[82] Ibid.
[83] 2022 meeting of a group focused on people with disabilities during disasters (2)
[84] Ibid.
[85] Ibid.
[86] Ibid.
[87] Ibid.

her office and hands them out informally. In spite of all this, the number of people headed to emergency rooms to charge devices during PSPS events notably dropped since 2019.[88]

Navigating technological, institutional, and environmental uncertainty

"It's your choice to keep your medication cold or to keep your CPAP or oxygen concentrator going" ~Sierra

Attempts to prolong battery life are made constantly by em-powered subjects. Successful strategies, hacks, and innovations are subsequently shared during public meetings; as are mishaps. "People with disabilities are the most I think adaptive and creative and engineering-oriented folk probably around," a participant at a public meeting expresses, "just out of our . . . life experiences."[89] For example, many DDAR applicants use CPAP machines, power wheelchairs, and oxygen concentrators.[90] A Goal Zero Yeti 3000X Lithium portable battery is typically allocated to individuals who rely upon these devices. A fully charged battery of this size powers a CPAP machine for approximately two nights. Camille, however, instructs her clients to use these devices sparingly to extend battery life for up to five days. During one meeting, a PSPS coordinator explains that producers of CPAP machines sell adaptors that can be plugged into 12-volt auxiliary power outlets; a cigarette lighter of a car, in other words. In an emergency, an individual could plug their CPAP machine into this port and sleep in their vehicle. And, manufacturers could make more money on this new product line, he notes.[91] Other ideas people share include purchasing a mini-fridge to keep critical medications cool during outages, rather than powering a full-size refrigerator.[92] At the same time, critical decisions need to be made about which devices to prioritize when time is running short during an evacuation. "It's your choice to keep your medication cold or to keep your CPAP or oxygen concentrator going," Sierra expresses during a public meeting, "obviously you're gonna unplug the refrigerator and when the refrigerator gets below refrigerator temperature . . . and your freezer is to refrigerator temperature . . . you move your medication from your refrigerator into your freezer and that way you can keep your medication longer." Heather draws a distinction between two categories that can help individuals make such difficult choices: 'life-saving' vs. 'life-sustaining' devices.[93]

Strategies like intermittently using devices, plugging in adaptors, purchasing smaller-scale products, and so forth do not work for everyone. Even a fully charged Yeti 3000X will not last long enough to *continuously* run an oxygen concentrator, for instance. A battery of this size also needs to be charged at an ILC or PG&E Community Resource Center during the day; an additional barrier for individuals to navigate. Table 2 indicates the time it takes to fully charge a Yeti 3000X as well as how long it will power an oxygen concentrator until it is fully depleted. It is recommended, however, that batteries be maintained by regular charging.

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[88] 2020 meeting of a statewide disability advocacy group
[89] 2021 meeting of a group focused on people with disabilities during disasters
[90] 2020 meeting of a statewide disability advocacy group
[91] 2021 meeting of a group focused on people with disabilities during disasters
[92] 2022 meeting of a group focused on people with disabilities during disasters (2)
[93] 2021 meeting of a group focused on people with disabilities during disasters (2)

Table 2. Powering oxygen concentrator with Yeti 3000X

Yeti 3000X Lithium Portable Power Station full charging time: **25 hours** (included power supply) **4.5 hours** (Yeti Fast Charge 25 Amp Power Supply) **2982** Watt-Hours		
Oxygen Concentrator (OC)	**OC Wattage**	**Battery Lifespan** (continuous use)
Respironics (small)	120 Wh	25 hours (approx.)
Inogen At Home	275 Wh	11 hours
Respironics EverFlo	350 Wh	8.5 hours
Invacare Platinum	585 Wh	5 hours

Source: Data for this table was retrieved from goalzero.com and oxygenconcentratorstore.com on February 21, 2024.

Simply put, in moments of desperation, barriers are endless, time is limited, and some decisions come at a great cost. For example, during a public meeting a disability rights advocate recounts people using their vehicles to generate electricity for DME and AT. The carbon monoxide emitted from their car killed them first. During traffic-heavy evacuations, individuals lost power when their cars ran out of gas and subsequently died.[94] Daniela shares an anecdote from the October 2019 power shutoffs. A man using an oxygen concentrator who received supplemental security income was running out of money toward the end of the month. His oxygen concentrator needed to be recharged every four hours. His truck, an alternative power source, used up more gas than he could afford. He was exhausted from driving around. Ultimately, by way of an ILC, he was taken to a hotel.[95] Daniela conveys the compounding desperation and needs people experienced during this time. One caller expressed only having six hours left in their oxygen tank, she says. They planned to lay in their bed without moving to conserve oxygen. Multiple people expressed dialing down on oxygen levels. CPAP machine users also called regularly. One stands out. A woman arrived at Daniela's office completely exhausted from losing sleep. When she does fall asleep, her breathing stops once per minute. She hadn't slept for multiple days, Daniela recalls.[96]

Despite the abundance of adaptations individuals with non-normative bodyminds bring to DME and AT, these devices do not come with safe emergency procedures, nor do they accessibly display serial numbers to reference during an emergency. Even batteries can be difficult to find because of how they are embedded within devices. The role of manufacturers and suppliers of DME and AT has been hazy, to say the least. "Many of us can't charge a battery if it's inside our device," Heather says.[97] Still, an emergency manager involved in PSPS planning encourages individuals to start with manufacturers. They sell products globally, in places with very limited power supply, and design most of their medical equipment to run off a lower voltage, he reveals. Paramedics use this equipment in the field and power it using their trucks.

Regardless of the inventive practices people with non-normative bodyminds, or em-powered subjects, already employ to survive, they are constantly tasked with tracking down additional actors

[94] 2022 meeting of a group focused on people with disabilities during disasters (1)
[95] 2020 webinar of CAL OES, Department of Aging
[96] 2020 meeting of a nationally-funded, disability-focused group
[97] 2021 meeting of a network focused on people with disabilities during disasters

like manufacturers, discussing and testing the technical limitations of batteries even when bodily risks are severe, researching battery usage in broader contexts, and ultimately building their own knowledge base and practices accordingly. They do so, though, with only limited assistance from institutional actors who have real expertise in troubleshooting mid- to large-scale batteries.

A digital divide

The other side of the ingenuity coin is hesitation. When people are hesitant to use batteries, they delay turning them on until the very last minute. In these cases, "Testing, testing, testing!" is a far-fetched recommendation. Those who are not as technologically savvy seek assistance at every stage when attempting to operate a battery. To do so, they must once again navigate a sea of actors who carry out PG&E's programs; a particularly difficult task when the source of a battery is unknown. Cory narrates a recent conversation:

> So last week, I got a phone call from this frantic, semi-frantic lady. She's like, "…we got these batteries from PG&E's Portable Battery Program." And so I get her information down. And she's like, "I don't know how to use this thing." And I'm like, "they didn't tell you?" They're [the woman and her husband] like, "No, they just drop it off." It's like they have this battery and another thing, it's called a Delta [rather than a Yeti]. I don't even know what that is. I'm like, "Let me sit down. I can show you how to do this in five minutes." . . . So literally, plugging in one little thing took five minutes for them . . . I didn't have a camera. I couldn't see what they were doing, this is all verbal . . . After 45 minutes of talking . . . and showing them how to use the battery, the husband, I can hear him in the background, takes his mask off and he's like, "can we have you on speed dial?" And I'm like, "you guys can call me up anytime you want. But I'm gonna be perfectly honest with you, I made a video . . . it's a five minute video [on the DDAR website] that shows you how to use the battery" . . . Both of them were so thankful.

But technological know-how is only one piece of the puzzle when batteries prove to be inaccessible artifacts in and of themselves. Goal Zero Yeti batteries come with small instructional text, for instance, which is illegible to people who are Blind, have low vision, and other sensory disabilities; instructional text is not provided in Braille either. Although DDAR affiliates, like Cory, produce supplemental instructional videos, those who are unaccustomed to operating unfamiliar technologies like large-scale batteries seek humans rather than *even more* technology to guide them through the set-up process and resolve any malfunctions. The Yeti battery comes with an app, Sierra notes, but even that is inaccessible. While software can be improved fairly rapidly, such fixes cannot quickly bridge digital divides. Here too people share workarounds during public meetings like taking a photo of the battery's instructions with a phone and then zooming into the image to increase the text size. In one meeting, Heather suggests having imagery accompany instructional text and indicates that the text

itself needs to be written in lay language.[98] This process of setting up, operating, and troubleshooting technical artifacts that power life-sustaining and -saving DME and AT is intimidating to say the least.

Battery mix-ups

Similar to Cory's example above, battery mix-ups are commonplace. Sierra indicates during a public meeting that batteries handed out through the DDAR program have silver stickers. If people cannot find the sticker, Sierra assists them with locating the organization that provided the battery. She once discovered that an unaffiliated company was providing batteries and taking five or six months to deliver them. She found herself fielding dozens of phone calls a day from their customers. "It was becoming ridiculous," Sierra remarks, "like dang, if I'm gonna be taking care of your consumers like you should pay me too."[99] Sierra ultimately couldn't answer callers' questions about the batteries they had received and later discovered that it was because these batteries were not even coming from PG&E; they were being supplied by a different utility company altogether. As Sierra expresses these grievances, another participant attending the same meeting suggests developing a shared serial number database to avoid such confusion.

Cory has faced the issue of battery mismatches all along. "'Hey, you dropped off this battery, and it's broken,'" callers would say. Cory recognizes his own clients by name, and these were not them. Like Sierra, he regularly finds himself answering phone calls from confused individuals who receive batteries at their door without any instruction. He provides another example where someone technically enrolled in the Portable Battery Program reached out to him for support instead:

> It's like people were getting batteries and calling us up and saying, "Hey, you dropped off this battery, and it's broken." I'm like, "what's your name?" . . . "Are you sure you got it from me?" And they're like "no," and I'm like, "Okay, do me a favor, take a look at the battery . . . is there a little sticker on the very front that says Independent Living Resource?" They're like "no." I'm like, "You're part of the Portable Battery Program." They're like, "Okay, well, what do I need to do?" . . . If I can help them, I'm going to help them. And that goes for anything . . . When we get the phone calls, you know, you just don't do that during a disaster . . . I said, "I've got a battery, I'll run it out to you. We'll swap out the bad battery for you. And we'll get it worked on . . . if you want to still be part of our program, you can sign up for it afterwards. But we'll take care of you for now."

Cory clarifies that batteries distributed through the Portable Battery Program provide enough power to last 24 hours, whereas the DDAR program aims to sustain power for about three days, the length of a typical PSPS event. Individuals who rely on power, however, are not informed of these differences.

A member of a community group focused on neighbors helping neighbors who is enrolled in the Medical Baseline Program illustrates her own experience receiving a battery. At first, she

[98] 2021 meeting of a group focused on people with disabilities during disasters (1); 2021 meeting of a group focused on people with disabilities during disasters

[99] 2021 meeting of a group focused on people with disabilities during disasters (1)

acknowledges that enrolling in the Medical Baseline Program requires skills in navigating the healthcare system that not everyone possesses. Once accepted into the program, she and her husband purchased backup batteries; however, the charge only lasted four hours. "What was weird," she tells me, "was I started getting contacted by all of these organizations doing the batteries." These organizations ranged from startups to companies from completely different industries. With the influx of calls, she did not know who to trust and thought that PG&E's program might have ended, but a battery eventually arrived at her doorstep one month later. "There's no way that I could have taken it downstairs or up by myself if I had to for my CPAP," she expresses. At the same time, she evaluates her own degree of vulnerability, which does not include financial instability, and becomes ridden with guilt for accepting a $1600 battery for free. She is classified as vulnerable according to PG&E's parameters like living in a high fire threat area. Yet, her awareness of multiple-marginalization and consideration of other markers of difference, not just class but also race—she is white—propel her and other members of her group to build personal relationships with CBOs situated in under-resourced communities in the county. Her motivation underscores major gaps in PG&E's outreach efforts, from how culturally competent their promotional materials truly are to the efficacy of their subcontracts with CBOs and tracking of battery provisions.[100] It also illuminates the blurred boundary between moral intermediation and non-normative embodiment.

The pitfalls of technological optimism

Within the energy sector, new tech innovators are increasingly entering the market to diversify energy storage products, drive up competition, drive down prices while increasing their own profits, and thereby reduce government spending on public services. Individuals who can afford it have independently tried numerous alternative backup power options spanning natural gas generators and solar panels to Tesla Powerwalls. Each comes with its own set of challenges, from price to size, installation, technological know-how, and so on. Cory too advocates for the implementation of novel technologies. He keeps an eye out for new products on the market that produce energy and can be scaled up. One such product is GravityLight, an approximately 26 lb. gravity-fed light that must be hung from a wall or ceiling. Once the bag that is attached to it is filled with rocks or sand, it begins to fall, generating enough electricity to power a light-emitting diode for 20 minutes. "Just think," Cory says with an air of technological optimism, "if you had a big warehouse with these big, giant weights that just go thanks to solar power. But then during the nighttime, these weights can drop down and slowly generate power." Cory also introduces me to Flywheel energy storage technology that functions using kinetic energy. "There's some outside the box thinking that we can do," which he is convinced will resolve some of the issues tied to portable battery transport and usage.

Though technological innovation sounds compelling, the toxic environmental impacts of battery dependencies are never mentioned. As batteries reach the end of their lifespan, Table 3 forecasts the potential toxic waste heap that could pile up annually in battery recycling centers due to PG&E's programs. This illustrates how human-induced climate change triggers one category of disaster, such as wildfires, and in the effort to remedy this issue, leads to another type of disabling

[100] 2020 meeting of a statewide disability advocacy group; 2021 webinar of CAL OES, Department of Aging

destruction across the globe. Because it is impossible to recover all of the materials in a battery, those that remain unrecycled end up in landfills, only exacerbating planetary environmental devastation. Moreover, novel products are still embedded in systems and structures of power that prevent equitable usage. For example, while PG&E currently provides portable generators for at-home use, they require a constant source of fuel, which can be cost prohibitive. Daniela shares an experience from 2019: "I was without power I think for six days in my home . . . and it cost us about $500 in propane to run our generator during that time, which was a significant cost that most people can't afford."[101] Furthermore, unused gas needs to be recycled, which is a process that requires lifting it onto a vehicle and then transporting it to a recycling center. Relatedly, one must have an able body to haul a Yeti battery to solar panels in order to plug them in. Tesla batteries, a trending topic, are *extremely* costly too, falling in the $10 to 20,000 range.[102] Sierra aims to reach out to Tesla.[103] These Powerwalls could help save floor space, she says, which is limited due to DME and AT.[104]

Table 3. Predicting Toxic Waste Heap Taken to Recycling Centers After Battery Reaches End of Life

Approx. annual battery deliveries through Portable Battery and DDAR programs in PG&E's service area: **7000 Batteries**	
45 lb. Yeti Battery	**315,000 lbs.**
106 lb. Yeti Battery	**742,000 lbs.**

Source: Data for this table is sourced from the main text and is cited accordingly.

In regard to spatial constraints, most large-scale power sources are designed for home owners rather than apartment dwellers or individuals residing in multi-family homes. Sierra is an advocate for having landlords install home integration kits or Powerwalls funded by utility companies in apartments where residents have greater energy needs due to charging life-sustaining and -saving devices.[105] Apartments that are shifting criteria to accommodate more options, however, often fall outside the price range that is affordable for people with disabilities, another disability rights advocate explains. Even when residential facilities like nursing homes have generators for backup, the managers of such facilities do not consistently keep them in working order. Managers need to be accountable for the maintenance of their equipment.[106] Although discussions like this make their way to the federal level, they are far from resolved as people with disabilities are simply redirected to their building managers to continue advocating for changes.[107]

Despite these pitfalls, moves to upscale technologies are constantly being made, at times successfully. For instance, during the six sometimes week-long PSPS events that occurred in October

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[101] 2020 meeting of a nationally-funded, disability-focused group

[102] 2022 meeting of a group focused on people with disabilities during disasters (1); 2021 meeting of a group focused on people with disabilities during disasters (1)

[103] 2022 meeting of a group focused on people with disabilities during disasters (2)

[104] 2021 meeting of a group focused on people with disabilities during disasters (1)

[105] Ibid.

[106] 2022 meeting of a group focused on people with disabilities during disasters (1)

[107] 2021 stakeholder call of FEMA, Office of Disability Integration and Coordination (2)

of 2019, thousands of individuals and healthcare facilities like nursing homes lost power in the counties Daniela serves. In one county, risks were mitigated when a large-scale backup generator was brought in to supply power to the downtown area. This was a critical move because individuals no longer had to scramble to find ice to refrigerate vital medications or wait hours at gas stations; they could feed their animals at home too. The CPUC continuously evaluates alternative energy sources such as microgrids that can potentially be installed in not just downtown areas but residential units as well.[108] A participant at a public meeting notes that the CPUC almost completely covers the cost of purchasing and installing a Tesla Powerwall through PG&E's Self-Generation Incentive Program. The problem, he believes, is getting people to reach out to approved contractors who could potentially assist with the application process.[109] With the backing of legislation to push this option forward, Yeti's newer Home Integration Kit could be a viable resource for low-income residents who experience frequent PSPS events.[110] Others advocate for more manufacturers with intellectual property rights on their products to enter the market thereby creating brand competition and suppressing prices. The goal is to "pull as much of the labor cost out of the equation . . . and really try to establish more investment in the capital equipment."[111]

DDAR program implementors try to build traction around new and modified technologies as well as DIY fixes like homemade air purifiers. At the same time, they direct their energy toward working out the kinks of the program and optimizing their own workflow while training others. This leaves them with no time to dwell on the underlying social causes of the challenges they—along with their clients, or em-powered subjects—face daily, such as why there is a need for Band-Aid programs to begin with. They act quickly when vulnerability is perceived, but don't have the capacity to dismantle the norms surrounding people who use DME and AT. Unlike Heather and other disability rights advocates I have talked to, moral intermediaries like Cory and Camille zero in on the technical and bureaucratic aspects of navigating PSPS and wildfire events rather than addressing these as structural social problems. Heather makes clear during our interview that these programs, which address PSPS events, are really short-sighted: "This whole rigamarole doesn't look at the real needs. It's only a really tiny slice of the pie [and] needs to be much broader." "Please, please, please, please don't just think about PSPS, because when we experience disaster events it won't be just for two nights," she says.[112] Janene puts it rather bluntly: service provisions can only get you so far in the face of deeply-rooted systemic issues.[113]

[108] 2021 meeting of a group focused on people with disabilities during disasters (3); 2020 meeting of a nationally-funded, disability-focused group

[109] 2022 meeting of a group focused on people with disabilities during disasters (1)

[110] 2021 meeting of a group focused on people with disabilities during disasters (1)

[111] 2021 meeting of a group focused on people with disabilities during disasters (3)

[112] 2021 meeting of a network focused on people with disabilities during disasters

[113] 2020 meeting of a nationally-funded, disability-focused group

Mutual aid

"Preparedness is not about independence, it's about interdependency" ~Cory

Experiences of mutual aid[114] are shared across public meetings. "A disability perspective on interdependence," Taylor (2017, 171) notes in alignment with material feminists, "recognizes that we are all vulnerable beings who will go in and out of dependency and who will give and receive care . . . over the course of our lives." Nocella II et al. (2017) refer to 'eco-ability' as the interdependence between people, nonhumans, and nature. Interdependency means that one's autonomy in the world is contingent upon relations with others, rather than a singular disembodied existence. The way people interact with the more-than-human world illuminates power differentials and dominant ideologies. For instance, humans are disabled by their environments, animals are devalued because they are perceived as lacking cognitive abilities, and 'Nature' is disregarded because it cannot vocalize its own agency. As such, eco-ability calls for a communal utilization of diverse 'relational tactics' in order to combat environmental injustices. It is a move that disrupts the independent (superior) and dependent (inferior) hierarchical dualism. But, Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018, 145) pointedly asks, "how can we admit weakness, vulnerability, interdependence and still keep our jobs, our perch on the 'thin edge of barbwire' we live on?" Questions remain about the conditions under which expressing vulnerability and giving and receiving care are empowering rather than shameful.

"Preparedness is not about independence, it's about interdependency," Cory echoes, "Get about five trusted allies, where everyone knows what people's expectations are."[115] One of those allies, for example, might allow you to recharge your batteries in their home. A story evolved during a multi-day power outage that sheds light on the potential fruitfulness of such relations. A 9-1-1 call came in from a mother whose son uses a respirator. The equipment battery light was flashing, indicating that the charge was running out. 9-1-1 was flooded with calls and could not get someone out in time. Instead, the operator conducted a Google Earth search and found a neighbor several houses down with solar panels on their roof. The operator called the neighbor who was able to supply power.[116] In a different instance, a woman using a magnifying glass to find the serial number of a battery contacted Sierra numerous times. The woman finally asked a neighbor in the street to read the number. It turned out the battery was not issued by an ILC after all.[117] Interdependence also involves building allyships with staff from local facilities. For instance, hospitals will more often than not only admit individuals with immediate medical problems during PSPS or wildfire events, so identifying nearby businesses with backup generators early on is the best bet.[118]

Many people with non-normative bodyminds already rely on the help of personal attendants, who are often also minoritized people living in poverty while ironically providing assistance to others. Though their forms of staking and navigating political claims are different, their conviction positions

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114 According to Collier and Lakoff's (2008) research, mutual aid refers to community-organized volunteer efforts whereby people offer assistance during times of need. This definition comes in handy here too.

115 2022 meeting of a group focused on people with disabilities during disasters (2)

116 2021 meeting of a group focused on people with disabilities during disasters (1)

117 Ibid.

118 2022 meeting of a group focused on people with disabilities during disasters (1)

them, to some extent, in the realm of moral intermediation. Daniela describes a scenario that occurred during the 2017 wildfires that illuminates the importance of continuous personal attendant services throughout disasters. Firestorms can separate people from their caretakers. Daniela characterizes a family: an 80-year-old couple in which the husband is a paraplegic and the wife, his primary caregiver. Their adult daughter has a developmental disability. While attempting to speedily evacuate, the husband forgot his power wheelchair. The family drove to a hotel where, luckily, an extra manual wheelchair was available. However, he found it difficult to transfer from this wheelchair to the hotel room bed and bathroom. He called the local EOC and indicated that he was willing to relocate anywhere, including a shelter, to receive assistance, but that he would like to stay with his wife and daughter at the same time. "There was no clear path to be able to provide that personal assistance for him either in the hotel or in the shelter," Daniela remarks. Ultimately, her ILC quickly linked him up with a personal attendant who helped him in the hotel until evacuation orders were lifted the following day.[119] "The equipment is only as useful as the ability of the person by whom the equipment is used," Roxanne pointedly states. And operating equipment, oftentimes requires a local network of people who care.

CONCLUSION

The through line

Through a collection of illustrative vignettes and diversity of literature, this chapter demonstrates what is gained and lost when an array of actors with diverse social positions, claims to expertise, and understandings of vulnerability operate fledgling disaster-related programs within a novel, evolving riskscape; one which is characterized by growing governmental responsibility for disaster outcomes and a politicization of issues that center non-normative bodyminds. New demands on state resources and protections are now made by people who are increasingly reliant on cross-scalar interdependent infrastructures. Within this emerging riskscape, new forms of environmental injustices transpire with a sharpened focus on the material qualities of everyday life. Agyeman et al. (2016) pointedly captures this sentiment when outlining the theoretical *and* actionable trajectory critical environmental justice has taken. "The material life of the body," he says, "[is] seen as fully entangled with questions of social justice, providing a stronger foundation for an intersectional politics . . . across racial, cultural, sexual, and gender boundaries that mark bodies" (331–2).

As PG&E attempted to correct the harms of previous wildfire management practices by implementing Public Safety Power Shutoffs, the corporation unleashed a slew of additional challenges for people reliant on electricity-powered DME and AT, for which it was unprepared. To mitigate future injuries to a population it had previously neglected as well as address increasing pressures from the State of California along with disability advocates, the utility perplexingly developed a series of sociomedical programs—an arena beyond its expertise. These initiatives evolved from numerous discussions between PG&E and CFILC, culminating in the establishment of a formal partnership. Additionally, a series of policies enabled CPUC to oversee and authorize or deny the company's

[119] 2020 webinar of CAL OES, Department of Aging

expenditures. These policies include the aforementioned Senate Bill 901, which tracks PG&E's spending in the Wildfire Mitigation Plan Memorandum Account. Furthermore, as I previously mentioned, CPUC's actions in response to PG&E's legal infractions, such as charging the company $106 million for disregarding Medical Baseline customers during the 2019 power shutoffs, have influenced the company's programmatic strategy.

To make up for its lack of proficiency in public health, PG&E outsourced the labor of carrying out their programs to hundreds of community-based organizations, without informing the actors comprising this growing network of duplicate efforts. In other words, PG&E established contracts with well-known, entrusted players in the disability field while, on the side and unbeknownst to these formal partners who were tasked with leading their programs, extended subcontracts to hundreds of additional public and private agencies. Perceptions of vulnerability ranged across the parties involved––from rigid, algorithmic, quantitative calculations of hazards to flexible, qualitative analyses of risk—which led to shifting rules about who should receive what and when. The result was a messy web of actors and institutions, each operating according to their own definition of vulnerability, that people with non-normative bodyminds—the recipients of PG&E's service and resource provisions—were left to navigate without consistent institutional support.

To keep PG&E's programs from collapsing, two forms of subjectivity necessarily emerged. On the one hand, DDAR program implementors, or moral intermediaries, funneled their moral fortitude toward making sure individuals reliant on DME or AT received vital resources and services in a timely manner. They mediated political and embodied claims to survival through the acquisition and circulation of batteries; in other words, by determining who gets access when. Most significantly, this phenomenon occurred in areas where discrepancies in the administrative and geographical conceptualization of vulnerability were particularly pronounced. They employed their own biopolitical governing techniques to make critical decisions about how to spatially and temporally distribute aid, in particular portable backup batteries. PG&E enabled this type of self-governance not only because it bolstered the quality of their programs, which were misplaced to begin with, but because it decreased their own liability while at the same time improving their public image—regardless of additional strains put on DDAR program implementors. On the other hand, people with non-normative bodyminds who also use DME and AT, or em-powered subjects, were *brought into* a position where they had to push the limits of their own intimate entanglement with backup batteries, or energy-storing technical artifacts, in order to effectively power these devices during an emergency. In addition, self-empowerment required not only collaborating with DDAR program implementors—who are neither energy experts nor doctors—but also conducting their own embodied research about the technical specifications and materiality of batteries, and subsequently sharing their findings with peers to build a collective knowledge base. Interdependence, rather than independence, was encouraged. The ability of em-powered subjects to do so successfully, though, depended on technological savvy, which not all possessed.

Rather than resolving the social norms and structures that underpin these problems, many stakeholders turned their attention toward developing innovative technologies to decentralize energy storage and provisions, increasing the amount of private actors bringing their products to market, accelerating brand competition to reduce the price of mid- to large-scale batteries, and ultimately

swapping government subsidies for essential life-saving and -sustaining public services with private profits. In the free market terrain of wildfire governance, novel partnerships, programs, and products are persistently promoted; yet, finding the parties responsible for any shortcomings of these offerings is nearly impossible in an everchanging network of actors who cannot even agree on where vulnerability and expertise lie.

Chapter 2: Forms of Participation: Shifting Subject Positions and Public Disclosure

INTRODUCTION

#PowerToLive

On the morning of December 16th 2019, I joined up as a participant observer and activist researcher with a coalition of groups representing power-dependent populations to protest PG&E's negligence at the company's headquarters in San Francisco (fig. 5). The demonstration was branded with the hashtags #PowerToLive and #NoBodyIsDisposable. Among the groups present were the Disability Justice Culture Club, which comprises disabled and neurodivergent queer people of color; Senior and Disability Action, a non-profit that educates and mobilizes older adults and people with disabilities to fight for social justice; Fat Rose, a group that brings fat liberation together with intersectional social movements; and others who are marginalized by scientific and policy institutions as well as provisioning systems due to bodymind difference. Reporters Green and Federis (2019) from KQED, the San Francisco Bay Area's National Public Radio station, underscored the aims of the action: putting power in the hands of people rather than PG&E's shareholders and establishing a local, renewable, and democratic energy grid.

The protest was a long time coming. Numerous popular news sources—from the New York Times (Penn 2019) and Los Angeles Times (Shalby 2019) to the Guardian (Ho 2019), Associated Press (Har 2019), and KQED (Green 2019)—had been tracking the impacts of rolling blackouts on PG&E's Medical Baseline customers since early October. This timeline paralleled the establishment of the #PowerToLive grassroots campaign, which emerged from a mutual aid spreadsheet. Toward the beginning of the month, 30,000 households in Northern California with Medical Baseline customers went dark; by late October it was 35,000, 11,500 of which were located in the densely populated San Francisco Bay Area. In one month alone, stories, like that of older adults trapped and abandoned within a blackened low-income apartment complex, added up to a major crisis for those reliant on electricity. Furthermore, these numbers deeply contrasted PG&E's estimate that 10,000 of its Medical Baseline customers *might* be impacted by October's rolling blackouts.

In the months that followed, media attention gradually subsided and the company's internal procedures were, again, black-boxed to the general public. The overarching aims of the action were not met. Even still, Sofia Webster of the disability justice performance project Sins Invalid positively reflected upon the demonstration while being interviewed for the *Into the Crip Universe: Cripping the Anthropocene* podcast (Sins Invalid 2020):

> I'm thinking of in 2019 when PG&E shut off electricity access with very little and sometimes zero advance notice for people who are in affected fire areas which can cause people with disabilities to die . . . I'm thinking of the organizers behind the movement #PowerToLive, which is a group of fat and disabled people who have been trying to hold PG&E accountable for the ways they interacted with disabled people during these annual wildfires . . . They locked down the PG&E building, they had

these beautiful art exhibits, and they are not going to get pushed around, and I think that's so beautiful and so important.

Figure 5: Coalition of activist groups at entrance to PG&E headquarters, December 16, 2019. Photos by author. At the top left is an image of a crowd holding painted cardboard torches that read "Clean Public Power to the People" beside a large cut-out of a fire extinguisher that reads "Extinguish PG&E, Killing Us for Profit, Fires Shutoffs, Climate Chaos." At the bottom left is an image of a sign that reads "CodePink for Peace" with members of the group, predominantly older adults, lying on the ground in front of it and a devil and angel standing on a makeshift stage to the side. A wide yellow banner to the right reads "Governor Newsom, We Need #PowerToLive." The image on the right pictures the back of an older adult sitting in a power chair with a service dog alongside other members of the crowd.

Unlike the activist coalition discussed above, groups working under the auspices of PG&E *are*, at times, heard. Certain groups' perspectives and representations of risk do impact institutional decision-making and public opinion. What I seek to comprehend is why, how, and to what effect some community groups work with while others against the power structures embedded in this public-

private energy provisioning system. In other words, I study a gamut of responses to PG&E's initiatives, from trust and ambivalence to an outright rejection of programs that medicalize social issues, which are mediated in public. As I have shown in the previous chapter, within the complex riskscape of wildfire governance—which shapes and is shaped by dynamic social exchanges, evolving practices, and fluid subjectivities—power relations influence how various actors and approaches are deployed to address wildfire-related risks. This chapter builds on those governance techniques and power/knowledge regimes. It does so by coupling an analysis of the evolving institutional setting—which is rife with cross-agency relationships and actors with varying orientations toward state power––with a discursive interpretation of the dialogues molding this space.

Such an examination of intra- and inter-agency conversations unveils how actors are granted unequal opportunities for participation based on perceived expertise, credibility, legitimacy of claims, and socioeconomic positioning. Differently put, it illuminates how various groups and their members are enabled or restricted from officially participating in the discourses surrounding the company's Medical Baseline and adjoining programs. Ultimately, drawing together an analysis of this institutional context with the discursive strategies employed within and among community groups and state and state-regulated agencies reveals how and by whom specific notions of social vulnerability are constructed, reified, upheld, and also disrupted during public events.

In this chapter, I develop three key arguments. *First*, only liberal, that is, rights-based and single-issue, modes of public participation are recognized and normalized within the landscape of *neo*liberal wildfire governance. Special interest groups that comprise individuals with established roles (e.g., DDAR program implementors, CFILC and ILC representatives, civil rights advocates, and so forth) that are legible to PG&E, the State of California, and local governments—rather than those with explicitly intersectional politics aimed at structural transformation—are regularly consulted with. *Second*, actors strategically navigate multiple, shifting, and at times contradicting subject positions in public to appeal to their constituents, political affiliates, and funders simultaneously. In other words, individuals who have cross-agency rapport are persistently called upon to amplify or mediate between messages that serve the interests of different—at times incompatible—parties via multimedia platforms. In effect, they tactfully secure steady flows of funding and resources, but their own sense of agency to express personal opinions and desires is on many occasions forfeited. *Third*, power-dependent individuals perpetually negotiate the boundary between public and private life and must continuously reposition themselves along this threshold to gain protections. They share personal, private vulnerabilities during public meetings to build traction around their own needs in order to formally elevate their concerns to governing bodies as collective demands.

Several bodies of scholarship underlie the arguments above. I draw on feminist (e.g., Fraser 1990) and queer (e.g., Warner 2002) interpretations of plural publics and 'counterpublics' to underscore that 'publicness' is not predetermined. 'Public' and 'private' do not have fixed meanings and the demarcation between public and private life is therefore also blurred and unsteady. Metaphors such as 'coming out of the closet' (e.g., Sedgwick 1990; Urbach 1996) are useful here, though with limitations. They are based on a domination (privately staying in)/liberation (publicly coming out) dyad that both queer and disability studies (e.g., Johnson and Kennedy 2020; Linton 1998) reject. Scholars from each field dismiss the notion that replacing one identity structure with another by way

of a unidirectional movement out of a figurative closet equates to freedom. In addition, I turn toward the field of critical discourse analysis (e.g., Blommaert and Bulcaen 2000; Fairclough 2015; Luke 1995) to understand how people navigate diverse subject positions across institutional contexts—which are invariably influenced by norms, ideologies, and macro power dynamics—by employing linguistic resources. While this type of analysis is informative here, it is utilized methodologically in the following chapter.

To begin, I sketch a timeline of the key public events that shaped this chapter and map out, in broad strokes, the core strategies at play as groups explicitly and implicitly discussed or strategically omitted to mention PG&E or the company's Medical Baseline and related programs. Each gathering follows a different participation format that will be analytically characterized in this chapter, but given the Covid-19 pandemic that hit at the onset of my fieldwork, the majority occurred virtually. Recordings and transcripts of virtual public meetings that I was not able to attend in real-time were later reviewed in-depth. I next delve further into such events by presenting examples that support my three arguments and illustrate the structures, affordances, constraints, multiple dynamics, and effects of public participation. As mentioned in the introductory chapter, to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of participants, the names of certain groups are replaced with generic descriptors that are at times provided by group members themselves. In instances where the stance of a group is publicized by its members, real names are kept. On all other occasions, pseudonyms are used for individuals. Those I use for individuals who hold prominent roles change between chapters when there is a need to unlink interview data from public-facing interactions. For similar purposes, date ranges rather than specific days are listed for public meetings.

TIMELINE

Forms of participation

By 2019, institutional shifts and novel approaches toward disaster governance following the Sonoma Complex Fires, which I discussed in the introduction, had begun taking root across scales. With new federal funding structures and state legislation driving collaborative wildfire approaches, emerging neighborhood networks now visibly and actively populated Northern California-based counties. This restructuring was repeatedly tested by state-sanctioned mitigation and adaptation strategies, such as deenergization events, that brought about unexpected complications. The ability of this institutional reconfiguration to withstand a new shock (i.e., power shutoffs) that only increased in frequency from 2019 onward remained unknown. The public meetings I observed were therefore not only situated within this riskscape, but provided a forum for participants to air their grievances, produce and exchange knowledge that bolsters or counters the expertise of institutional actors, capture their experiences in plans and policies, and collectively lay the groundwork for a path forward. It is within these spaces that I also encountered the moral intermediaries and em-powered subjects whose narratives formed the previous chapter.

The timeline of public events I attended as a participant observer, both virtually and in-person, extends from December 2019 to May 2022. This nearly two-and-a-half year stretch encompasses the one-off #PowerToLive protest; consistently held, cross-scalar forums on disaster preparedness

facilitated by disability-focused groups; regularly scheduled community and governmental meetings; timely, county-led wildfire briefings and interactive webinars; periodic webcasts organized by groups oriented toward older adults; occasional panel discussions and presentations delivered by guest speakers across meeting types; standalone, cross-agency publicly broadcast videos; and PG&E's own limited public safety town hall series. Table 4 depicts a selection of events that unfolded during this timeframe, but especially clustered around 2021, and characterizes group discussions surrounding PG&E. For some groups, the aim of these conversations extended beyond clarifying and taking a stance on the company's sociomedical programs. In addition, they were invested in proposing improvements to PG&E's practices and subsequently incorporating these suggestions into the *Sonoma County Multijurisdictional Hazard Mitigation Plan* that was receiving public comments for its 2021 update. Rather than including all of the events I attended or viewed retroactively, I highlight only those that vividly depict the heterogeneity of participation formats.

When considered together, inter-group demographic diversity was clearly evident. Intra-group membership, however, appeared homogenous at times—particularly along axes of race, age, and income—and often varied according to where people live. For example, groups with a wealthy or financially secure membership base were predominantly white; groups with members experiencing financial precarity, on the other hand, comprised disabled queer, nonbinary, and transgender people of color.

Table 4. Timeline of selected public events where implicit or explicit discussions surrounding PG&E's programs transpired, or notable omissions of the company's name and services were made.

Timeframe	Group	Event Type	Orientation Toward PG&E
October – December **2019**	Senior and Disability Action, Disability Justice Culture Club Fat Rose, and more	#PowerToLive #NoBodyIsDisposable Protest	***Blame:*** PG&E is directly confronted for its neglect
January – March **2020**	California Governor's Office of Emergency Services (CAL OES), Department of Aging	Disaster Preparedness Webinar	***Endorse:*** PG&E is explicitly mentioned by speakers and during the Q&A session. The audience is directly instructed to carry out the company's recommendations.
April – June **2020**	Disability-Focused Group	Emergency Preparedness Webinar	***Hybrid:*** A liaison between the group and PG&E explicitly describes the company's funding structure as it relates

			to the pilot partnership between PG&E and CFILC
July – September **2020**	-----	-----	-----
October – December **2020**	Sins Invalid	Podcast	***Blame:*** Speakers omit to mention PG&E's offerings and instead focus on the company's negligence and #PowerToLive protest
January – March **2021**	PG&E	Virtual Safety Town Hall	***Promote:*** PG&E employees promote the company's offerings and encourage customers to sign up for its programs
April – June **2021**	Sins Invalid, Paul K. Longmore Institute	Panel Discussion	***Hybrid:*** PG&E is bypassed as attention turns toward federal-level (i.e., FEMA's) irresponsibility
	Coalition of Disaster-Focused Community Groups	General Meeting	***Endorse:*** PG&E employee is invited to present the company's offerings; they encourage group members to sign up for programs
	Northern California-Based County Department of Emergency Management	Promotional Video	***Obscure:*** PG&E outsources its campaigning to individuals outside of the company who have built rapport with community groups
	Northern California-Based County	Wildfire Briefing	***Obscure:*** The audience is instructed to follow PG&E's protocols, though the company's name is never mentioned

	Community Group Focused on Neighbors Helping Neighbors	General Meeting	***Hybrid:*** Although multiple members are enrolled in PG&E's Medical Baseline Program, the group only discusses the company's financial offerings in relation to infrastructure (e.g., property protection)
July – September **2021**	Coalition of Disaster-Focused Community Groups	General Meeting	***Obscure:*** Participants are instructed to follow PG&E's protocols, though the company's name is never mentioned
October – December **2021**	Non-Profit Focused on Older Adults with Disabilities	Emergency Planning Webinar	***Endorse:*** PG&E employee is invited to promote the Medical Baseline Program and its connection to three tiers of vulnerability: all customers, vulnerable customers, and medically vulnerable customers
	FEMA, Office of Disability Integration and Coordination	Stakeholder Call	***Obscure:*** Speakers omit to mention PG&E when complaints that are directly tied to the company's programs are made during the Q&A session.
	Disability-Focused Group	Internal Disaster Preparedness Meeting	***Hybrid:*** Participants deliberate over PG&E's programs and offerings
January – March **2022**	Disability-Focused Group	Public Disaster Preparedness Meeting	***Critique:*** Participants critique PG&E's programs and offerings

April – June **2022**	Community Group Focused on Neighbors Helping Neighbors	General Meeting	***Endorse:*** Group members discuss strategies to amplify messaging about PG&E's offerings

Notes: In the column to the right, I use the following typology to simply describe different orientations toward PG&E and the, related, social goals of meetings: *blame, critique, endorse, promote, obscure.* When these do not map neatly onto the listed categories, they are labeled *hybrid*.

Several notable participation strategies become apparent through my initial review of the meetings above. On the one hand, groups that hold intersectional (a la Crenshaw 1991) and liberatory rather than assimilationist (a la Stanley and Smith ed. 2015) politics *blame* federal and local institutions; they refuse to work within a system that has abandoned them from the get-go and opt out of planning processes. While single-issue (e.g., disability), rights-oriented groups certainly *critique* PG&E's programs and offerings, their dynamic discussions center on gaining recognition and making improvements to energy provisioning systems from within by way of plans, policies, and technological efficiency. Other forms of participation include endorsing and promoting the company across multimedia platforms. When facilitators of community groups invite PG&E employees to general meetings to describe the Medical Baseline and adjoining programs to their members and encourage them to sign up, they in effect *endorse* the corporation. PG&E representatives also give standardized presentations through their own town halls to directly *promote* the company's offerings. However, few opportunities for public input are afforded and the company's shortcomings are often officially exposed by external auditors (e.g., Auditor of the State of California 2019). Finally, information and materials regarding PG&E's services are circulated (a la Latour 1986) by individuals who hold roles outside of the company, but become the public face of their content. By standing in for PG&E, they *obscure* or render its motivations and responsibilities invisible. In the sections that follow, I illuminate these strategies in action and demonstrate how they are embedded in social norms, involve shifting subject positions, and necessitate the public disclosure of individuals' private circumstances. The ways in which 'vulnerability' is expressed and understood across actors and institutions are not fixed. Of critical importance, and what the examples below illustrate, is the fluidity of the term and how it fluctuates based on who *gets* to specify its meaning both implicitly and explicitly, negotiate its parameters, interpret and codify definitions, and draw the boundaries within which settled-upon (or unraveled) interpretations circulate.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Plural publics and forms of participation

In this section I detail how and why certain forms of participation, including one-off protests, become normalized. In other words, this section demonstrates how relationships between different publics and counterpublics as well as state institutions—be they rife with distrust and dissenting voices or imbued with collaborative potential—produce, are produced by, and entrench specific types of

participation that distinguish the possible from impossible. Importantly, I showcase how groups dedicated to the needs of singular demographics gain recognition and consultation from state agencies. In my effort to unearth the norms underlying different kinds of participation, which may be hierarchical or dispersed and oftentimes taken for granted, I organize the remainder of this section according to the various publics who have PG&E in their orbit (i.e., activists, community and advocacy groups, governmental institutions, and the utility itself). Considering factors such as each group's sociopolitical positioning, membership base, affiliates, relationship to the state, topics prioritized during public events, interpretation of vulnerability, mechanisms for integrating feedback, and tactics and strategies deployed during disasters can provide a holistic overview of how and why specific forms of participation endure (or not) over time. It is important to note that participation within these groups is not rigid, especially as individuals hold multiple or changing roles.

Activists

"Don't make the mistake of thinking the government is here for us,"[120] says Maria Palacios, a self-identified "Latina immigrant disabled woman" and performer during a panel discussion organized by Sins Invalid and the Paul K. Longmore Institute titled *Disability Justice Transformations: Overlaps and Tensions with Climate Justice* that I attended on May 27, 2021. FEMA's audacity to center individual preparedness in disaster response efforts sparked Maria's frank response, "When someone is drowning you don't need a fucking phone number!" People are barely holding their heads above the water. "Don't make the mistake of thinking non-disabled people are here for us, that's just the truth," added Executive and Artistic Director of Sins Invalid Patty Berne, "Ableism will ensure that we burn, drown, are forgotten . . . Ableism is what makes us vulnerable." Addressing ableism in the context of disasters requires a reorientation toward disaster *justice* rather than preparedness, the panel concurs. When the activist ideology of positioning ableism at the center of vulnerability and disaster, or broadly climate, justice is omitted from state-designed frameworks that persistently put the onus of preparedness on individuals, protests erupt to shed light on the material impacts of such chasms.

The activist world within which Maria is situated rubs up against but seldom infiltrates dominant institutions, including local government agencies. This world comprises numerous groups, from Sins Invalid and the Paul K. Longmore Institute on Disability to Senior and Disability Action, Disability Justice Culture Club, Fat Rose, and more. Sins Invalid's (2024) mission statement effectively captures the ethos of such activists and their practices:

> [They are] a disability justice based performance project that incubates and celebrates artists with disabilities, centralizing artists of color and LGBTQ/gender-variant artists as communities who have been historically marginalized. Led by disabled people of color, Sins Invalid's performance work explores the themes of sexuality, embodiment and the disabled body, developing provocative work where paradigms of "normal" and "sexy" are challenged, offering instead a vision of beauty and sexuality inclusive of all bodies and communities.

[120] Quotations in this paragraph are drawn from my fieldnotes rather than transcripts.

The Paul K. Longmore Institute on Disability similarly underscores intersectionality and "showcases disabled people's experiences to *revolutionize* [my emphasis] social views" (San Francisco State University 2024). Members unite scholarship and activism by way of cultural events and public education, including film screenings, to pursue social change. For activists who regularly explore themes of multiple marginality and non-normative embodiment, climate change—a threat multiplier––is one of many interlinked socioenvironmental problems to focus on. In line with Warner's (2002) queer counterpublics, these groups shine a vibrant light on bodyminds that are too often deemed undesirable. During acute and chronic disasters like wildfires and adjoining Public Safety Power Shutoffs, they artfully draw attention to and counteract a pernicious status quo both on and off the stage; one that increasingly erodes their trust in state and state-regulated institutions and magnifies a critical need for interdependence and mutual aid. Nearly one year following the 2019 protests, for instance, a new Sins Invalid performance titled *We Love Like Barnacles: Crip Lives in Climate Chaos,* which features Maria's work, streamed live.

When formal institutional settings are bypassed, people turn up to form a counterpublic around alternative discourses that resonate and spur them to action, such as the #PowerToLive protest that I discovered on social media and attended due to my utter dismay about PG&E's inaction. While internal meetings are held between organizers, performers, and the like, public events such as protests, performances, and panel discussions become known through subversive discourses that, according to Warner, circulate among *strangers* by way of email newsletters, social media posts, in-person communication, and so forth. Within spaces of dissent, transformative potential lies in unwaveringly employing disruptive, unpredictable tactics.

When the boundaries of participation are less rigid, such as during protests, the types of interaction that are available to participants expand. Protest attendees and passerby who are on the indecisive brink of joining the action could converse. Eavesdroppers might circulate the aims of the protest through their own networks. On the flip side, conflict might be stirred if perspectives clash. But while Warner describes counterpublics as those that are self-creating and self-organizing, in the public arena of protests, most participants still assume a forward-facing position and await directives from the stage. When public protests are sanctioned by local authorities, unexpected *major* disruptions could culminate in a breakdown of the participation format until the status quo is restored. On the one hand, individuals may be removed against their will and lose any leverage they had in securing state protections. Ideological erasure is enacted when the claims of activists—in this case interpreting vulnerability through the lens of ableism and reorienting state efforts toward disaster justice—are no longer heard or seen, and can therefore remain unabsorbed and be deflected. Energy provisioning corporations like PG&E rely on the predictability of such formats; even when confronted directly, they wait out the commotion and go back to business as usual, as evidenced by the #PowerToLive protest. At the time of this writing, nearly four years following that action, a fully decentralized local energy grid has yet to be publicly recorded as an agenda item by the utility. Rather than confronting the social problem that is ableism, company dollars have been poured into rebranding and promoting its Medical Baseline Program, which medicalizes disability—a related point of contention—and further entrenches the paradigm that individuals need to take disaster preparedness into their own hands.

It is important to note that finding avenues to tap into subversive discourses and extant or emerging counterpublics, which organize and attend actions like protests, requires prior inclusion in relevant social networks or some degree of technological resourcefulness that is hardly universal. In addition, the mechanisms available for individuals who attend actions but are not involved in organizing to provide feedback rarely extend beyond simple surveys that are primarily distributed online. Even still, activists like those involved in the #PowerToLive protest have, over time, created a range of accessible online spaces for organizing—and also socializing—that planners and policy-makers have not (yet) infiltrated but could certainly learn from, a topic to which I'll return. Given the diversity of possibilities to structure a virtual or in-person meeting within which social relations unfold, activists have an opportunity to *directly* give other participants the floor outside of protest chants and premeditated question and answer (Q&A) sessions. For example, the chat bars of virtual meeting platforms like Zoom function as spaces for participants to engage in subordinate, though arguably just as effective, communication and planning of online or on-site actions. In sum, in/accessibility is a key determining factor of who turns up as well as how a social gathering is composed and transpires.

It is not that activist groups, such as those present on December 2019, disengage with the state entirely. Though they do not hold regular public meetings regarding energy provisioning with institutional actors from say PG&E, they are invested in federal policy shifts like the Green New Deal that mirror their values and demands discursively but are harder to attain than incremental changes at the local level. This resolution (Recognizing the duty of the Federal Government to create a Green New Deal, H. Res. 109, 117th Cong. 2021) defines frontline and vulnerable communities as follows: "[I]ndigenous peoples, communities of color, migrant communities, deindustrialized communities, depopulated rural communities, the poor, low-income workers, women, the elderly, the unhoused, people with disabilities, and youth." The Green New Deal counters free market ideologies by calling on the federal government to reduce greenhouse gas emissions while simultaneously addressing economic inequality and racial, environmental, and climate injustices, rather than solely relying on technocratic innovation by the private sector (Friedman 2019; Svoboda 2019). Furthermore, by stating that power needs should be met through "building or upgrading to energy-efficient, distributed, and 'smart' power grids, and ensuring affordable access to electricity," it explicitly mirrors the goals of the #PowerToLive protest. The language of justice is interspersed throughout the bill. "Systemic injustices," for instance, encapsulate "racial, regional, social, environmental, and economic injustices." While ableism is not explicitly mentioned, framing injustice as social and systemic captures the general disposition of activists.

Finally, the bill's execution would ensure "the use of democratic and participatory processes that are inclusive of and led by frontline and vulnerable communities and workers to plan, implement, and administer the Green New Deal mobilization at the local level." Ironically, this latter part aligns with neoliberal austerity measures that leave ownership and the work of implementation, though this time with the aid of "community grants, public banks, technical expertise, supporting policies," and so forth, up to individuals. In other words, public institutions still diffuse their actions and protections through private persons. Although numerous pitfalls come with such approaches when they transpire on the ground—as evidenced by the examples provided in the previous chapter—the discursive strategy of threading "justice" through the body of the Green New Deal is enough to gain the support

of activists and steer them away from more immediate participatory processes framed by state and state-regulated agencies that are structurally similar but not imbued with such language.

What this ultimately means is that activists who are immersed in intersectional—rather than single-issue—social movements, where the locus of vulnerability is systemic injustice and the goal of action is addressing socioeconomic challenges that are compounded by climate change, bypass formal participatory processes. As a result, their liberation-oriented perspectives have not been codified in plans and policies that have emerged following the Sonoma Complex Fires of 2017 and power shutoffs of 2019, such as the *Sonoma County Multijurisdictional Hazard Mitigation Plan*. Institutional refusal also entails giving up their chance to design neighborhood-scale Community Wildfire Protection Plans and receive FEMA funding to implement suggested changes.

Community and advocacy groups

Community and advocacy groups are bent on fixing the apparatus of disaster governance from within. That said, their collaborations with state and state-regulated actors and institutions oftentimes unfold on a rocky terrain. Though all maintain a focus on disasters, groups range from state- and regional-scale established entities that center people with disabilities and older adults to community-oriented groups where neighbors help neighbors and coalitions are built. As Warner (2002) notes, publics come in different shades. The dichotomous classification of public/counterpublic breaks down here as groups form relationships with governmental and corporate agencies in the construction of plans and policies, such as neighborhood-scale Community Wildfire Protection Plans that are consolidated and appended to county-wide documents in order to qualify for FEMA funding, as previously noted. Some partnerships are fruitful, trustworthy, and longstanding while others are fraught, unreliable, and intermittent. As community and advocacy groups navigate institutional relations, especially during moments of crisis, their location on the public/counterpublic gradient fluctuates as well. For instance, someone who protests PG&E one day might invite a representative of the company to meet shortly after. In an intimate setting, parties may find common ground; however, dissenting voices that demand answers can also be elevated. Because they are not embedded in formal institutions per se—although individual members at times choose to be so—such groups preserve a sense of agency in determining when and to what degree state actors should be involved in their operations.

Community and advocacy groups can deviate from normalcy and are cognizant of their subordinate social positioning, yet the discourses they circulate are seldom hostile. More often than not, targeted and immediately actionable *recommendations* are developed and formatted in ways that can be easily integrated into institutional campaigns, plans, and policies. The Listos California Emergency Preparedness Campaign, for example, "engages a statewide network of community-based organizations, Tribal Governments, and Community Emergency Response Teams" in order to textually and graphically synthesize the needs of their constituents (Listos California 2024). The campaign, which is funded by Governor Gavin Newsom and state lawmakers, has been housed in the Governor's Office of Emergency Services since 2019 but is, to this day, distributed through organizational (e.g., non-profit) and community websites as well as hand-to-hand exchanges of printed

flyers during public events (fig. 6). On the one hand—and in contrast to activists—members of such groups join together within existing structures to exchange knowledge and negotiate with authorities (i.e., the state); on the other, they create openings in these orthodox structures for independent opinion-formation and oppositional voices to seep through. While most community and advocacy groups take this approach, unless explicitly forming a coalition, they rarely overlap because their own constituents (i.e., the demographics they serve) remain their sole target.

For these groups, 'vulnerability' equates to 'populations with access and functional needs.' As noted above, most take a liberal, single-issue approach that centers the rights and inclusion of a clearly defined demographic, within the broader access and functional needs category, in emergency preparedness. That is not to say that groups oriented toward single-issue politics do not form intersectional movements, a point I will return to in the concluding chapter of this dissertation. This approach is evidenced by numerous examples. For instance, Rafael, a person of color whose disabilities or lack thereof remain unknown and whose organization directly partners with PG&E, says to a coalition of disaster-focused community groups, "seniors and people with disabilities are most vulnerable during fires."[121] Other groups primarily cater to Spanish-speaking Latinx populations, while underscoring the particular vulnerabilities faced by people without legal status, including migrant farmworkers who are seldom consulted on these matters by state agencies and generally mistrust authority figures. In other words, it is only by way of community and advocacy groups that have rapport with governmental agencies that the embodied expertise and claims of neglected populations are taken into consideration. What is interesting here is the pairing of groups that work within such *liberal* framings of vulnerability, such as those described above, and *neoliberal* wildfire governance where vulnerability is defined by a multitude of dispersed actors and quantitatively mapped by the state. Community and advocacy groups reconcile these differences by employing a variety of strategies, which I've outlined below, that draw sustained attention to their members.

[121] Quotations in this paragraph are drawn from fieldnotes rather than transcripts.

Figure 6: Listos California Emergency Preparedness Campaign pamphlet from the 2022 Fire and Earthquake Safety Expo in Cloverdale, California. At the top left is an image of the cover page of the pamphlet with a logo comprising two rings. "Listos California" is written in the outer ring, while the inner reads "California ALL." The cover page indicates that this pamphlet is available in six languages. The image at the top right graphically represents "Tips for a Variety of Circumstances," including a calendar, to be carried out by vulnerable populations, from pregnant women to people with limited English. The two images at the bottom zoom into specific instructions for "People with Speech/Communication Disabilities," "People with Mobility and Other Physical Disabilities," "People with Pets," and "Older Adults." A set of simplified general recommendations like "Carry an instruction card on how to communicate with you" or " Make a plan for damaged ramps/rails" along with a graphic representation of the people these directives pertain to accompany each category.

Some community and advocacy groups, for example, proactively overlay existing governmental hazard maps with their own stories as plans like Sonoma County's *Multijurisdictional Hazard Mitigation Plan* are being updated. These ArcGIS[122] virtual 'StoryMaps' enable groups to incorporate text, images, videos, and additional media to narrate their experiences and spatially pinpoint where vulnerable populations reside. As previously mentioned, they inform and widely circulate state-based infographic campaigns not only across diverse stakeholders working in the wildfire arena and the general public but also, and most importantly, among the populations they serve. More broadly, as was discussed during an internal disaster preparedness meeting of a disability-focused group I attended in late 2021, aggregating and accessibly codifying information, which tends to get lost in discussions with emergency managers, in emergency protocols was an agreed upon

122 Web-based mapping software

strategy for the following year. Participants of this meeting included city-level emergency preparedness staff, state-wide community organizers, national disability rights advocates, individuals with ties to Independent Living Centers, and more. One attendee suggested "bringing together disparate and separate activities and identifying the information that would make them more connected . . . and not treating it as special or out of the ordinary."[123] Following a series of exercises conducted with people with disabilities, another advocate encouraged the group, "Get it out of your head, write it down, share it." Otherwise, lessons learned "in the trenches" will fall through the cracks. What comes next is strategically filling in institutional gaps and getting missing information within the purview of critical stakeholders. Another participant made the following recommendation: "When we get in the middle of a PSPS[124] season, it gets a bit more hectic and when things start to slow down, that's when we would like to support [PG&E] in getting more creative and getting more marketing materials." Feedback mechanisms are explicitly discussed during such meetings. Participants, for example, are given access to an editable online planning document and time to review any video content before it is posted. Attendees also suggested contacting a "disability working group for racial justice" to request feedback. The aim of collecting missing information is not just to incorporate it into official documents, but to hold elected officials accountable, because echoing Maria and Patty, "people with disabilities are put away, left behind, left for death."

Stakeholders from a variety of sectors are consistently invited to public meetings where facilitators and participants express unified grievances. Group critiques, again, are directed toward making sure that the unique needs of group members with *clearly-cut* marginal identities are adequately met—whether or not these individuals' additional characteristics align with social norms. In other words, while their membership base might hold overlapping non-normative identities, which have a compounding effect on the level of neglect one might experience during a crisis, their focus remains singular. It is only when coalitions are formed that multiple axes of marginalization, such as racial and economic inequalities, are brought to the fore during meetings. When a single-issue, rights-based liberal model that elevates a legible and boundaried population is followed, participants gain access to national, state, and local channels. For example, the goal of "establish[ing] a vulnerable population support network, working closely with community organizations and assisted care centers to foster informal support networks through a program to encourage people to check in with and provide assistance to elderly and disabled neighbors" was already marked complete in the *Sonoma County Multijurisdictional Hazard Mitigation Plan* draft document of 2021 (169). That said, while liberal framings might get someone through the door, by virtue of operating within a neoliberal context, the labor of implementing any achievements is still offloaded onto vulnerable individuals. For instance, the "community organizations" that are tasked with providing assistance in Sonoma's plan comprise the very "elderly and disabled neighbors" who need help in the first place. In other words, these individuals are supporting themselves through organizations of their own making.

In some instances, group representatives carve out positions for themselves in county-wide emergency operations centers. Rather than structurally transforming the emergency apparatus, their aim is to ensure the safety of their constituents during wildfire-related events (i.e., that they are

[123] Quotations in this paragraph are drawn from my fieldnotes rather than transcripts.
[124] Public Safety Power Shutoff

effectively reached and their needs are attended to). This form of collaboration flattens the governing structure between counties, community groups, and vulnerable residents. Having trusted parties embedded in institutions is especially critical for people like immigrants without legal status who distrust government officials. In other scenarios, members of community and advocacy groups are called upon for consultation. Lane, a white older adult who requires power for her DME, for instance, tells me about a collaboration with the United States Department of Health and Human Services and the inaccessibility of the meetings they organized: "They assign people who don't know anything about the issue." Departments request consultants like Lane to generate new reports on content she has been writing about for decades. "A lot of these advisory groups, they talk to us instead of with us," Lane says, "So like locally they'll do presentations every month and have a Q&A, where there's not a real deep dive into how're we gonna improve response." She then asks, "How're we gonna improve what we need to do to make sure that people stay safe?"

As a result, Lane feels tokenized and forced to carry out much of this work on her own, pro bono. She criticizes participation formats of government-run meetings: "People don't know how to plan *with*. They're much more into planning *for*. And planning with takes a lot of work. And so, a lot of them don't want to devote the time, the money, the staff to do this, 'cause it's hard work." "[F]or a while you know we had some really great collaborations with FEMA," Lane continues, "with the Office of Disability Integration and Coordination, but that fell by the wayside when they got a new director who wasn't interested in community collaboration. So all of that hard work went down the toilet." Although FEMA holds monthly stakeholder calls that are open to the public, Lane considers these to be off target and "airy-fairy," in the "ozone of the stratosphere" rather than in touch with reality. While FEMA has hired a new person, the learning curve is huge. Another regular meeting participant and disability rights advocate, Graham, who is white and offers local- to national-scale consultations, encourages people to learn about "organizational, jurisdictional responsibilities under the ADA [Americans with Disabilities Act], even in school," so that these lessons do not come as a surprise when they get a job. Each jurisdiction is supposed to have an ADA coordinator, but this is not always the case. Many emergency managers are not aware that they have access to an ADA coordinator who can offer guidance. "So, their main support for being able to do this, they didn't even know they had it," Graham explains.

Finally, community and advocacy groups prepare their own constituents and put their needs on the institutional radar by offering trainings. Camille, our DDAR program implementor from the previous chapter, for example, tells me that one-fifth of her working hours are devoted to trainings. "I've been asked by an agency to come and do a training," she says. When she arrives, "one person in the room is like into it and everyone else is like 'okay, now I got my hours in so I can go off and forget about it.'" Camille finds this extremely frustrating. "I've done two-day workshops before where some people were like really into and this other person was sent by a state program," she continues, "He sat there, he didn't participate, he just kinda listened whatever and he left." Camille describes the helplessness she felt in that moment: "I heard from other staff members, he came back tossed the binder . . . and walked off. And that was it. And nobody there ever did any follow up." Others, though, are enthusiastic, invite Camille to conduct additional consultations, and transfer their newly-gained knowledge to their own clients. Cory, another familiar intermediary between the DDAR program and

PG&E, carries out trainings as well. He uses a heart-based rather than fear-based approach, which "seems to work better than, you know, 'if you don't do this, people are gonna die!'" His next training program will be seven weeks long and split between personal and agency preparedness. Cory works within Incident Command Systems and collaborates across neighborhood groups, community- and faith-based organizations, and governments. He uses the 'Circles of Support' model to frame his trainings, which in this context begins with the person and extends to family, community, and government.

What the examples above—from immersion within institutional structures to consultations and trainings—demonstrate are the variety of social settings and interactions generated by community and advocacy groups, as well as those they are invited into. Similar to activists, their regular online meetings follow a rather normative approach where facilitators conform to a predetermined agenda while seeking feedback from ratified participants, verbally or in the chat bar, on each line item. Chat bars are, again, spaces where subordinate forms of communication (e.g., afterthoughts on previously discussed topics), can be posted. Interpreters also join facilitators in making sure public meetings are accessible.

While webinars leave little room for audience participation—and only speakers are typically viewable on screen—when meetings are absent of presentations and panel discussions, space is opened up for substantial engagement, meaningful interactions, and suggestions for future discussions. Some groups even break out into subcommittees to discuss more nuanced challenges faced by their constituents, such as emotional care. It is here where intersectional identities are acknowledged. For example, groups prioritizing Latinx residents might branch off to address access and functional needs rather than squeezing the topic into a general meeting. It is rare not to find an institutional actor present at a meeting or within a subcommittee—be they from the governmental, non-profit, or corporate sector—just as major disruptions are seldom seen. Instead, pointed questions take their place. Virtual public discussions are, more often than not, recorded and posted to social platforms like YouTube. This is where discourses circulate and traction can be built around the issues faced by specific demographics. In other words, publics grow through the distribution of their discourses, from StoryMaps and campaigns to hour-long meeting recordings. The liberal approach of defining specific demographic populations as vulnerable and expanding the circulation of information about them through digital and printed channels, as well as verbally during meetings attended by diverse stakeholders, produces specific participation formats where relationships thrive or diminish.

Governments

Federal, state, and county agencies, too, facilitate regular meetings pertaining to wildfires and other hazards as well as planning documents. They range from FEMA's Office of Disability Integration and Coordination to the California Governor's Office of Emergency Services and Department of Aging as well as Northern California-based counties and their Department(s) of Emergency Management. Meetings, as previously mentioned, involve participatory workshops to gain public input on various facets of newly written or updated plans (e.g., the 2021 *Sonoma County Multijurisdictional Hazard Mitigation Plan*) and policies, webinars to publicly clarify the technical details

of emergency management schemes, and presentations to familiarize individuals with and encourage them to follow the most up-to-date official instructions on what to do before, during, and after emergencies (e.g., how to tag homes that residents have evacuated). They are facilitated by staff members of these agencies and populated by various institutional stakeholders, including representatives of community and advocacy groups who relay information back to their constituents as well as county residents during more localized meetings. Community and advocacy groups as well as their proactive members who have collaborative relations with governmental agencies and give pointed suggestions surrounding a single issue are consulted with by wildfire professionals.

As can be expected, familiar faces, from fire marshals to city planners and technical experts, abound. In attendance are also emergency managers. Advocates working in the disability arena offer numerous insights into the world of these managers who are key stakeholders at governmental meetings but possess little knowledge about the ADA. Larger jurisdictions can hire more staff members, but rural areas seldom have even a single full-time emergency manager, let alone one who has the capacity to focus solely on people with disabilities. "We've spent a huge amount of time trying to convey to these emergency managers that most of the people who are significantly affected in an emergency are people with disabilities," Graham expresses, "and that you know, bang for your buck, you'd be better off doing something [for] people with disabilities . . . rather than just sort of the general public." However, this is a hard sell because, understandably, it is difficult for emergency managers to tell an entire community, "'we're gonna work on people with disabilities and not all of you.'"

On the other hand, Graham believes that FEMA delegates roles clearly: "Every emergency management department knows all of these different steps and who's a part of that, and they know how to execute that plan in an emergency." What they do not know is how to include disability in their equation and discourse. Lane implores people with disabilities to "speak out and speak up" in order for governmental actors to be honest, "'cause I've been up . . . in those little counties and I've been in meetings where the community has come together to make some real specific plans and the emergency managers . . . they stand up and say, 'don't worry, we'll take care of it,' which is bullshit." Cory describes his own dealings with emergency managers over the course of 35 years. When they ask, "'who should we have out on our table?'" Cory lets them know that that is the wrong question. The question, he says, should be "what table should *I* be at?" He encourages them to get to know the players in that area. But even ADA coordinators, Graham points out, are at times in worse shape than emergency managers. Graham wonders about their inaction and the issues they face within their own organizations when it comes time to push initiatives through. Even though ADA coordinators are connected to communities by way of public meetings, they are also "less than an office of one . . . and they have the entire jurisdiction's ADA deal to handle. So it's not an easy situation and so we're trying to push on the top to let them know what these people here need." "We'll see how that goes over the years," Graham concludes.

Though many public gatherings end with a participatory component or question and answer (Q&A) session, virtual meetings often begin with content that is so standardized, prerecorded videos take the place of live presentations. Such is the case with conversations surrounding 'home hardening and defensible space,' for example, a costly practice that nearly every agency considers a top priority for homeowners, in order to protect their 'vulnerable' private property rather than human health and

well-being. These videos are accompanied by simple explanatory graphics (fig. 7) that leave many questions unanswered due to time limitations as well as the absence of individuals qualified to address them. In other words, rather than fostering a dialogue where critical questions can be asked (e.g., why is *this* the primary mode of ensuring safety from wildfires? Why continue to build homes in fire hazard zones?), public meetings begin, and on many occasions end, with didactic one-way streams of information offloaded onto "participants." Where space for dialogue is carved out, often in virtual breakout rooms, individuals express concerns about financing and carrying out the physical labor required to harden homes. And when grants *are* available for county personnel like fire chiefs to support such endeavors—financially, physically, and technically—resourceful individuals who have already built personal relationships with institutional actors are given priority. Moreover, absentee landowners whose overgrown properties stand adjacent to hardened homes and defensible space on vulnerable terrain reduce the effects of such processes. These nuances—along with the sheer need for individuals to have an able and neurotypical bodymind to implement laborious recommendations—were pointed out to me by residents who I joined on neighborhood walks rather than during the numerous public meetings I attended where fixed prerecorded videos and reductive graphics portraying vulnerable properties, of considerable size, were displayed.

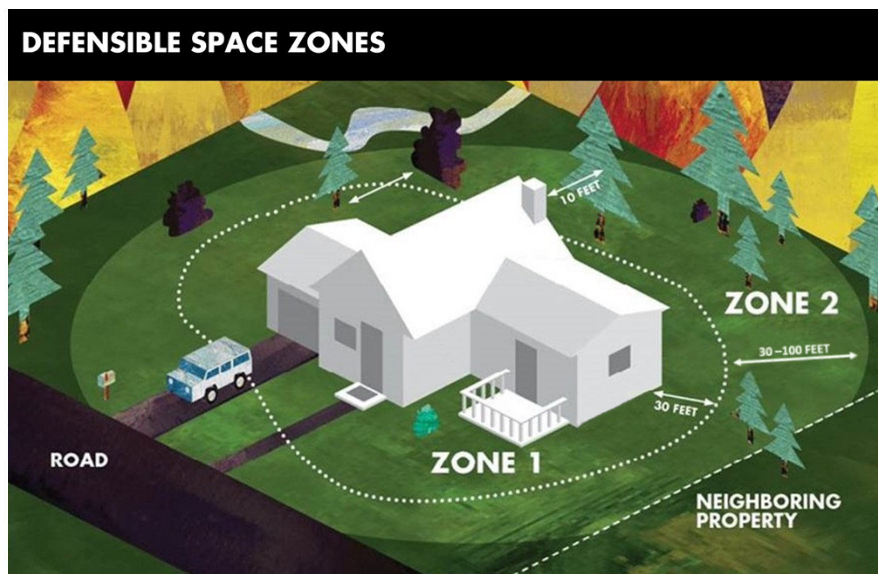

Figure 7: A widely circulated CAL FIRE graphic depicting the widths of 'defensible space' zones (Permit Sonoma 2023). The illustration, created in a paper cut-out aesthetic, shows a large white house surrounded by two zones that are delineated with dashed lines. The first zone extends 30 ft beyond the perimeter of the house, while the second broadens from 30 to 100 ft. Surrounding flames do not infiltrate the property because fuel within these two zones has been cleared.

When time is allocated for participants to engage in dynamic discussions and provide feedback to governmental agencies, as is the case in some Northern California counties, valuable insights can be synthesized and integrated into hyper-local planning documents like Community Wildfire Protection Plans that are appended to hazard mitigation plans. Across districts, tools such as

IdeaBoardz (fig. 8) are utilized by county staff to encourage participants to input, organize, and collectively prioritize the assets they value, hazards and risks they foresee, and projects to implement. Additionally, once plans are written anew or updated, periods of public comment enable individuals to provide feedback. The general framework, including its core content, of a planning document, however, is always predetermined. Just as protecting vulnerable property is an institutionally agreed-upon top priority, vulnerable populations are also pre-classified. The Sonoma County (2021) *Multijurisdictional Hazard Mitigation Plan Update*, for example, relies upon demographic categories specified in the U.S. Census Bureau's 2019 American Community Survey to pinpoint vulnerable populations. According to the document, "People with disabilities are more likely than the general population to have difficulty responding to a disaster. Local government is the first level of response to assist these individuals, and coordination of efforts to meet their access and functional needs is paramount to life safety efforts" (4). Once again, recognition and resources are allocated to populations based on singular and presumably static identity markers. The *National Preparedness Report* of the United States Department of Homeland Security (2021), which houses FEMA, also predefines vulnerable populations as those with 'Access and Functional Needs,' but the category here is more capacious than a demographic list and encapsulates the following:

> Persons who may have additional needs before, during, and after an incident in functional areas, including but not limited to maintaining health, independence, communication, transportation, support, services, self-determination, and medical care. Individuals in need of additional response assistance may include those who have disabilities, live in institutionalized settings, are older adults, are children, are from diverse cultures, have limited English proficiency or are non-English speaking, or are transportation disadvantaged (84).

Feedback mechanisms still need to be put on the radar of residents by way of attending public meetings—either governmental or those facilitated by community and advocacy groups that relay information—or visiting the websites of county planning departments. It is important to note that while these departments tend to hold meetings during off-hours to accommodate a wider swath of the local population, FEMA schedules their Disability Stakeholder Calls so early in the day that they inevitably interfere with working hours, regardless of which part of the country one resides in.

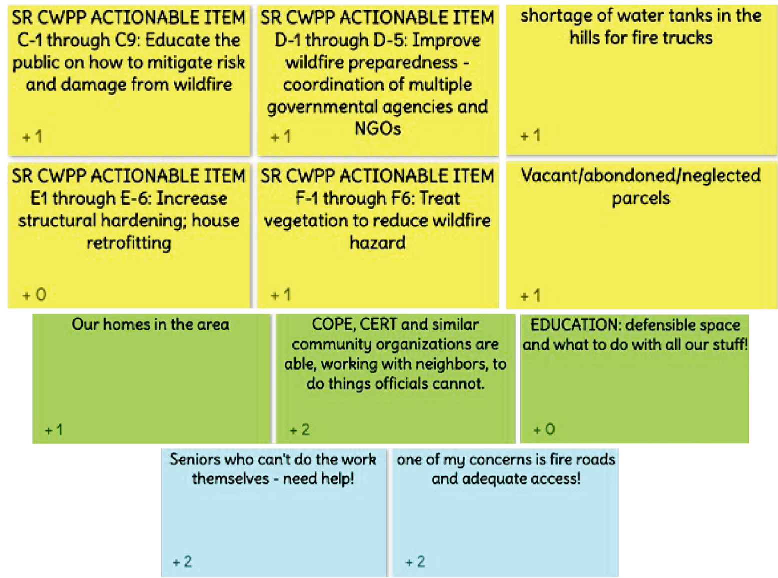

Figure 8: A montage of IdeaBoardz displaying assets that were valued (e.g., community organizations doing things officials cannot), hazards and risks that were perceived (e.g., "Seniors who can't do the work themselves"), and projects that were prioritized (e.g., "Increase structural hardening") during a series of public meetings across different districts in a Northern California county in 2021. Because individuals were divided into virtual breakout rooms according to their neighborhoods, only notes with general content—rather than neighborhood-specific content—that could apply to multiple areas are included here. Numbers at the bottom left of each note indicate how many people supported the idea.

Beyond meetings facilitated by local governments, public accountability is diffused among cross-scalar institutional actors and therefore diminished. Informational content presented during state-based webinars, for example, spills over into Q&A sessions; pressing questions are relegated to follow-up emails and phone calls where they seldom appear before the public eye. At the federal level, questions are relayed from speaker to speaker, deferred, or deflected altogether. When pointed, potentially contentious questions concerning negligent behavior are raised by meeting participants, speakers avoid naming responsible parties altogether. FEMA's regularly scheduled Disability Stakeholder Call—a webinar for individuals who craft, implement, or are affected by national policies surrounding people with disabilities amid disasters—provides ample examples of such social interactions. After panelists discuss a specific topic, callers are placed in a queue and given the opportunity to ask a question, if time allows. During one call concerning emergency power planning for people who use critical or vital electrical DME and AT, for instance, participants were provided with a lengthy list of actions to take. These included the following: plan for extra sources of power; read equipment instructions and talk to equipment suppliers and insurers; keep a list of alternative power providers and consider asking the police and hospitals too; label all equipment with your name, address, and phone number and laminate these labels; have copies of serial numbers of devices in a water-proof container; and so on and so forth. In addition, the speaker encouraged participants to ask questions regarding the type of surge protection they need, whether their device can operate on

another power source, if their equipment can be manually powered, and what they can do if they lose power in the middle of a treatment. "If you plan for it, it will be better later,"[125] he insisted. While these thorough tips, which extend far beyond the Listos California Disaster Ready Guide and even address users of specific devices—from motorized wheelchairs to oxygen concentrators—are surely helpful, the burden of carrying them out independently maps neatly onto the free market paradigm of disaster governance.

This talk prompted numerous questions regarding the affordability of such preparedness measures, which were persistently deferred. For example, one participant asked, "Are there discounts for people with disabilities to buy generators?" "I would not know specifically about that," the speaker replied, "You would need to work with your local area. Start with state [agencies] then . . . talk with your power companies and more local agencies." "The power companies are doing something, not a lot, and it seems like that might be trickling across the country," he continued, "You will have to do some legwork to find that information." A related question followed: "How are low-income people going to pay for all of this?" "There is nothing specific from FEMA that is addressing local assistance like this," the speaker replied, "This is more for local organizations to provide assistance with." "Your first effort on the local level would be to talk to an Independent Living Center, and other local agencies, then governmental agencies," he continued, "If you find nothing there, then it becomes an advocacy issue." The speaker's answers incessantly directed participants toward local agencies and self-advocacy. Even questions regarding generators for people who live in apartment buildings were met with answers like "check in with your condo or apartment complex about what devices can be held in your apartment complex. [I] can't offer any specifics." Throughout the entire Q&A session, PG&E was referred to as "a company who saw that they had a liability," rather than being explicitly named as a party that could address these costs and technicalities. While those who raised questions received vague answers, it remains unclear how many people never made it to the front of the line.

To conclude, the ability of participants to engage with each other decreases as one climbs higher up the institutional ladder. In other words, even single-issue approaches reach their limits. Dynamic social interactions exist primarily at the level of local government, if at all. It is at this scale where feedback mechanisms can be employed and institutional actors held accountable. Local staff tend to be more accessible than other governmental actors, Lane confirms. Proactive community and advocacy groups that have rapport with governmental agencies *and* present pointed suggestions concerning clearly delimited issues receive the benefit of consulting with county officials. Federal-level public participation, on the flipside, becomes nothing more than waiting patiently in a queue for an answer that might never come.

The utility

To wrap up this section, I address the heavily black-boxed interactions within PG&E. Outside of the company's own county-based, limited Public Safety Town Hall series and presentations given during meetings of community and advocacy groups and governmental agencies, employees are

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[125] Quotations here are drawn from my fieldnotes rather than transcripts.

practically unreachable. Contrary to the title and its implication that public officials (i.e., PG&E employees) will respond to questions raised by participants, these one-off "town halls" are an avenue for the company to present initiatives, absent of public engagement. Instead, external agencies like CFILC, which also take a single-issue approach, are tasked with garnering public input surrounding PG&E's programs (e.g., conducting targeted surveys to understand the experiences of people with disabilities during wildfire-related events). This form of data collection, however, is neither dynamic nor ongoing. Put differently, such surveys helped frame the company's offerings to people reliant on DME and AT, but active conversations surrounding their efficacy persistently occur outside the company's purview. In a similar vein, invited talks are nothing more than truncated versions of town hall presentations delivered in a conversational tone. Over the course of this fieldwork, my numerous attempts at finding contact information for presenters or other employees involved with PG&E's Medical Baseline and adjoining programs were unsuccessful. Even those who invited employees to speak at their public meetings lost contact with representatives of the corporation. This was due to PG&E's high attrition rate, abrupt termination of company-affiliated email addresses, and general lack of continuity across actors and programs. Several examples, outlined below, demonstrate this erasure.

During a community-oriented meeting I attended in 2021, a member of PG&E's government relations team delivered the company's standard presentation to members of two Northern California counties. The speaker laid out the company's offerings—spanning targeted outreach during power shutoffs, battery distributions, hotel accommodations, Spanish language resources (a key need of participants), and more—but only provided two general, rather than direct, points of contact: pge.com/wildfiresafety and wildfiresafety@pge.com. My attempts to trace this speaker's personal, company-affiliated email address were to no avail. Furthermore, the presentation slides included logos of various community-based organizations, from food banks to Independent Living Centers, that presumably endorse the company and its efforts. These collaborations were emphasized, yet never explained; neither was the fact that *hundreds* of mismanaged partnerships were brought into PG&E's fold, which participants could no longer inquire about because of missing contact information. The frustration this evoked was thoroughly detailed in the preceding chapter. Later, in 2022, I located PG&E's booth during the Fire and Earthquake Safety Expo in Cloverdale, California. While manned by the company's employees, my in-person attempt to obtain a direct email address or phone number for anyone running the Medical Baseline or adjoining programs was similarly deflected. Instead, I was given a brochure, which I will visually analyze in the following chapter. What became rather clear is the discomfort the individuals running the booth felt when questioned about the company's programs; so much so that my inquiries led them to believe I was a reporter—an assumption I corrected right off the bat. Ultimately, I was provided with company-wide contact information identical to that listed above.

While my discursive analysis of the company's messaging and construction of vulnerability will be the focal point of the next chapter, important to underscore here are the silences surrounding PG&E and their internal workings. As evidenced by FEMA's Disability Stakeholder Call that I previously described, even when the company is obviously implicated in an action (or inaction), euphemisms like "a company who saw that they had a liability"—instead of "PG&E, the liable party"—position them outside of the limelight. When the corporation *is* mentioned, human culprits certainly

are not. These silences are particularly notable because of PG&E's status as a key institutional player that sits at the center of negotiations in the wildfire arena. In other words, the company is never irrelevant. Rather, PG&E is both ubiquitous and rendered invisible at the same time. For example, during a webinar of the California Department of Aging that I attended in early 2020, heart-wrenching stories of individuals needing services were interspersed throughout the public meeting along with recommendations that are now a direct responsibility of the utility—regardless of whether or not these demands should have been placed on the company initially. PG&E, though, was explicitly named only a single time. Relatedly, in 2021 I joined a meeting of a community group. The guest speaker was an employee of a non-profit that focuses on people with disabilities and partners with PG&E by way of the DDAR program. Despite his direct connection to the company, PG&E was mentioned only once as he listed the difficulties and limitations people face during wildfire-related events. Instead, the presentation centered standard actions individuals could take for themselves, from tuning into alerts, social media, and local radio and TV stations to filling go-bags, making general plans, building a network of trusted allies, finding a transportation contact, and securing back-up batteries. In this way, guest speakers can link and delink PG&E as they see fit, especially when the company's usual PowerPoint presentation remains offline.

Opportunities for public engagement are sparse. Gatherings that are framed as town halls give speakers, rather than participants, the floor. There is virtually no avenue for participants to interact with presenters directly and they are seldom visible on screen. During one virtual town hall I attended in 2021, for instance, I was surprised by the lack of questions listed in the chat bar. Though all audience questions required approval by the meeting's moderator, none were actually posted. When I asked the moderator why this was the case, I was given no explanation. My query was effectively omitted; perhaps others were too (fig. 9). Once more, individuals, myself included, were left in the dark. PG&E employees who are invited to join meetings of community and advocacy groups leave some wiggle room at the end of their presentations, but given the amount of instructional content they share, clarifying questions about each program's offerings tend to dominate the conversation, especially when a group's primary language is not English. In all instances, the social situation structured by PG&E equates to a unilateral stream of information to be consumed by customers, but never questioned or challenged. Little transformative power is available to participants when the walls around a company are built so impermeably thick that even well-established organizations that have been advocating for people with disabilities for decades experience difficulties getting through the door. Participants put contentious topics on PG&E's radar during their own meetings when company representatives or intermediaries, such as DDAR program implementors, attend as listeners rather than speakers. Relaying such controversial issues back to PG&E requires continuously shifting subject positions across and within meetings, a matter I will discuss next.

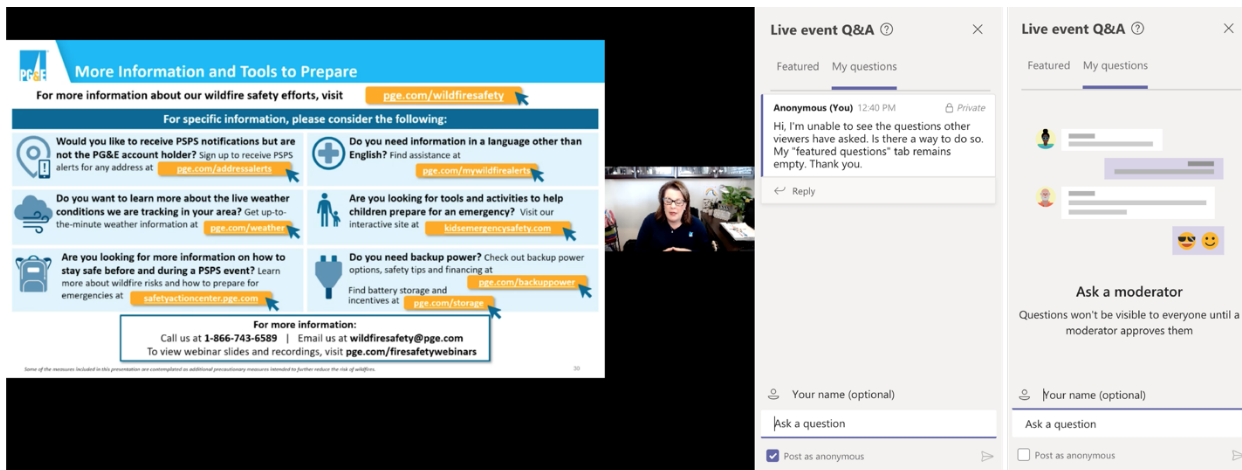


Figure 9: Screen capture of chat bar and presentation from PG&E's Virtual Safety Town Hall. The image on the right shows the chat bar at the start of the meeting. It reads, "Ask a moderator" and "Questions won't be visible to everyone until a moderator approves them." Beside it is an image of the chat bar toward the end of the meeting with my comment posted to the moderator: "Hi, I'm unable to see the questions other viewers have asked. Is there a way to do so. My 'featured questions' tab remains empty. Thank you." In the center is a small image of the speaker and the PowerPoint slide they are discussing that displays, with text and icons, "More Information and Tools to Prepare." PG&E's general contact information is listed at the bottom of the screen.

To conclude, what the illustrations above reveal is that formations of 'publicness' continuously evolve and are, in this case, influenced by the immediacy of climate change-related catastrophes and subsequent openings for institutional reconfiguration. The co-occurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic brought such urgent conversations into online spaces that, due to their structural constraints, predetermine how social interactions transpire. Disability-oriented groups, however, have long since relied on these virtual hubs to gather. From the Paul K. Longmore Institute on Disability's Café Crip to the performances of Sins Invalid, among other dance parties with virtual DJs, the accessibility of online venues draws in a wider swath of the population. In other words, even though social relations are limited by the affordances of video technologies, new audiences, such as em-powered subjects, could form and regularly participate in and across a multitude of virtual and hybrid publics that attract diverse stakeholders. Be they justice-oriented activist counterpublics that protest ableist structures, community and advocacy groups that collaborate with institutional players, cross-scalar governments that initiate participatory processes, or black-boxed utilities that deliver presentations under the guise of town halls, they all produce participation settings within which vulnerability is strategically negotiated and governed by individual actors who represent themselves, specific groups, or advocate for single issues. How these actors do so is the theme of the following section.

Shifting subject positions

In this section, I analyze the ways in which people publicly negotiate and navigate multiple or hybrid subject positions, ideologies, complex relationships, and contradictions to engage and build trust among their own constituents as well as governmental and corporate resource-provisioning agencies. Doing so requires making distinctions between who speaks, who actually composes the sentiments being expressed, whose beliefs are reified by what is stated, and who the dialogue itself centers. It also necessitates attuning to how speakers alternate between first-, second-, and third-person pronouns as well as the forms of vulnerability that get highlighted as their positionality, or 'footing,'[126] changes in relation to different audiences. Critical discourse analysis is also a useful reference here in demonstrating how individuals are situated within institutions (e.g., FEMA) and thereby institutionalized categories, norms, and discursive regimes. The ways in which people partake in such discourses are local and idiosyncratic; yet, they can be complicit in legitimating and perpetuating extant power relations or resistant to moral regulation (Blommaert and Bulcaen 2000; Luke 1995).

Hence, the significance and intent of this section is to expose how authority and agency are enacted in various settings. My investigation is grounded in the following examples of public interactions: (1) 2022 meeting of a disability-focused group; (2) 2022 meeting of a group focused on neighbors helping neighbors; (3) 2021 promotional video of an emergency management department in a Northern California-based county; (4) 2021 community-oriented meeting of a Northern California-based county; and (5) 2020 meeting of a nationally-funded, disability-focused group. Key segments of transcripts or fieldnotes were selected that illustrate pronounced shifts in subject position during each event. The conversations that ensued are between moral intermediaries and em-powered subjects as well as institutional actors.

1. 2022 meeting of a disability-focused group

I begin with a six-minute segment of a virtual public meeting I attended of a disability-focused group comprising roughly 40 individuals in early 2022. While many people had their cameras turned off, logos of organizations like CFILC populated the screen. In other words, a significant proportion of participants had institutional affiliations that they foregrounded. This strategy enabled audience members to position themselves as representatives of an organization rather than as individuals. When their cameras were turned off, they effectively spoke on behalf of an organization. The meeting's focus on power shutoffs prompted the audience to direct their grievances toward Camille, the DDAR program implementor from the previous chapter, who was not only responsible for her own clients, but also had to answer to PG&E, CFILC, and a cross-county ILC. Facilitators of the meeting, whose positions ranged from a statewide organizer to national consultant, too, redirected questions to Camille as they saw fit. The segment begins with the Q&A portion of the meeting during which the facilitator, Lane—who I have already introduced in this chapter—restates a participant's question:

[126] According to Goffman (1979), 'footing' refers to how individuals shift stances based on varying social situations, align (or not) with others, and frame events.

“When you, you’re in [a] rural area, when you for example deliver a Yeti battery to somebody who is going to need another one when that [first battery] quickly drains for their critical medical devices or a hotel isn’t [an] option, what do you do addressing Kendall’s [the asker’s] question?” By reorienting Kendall’s—whose camera is turned off—question toward Camille, Lane summons her as an expert and accountable party. What follows is Camille’s reply.

Camille answers with agency, yet immediately diminishes her own power, deflects responsibility, and disaffiliates herself from institutional partners by using personal, first-person pronouns. In saying “I can only speak for myself,” Camille alerts the audience that she is both the author (i.e., the one who composes the sentiments being shared) and animator (i.e., the sounding box) of her speech. Put differently, no one else is liable for her words. She strategically separates herself from institutional actors who, behind the scenes, ideologically and discursively frame the content of the DDAR program she operates. As Camille creates her own flexible subjectivity through her mobilization of the pronoun I—which she uses twice as much as plural, first-person pronouns in this segment—she circumvents positioning herself as the responsible party. Hence, while Camille is inherently connected to the program, this distancing enables her to amplify her role as, solely, an intermediary who holds some agency but is constrained in her ability to enact the requests of participants. This is apparent in her explanation: “It would be inappropriate for me to say they [presumably PG&E, CFILC, ILCs, first responders from the sheriff’s department and volunteer fire department, and other affiliates] should [do so and so].” However, Camille reassociates herself with them in stating that “they should hear” the concerns being expressed, which she *only* holds the power to relay. These are good things for me to get feedback on, Camille affirms, because “we’re [the referent remains undefined] gonna be discussing this most recent [fire] event.”

As she continues, Camille repeatedly shifts between using personal, first-person pronouns to validate her own agency in supporting people and using plural, first-person pronouns to reduce her authority in addressing structural and systemic issues surrounding emergency preparedness and response. Anecdotes concerning individual clients who become the figures or protagonists in her speech, for example, are told in first person, from I and me to the possessive “my clients.” “I really take each person’s situation individually and work from there,” rather than casually directing them elsewhere, “oh just go to the PG&E center,” when you require backup power. It is important to note that this is the first time Camille interpellates PG&E to demonstrate her virtuous stance as she, of her own accord, bypasses the company to provide superior care. This aligns with her role as a moral intermediary. Camille creates multiple plans *for* them, all the while blaming individuals—outliers to this amorphous them—who stay at home because of their livestock, which I interpret as another move to shift blame. In constructing her individuality here, the onus is put on clients. In contrast, when describing components of formal planning documents, Camille uses plural, first-person pronouns, “that we put in there [the plans],” while continuously reminding participants that she can only speak for herself, even in her role as an intermediary.

Finally, Camille shifts the frame of the dialogue to ‘support networks’ and community building. In other words, it is not just institutional players who hold power, people with disabilities must also locate and network “with who their support folks are.” This reframing, usage of third-person pronouns, and extension of liability to additional actors, distances Camille from the issue at hand. Said

another way, it holds *all* stakeholders responsible for "participating more in the planning stages." She underscores this point by characterizing the fluctuating landscape of wildfire governance, "Of course things evolve and there are different players." Ultimately, invoking all of the players in this evolving space is a means of extending agency and thereby diffusing and deferring personal accountability. While Kendall and Lane turn to Camille as an expert who holds power because of her institutional affiliations, Camille interestingly uses these very affiliations to diminish her own decision-making authority. In this way, they each refer to the same entities for opposing purposes. Next, I turn to a meeting of a community group where a DDAR coordinator was also in attendance. This time, specific aspects of PG&E's programs were presented to participants. The utility was actively summoned into the virtual room.

2. 2022 meeting of a group focused on neighbors helping neighbors

In mid-2022, I attended a public meeting[127] of a Northern California-based group focused on neighbors helping neighbors that primarily comprised individuals with various access and functional needs. A multi-county DDAR coordinator and person of color, Lucas, reached out to the meeting facilitator, a fellow local, to ask whether he could give a presentation about the DDAR program and PG&E's offerings during the group's general meeting. His request was approved and the room filled with an air of collaboration. The conversation that ensued was interspersed with questions like, "what can <u>we</u> do?" At the same time, participants immediately noted gaps in the initiative. In what follows I describe how Lucas as well as meeting attendees navigated such contradictory stances in order to reach alignment and agree upon a set of actions to move forward. Here I draw from a selection of fieldnotes instead of a transcript.

Upon receiving the presentation, participants take a practical and optimistic approach toward finding ways to improve the program. Lucas's stance, however, is neutral, rather objective. He notes the gaps that must be filled, but does not emplace himself into the role of one who needs to reduce them. While Lucas holds a parallel position to Camille and also claims authorship of his own speech by regularly mobilizing the first-person, singular pronoun <u>I</u>, he does so for a different end. Statements such as, "<u>I</u> have not heard of this, it seems like something <u>we</u> would cover," solidify Lucas's casual and seemingly impartial stance. In this way, he positions himself in the collective <u>we</u> of PG&E and other institutional affiliates, but simultaneously gives himself the flexibility to feign ignorance when deploying the personal <u>I</u>. The utterance "would" is also significant here. While Lucas is part and parcel of the DDAR program, providing an impression of rather than asserting his authority and knowledge of its inner workings enables him to shift blame for its mishaps onto those who are not present. In effect, it is Lucas who gets to shape and negotiate the role of those who are absent from the meeting. His very agency and power lies in this ability to use reported speech. Put differently, even his overt claims to agency do not translate into action. "The program is trying to change its wording so that people know who it encompasses," he says. This is a rhetorical strategy that works in several ways. It diffuses responsibility by anthropomorphizing a program and thereby erasing the human agents behind it. Moreover, it neutralizes any resistance and critique that participants might articulate

[127] Though the meeting was public, permission was required to join.

regarding different facets of the program, such as its confusing language. PG&E exercises control and defends its unavailability to field concerns by consistently outsourcing and offloading responsibility onto public-facing individuals like Lucas who do not have the authority to change its operations from within, beyond offering suggestions.

Several key dynamics are at play that can explain differences in Camille's and Lucas's subject position, rhetorical strategies, as well as the reception of their talks by meeting participants. On the one hand, inculcated gender norms place expectations on Camille to speak personally and Lucas matter-of-factly. Unlike Camille, Lucas's speech is free from anecdotes and strikes a factual, impersonal tone with responses such as, "Through 2-1-1 PG&E sends the application [for the Medical Baseline Program], or people find it online, or call in to the center to receive help with the application." In other words, he is a direct conduit of information from PG&E to meeting participants and vice versa. On the other hand, Camille enters a social situation that is contentious, while Lucas is invited into a collaborative environment. Therefore, Camille is required to assert her positionality from the get-go, all the while Lucas's stance is never questioned or challenged, despite his inability to directly address questions from the audience. When a participant asks Lucas about older adults in rural communities who do not have access to transportation services during emergencies, for example, he notes that he will reconnect with the group about this matter because the transportation requests he is aware of are from a different county. "I want to know if there is a need," he says, "and will then make the necessary connections." Again, who these connections are remains unsaid, but with "necessary" preceding "connections," Lucas positions himself as someone who cannot implement substantial changes. Relatedly, when asked whether he has been in touch with a local senior center that does not have enough portable wheelchair lifts to evacuate residents out of the multistory building, Lucas replies, "I haven't experienced anything like that, but it seems to fall into what we might cover." Once again, Lucas situates himself in the collective we, but exercises agency by stating that this shortcoming has remained off his radar. In other words, he has no reason to report this issue to his institutional affiliates or responsible parties because he has not personally encountered it. Furthermore, whether or not this concern falls within the domain of what the DDAR and Medical Baseline Program cover is also up for question, as evidenced by his usage of "might."

In contrast, meeting participants predominantly use first-person, collective pronouns to situate themselves within the communities that are central to (i.e., the protagonists of) their narratives. They have created the social setting within which the meeting unfolds; one where they have given themselves the floor to express, in their own voice, what their community has at stake. Though not embedded in any institutions per se, they consider themselves responsible for enacting the changes they would like to see. For example, the meeting facilitator states, "We can help amplify your [Lucas's] message. Again we're trying to reach folks who are most vulnerable." Furthermore, accountability is readily taken as the facilitator admits, "We don't reach folks with disabilities well." Fellow participants use personal pronouns when describing any gaps they have witnessed, but quickly reset themselves within the collective. "I saw your booth [one put up by PG&E to inform residents of the Medical Baseline Program], and the community didn't seem to understand what you were offering," one person mentions. The community here is singular and inclusive. Meeting participants give themselves agency by speaking for the community—presumably individuals with access and functional needs—

in its entirety, regardless of socioeconomic differences across the population. What is important to note is that unlike Lucas who strategically distances himself from "the program," meeting participants draw him back into PG&E's fold by using the inclusive, second-person pronouns <u>you</u> and <u>your</u>. From their perspective, Lucas and PG&E are one entity. When Lucas is repositioned in this way, he subsequently answers using all-encompassing and inclusive first-person pronouns, "What <u>we're</u> trying to do is reach people who don't know it's [the DDAR or Medical Baseline Program] available." While this emplaces him within the company, the personal actions he will (or not) take remain off script. In the next section, I discuss a promotional video for PG&E's services in which individuals who have built rapport across governmental and community groups deliver the content.

3. 2021 promotional video of an emergency management department in a Northern California-based county

In mid-2021 an informational video was released by a Northern California-based emergency management department. The roughly eight-minute long video featured not only employees of the county, but also representatives of revered community groups. While the video was branded with the county logo, it effectively endorsed PG&E's programs, both graphically and textually. Governmental and community actors animated its content, however, the author who composed the sentiments being shared and party whose beliefs were reified by the script (i.e., both PG&E) were absent. The figures of the speech were residents of the county that the video aimed to reach. In this analysis, I focus on segments of the video that address PG&E's Public Safety Power Shutoffs.

To, quite literally, set the stage, banners with photographs and quotations in both English and Spanish from leaders and members of community groups were hung behind the speaker. The speaker begins, "Under certain conditions, PG&E may choose to turn the power off in order to avoid any of their lines sparking a wildfire." The company's agency is being shaped here by way of reported speech. Rather than taking a clear, direct, and confident stance, PG&E "*may* choose" to perform an action. As the speaker continues, her immediate transition to second-person pronouns pushes PG&E into the background without relinquishing the control she has already assigned to the company: "So what can <u>you</u> do? First of all, assume this will happen to <u>you</u> sometime in the summer or fall and that <u>you</u> will indeed experience a power outage and get ready for it. Be sure that <u>you</u> are signed up at PG&E for notification[s] of power outage[s]." Her exclusive usage of <u>you</u> and <u>your</u> throughout the entire video consistently puts the onus on individuals to take preparatory measures. Furthermore, separating "this will happen to you" from PG&E—in other words, disconnecting the cause from the effect—is a rhetorical strategy employed by the speaker to shed the company of accountability. Again, she is solely the sounding box rather than author of the speech, regardless of her own beliefs concerning PG&E's responsibilities. In turn, PG&E can only act if individuals act first. The speaker goes on, "If <u>you</u> have equipment in <u>your</u> home that <u>you</u> rely upon for medical reasons, <u>you</u> can also sign up with PG&E's Medical Baseline allowance list. This list allows PG&E to recognize <u>your</u> medical dependency and be sure that they reach out to <u>you</u> in a number of different ways to make sure <u>you</u> are aware if a power outage is imminent in your area." This point is evidenced by the utterance, "allows PG&E to." Put another way, the company is not *allowed* to reach out to you of their own accord. What is critical to note is that while the speaker is not the author or principal of the speech, her role as a trusted

liaison between governmental agencies and community groups *does* give her some degree of agency behind the scenes. In other words, she—along with others featured in the video—might choose to participate in such projects when they serve her constituents by way of putting them on the, in this case utility's, radar and subsequently receiving financial, technical, and physical aid.

I next zero in on the vignettes shared by leaders and members of community groups who shift pronouns from second- to first-person in the video. Individuals are now both the animators and presumably authors of their speech, but the background entity remains PG&E. While their relationship to the company off screen is ambiguous and no direct links are explicitly mentioned, they each share stories that prompt viewers of the video to take matters into their own hands, all the while underscoring PG&E's Medical Baseline Program and other services. "Public service power outages are a part of our life," says one speaker, using "public *service*" rather than "public safety," the official title. His usage of our positions him within the broader community of viewers. Another speaker expresses, "For power outages, I learned and purchased a solar charger and generator." It is not only her responsibility to learn, but she must also have the financial means to buy backup power, a resource PG&E claims to provide. In this way, she diverts viewers' attention away from PG&E and towards her own ambition. "Public safety power shutoffs which we've been experiencing the last few years are very disruptive. One of the things we did for that was we bought a dual fuel generator…," echoes one more speaker who took the initiative, along with his partner, into his own resourceful hands. A fourth speaker reverts back to second-person pronouns: "So if you have your power shut off, one of the things to remember is that if you have any health issues . . . you can be on the Medical Baseline Program with PG&E and that will help save costs for you when you have issues and they give you an early warning sign when power is going to be shut off." Here, too, individuals must "remember" to sign up for PG&E's programs to save costs. Yet, as noted by previous speakers, the most helpful resources are purchased using funds that come out of their own pockets.

Finally, accountability is extended to and thereby diffused across individuals' full networks. "If PG&E has notified you of an imminent power outage in your area, now is the time to put your plan into action," says the main speaker. This plan comprises "work[ing] together with your family and your neighbors to consider what you will do should your power need to be turned off." In these directives, PG&E virtually vanishes once they sound the initial alarm. The speaker now introduces third-person pronouns, "If you know somebody who may need assistance in a power outage, reach out to them now," she forms a circle with her arm drawing it inward, "so that you can be part of their plan." The video ends with the tagline, "Be Safe Together, Be Ready Together." Although PG&E has outsourced its campaigning to locally trusted actors who effectively become the unified face of its operations, the company maintains its location within the realm of "together." The following section is rooted in a public meeting of a governmental agency where speakers alternate between positioning themselves within and outside of the community of county residents.

4. 2021 community-oriented meeting of a Northern California-based county

In mid-2021, I tuned into a public meeting of a Northern California-based county that was intended for its residents or "the community," broadly speaking. During the virtual gathering, four to seven high-ranking officials—ranging from representatives of CAL FIRE, the county's emergency

management and communications departments, specific districts, sheriff's office, and so on—populated the screen at any given time. The goal of the meeting was to empower viewers to independently take preparatory measures during the ongoing fire season. My analysis spotlights several segments of the meeting's transcript where different speakers who hold supervisorial roles urge individuals to reclaim their power through self-reliance rather than dependance on the county. While the content each speaker shared was different, they all employed a similar rhetorical strategy of alternating between first-, second-, and third- person pronouns to project expertise while simultaneously diffusing their authority by positioning themselves as relatable, trustworthy members of the community. This approach amplified their credibility.

To begin, a representative of the county's emergency management department insists, "[I]nstead of fear and apprehension, we really want to help people understand that with information and some preparedness, they can be empowered, and [feel] confident in both their ability to take care of themselves and their families, as well as connect with the larger community." Though he starts with rather impersonal remarks by using third-person pronouns to generally address people within an undefined community, in using the first-person, collective pronoun we, he immediately establishes that the experts in the room are speaking from a unified voice. While they animate their speeches separately, these officials have, together, authored the text. In addition, those who hold prominent roles are responsible for what is communicated; it is their duty to ensure that individuals residing within the state and county are taking appropriate safeguards. "The first step in many of these events is becoming aware of the potential hazard in your area. And so we're asking residents to kind of understand where they live." This instruction, which is first oriented toward individuals through the use of the possessive, second-person pronoun your, is quickly extended to all residents. What is interesting is the shift in pronouns that directly follows: "Are we paying attention to potentially a red flag warning condition or potentially PG&E shutting off the power…?" Here the speaker replaces the third-person, distant they with a first-person, collective we. In doing so, he situates himself within the community these instructions are aimed at reaching. This move is different from that above, where we refers to officials running the meeting, in aggregate. Yet still, the speaker quickly reclaims authority, "and, of course, local government and public safety agencies will then move into responding to these events by conducting alerts and warnings." This series of statements, which begins with a more or less hierarchical relationship, evens out as the speaker positions himself within the community and then tacitly addresses participants as collaborators (i.e., just as you familiarize yourself with the local environment, we will provide alerts). Here though, he distances himself from the very agencies he is part of by naming them as separate entities. He does this once more, "[T]he county and our cities and all our public safety agencies have made tremendous [progress in] activating and making full use of all the warning systems available to us." This time, however, by including the first-person our and landing on us, the speaker reframes the system of local agencies as entities that belong to and serve not only him, but the community he is part of as well.

A representative of CAL FIRE takes the stage next to address the increasing wildfire records set in the state year after year. The first-person, collective pronoun we dominates his speech. That said, noticing moments when he shifts to first-person, personal and second-person pronouns is key. "I want the crowd to take a moment and think about it, that in 2019 we actually had a real winter," he

begins, "We celebrated having average rainfall and things were good and we really had a low key fire season right up until we didn't." The speaker immediately transitions from using the first-person, personal pronoun I to a collective we, which emplaces him in both the community and physical environment. Although he is a representative of the state, not county, by virtue of experiencing the same phenomena, that is, average rainfall during a real winter, he positions himself as a relatable figure. The speaker continues in a similar vein: "And so the Kincade fire occurred during the most critical burn conditions. And so what we are now seeing here locally is that any day can be a bad fire day . . . So we need to have that constant vigilance to be ready to go and to have your home prepared regardless of the conditions, because we're one wind event away from a major fire." In this instance, his usage of we takes on an additional meaning. The speaker once more situates himself within the local setting, but now reclaims his expertise in stating what we, the officials present at the meeting, "are now seeing." He then extends the task of observation to the audience by directing them to be vigilant. This assigned action, emphasized by his switch to the second-person pronoun your, is meant to even out the playing field by distributing responsibility. As such, individuals are granted agency by way of serving the state.

A representative of the fire department follows. She addresses the audience directly by first claiming authorship of the text through mobilizing the first-person pronoun I, "So I think the thing that I want to impart to you," and then immediately shifting to second-person pronouns, "is it's really important that you take your power back, don't totally rely on us. You need to rely on yourselves and your community. Be a hero in your community." The speaker is not only the author of her script, but also the principal. She, herself, thought about the most important message to convey to the audience. Several additional rhetorical strategies are employed here too. Right off the bat, a clear distinction is made between you and us, the experts in the room. The shift to second-person pronouns comes with a turn toward patriotic language, from heroism to reclaiming power. When power was initially lost, however, is never mentioned. By telling participants what they *need* to do, she affirms her authoritative stance. This pairing of official directives (i.e., individuals carrying out actions that are needed by authorities) with personal empowerment builds, "We need you . . . We need you to empower yourselves with being prepared, with creating defensible space, with dealing with your home hardening, with finding out what the strengths and weaknesses are in your community." A dependency is established here—officials need the community—which is supposed to empower individuals, but only after they carry out the labor of state employees. As mentioned previously, such tasks (e.g., creating defensible space) often fall outside the financial means and physical abilities of residents. Finally, the speaker uses the first-person, collective we and possessive our to briefly position herself within the community, but ends with the same separation between us (i.e., officials) and you (i.e., individual members of the community) that she began her speech with. "We need to be prepared for any disaster, fire, flood, earthquake, landslide, whatever that may be. And so, we don't get to let our guard down even when we get out of fire season. If we ever, God willing, do get out of fire season, we still need to stay vigilant and prepared," she says, "So this is a 365 job for not only us, but for you." While the onus of preparation is at first exclusively placed on individuals, here the speaker divides the labor. All individual members of the community, including her, must work alongside each other, year-

round, with urgency. When residents are involved in this way, their work is deemed just as important as that of the state, and personal empowerment is achieved.

I conclude with a representative of the county sheriff's office. She emphasizes the points made by prior speakers, but this time adds a layer of affect. "[I]n that crisis moment, in that scary moment, take action for yourself and your family. Take responsibility for yourself and your family," she tells participants. Her usage of second-person pronouns and explicit nod to responsibility, shifts any blame for ensuing accidents away from state actors. This diffusion of accountability is consistent throughout her speech: "Don't wait to be told what to do. When there's a fire happening and things are moving quickly, we don't necessarily know all the details. In fact, I can guarantee we won't know all the details, early on in the incident. We never will. So it's important for you to take action for yourself, even with little information." While the previous speaker distributed responsibility by assigning participants a list of actions to take, here, the same effect is reached by underscoring the uncertainty of weather conditions. Participants are treated as experts of their own situations and are therefore liable for themselves. The speaker also grants herself authority to speak for all official parties present (i.e., mobilize reported speech) and thereby shape their collective point of view and limitations. What these vignettes demonstrate is how distinctions are made between individuals who are subjected to events and those who take action, which mirrors conceptions of powerlessness versus empowerment. In my final example, I turn toward a meeting of a disability-focused group that occurred not long after the major power shutoffs of 2019, which sparked this research.

5. 2020 meeting of a nationally-funded disability-focused group

In this analysis, I review a two-minute segment of a transcript from a meeting that took place in mid-2020 concerning PG&E's Public Safety Power Shutoffs. This gathering was hosted by a nationally-funded group that focuses on people with disabilities and featured representatives from CFILC and ILCs. The portion of the meeting I analyze comes from the speech of a high-ranking ILC employee. She begins, "We're really gonna go into what we experienced in October 2019." During this time, PG&E executed five PSPS events in her catchment area where fire risk was elevated. By using the first-person, collective pronoun we, the speaker from the get-go emplaces herself within the affected area along with participants. Because she never uses the first-person, personal pronoun I, it is unknown whether she is also the author of the speech, in addition to being its animator. Her institutional affiliation to an ILC is clear, yet her relationship to PG&E is not explicitly stated. The speaker continues, "[W]hat we have seen just similar to other disasters is that people with disabilities are disproportionately impacted during disasters and during PSPS-type events. We have people with disabilities from older adults who rely on power for life-sustaining measures or for independent living." Here, a distinction is made between we, the institution or ILC, and people with disabilities who the institution serves. It is important to note that ILCs predominantly employ individuals with disabilities who are presumably similarly impacted.

"[A] PSPS event is maybe an inconvenience for some people in the community, but for people who rely on that power for the durable medical equipment and assistive technology, it really puts them in a kind of a crisis situation. And that's exactly what we found in October 2019," she says. The speaker now adds the third-person pronoun them, once more differentiating people with disabilities, as a single

entity, from the unified we of the ILC she works for. "We do have power outages periodically," she notes, geographically situating herself within the area and community once more, "but these are very different than a PSPS event like we experienced in 2019." Again, she too was impacted by these power shutoffs. Next, the speaker directly locates herself within the community through her usage of the first-person, possessive pronoun our, "Power outages in our community often are due to a snowstorm. It may be isolated to just a particular part of the community, but with the PSPS events we saw a very different situation that really put a burden on the community and on individuals on how to get their needs met during multiple days of power shutoff." While the speaker at first emplaces herself within the community, her subsequent use of we repositions her institutionally. This point is reinforced as she shifts to the third-person pronoun their. She can therefore speak for the institution by way of reported speech, but her credibility also rides on being a member of the geographically-situated community. Whether or not she considers herself a member of a broader disability community is not expressed in this segment. Yet, her consistent conflation of geography with community—evidenced by statements such as, "It [snowstorms] may be isolated to just a particular part of the community"––enables her to more readily find common ground, regardless of bodymind similarities or differences.

Analyzing the semantic domain of such social interactions provides a window into the world of shifting subject positions. The examples throughout this section demonstrate how agency is constructed through the exchange of pronouns during public meetings or in public-facing videos. Critical here are the ways in which different actors negotiate and navigate institutional constraints, situate themselves within geographies and communities, address or bypass questions, determine their proximity to topics of discussion, locate where accountability and responsibility do and should lie, take an active or passive stance, elevate or discount specific forms of vulnerability, speak on behalf of others, summon absent parties, and so on and so forth. The following section builds on these themes by delving deeper into how individuals mobilize their own agency. The examples are of people who share personal anecdotes to gain public traction around the vulnerabilities they face.

Teetering on the edge of public and private life

Throughout my fieldwork, I encountered numerous individuals (i.e., em-powered subjects) who shared deeply personal experiences that accompanied unexpected and prolonged power shutoffs. The sheer horror of navigating institutional bureaucracy when in dire need of assistance came across in the interviews I conducted, public meetings I attended, and transcripts I closely reviewed. Many of these stories were recounted before. In this chapter, though, I zero in on several examples where individuals brought private vulnerabilities into the public domain for a very specific end: to gain collective traction around their own needs and subsequently put them within the purview of formal institutions. Here, too, an analysis of participation formats and rhetorical choices is useful for understanding how people negotiated the boundaries between public and private life, visibility and invisibility, activity and passivity, and so forth. These individuals strategically positioned themselves within groups, mobilized their own agency, employed communication tactics, and promoted issues of personal importance that they hoped would stick, both within and outside of meeting spaces.

Literature on disclosure is, in some respects, enriching to this section. 'The closet' is a longstanding metaphor in queer theory that disability studies scholars have since referenced. The term

itself can be interpreted in two ways: (1) as a storage space that contains items that would otherwise soil a room, and (2) how, especially gay, identity is concealed (though not quite hidden) and disclosed (though not quite displayed; Urbach 1996). When the physical juxtaposition of room/closet is metaphorically employed, the clean and orderly bedroom becomes associated with a normative heterosexual identity that contrasts the junk-laden closet of abjection or homosexuality. The metaphor of the closet bifurcates and fixes homosexuality and heterosexuality as distinct, uneven identity categories. Rather than being a singular occasion, 'coming out' involves continuously exposing or erasing one's presumably static identity. This shift from one rigid identity category to another, however, is rejected by queer and critical disability theorists alike. The crucial analytical move made by this metaphorical closet, writes Sedgwick (1990), is to instead demonstrate how such binary oppositions are in actuality relational, dynamic, mutually dependent, and unsettled. "There is always some seam, gap, hinge, knob, or pull that reveals the door as a mobile element and the wall as a permeable boundary," Urbach claims (1996, 66). He suggests positioning a third interstitial space just before the closet, the 'ante-closet' or space of change where identity markers could be resignified. Perhaps this ante-closet also provides a liminal environment for em-powered subjects to choose what aspects of themselves to reveal, how, to whom, and when.

Linton (1998) finds a parallel closet door in the disability sphere; one that divides the normal from abnormal. Illuminating the boundary between nondisabled and disabled, Linton states, is not a means toward further separation, but rather an attempt to unify and "identif[y] phenomena largely hidden by that fragmentation" (124). Johnson and Kennedy (2020) also complicate the unilateral departure from the closet. 'Coming out' as disabled is not a one-way flow from concealing to revealing, but rather "nuanced gradations of rhetorically strategic disclosure" with effects that shift depending on the sociopolitical, economic, and cultural contexts in which such disclosure takes place (161). It is a continual process—a complex calculus comprising rhetorical and embodied movement—that involves perceiving unfolding interactions within and across contexts and other contingencies; acknowledging the meanings of disclosure; considering ramifications to future individual and collective experiences; and performing disability according to these factors (Kerschbaum, Eisenman, and Jones 2017).

In sum, how the dividing line between closet and room is navigated can spur different flows of discursive power, forms of manipulation, meanings, shame, desire, and so on, which can each be leveraged materially and rhetorically (Sedgwick 1990). Alongside obvious risks, 'coming out of the closet' holds transformative potential; however, the degree to which such change can be realized as individuals disclose personal information about their private lives to a public rife with institutional oppressions and static conceptions of identity is up for debate. I ask, then, how do collective demands for governmental involvement arise from individuals' public disclosure—be it straightforward or nuanced—of private, embodied moments? The examples that answer this question come from two public meetings: the first is that of a disability-focused group, which was also discussed in the previous section, and the second, a community group oriented toward neighbors helping neighbors.

1. 2022 meeting of a disability-focused group

I first analyze a virtual public meeting of a group focused on people with disabilities amid disasters, which I introduced at the start of the preceding section. Here, though, I spotlight a different portion of the previously discussed six-minute segment. As a reminder, this meeting took place in early 2022 and centers PG&E's PSPS events. Many of its approximately 40 participants had institutional ties, most notably with CFILC, including its facilitators who consult the state. I bring our attention back to Kendall, a state-recognized, longstanding advocate for people with disabilities. In addition to voicing questions, Kendall shares his complaints in the chat bar throughout the meeting. I interpret this as a defiant, subordinate form of communication when considering the structure of the meeting; one where facilitators and panelists take the virtual stage until the Q&A session commences. In other words, there is an expectation that the audience will not verbally disrupt the meeting until called upon. The interactive chat bar, however, becomes an autonomous zone for participants to silently intervene. What this feature provides is an archive of messages, listed in order of reception, that facilitators can refer to later. Therefore, it is also evident when questions, comments, or complaints are bypassed. Kendall's string of comments catches Lane's, the meeting facilitator's, attention. She gives him the floor, though temporarily, to reframe the frustrations he has expressed in the chat bar as a single question, which "we could answer." The first-person, plural pronoun we refers to the experts on screen, including Lane herself. In what follows, I track how Kendall not only reframes the content of his text, but also takes advantage of the fact that the room is populated by actors who could lift his concerns up the institutional hierarchy, as evidenced by the slew of organizational logos populating the screen.

Kendall traces the root of his frustration to a past scene. He begins by shifting the frame to a previous moment in time and reenacts the dialogue which unfolded. He sarcastically mimics a PG&E employee, "Oh, you take it [the battery] to the PG&E charging station" and subsequently, in real time, expresses his discontent about not being able to lift and transport the battery. While Kendall is the central figure of his own reported speech, he next shifts to the pronoun we to discuss the lack of collective action surrounding this issue. Unlike Lane who uses we to summon the experts in the room, Kendall's mobilization of the pronoun encompasses the collective body of participants, within which he is situated. He continues by describing people with disabilities throughout California as an external, homogenous, and implicitly powerless entity who "we . . . those of us, here, who are in an educator role [need to educate about] what they should do." A number of rhetorical strategies are at play here. Kendall's referent for we and us suddenly parallels Lane's. He sets apart the experts in the room and simultaneously positions himself within that category by identifying himself as an educator. Kendall thereby claims his stance as a figure who holds some degree of power and authority. In using the third-person pronoun they, Kendall makes a clear distinction between people with disabilities who are in an active educator role and those who are effectively passive.

Kendall then shifts the frame once more by summoning an insidious figure: PG&E, a for-profit corporation that is responsible for his troubles. He begins by critiquing the language authored by PG&E, specifically 'Public Safety Power Shutoffs,' and argues that 'deenergization events' is a more accurate title. PSPS events are "not for our" benefit, he exclaims, now placing himself on equal footing

with *all* of the meeting's attendees. In his usage of the possessive, first-person pronoun our, he no longer differentiates between the individuals present, be they educators or not. What is interesting is that California's Senate Bill 52, which passed in 2021, defines planned power outages as 'deenergization events' and classifies them as a local emergency. In other words, Kendall's claim that 'Public Safety' is a misnomer—as the safety of people with disabilities is continuously overlooked—has already been recognized and codified by the State of California. The point of contention for Kendall is that PG&E, a negligent player, persistently misrepresents their intentions. Their rebranding of power shutoffs has circulated so widely that the misnomer is, colloquially, used far more frequently than governmental terminology.

Kendall continues by drawing absent state agencies that regulate PG&E, such as the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC), "who would listen to us," into his speech. The statement, "would listen" suggests that he has insight into the world of such institutions and their decision-making capacities. Whether or not us is all inclusive is now unclear. Yet, his call for collective action leaves no one in attendance off the hook: "we should all be advocating for the electric utility [CPUC]." In other words, everyone should advocate for state-level agencies to use their power to hold PG&E accountable and thereby improve conditions for people with disabilities. In this way, Kendall publicly reenacts a personal embodied experience in order to reorient participants toward advocacy and push for systemic change, which extends far beyond any single person. At the same time, he gains traction around his deep-seated aversion to PG&E. As he continues his diatribe, Lane nudges Kendall to ask a question. Her interruption restrains his power—a dynamic he has been trying to resist—and serves as a reminder that the playing field is not even after all. Kendall's remarks are never restated in the form of a question but they *are* addressed by our DDAR program implementor from the previous section, though only haphazardly. My next example of a community group meeting demonstrates how individuals disclose private information by carving out space in meeting agendas for personal presentations, rather than anxiously waiting for a turn to speak.

2. 2021 meeting of a community group oriented toward neighbors helping neighbors

In late 2021, I attended a virtual public meeting of a Northern California-based group focused on neighbors helping neighbors that wildfire specialists from different local institutions (e.g., the county emergency management and volunteer fire department) joined as well. While members of the community group have a variety of access and functional needs, the day's topic was communication between older adults, specifically those living independently, and emergency personnel. The presentation, both authored and animated by an older adult, covered the unique challenges—from mobility and hearing to social isolation and disruption of support—faced by this broad population during emergency preparations. Important to note is that the speaker, who is white and presumably financially secure, did not draw distinctions among older adults along axes of gender, race, or class. Her own embodied experiences as well as professional expertise in this domain, however, enabled her to reach a granular level of detail in her recommendations. "Avoid patronizing language,"[128] she noted

[128] Quotations here are drawn from my fieldnotes rather than transcripts.

for example, "speak clearly and directly, make eye contact . . . use visual aids." "Verify comprehension," she continued, "ask the older person how they would use the information." These directives were explicitly aimed at the institutional actors present. Manifold suggestions followed, such as, "Masks are hard for people with hearing impairments since the mouth is hidden," "It's important to be flexible and accommodating . . . A morning meeting might be a good idea. If the person seems tired, make a follow-up appointment," and so on. Working with older adults might involve multiple meetings, she explained, and these sessions will be more effective if they are perceived as an "exciting project." Her research, drawn from national surveys, was threaded through the speech and bolstered the specific recommendations she put forth: "Older people tend to not be prepared for emergencies. Less than one-third had an emergency preparation plan. Less than one-third participated in emergency preparation and training." Furthermore, she, of her own accord, enlisted residents to collect data and build case studies to incorporate into the talk. Meeting attendees saw themselves, or their loved ones, reflected on screen. In other words, they could relate to the figures shown, whether or not the details of their personal lives perfectly aligned.

The power of the speaker's presentation was rooted not only in the fact that it synthesized the needs of older adults living in the area, herself included, but that its core content (i.e., what to do to reach older adults during emergencies) could be seamlessly integrated into county plans by the very people present at the meeting. This was especially true for general suggestions, such as wrapping up meetings by reviewing evacuation timelines and reinforcing the most important points made. "Of all the things <u>we</u> talked about today," the speaker impersonated an emergency manager meeting with a resident, "what do <u>you</u> think are the most important things for <u>you</u> to do in an emergency situation?" What her usage of the plural, first-person pronoun <u>we</u> made clear is that conversations between emergency personnel and older adults were to happen one-on-one. Agency should be granted to the latter, her use of the personal pronoun <u>you</u> connoted. This key message was explicitly communicated, "The older person should be the captain of the team because ultimately their responsibility will be carrying out the plan." The speaker even supplied local officials, the target of her talk, with a series of questions to ask: "What is your living situation like? Do you live alone or with others? Do you drive or do you use other transportation?" They could—at the very least—circulate, by word of mouth, the insights they gained and enact simple recommendations themselves, such as offering older adults assistance with gathering supplies around the house to build a 'go bag' or 'shelter-in-place kit.'

Ultimately, the speaker seamlessly embedded her own embodied circumstances into a presentation, which she strategically delivered during a community meeting that local emergency personnel would inevitably attend. The personal initiative she took was aimed at drawing attention to the 'older adults' sub-category—listed under the 'access and functional needs' classification—of planning documents. She mobilized her role as a member of the group to expand the public discourse surrounding emergency preparedness for older adults. The presentation she delivered adequately represented the experiences of other older adults in the room. Therefore, she was entrusted to speak on their behalf, from a united, collective voice; one that was also legible to and captured the attention of local officials who could apply their learnings on the ground. These same officials were connected to county departments that influence state plans and policies. Hence, the knowledge she put forth was

not only timely, but could be adapted to media of various forms. Her public sharing of private vulnerabilities, in effect, empowered everyone in the room, herself included.

DIMENSIONS OF PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Navigating public spheres

What becomes apparent in my analysis of dynamic plural publics, shifting subjectivities, and blurry boundaries between public and private spheres is that notions of 'publicness' and the landscape of participation are morphing in novel ways that draw upon the longstanding practices of individuals with non-normative bodyminds. While twentieth-century conceptualizations of the public sphere (e.g., Dewey 1946; Arendt 2018; Habermas 1991) that bifurcate and fix definitions of public and private life have long since been obsolete, questions regarding the cultural and rhetorical processes that shape 'publicness' remain. What constitutes the public realm evolves in accordance with contemporary power/knowledge regimes. In this chapter, I have demonstrated how public speech continuously traverses digital and physical zones at various scales—some ad hoc, while others are regularly planned. Within these spaces, insiders and outsiders are preestablished based on their rapport with state and state-regulated agencies, and they are also produced in situ depending on their capacity to frame dominant discourses or their exclusion from them.

Such concerns have been taken up by a number of authors as well (e.g., Fraser 1990; Warner 2002). Core to Fraser's argument, for example, is the notion that a multiplicity of publics comprising individuals "speaking 'in [their] own voice'" can advance equal participation (69). She maintains that women, the working class, people of color, gays and lesbians, and so on have always created alternative publics beyond the boundaries of wider discourses to challenge exclusionary norms and agitate dominant publics. "I propose to call these subaltern counterpublics," Fraser writes, "in order to signal that they are parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups can invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (67). A 'strong public,' Fraser contends, is one that marries autonomous opinion-formation with decision-making that is detached from authoritative measures (69). While some groups presented in this chapter—particularly activist coalitions—align with Fraser's notion of subaltern counterpublics, the financial incentives issued in 2017 for communities to collaborate with state agencies have resulted in a multitude of overlapping publics whose alternative discourses are completely interwoven with those that are dominant. Within a disaster-prone environment where people's lives are perpetually at stake, evading state actors and directives entirely means opening oneself up to increasing risks. As a result of financial support and assistance with implementing landscape changes, as well as the delivery of resources and services, community groups have realized greater success in partnering with the state despite, at times, fraught relations.

For Warner (2002), on the other hand, a public is contingent upon *strangers* receiving, absorbing, resonating with, and participating in circulating discourses (e.g., literary works), which in turn shape their subjectivity. Such self-creating and self-organizing publics, which function separately from state institutions, come in different shades. Those that are dominant conflate their lifeworlds with normalcy. Counterpublics, on the other hand, are aware of their subordinate status and grow

agency by way of circulating discourses that are hostile in nature and deter 'ordinary people.' They make a scene to transform the status quo and "are said to rise up, to speak, to reject false promises, to demand answers, to change sovereigns . . . to scrutinize public conduct" (88). For instance, "A queer public might be one that throws shade, prances, disses, acts up, carries on, longs, fantasizes, throws fits, mourns, 'reads'" (89). Dolmage (2016) concurs by bringing in the concept of *mētis*: cunning and adaptive forms of knowledge as well as timely and practical communication tactics (a la de Certeau 2002) that are necessarily embodied, divergent, and at odds with normativity. "If we approach our world as one of chance and change," Dolmage states, "then *mētis* becomes the best available means for us [the so-called weak] to move in hundreds of rhetorical situations every day" (157). It contrasts rational liberal models that are oriented toward the attainment of rights and instead favors failure (a la Halberstam 2011), undoing, and exploiting the rifts in dominant ideologies to foreground surprising and creative ways of living. "Unlike the forward march of logic," Dolmage explains, "*mētis* is characterized by sideways and backward movement" (5).

While Warner and Dolmage both yearn for counterpublics that are embodied, affective, and playful in these ways, Warner acknowledges that some only gain agency by engaging with the state and abandoning their initial transformative intentions. This point is crucial to consider as new opportunities for collaboration and mobilization are being created by and for individuals residing on the frontlines of disasters. Just as virtual and hybrid interactive formats can be liberatory and disrupt dominant publics, they could just as easily entrench orthodox power relations due to their rigid structure. Individuals who were previously disengaged from wildfire discourses that occurred in inaccessible environments now regularly make their claims known to state and state-regulated actors during public processes. At the same time, Warner's notion that publics and counterpublics comprise strangers breaks down in this context. Links and passwords, which are provided in advance to *appropriate* individuals, are required to unlock the virtual doors of public meetings. Furthermore, meeting facilitators have the ability to easily mute and remove individuals, preventing prolonged disruptions. Unless unauthorized access occurs, these online platforms remain resilient against infiltration and persistent interruption.

Whether in collaborative or contentious ways, activists and community groups invariably rub up against state and state-regulated agencies. For this reason, it is important to consider the lessons that can be drawn for planning processes within this institutional setting, which includes sociomedical programs. For policies and plans to yield meaningful results, individuals with non-normative bodyminds should be able to join *regularly* scheduled and easily accessible public meetings where discourses can evolve in unprecedented directions. Moderated but open virtual platforms, with prolonged periods of time allocated for discussion, provide one way to ensure that the intricacies of individuals' experiences and needs—whether running counter to or aligning with dominant discourses and management schemes—can be articulated, synthesized, and duly acknowledged in a timely manner. Concurrently, state actors must also find avenues to engage with activists and community groups on their own terms, and subsequently integrate their learnings into planning and policy-making processes. In other words, they too should keep a pulse on the discourses, practices, and accessible channels individuals with non-normative bodyminds use in their everyday lives, not just for work, but also for exploration and play.

Drawing connections

This chapter demonstrates the importance of drawing together an analysis of cross-agency relations with a discursive interpretation of the conversations that transpire within this evolving institutional setting. My analysis of different forms of participation—be they protests, dynamic discussions, panel presentations, timely webinars, restricted town halls, or even promotional videos––reveals how the structures within which social interactions occur enable or restrict the agency of participants. In other words, they frame how agency is mobilized and to whom it is afforded, as well as how vulnerability discourses circulate within and across gatherings. They amplify or conceal power differentials. The participation settings designed by activists, community and advocacy groups, governmental agencies, and the utility PG&E, for instance, establish who is a ratified versus unratified participant of a given social situation, who is granted the floor and when, which interactions count and whose communication falls secondary, as well as underlying norms that shape the very format of speech (e.g., what is permissible or disruptive). This initial investigation led me to my first of three core arguments: Only rights-based and single-issue modes of public participation are recognized by the state, across scales. Said another way, putting a group's constituents on the governmental map and bringing their concerns within the purview of decision-makers requires being legible to state agencies. It means affecting change from within predetermined structures and entering the institutional fold. Groups with intersectional politics whose members believe that vulnerability is inextricably tied to ableism and systemic injustices, rather than isolated demographic markers, resist such strategies and opt, instead, for mutual aid.

Each social interaction determines the ways in which not only agency, but also roles and responsibilities are negotiated. My second argument shows how individuals alternate between first-, second-, and third-person pronouns to postpone, accept, or deflect accountability. This is especially the case when they operate in close proximity to or under the auspices of institutions, such as PG&E. Individuals like DDAR program implementors, for example, strategically navigate participants' questions and frustrations by responding as both animators and authors of their own speech *or* strategically deploying reported speech, that is, text authored by someone else, in this case PG&E. In this way, their subject position is in constant flux; a fine calculus about whether, and to what degree, power and authority should be claimed or diffused is always in the works. Their agency is evidenced by both their ability to navigate such contradictory social situations and appeal to actors of interest as well as capacity to secure resources for their constituents.

To conclude, I land on my third argument: People who are dependent on power perpetually teeter on the edge of private and public life, where they are constantly forced to decide which direction to move in. Stepping (or rolling) into the public sphere means taking the risk of disclosing private vulnerabilities and fixing one's identity. Individuals make this choice to gain traction around personal troubles so that they are subsequently elevated and restated as group demands to governmental institutions. Across settings, em-powered subjects deploy a mixture of pronouns to communicate with participants of public meetings—whether addressing attendees as a unified whole or separate units—in ways that, hopefully, resonate. Regardless of the structure of the meeting or rhetorical strategies used, their goal is to improve conditions for themselves—and thereby people with disabilities broadly–

–amid power shutoffs and other wildfire-related events; it is to bring a more considerate world into being.

In the following chapter, I employ critical discourse analysis to interpret how PG&E crafts information about its Medical Baseline and adjoining programs as well as integrates definitions of vulnerability into the promotional materials (i.e., graphic, spoken, and written texts) that circulate among these groups.

Chapter 3: Discursively Analyzing the Gradient from Health and Normativity to Vulnerability and Marginality

INTRODUCTION

Virtual Public Safety Town Halls

From 2020 onward, PG&E has been promoting its offerings and progress through a series of uniform webinars, or Virtual Safety Town Halls, targeting various counties across its service area. Facilitators of these sessions range from the company's senior managers who are responsible for engaging customers in PSPS events to public safety specialists and vegetation experts. Over the course of an hour and a half, employees discuss 'PG&E's Commitment to Safety,' the utility's 'Community Wildfire Safety Program,' 'Enhanced Vegetation Management,' and finally 'Public Safety Power Shutoffs' (PG&E Webinar 2021). It is during this final "Public Safety Power Shutoffs" segment that roughly five minutes are dedicated to covering how the Medical Baseline and adjoining battery provisioning programs can benefit vulnerable populations. During this time, vulnerability becomes more than a vague expression; it is conveyed as a point on a continuum ranging from least to most vulnerable; normative to marginal. Access to the company's offerings parallel this gradation. In other words, individuals who fit into the most vulnerable tier are also afforded more services.

It is crucial to bear in mind that by the time PG&E began conducting these town halls, its Medical Baseline Program had been rebranded. Benoit (1997) speaks to several strategies corporations like PG&E use in moments of crisis to restore their image. Crisis communication generally involves deploying visuals and text to correct past actions and bolster public perception. With a quick glance at the fresh Medical Baseline Program website and printed brochure, it becomes clear that PG&E's efforts are now aimed at not only racially diversifying its customer base, but also using racially marginalized individuals to represent the company and thereby repair its public image. For example, the website's landing page features a Black older couple embracing. The woman sits smiling with a tube strung under her nose, while her standing husband kisses her cheek. At public events, a flyer featuring the same image is distributed, albeit translated into Spanish to reach the targeted population (fig. 10). Prior to attending a town hall, these images already orient participants to whom PG&E designates in its highest vulnerability bracket. Effectively, individuals on the margins, who were initially overlooked by the corporation, are now the smiling faces representing its programs to the general public.

Understanding how vulnerability is constructed and stratified, both tacitly and explicitly, necessitates a granular investigation of such visuals as well as texts accompanying PG&Es primary form of communication with customers, its town halls. I therefore conduct a qualitative discursive analysis of a representative four-and-a-half minute segment of the company's Virtual Safety Town Hall for Sonoma and Marin Counties. This exemplary section is not only concentrated on Northern California counties, the broader site of my research, but zeroes in on the company's sociomedical programs. Past and future town halls adhere to a nearly identical structure when addressing such

content. Within this segment, I explore the ways by which PG&E employees define, circulate, and integrate (or omit) different levels of vulnerability, and corresponding degrees of normativity and marginality, into their programs. I pay particular attention to how vulnerability *needs* to be constructed in order for PG&E to garner support and generate traction around their new messaging and programs. At the same time, I consider how embodied experiences are constructed at the micro scale of language *in use*, all the while acknowledging asymmetric power relations between the utility and its customers. What my investigation reveals is that PG&E mobilizes three discursive strategies throughout their town halls: (1) a generalization of vulnerability, (2) trust building through sociospatial proximity, and (3) the market-driven commodification of care services.

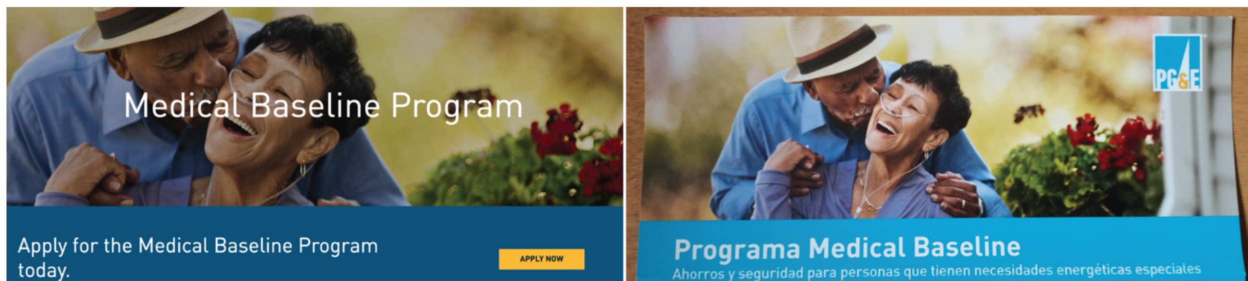


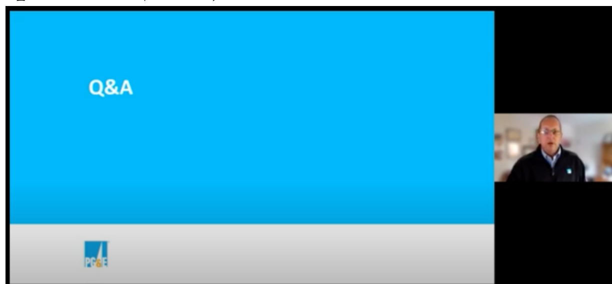
Figure 10: PG&E's Medical Baseline Program website landing page (left) and printed flyer in Spanish (right). The headline on the flyer translates to "Savings and security for people who have special energy needs." Image descriptions can be found above, in the body of the text.

Critical discourse analysis

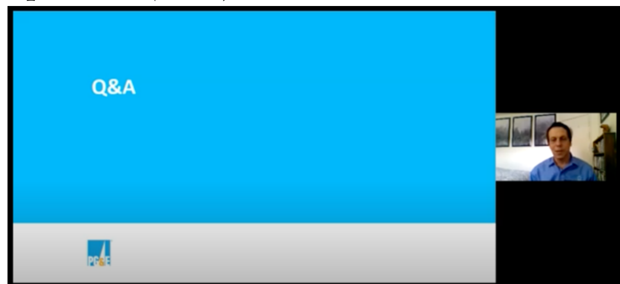
As I have shown in the previous chapter, locally situated discourses can reveal how power/knowledge regimes operate, be it through individuals who strategically shift their own subject positions; institutions that instill rules, norms, categories, and thereby construct social realities; bodily practices; and so on. By these means, social institutions like PG&E and state agencies delimit who has access to and control over discourses in various institutional contexts; in other words what people can and cannot say or do, who is an insider or outsider, who is visible or invisible, and ultimately what kinds of worlds are possible. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) enables one to denaturalize such elements when they are taken for granted. This method can expose contradictions between stated claims and actual lived realities, while also identifying the causes behind these discrepancies. At the core of CDA is an examination of relations and operations of power and ideology alongside more granular linguistic assessments of quotidian speech. When an analysis of macro-scale sociopolitical and economic forces is brought into interpretations of micro day-to-day talk, unequal material differences in people's everyday lives also come to light. A dimension of CDA that is crucial to this study is the formation and summoning, or interpellating (a la Althusser 1970), of different subject positions that are invariably tied to power dynamics and ideological frameworks. Importantly, scholars of CDA consider discourse to be a site of resistance and social struggle over normativity and regimes of power; one that holds transformative potential in the material world (Blommaert and Bulcaen 2000; Colombo and Porcu 2014; Fairclough 2015; Hart et al. 2005; Luke 1995; Pennycook 1994; Van Dijk 1993).

Although CDA informed the previous chapter, here it is used methodologically. Hence, I extend my assessment of wildfire governance to the lexical (i.e., selection of words), syntactic (i.e., arrangement of words and phrases), prosodic (i.e., patterns of stress and intonation), and semiotic (i.e., signs and symbols) choices made by key players within this riskscape. My analysis involves dissecting a transcript, downloaded from YouTube.com, of PG&E's Community Wildfire Safety Program, Virtual Safety Town Hall for Sonoma and Marin Counties that took place on March 3rd, 2021. To locate the segment of the transcript most pertinent to this chapter, I conducted a lexical search of the following terms, which are commonly used to classify individual and population-level vulnerability[129] as well as broadly refer to people: African American, Asian, **body**, Black, burden, **community**, citizen, **customer**, **disability**, evacuate/tion, disadvantage, displace, disproportion, elderly, equity, **family**, gender, hardship, **health**, Hispanic, homeless/houseless, illness, **impact**, **Indigenous**, **individual**, justice, Latino/a/x, LGBT, Native American, **neighbor**, older adult, people of color/POC, population, race, **resident**, senior, sick, undocumented, vulnerable/vulnerability, and **woman/en**. The bolded terms, in their various forms, were found in the transcript. Interestingly, 'vulnerable' and 'vulnerability' were never expressed overtly; rather, substitutions like 'impacted' were used in their stead. I chose the most salient segment based on the relevance and frequency of the terms used. The selected portion, minutes 68:34 to 73:05 (fig. 11), falls within the Q&A session of the town hall during which pre-screened concerns were presumably raised by audience members. Recalling the previous chapter, it is worth noting that the questions I posed during a live event were never addressed. My analysis of this recorded town hall is supplemented by fieldnotes from those I attended virtually in real time. In what follows, I zoom in and out of the selected transcript to illustrate how my three arguments are animated.

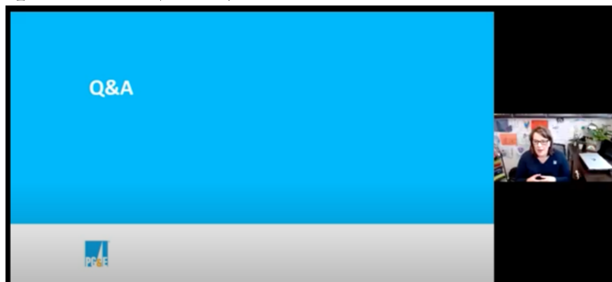
***Speaker 1** (68:34)*



***Speaker 3** (69:26)*



***Speaker 2a** (70:32)*



***Speaker 2b** (72:03)*

[129] This is not an exhaustive list.

Figure 11: PG&E's Community Wildfire Safety Program, Virtual Safety Town Hall for Sonoma and Marin Counties, March 3, 2021. The figure comprises four screenshots of PG&E's town hall that are taken between minutes 68:34 and 73:05. On the right-hand side of each screenshot is a small video of the speaker. There are three different speakers in total. To the left is a large slide with "Q&A" written across the top. The fourth screenshot includes a slide showcasing all of the services the utility offers through its Wildfire Safety website.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Bodymind norms

When discussing the categorization of non-normative bodyminds, it is crucial to remember that institutions employ discourses to structure and establish hierarchies among social groups. These classifications are not only embedded in governmental practices, but also have the potential to influence how people define themselves and others[130] (Luke 1995). Furthermore, the demarcation of proper and improper subjects is a key norming strategy that is utilized by institutions to diagnose, evaluate, and ultimately discipline individuals (Spade and Willse 2015). Butler's (1993) questions are pertinent here: "How do tacit normative criteria form the matter of bodies? And can we understand such criteria not simply as epistemological impositions on bodies, but as the specific social regulatory ideals by which bodies are trained, shaped, and formed" (26)? Examining how regulatory norms emerge as PG&E employees frame disability makes this query particularly relevant. Moreover, as disabled bodies are negotiated, constructed, and disciplined, cultural attitudes and tensions concerning rhetorical possibilities also come to light. In sum, bodies consistently serve as objects of knowledge and are enmeshed in power dynamics (Dolmage 2014). With this, I turn toward our three speakers to understand how high-risk bodyminds are discursively constructed and categorically positioned during PG&E's Virtual Safety Town Hall and what is at stake.

1. Generalization of vulnerability

"We're all in this together"

"I just think about, we're all in this together here, right?" a PG&E employee asks a silent, virtual audience. He continues, "I always like to reflect on every time I get to be out in the field . . . to prevent events from happening that impact every one of us." His arms gesture outward to emphasize the inclusion of all participants attending the town hall; a recurring motion accompanying the use of universal pronouns throughout the speech. By continuously deploying general pronouns like we and us alongside terms such as 'team,' PG&E representatives construct a collective body and apolitical context. This imagined neutral setting is one in which both the company's employees and customers (i.e., hearers and readers of the presentation) are considered vulnerable subjects, one and the same. In other words, the repetitive deployment of such pronouns equalizes the positionality of speakers and

[130] Foucault refers to this phenomena as 'technologies of the self.'

audience members. In effect, PG&E produces an environment in which vulnerability is shared among players on a level field who have equal stakes in the game. This outcome is not only created through speech, but is bolstered by the mobilization of semiotic resources including gestures of open arms, head nods, and upward gazes (Goodwin 2010; Schegloff 1995). Figure 12 exemplifies how vulnerability is produced and flattened in these ways.

Next, the meeting facilitator jumps in to affirm what was said and proceeds by homing in on the Medical Baseline Program. Her hands motion outward as she emphasizes, "I *encourage* you to enroll in our Medical Baseline Program if you are reliant on power for *any* medical needs." "We will also be sending *direct* communications to customers who are *most* likely to be impacted," she stresses while pointing at the audience. Throughout this segment, bodymind conditions and needs that produce differential forms and degrees of vulnerability are reduced to a baseline, catch-all initiative. Two phenomena are worth noting here. On the one hand, categories of difference are dissolved in the formation of a singular *most impacted* group. On the other, the formation of this subordinate group is required in order for PG&E to demonstrate its moral work of moving—through an all-encompassing, comprehensive website—those who are most impacted to the tier of collective, universal vulnerability: above the baseline. This, once more, homogenizes and normalizes a spectrum of experiences. What remains unspoken is the source of the impact. The implicit assumption in these sorting mechanisms is that the *most impacted* individuals can easily access and navigate the website housing PG&E's initiatives. "It's *very very* easy online," the speaker persuasively concludes. The extracts drawn in Figure 13 illustrate how this classification system is put into action. What remains unsaid, however, is who gets priority when *everyone* is considered vulnerable. As mentioned earlier, these decisions are made on the fly by moral intermediaries and em-powered subjects who navigate a complex, jumbled network of community-based organizations—each operating according to its own unique definition of vulnerability—and attempt to engage with PG&E's tangled sociomedical programs without consistent support from the corporation. In what follows I provide a more nuanced breakdown of this linguistic strategy, highlighting specific fragments of the transcript.

The nuances

The sequences highlighted in Figure 12 display a number of linguistic features. In line 1, heightened volume and stress are placed on the first-person plural pronoun <u>we</u> in its various forms (e.g., <u>we're</u>). As previously mentioned, this pronoun is positioned alongside the utterance 'team,' which is also emphasized and prolonged to denote a shared subject position. Ultimately, these lexical and prosodic choices enable each speaker to animate PG&E's message of shared vulnerability. Furthermore, I interpret the upward and outward extension of the speaker's hand in line 2 as a recognition of an all-inclusive 'neighborhood' and 'community.' This spatial turn will be discussed in more depth in the subsequent section. What is important to note here, however, is that these multi-modal indicators produce the notion of a collective body impacted by wildfires in a similar fashion across time and space.

The idea of collectivity is reemphasized in line 15 when the speaker reiterates their perspective on a united stance; thoughts that presumably extend outside the confines of a singular town hall. The rising intonation of the utterance 'right?' makes it a rhetorical question that is missing its second pair

part, or response by a second speaker. Put simply, the question is directed at an audience that is not granted access to candidly reply. The semiotic backdrop, comprising a bright blue screen labeled Q&A, accentuates the irony here as responses are restricted to speakers. Line 21 is a further attempt to summon all customers by way of a forward hand gesture and use of the personal pronoun us. The phrase "every one of us" first acknowledges individuals and then consolidates them into an us. Line 23, which again indexes spatial configurations that will be addressed later, introduces the second-person pronoun you. When followed by the utterance 'know,' audience members are granted epistemic credibility. And yet, epistemic authority rests solely in the hands of speakers who animate PG&E's claims of collective vulnerability. "In this" indexes an undefined yet shared context that is aimed at putting the speakers and audience members on equal footing. Each explicit mention of togetherness in wildfire vulnerability is accompanied by the speaker's lifted arms.

Time	Speaker	Line	Utterance
(68:34)	***Speaker 1***	1.	WE'RE here. We're the local te::am (.)
		2.	We're=we're neighbors and residents in the communities *gestures up and outward with hand* that you live IN.
(69:26)	***Speaker 3***	13.	<Ye:::ah you know:: uh> events like <this:: a::re> so positive to=to be able to do::
		14.	<uh to:: really bring ho::me this uh culture of uh->
		15.	>yeah I just think about, we're all in this together< here, right? and,
		16.	um, I-I always like to reflect *glances away, upward* on every time I get to be out in the fi::eld *head nod* and intera::cting with uh::
		21.	to uh prevent events from happening *gestures forward and outward with hands* that uh impact every one of us.
		22.	>We-we're all *gestures forward and outward with one hand* sharing where we're callin in from< *shoulders shrug* uh here this afterno:on.
		23.	And uh:: you know we're, we're all Californians, we're all neighbors, and we're all in this together. *leans and gestures forward with lifted arms at the conclusion of each phrase*
		24.	So uh, I'm >looking forward to continuing that partnership *lifts hand forward* with all of our customers here on this line and those that are not.<

Figure 12: Transcript highlighting the deployment of universal pronouns and equalization of positionality between speakers and recipients.

Figure 13 is composed of sequences that illustrate the construction of a most vulnerable group and its relation to the broader vulnerable collective. The progression from *generally impacted* to *most impacted* begins in line 35. Importantly, the source and outcome of impact are undefined. Stress placed on the modal verb 'will' and the heightened volume of 'direct' emphasize the specific targeted action––sending communications—that PG&E will take to accommodate "most likely to be impacted" customers. The prosodic features of stretching, stressing, and increasing the volume of 'most' indicate varying degrees of impact along a shared continuum of vulnerability. The repetitive upward and downward motion of the speaker's hands, along with pointed gestures aimed directly at the audience, produces a measured, calculated, steady, predictable, and thereby reliable and dependable semiotic environment. In other words, these gestures signal that all of the steps necessary to elevate those who

are most impacted to a *normal* state of vulnerability will continuously be taken. The lexical choice of using ‘customer’ rather than the second-person pronoun you is worth noting. After all, PG&E is only providing the service of direct communication to its paying customer base.

Once the speaker introduces PG&E’s website and Medical Baseline Program in lines 57 to 60 as a “catch-all place,” the second-person pronoun you is also reintroduced. The work of you is to summon audience members and to provide them with a call to action; a call that is emphasized by the prosodic stretching and raised intonation of ‘encourage.’ The subsequent stress placed on ‘if’ in line 58 once more separates the *most vulnerable* individuals from the generally vulnerable categorical norm. Membership into the most vulnerable group is earned by having ‘any’ medical needs. The stress placed on ‘any’ flattens all medical needs to a reductive baseline. The outward hand motion that accompanies the utterance ‘any’ further highlights that *all* needs are covered. By using the term ‘even’ in line 59, the speaker conveys that distinct, rare medical conditions are covered too. This is confirmed by their continuous outward hand motion and stress placed on ‘that’ in line 60. What is important to note is that while no one with a medical condition is purportedly excluded, the process of qualification is still required. The ease of this qualification process—enrolling in and navigating PG&E’s online program––is described in line 63. The repeated and prolonged expression ‘very,’ which precedes ‘easy,’ has the prosodic effect of ensuring that the message is impactful and registers with the audience. At the same time, it highlights the assumptions PG&E makes about the abilities, perceptions, and available time of those who presumably require the Medical Baseline Program. In this way, a specific *most* vulnerable subject is defined and called into being. Overall, PG&E’s website is presented as a universal hub that can elevate all individuals to a normative level of vulnerability that can be tackled collectively.

34. But I really like *points forward* the suggestion an-I an-I thank you for that.

35. We will be also sending DIRECT communications *separates hands and holding the thumb and fingers of each hand together waves up and down* to customers who are MO::ST likely *subtly points to audience with both hands* to be impa:cted.

36. and that really means that you're served by a li:ne that runs through tier two or tier three (.) *holds hands out and moves along “line” unidirectionally*

---

56. You can compare? *directs hand downward with palm facing down* different solutions. *draws hand toward ear*

57. Um, really great pla-ah you know kind of catch-all place (.)

58. I enco::urage? you to enroll in our Medical Baseline Program if you are reliant on power for a::ny? *motions hands outward* medical needs.

59. That? could even be if you have challenges regulating body temperature as a result of medication *motions hands outward* that you're taking.

60. Um, that could qualify you *waives each hand forward* for the Medical Baseline Program.

61. So please, take a look *subtly points forward with both hands* at it.

62. Take the time to enroll.

63. It's ve::ry ve::ry easy onli::ne (.)

Figure 13: Transcript highlighting the categorical construction of a *most impacted* group.

As discussed earlier, what these examples illustrate is a norming strategy whereby a continuum of bodymind experiences—no medical conditions, any medical conditions, rare medical conditions—

gets bifurcated into two tiers: the generally impacted or vulnerable bracket (i.e., the entire population) and the most vulnerable bracket. Despite variations in bodymind capabilities and capacities among audience members, PG&E representatives attempt to bridge gaps and foster mutual understanding across these hierarchical tiers by emphasizing emotional, cognitive, and physical commonalities. This norming strategy involves a regulatory practice: making certain that the subordinate group takes the required actions to assimilate into the generally vulnerable population. The outcome is that bodies are shaped according to the sociomedical services they are able to access. In other words, the effects of these discursive strategies are tangible and embodied. In what follows I bring a spatial element into this equation, which will add another layer to the equalization process.

2. Trust-building through sociospatial proximity

"We're all Californians, we're all neighbors"

"We're all Californians, we're all neighbors, and we're all in this together," a PG&E employee expresses while leaning forward and gesturing upward. In order for the company's classification scheme to resonate with customers, trust must be built through spatial and social proximity. A shared perception of risk emerges as employees forge increasingly narrower spatial ties between the company and its customer base. As evidenced by Figure 14, familiar (e.g., neighborhood), relatable (e.g., community), and presumably comforting (e.g., home) spatial configurations that individuals can connect to on a personal and emotional level are invoked to engender confidence in PG&E and, quite literally, establish common ground. In addition to being "residents in the communities that you live in," the speaker characterizes their colleagues as "a *local* team who is here to listen and work together." Of crucial importance is that these referents, which are reinforced by gestures of encircling hands with clenched fists, are absent of any defining features and boundaries. Therefore, expressions like "we're all neighbors" not only rob spaces of their cultural, political, and economic meanings, but the process of unification strips bodies of these markers as well.

In addition to spatial proximity, indications of social proximity are also deployed to cultivate trust. "There are faces behind the PG&E logo that all of you are so familiar with," a smiling speaker continues. "There's so much more goin[ing on] behind the scenes. Men and women that are working so hard to increase public safety to prevent events from happening that impact every one of us," they gesture forward and outward to demonstrate the extensiveness of <u>us</u>. Here the speaker personifies PG&E by revealing that there are live faces behind the brand, thereby creating a notable distinction from public views of the impersonal for-profit corporation. Evoking ideas and feelings of social togetherness through the usage of personal and second-person pronouns and modified repetitions of positive affirmations between speakers (e.g., "great suggestion!") further humanizes and solidifies the company's rebranded position as a source of protection and safety. Figure 15 underscores how speakers animate PG&E's new messaging, which is aimed at fostering a culture of belonging through such expressions of social proximity. I next delve into a more detailed assessment of this linguistic approach, pinpointing particular excerpts from the transcript.

Figure 14 illustrates how PG&E instills trust among its customers by producing a sense of spatial proximity. From the beginning, line 1 introduces two spatial contexts: 'here' and 'local.' The lexical choice of excluding geographical cues enables the speaker to paint a picture of an all-inclusive, relatable space. Line 2 pushes this lexical move a step further by incorporating expressions of spatial familiarity, such as 'residents,' 'neighbors,' and 'communities.' The speaker uses the second-person pronoun <u>you</u> in conjunction with "live in," which becomes progressively louder, to connect with audience members. The syntactic choice of gradually zooming in from the state to the neighborhood and home without providing any defining features or boundaries enables the speaker to evoke a tighter sense of spatial proximity. The speaker's upward and outward hand gesture is another multimodal attempt at emphasizing the expanse of spatial connectivity.

Line 9 begins with "as a local team," serving as another indicator of a shared spatial identity. The speaker's encircling hand gesture that ends with a closing fist can be interpreted as a spatial enclosure held together by a tightly knit, strong team. The utterance 'here' is followed by the prolonged "to listen" and is accompanied by a forward extension of the speaker's hand. This semiotic approach evokes participation, yet no physical or virtual entry point is granted to participants. Next comes the declaration "serve you better," though what is being served remains ambiguous. Line 14 conjures up the most intimate physical space, the home. Line 16, then, serves as a reminder that PG&E employees are also in the 'field,' which enables them to interact with their customers face to face—an indicator of not only closeness, but mutual knowledge production. Finally, line 23 offers a modified pronouncement of narrowing spatial proximity and shared identity: 'Californians' are *all* neighbors. The speaker continuously lifts up their arms as each space is mentioned, a possible indication that the list could continue. In this way trust—and all that it encompasses, from relatability and familiarity to comfort and belonging—is generated by virtue of undefined spatial proximity.

(68:34)	***Speaker 1***	1. WE'RE here. We're the local te::am (.)
		2. We're=we're neighbors and residents in the communities *gestures up and outward with hand* that you live IN.
		8. We'll work with local uh county and city officials.
		9. <AS a local team> (.) *wide circular gesture with hand, closing fist toward end* who is here to li::sten (.) *gestures forward with hand* and=and work together *gestures forward with hand* to serve you better (.2)
(69:26)	***Speaker 3***	13. <Ye:::ah you know:: uh> events like <this:: a::re> so positive to=to be able to do::
		14. <uh to:: really bring ho::me this uh culture of uh->
		15. >yeah I just think about, we're all in this together< here, right? and,
		16. um, I-I always like to reflect *glances away, upward* on every time I get to be out in the fi::eld *head nod* and intera::cting with uh::
		22. >We-we're all *gestures forward and outward with one hand* sharing where we're callin in from< *shoulders shrug* uh here this afterno:on.
		23. And uh:: you know we're, we're all Californians, we're all neighbors, and we're all in this together. *leans and gestures forward with lifted arms at the conclusion of each phrase*
		24. So uh, I'm >looking forward to continuing that partnership *lifts hand forward* with all of our customers here on this line and those that are not.<

Figure 14: Transcript highlighting how trust is built through spatial proximity.

Figure 15 demonstrates the ways in which social proximity is mobilized to build trust. Line 4 sets off a series of enthusiastic affirmations that are exchanged among speakers (e.g., "I agree with Vic," "Thank you Mark," "Really good message," "Great suggestion," "Great resource") and animate PG&E's positive rebranding. Such polite sequences of gratitude and appreciation bolster PG&Es effort to promote a culture of supportive, close relationships among the company's employees and customers. Epistemic credibility is interchanged between representatives of the utility and audience members in line 6 as the speaker implores participants to "Let us know. Please," once again mobilizing the personal plural pronoun us to signify mutual engagement. The emphasis and rising intonation on 'know' is a prosodic choice that further indicates epistemic proximity and reciprocal knowledge creation. The continuity implied by "we will keep" is followed by the interpersonal connection "working with you directly" suggests in line 7. Here, usage of the second-person pronoun you individuates customers and encourages them to develop an ongoing partnership with PG&E. Explicitly directing these messages at "the community" in line 12 is another lexical construction of social and spatial proximity. As the speaker in line 13 is invited "to share his thoughts with the community," colloquial rather than formal lexicon follows. He strikes a conversational tone and once again evens out the epistemic playing field by prolonging 'share,' which is soon after accompanied by "you know." The positivity of such events (i.e., the town hall) is explicitly emphasized in line 13. The subsequent phrase "to be able to do" suggests the effort and hurdles overcome in organizing this town hall and, presumably, those to come.

Next, the company's logo is personified in line 18. 'Are' is stretched in an attempt to remove any uncertainty that there *are* familiar faces behind the PG&E logo. The utterance 'all' captures every customer in this realm of familiarity. Irony is also brought into this semiotic environment with the

speaker's slight laugh and smile, both of which emphasize the absurdity of anyone doubting the existence of PG&E's recognizable employees. The prosodic exaggeration and lengthening of 'more' and 'scenes' in line 19 emphasizes the magnitude of PG&E's work beyond the public's purview. The speaker's outward hand gesture spatially denotes the extent of this work. The stress placed on 'hard,' 'increase,' and 'happening' in lines 20 and 21 further qualify the work happening behind the scenes. Line 21, through the usage of us, once more assembles speakers and audience members into a similarly impacted collective. The utility of the phrase, "prevent events from happening," is important to note. This syntactical move implies that wildfire events just happen. It strips PG&E of their responsibility in causing wildfires, and thereby protects the company's new public image. As the utility's website is praised in line 51, the speaker pulls their pinkie downward, signaling the commencement of a list, wherein features of this "Great resource" can be highlighted. Taken together, such supportive statements and expressions of social proximity contribute to PG&E's rebranding as a trustworthy organization.

To recall, PG&E's norming strategy began with bifurcating vulnerability into two distinct categories (i.e., generally impacted and most impacted), whereby the most impacted group is uplifted to the generally impacted, normal tier by way of the Medical Baseline Program. The second part of this strategy, demonstrated here, is delineating space in ways that reinforce the norm of shared vulnerability by virtue of physical proximity; closeness that also reveals the company's humanity. In essence, there is purportedly no distinction between you and us that PG&E cannot normalize through their programs and discourse. Next, I discuss what is at stake when the company's *most* impacted customers are directed to take action on their own.

Time	Speaker	Line
(68:34)	***Speaker 1***	1. WE'RE here. We're the local te::am (.)
		2. We're=we're neighbors and residents in the communities *gestures up and outward with hand* that you live IN.
		3. Uh, we- MY role *places hand across chest* is to work >with=with< local uh government offici::als. *pulls jacket zipper downward*
		4. and um, I=I agree with Vic, if you can call our <800?> (.) <743 5000> number. *gestures outward with hand*
		5. if you have a conce::rn or a question, you see a ha::zard (.) uh report it?
		6. Let us know? Please (.)
		7. and we will keep working with you directly as the customers. *eye gaze shifts between viewers and downward direction*
(69:15)	***Speaker 2***	10. *only audio* Thank you Mark.
		11. Really good mes::sage.
		12. I'm gonna-uh toss it over to Migu::el to uh sha::re (.) his thoughts with=with the community (.2)
(69:26)	***Speaker 3***	13. <Ye:::ah you know:: uh> events like <this:: a::re> so positive to=to be able to do::
		16. um, I-I always like to reflect *glances away, upward* on every time I get to be out in the fi::eld *head nod* and intera::cting with uh::
		17. with a custome::r? or an agency partner? or anybody that uh:::
		18. there a::re faces *head nod forward, smiles* behind the >PG&E< logo that all *slight laugh* of you are so familiar with.
		19. Uh, there's so much mo::re goin behind the sce::nes. *gestures outward with hands*
		20. Uh-men and women that are working so hard to uh increase public safety.
		21. to uh prevent events from happening *gestures forward and outward with hands* that uh impact every one of us.
		30. *video on* um on monthly bi::lls *hands held together with fingers intertwined, unfurls fingers and gestures outward* that are coming in Ju::ne through A::ugust. *gestures outward, switching hands per each month*
		31. GRE:::AT suggestion. *gestures downward with hands, palms facing each other*
		32. I will tell you that *positions thumbs together* uh we are planning for an i::nsert *gestures downward with hands* in-uh I believe the Ma::y bill that will TALK >a little bit about the PSPS.< [Public Safety Power Shutoffs]
		50. Um, but, again pge.com Weather (.) *draws pinkie down with opposite hand*
		51. GRE:::AT re::source. *draws pinkie further down*

Figure 15: Transcript highlighting how trust is built through social proximity.

3. The market-driven commodification of care services

"Bottom line, go to PGE.com"

Finally, CDA enables me to thread the macro socioeconomic and political forces of neoliberalism through the micro negotiations and rhetorical turns evident in my transcript. When aid is needed, the power relations that permeate various facets of care—from trust and support to security and comfort—between PG&E and its customer base are suddenly exposed. Here, power is enacted by transferring the onus of action from PG&E onto its customers. The heart-wrenching stories shared

by moral intermediaries and em-powered subjects, detailed earlier, exemplify the outcomes of this approach. Specifically, when it comes time to implement precautionary measures, the universal plural pronoun we shifts to the second-person pronoun you, and what follows is a list of steps customers, on their own, must take in order to remain safe during wildfires and Public Safety Power Shutoffs. In other words, the use of you no longer signifies unity as it did before; instead, it indicates a shift in responsibility and the individualization of vulnerability. As a customer, *you* are now tasked with sifting through PG&E's market-influenced services, provided you first meet the qualifications. The speaker lists the company's array of web offerings. However, the "bottom line is . . . go to pge.com" where "there [are] financing options" and customers can "compar[e] solutions." As highlighted in the preceding chapter, financing possibilities come with a hefty price tag, demanding both resourcefulness and financial stability. This creates an uneven dynamic where PG&E's rebranded efforts fall short when it comes to substantial and expensive interventions that customers depend on for surviving wildfire-related crises. Ultimately, PG&E and its customers no longer occupy equivalent positions epistemically, politically, economically, and in terms of vulnerability. It is in this way, as presented in Figure 16, that speakers interpellate audience members into neoliberal subject positions.

The nuances

Numerous instantiations of market-driven care appear in Figure 16. Line 4 begins with the second-person pronoun you followed by a call to action. This marks the beginning of a set of guidelines individuals must follow to prepare for disasters. 'Can' in this line implies *you will be able to*, a softened command that offers the customer a choice in the matter. The customer is next asked to take initiative by reporting any concerns, questions, or hazards they encounter, a sentiment presented as a form of participation. What remains unsaid is that this is the very labor PG&E employees are paid to carry out. Line 35 employs the collective pronoun we followed by an emphasis on the work PG&E 'will' accomplish by sending out 'direct' communications. This point is reiterated in line 39 when the speaker modifies and repeats what was previously stated. 'Will' and 'direct' are once again accentuated to underscore the actions the company has and shall take. 'Guidelines' and 'emergency plans' are components of a list of services PG&E claims to provide that are stressed in line 43. This list is bolstered by a repetitive hand motion: the speaker recounts each item by drawing their pinkie downward. The speaker's hands then widen at the utterance 'how,' which I interpret as a signifier of the broad array of steps that must be taken. It is important to remember that customers alone bear the responsibility for executing each intervention.

Lines 47 and 48 reemphasize the importance of navigating to 'any' of PG&Es wildfire safety pages. An outward hand motion symbolizes the wide array of pages to navigate through. The lexical choice of 'bottom line' indicates that the most basic and crucial step each customer should take to access safety tips is to visit pge.com. The inventory of offerings these webpages provide is continued in lines 54 through 56. The rising intonation of the utterances 'safety,' 'financing,' and 'compare solutions' highlights the diversity of PG&E's virtual offerings. As previously mentioned, what 'financing' implies is that these options are costly and fall into the hands of customers. As shown in line 60, PG&E establishes eligibility criteria for customers to participate in its programs, shifting the

responsibility back onto them. The perpetual forward motion of the speaker's hand in lines 54 to 61 draws participants into this process of enacting safety. The plea of "please, take a look . . . take the time to enroll" in lines 60 to 63 is another invitation to enroll in a program that requires customers to effectively care for themselves. Finally, lines 65 and 66 lay out the minimal action, "if you do *nothing* else," that individuals must take. As line 66 implies, the ability of PG&E to make any moves is contingent upon participants taking steps first. Adjacent to the speaker is a slide that illustrates the utility's wildfire safety hub (refer back to Figure 11, speaker 2b). In this semiotic environment, PG&E's digital offerings are represented by bright orange buttons with dark blue arrows pinpointing where customers should click. At the very bottom of the screen, the minimal call to action—updating your contact information—appears in a translucent orange, overshadowed by the saturated colors inviting customers to explore and buy into every other offering first.

Essentially, rising to the normalized tier of shared physical and spatial vulnerability is accomplished through acts of *self*-preservation and care. The catch-all offerings provided by PG&E, which ultimately require action on the part of individuals, are where differential bodymind conditions are exposed. The construction of a unified vulnerable body crumbles as PG&E's market-driven services and commodities are taken up by those who can navigate its sites and afford its financing options and those who cannot. The consequences of these differences, however, materialize during wildfire events outside the purview of PG&E.

4. and um, I=I agree with Vic, if you can call our <800?> (.) <743 5000> number. *gestures outward with hand*

5. if you have a conce::rn or a question, you see a ha::zard (.) uh report it?

35. We will be also sending DIRECT communications *separates hands and holding the thumb and fingers of each hand together waves up and down* to customers who are MO::ST likely *subtly points to audience with both hands* to be impa:cted.

36. and that really means that you're served by a li:ne that runs through tier two or tier three (.) *holds hands out and moves along "line" unidirectionally*

37. >Uh not necessarily that you're *smiles and points forward with both hands* in tier two or tier three<

38. >but that you're se::rved *motions downward with hands, palms facing each other* by a line that runs thrOU::GH tier two, tier three.<

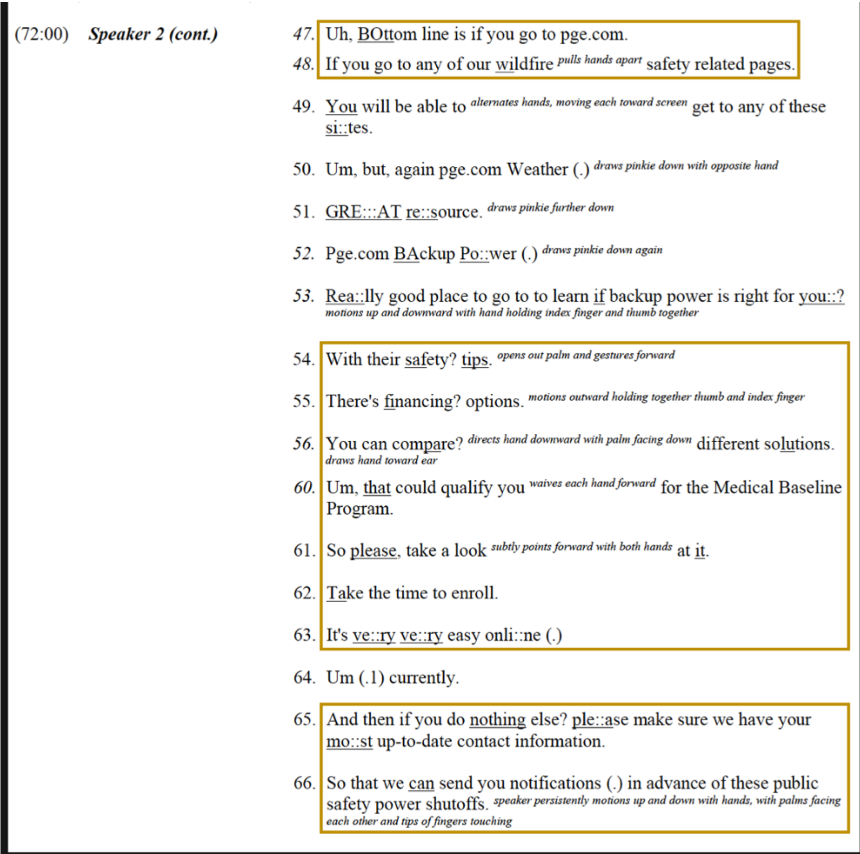
39. We will be sending you uh direct targeted mailings *moves hands up and down several times*

40. throughOUT the season, *widens hands* if you will.

41. So, that will begin really in the April-May time frame.

42. That will continue *motions outward, turning palm upward* through August.

43. And those different mailings *moves hands up and down several times* will provide guidelines on kind of *draws pinkie down with opposite hand as though counting and then widens hands* how to prepare your emergency plan.



(72:00) *Speaker 2 (cont.)*

47. Uh, BOttom line is if you go to pge.com.
48. If you go to any of our wildfire *pulls hands apart* safety related pages.
49. You will be able to *alternates hands, moving each toward screen* get to any of these si::tes.
50. Um, but, again pge.com Weather (.) *draws pinkie down with opposite hand*
51. GRE:::AT re::source. *draws pinkie further down*
52. Pge.com BAckup Po::wer (.) *draws pinkie down again*
53. Rea::lly good place to go to to learn if backup power is right for you::? *motions up and downward with hand holding index finger and thumb together*
54. With their safety? tips. *opens out palm and gestures forward*
55. There's financing? options. *motions outward holding together thumb and index finger*
56. You can compare? *directs hand downward with palm facing down* different solutions. *draws hand toward ear*
60. Um, that could qualify you *waives each hand forward* for the Medical Baseline Program.
61. So please, take a look *subtly points forward with both hands* at it.
62. Take the time to enroll.
63. It's ve::ry ve::ry easy onli::ne (.)
64. Um (.1) currently.
65. And then if you do nothing else? ple::ase make sure we have your mo::st up-to-date contact information.
66. So that we can send you notifications (.) in advance of these public safety power shutoffs. *speaker persistently motions up and down with hands, with palms facing each other and tips of fingers touching*

Figure 16: Transcript highlighting the market-driven commodification of care services.

CONCLUSION

Norming the spectrum of vulnerability

In summary, PG&E seeks to classify and normalize a broad spectrum of circumstances by discursively producing a singular, homogenous body that is subject to a universalized form of vulnerability throughout the Community Wildfire Virtual Safety Town Hall for Sonoma and Marin Counties, as well as other town halls in the series. The company does so by reducing vulnerability to two points, most impacted and generally impacted, where the general category is given priority and therefore normalized. And although it is selectively normalized, all bodyminds are purportedly accounted for by way of the tools PG&E offers. The company's moral work of moving the most vulnerable group up to the normative, all-embracing tier of general vulnerability is an act of unifying bodymind experiences. In order for the normalization of specific forms of bodymind vulnerability to occur in this way, trust must be built through sociospatial proximity. A shared sense of risk is discursively constructed through social and spatial connections between PG&E and its customer base. Spaces and bodies undergo a deliberate removal of sociocultural, political, and economic meanings through such equalizing processes. Unruly bodyminds that disrupt these norms by calling attention to inequities, such as the commodification and unaffordability of life-saving care services as well as intersecting oppressions, are not granted access to the institutional spaces (e.g., this town hall) where

vulnerability is standardized. Their voices, conditions, needs, perspectives, desires, and so on can, therefore, only be animated by predetermined speakers.

The concept of biomedicalization (Clarke et al. 2003) can be useful in understanding the operation of this governing strategy. When *everyone*, the authors write, is considered in a perpetual state of becoming 'at risk,' they are susceptible to the discourses as well as commodities and services that institutions claim to offer; in other words, tools and resources that will alleviate risk and thereby shift identities from marginal to normative, sick to healthy, and so on. "Risk technologies are therefore 'normalizing,' not in the sense that they produce bodies or objects that conform to a particular type, but more that they create standard models against which objects and actions are judged," Clarke et al. argue (173). Opportunities are subsequently promoted, but distributed unevenly across different populations. Therefore, bodyminds are not only regulated according to the categories against which they are judged, they *are* eventually transformed based on their ability to access and consume (or not) institutional offerings. Stated plainly, as identities are reordered, material effects surface too.

We have already learned in previous chapters that cultural factors play a vital role in shaping riskscapes. The way people perceive, interpret, and depict potential hazards are intricate, varied, and dynamic. The social relations and subjectivities that emerge are similarly complex, multiple, and fluid. Yet, institutional practices that are aimed at addressing specific risks seldom take this reality into account. As noted above, in actuality, people are afforded different opportunities to shape normative governance practices, which already bias the viewpoints of dominant entities such as PG&E. Coupling analyses of macro power relations with local discourses can expose the nuances of such processes as well as whose constructions of knowledge and risk come to count (Luke 1995). Within the riskscape of wildfire governance, this methodological approach reveals the contradictions and disparities between PG&E's discursive strategy and lived experiences of moral intermediaries and em-powered subjects. Too often, people reliant on electricity-powered durable medical equipment and assistive technologies slip through the cracks of the utility's bifurcated classification scheme. This is precisely because PG&E's normalizing mechanism does not map onto how DDAR program implementors (i.e., moral intermediaries) calculate risk, prioritize the circumstances of 'impacted' individuals, and distribute resources. In moments demanding urgent decisions, the *most* impacted individuals regularly encounter inequalities. To recall, for some the company's primary commodities, backup batteries, are life-sustaining, while for others they are life-saving. At the same time, PG&E's notion of neighborliness dissipates when people living adjacent to each other have differential access to resources based on the utility's geographically demarcated service area; boundaries that cut through CAL FIRE's Fire Hazard Severity Zones and contrast those that are qualitatively determined by moral intermediaries.

The social connections speakers outlined between the company's employees and customers lack any basis in reality as well. As the vignettes in previous chapters show, em-powered subjects (i.e., those who are most impacted) effectively interact with DDAR program implementors through Independent Living Centers. Their attempts to reach PG&E employees have been to no avail; instead, they are rerouted through a confusing labyrinth comprising hundreds of community-based organizations. When the face behind the logo does appear, it is primarily within a context designed by PG&E (i.e., the town hall series) or one that is also regulated, such as a meeting of a community group

or state agency. In these settings, employees wield full control over the company's image while also dictating or influencing the acceptable forms of participation. As evidenced by the previous chapter, even actors with multiple institutional affiliations, such as DDAR program implementors, shift subject positions to uphold PG&E's rebranding effort and divert accountability from the corporation. Finally, it is important to note the utility of 'most impacted,' a vague euphemism for vulnerability, risk, and the like, which lacks both an object and subject. Who in fact does the impacting? This rhetorical choice enables speakers to shift responsibility away from PG&E for causing any impacts.

Of course there are some limitations to virtual, live-streamed and recorded, public meetings that are directed toward members of an imagined community, as the name Community Wildfire Safety Program implies. As Luke (1995) notes, CDA needs to pay close attention to social spaces and networks that are opened up by new technologies because they yield novel power/knowledge regimes. When inclusion and exclusion are virtually monitored by dominant institutions such as PG&E, a stark division between who does and does not belong is drawn behind the scenes. Therefore, if corporations are at the helm, physical social settings might reveal more nuanced processes of ratification, participation, and thereby power relations.

Ironically, while writing this final paragraph at my PG&E-serviced home during an atmospheric river, I found myself unexpectedly plunged into darkness by an automatic power outage.

PRACTICAL IMPORT

The first of its kind

The DDAR Program is the first of its kind in the United States, and therefore a model example of what is possible in the realm of disaster governance. The question therefore becomes, how do we implement plans and policies that get it right? How can the decision-making processes and institutional practices that transpire lead to meaningful and lasting interventions that attend to a multitude of situated experiences, formations of social vulnerability, and subjectivities that are shaped by this riskscape? Most importantly, how can agency and empowerment—which is not contingent upon making life or death choices speedily and accurately—be granted to and mobilized by people with non-normative bodyminds who have been persistently neglected by emergency management and response.

In this concluding chapter, I discuss the practical import of my dissertation and the methodological approach of coupling an institutional analysis with the study of speech, both in action and in transcript form. Although I am not a practitioner, what this research enables me to do is locate potential sites of intervention that have been repeatedly referenced by my interlocutors and facilitators and participants of public meetings attended in real time, as well as expressed in recordings and publicly available transcripts. Illuminated by this emerging riskscape of novel institutional partnerships and programs are evolving spaces of knowledge production, meaning-making, power formation, and social interaction, which are based on actors' divergent perceptions of vulnerability and socioeconomic positioning. While there is no magic bullet, my findings could direct planners, policy makers, emergency responders, and institutional affiliates toward tensions, contradictions, misalignments, and disparities—or what Kaika (2017) terms 'dissensus'—as they materialize within this multi-layered context. "[I]nstances and practices of dissensus," Kaika states, can "act as living indicators, as signposts of what urgently needs to be addressed and where" (99). In this case, meaningful interventions could be designed for (1) improving collaboration, (2) upholding diverse perspectives, (3) integrating feedback, and (4) engaging technologies. The chapter is laid out accordingly. For each category of intervention, I outline significant challenges and offer initial thoughts about how we might begin to address them.

As climate change progresses, the need for imaginative and transformative, rather than solely reformist, strategies will become more pronounced. Like mentioned previously, power shutoffs—associated with wildfires and now atmospheric rivers in California—are only a small piece of the pie. With the landscape of disaster governance expanding and a new power/knowledge regime taking root, enhancing trust among a growing number of disparate groups and actors whose roles and responsibilities are constantly being renegotiated is paramount; especially for people who are persistently an afterthought.

With whom to partner?

Time and again my interlocutors stressed the critical importance of collaboration and communication among *all* players involved in wildfire governance; a seemingly impossible task given the multitude of unstable partnerships that have come to characterize the field. People operate in siloes precisely because they are overwhelmed by the sheer number of unfamiliar agencies and actors and overburdened by the need to perpetually identify, detangle, and realign people's goals and practices. This also means that timely, crucial information might never reach the correct hands. Individuals in leadership roles have pinpointed key *institutional* partnerships, both ongoing and nonexistent, that should be prioritized. For instance, public-private collaborations might involve the public sector partnering with various transit agencies, hospitals and healthcare plan providers, senior centers, hotels, and the like. Another example is PG&E's collaboration with 2-1-1, a telephone line for those seeking community services, which has already streamlined the screening process for the Medical Baseline Program by utilizing a shared database. At the most basic level, emerging partnerships must be communicated to all relevant stakeholders at their onset. But this research reveals a more significant disparity: individuals who hold intersectional, anti-authoritarian politics and are illegible to the state and its corporate affiliates are all too frequently bypassed.

Planning with rather than for, asking whose table I should be at rather than who should be at mine, these are just a few of the approaches my interviewees suggested to improve planning. Implementing them becomes a challenge, however, when public and private officials do not take seriously alternative—artful, poetic, and disruptive—expressions of vulnerability that characterize the metaphorical, physical, and digital tables of activists and the like. Interestingly, prior social movements in the Bay Area have successfully taken an intersectional approach by coupling the efforts of identity-oriented groups. For example, the Black Panther Party provided meals to disability rights activists as they took over San Francisco's federal building for 26 days in 1977. The aim of the '504 movement'––targeting a section of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act—was to pass legislation that prohibits ability-based discrimination in federally-funded programs (Lebrecht and Newnham 2020). Ed Roberts, the founder of the University of California, Berkeley's Physically Disabled Students Program, which later served as the model for Centers for Independent Living that are integral to this research, played a significant role in the action (Ed Roberts Campus 2024). While a number of my interviewees participated in the Disability Rights Movement and have since solidified relationships with governmental actors, present-day intersectional approaches differ in that they do not fixate on singular identity markers. Even the contemporary mainstream has acknowledged that gender-, sexuality-, and ability-based identities are fluid rather than fixed. Sins Invalid, for instance, explicitly puts on display the entangled, complex, and manifold identities of their staff and performers—from queer, transgender, and non-binary to disabled, fat, and racially diverse. These configurations shift, blur, expand, contract, and in so doing illuminate various facets of systemic and structural oppression as well as potential sites of political transformation.

How then do we build upon the work of the Disability Rights Movement by nourishing these new openings and manifesting change through imaginative visions and improved relations? This is

crucial to consider now because we are no longer dealing solely with federal programs. Instead, we are facing multi-scalar governmental and corporate agencies that utilize their power to create impenetrable safeguards. These safeguards deter individuals with unconventional, yet possibly beneficial, ideas from joining wildfire discourses. Whether such contention and incongruity will merely prolong the status quo or lead to meaningful change remains unknown. If nothing else, spaces must be carved out for public and private officials to interact with people with non-normative bodyminds on terms set by representative activists and community groups. Within these spaces, embodied and experiential forms of expertise should be given priority in shaping the discourses that circulate through institutions and, in turn, improving material realities.

How many is too many?

Though redundancy is vital in any system, especially one that is decentralized, we must also consider the point at which an excess of partnerships muddies the waters and leads to detrimental impacts. In situations where coordination is crucial, prioritizing depth over breadth of relationships should serve as a guiding principle. I have presented mounting evidence to illustrate the extent of time and stress experienced by individuals relying on DME and AT as they navigate a sea of overlapping partnerships through both physical and digital means. This is too often the effect of fickle contracts, program reorganization, lack of continuity, and overlooked gaps; in other words, structural problems that manifest in urgent life and death scenarios on the ground. The utility's rocky leadership coupled with high attrition rates also hinders DDAR program implementors' ability to seamlessly distribute resources to clients. They are required to conduct additional trainings due to continuous shifts in the program's rules, such as the threshold for power loss required before funds can be released. Furthermore, numerous people have received batteries from PG&E's community-based partners who are unreachable, leaving the utility's main contractors and battery distributors, DDAR program implementors, unable to provide assistance because they are unfamiliar with products that are not their own. Although suggestions such as creating a shared serial number database have been proposed, they do not address the underlying issue.

Capping the number of partnerships to reduce duplicate and costly efforts might yield better results that strengthen extant connections. Finding this limit requires tracing the channels (e.g., 2-1-1) that individuals *actually* take to request resources directly or enroll in PG&E's sociomedical programs. This approach avoids pointing people in multiple directions, including signing up for peripheral databases that don't work, such as national emergency registries. Only then can it be determined whether additional parties are necessary. Of equal importance is ensuring that agencies assume roles aligned with their experience and expertise, a topic I will delve into next.

Who holds the reins when?

What became apparent at the outset of this research was the peculiarity of an electric utility running sociomedical programs, while healthcare providers have been conspicuously absent. A number of individuals have commented on the lack of attention to emergency preparation in public,

and I add private, healthcare plans. Other parties that have been notably absent are battery manufacturers and suppliers who should, along with PG&E, troubleshoot batteries. Instead, individuals dependent on durable medical equipment and assistive technologies have been testing these technical artifacts with their bodies and precariously fixing them through trial-and-error experimentation, especially when the instructional text is too small to read or not translated into Braille. The involvement of manufacturers and suppliers would spare DDAR program implementors the time and energy associated with creating supplementary instructional videos. Furthermore, companies responsible for the production of batteries could make each phase of the lifecycle as environmentally and socially equitable as possible to avoid additional disabling effects to humans and the more-than-human world. Meanwhile, PG&E could improve their programs by supporting all stages of battery provisioning, from delivery to disposal, and assisting with lifting and replacing depleted batteries with those that are fully charged. Finally, building managers have also been missing from the equation but play a key role in creating safe evacuation routes, developing methods for seamlessly lifting batteries to upper floors, installing home integration kits or Powerwalls when financially and spatially feasible, checking in on residents during emergencies including power shutoffs, and so on.

In other instances, leaders of community groups have extended their own agency and successfully carved out roles to support their constituents. This was the case when individuals embedded themselves into an Emergency Operations Center to provide assistance for Latinx migrant farm workers without legal status, among others. Alternatively, people are positioned correctly but are unable to take the reins due to budgetary constraints and, relatedly, a lack of backup. This became evident in narratives about ADA coordinators who often operate independently in their roles and are unrecognized by emergency managers. On the flip side, people are located accurately, but their roles drastically expand during emergencies when they suddenly find themselves taking on jobs of different agencies. This became apparent when Independent Living Centers took on the tasks of Emergency Operations Centers during extended power outages.

Yet more pointedly—and existentially threatening to PG&E—is a proposition for the corporation to incrementally take steps back and listen to activists when they demand a decentralized, local, renewable, and democratic energy grid. In what follows, I discuss another potential site of intervention tied to considering multiple, and even contentious, points of view in the face of emergency planning.

INTERVENTIONS for UPHOLDING DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES

Which norms to shift and which to maintain?

This section addresses how to move forward while formally acknowledging that people's actions are informed by manifold, at times misaligned, perceptions of vulnerability. When plural publics develop within and outside of institutional spaces and dynamically produce their own discourses surrounding vulnerability, they can point us toward spaces where normative governance practices fall short and need to be reexamined—bearing in mind that these publics will be afforded uneven opportunities to enact change based on their political orientation and socioeconomic status.

Perhaps the question then is not who gets to set the norm, but rather what practices should be normed to bring about transformative change. These are norms from which a broad set of circumstances and distinct subjectivities emerge and are evaluated against. Furthermore, it is through these norms that risks are constructed and conditions diagnosed. Norms determine how experiences, needs, and desires *must* be expressed to be taken seriously. They influence perceptions of people's worthiness and the in/dispensability of their ideas.

If the dignity, humanity, and possible suffering of people with non-normative bodyminds, who rely on DME and AT, are centered, then one norm that could be opened up for reconsideration is the method utilized for demarcating geographic boundaries because it influences who receives support and material resources. Decisions regarding mapping, including interpretation and usage, must be harmonized across CAL FIRE, PG&E, and DDAR program implementors. Triangulating quantitively produced maps with qualitative, grounded experiences to identify boundaries along which life-altering decisions are made—such as whether to help someone who resides just outside of PG&E's service area—could be a starting point. The burden of independently carrying the moral choice of who to save would be removed from the shoulders of DDAR program implementors if a degree of geographic flexibility were written into PG&E's programs. As the disposition of my interlocutors is to blur rigid CPUC- and PG&E-enforced boundaries and offer support to people residing just outside of them anyway, normalizing and formalizing this practice would alleviate looming dilemmas that persistently weigh on their conscience.

Another norm that recurringly surfaced throughout this research was tied to the discourses integrated into planning documents. If intersectional, liberation-oriented activists are to build rapport with governmental agencies, then the language of social and environmental justice as well as systemic and structural inequities, such as ableism and the medicalization of disability, must be explicitly incorporated into spoken and written texts. These issues should not be addressed merely nominally; they should be followed by substantive action—at a minimum, democratic and participatory processes. Activists back the Green New Deal because it reflects their values, ideologies, and vision in writing, even though, in some respects, the localized changes it advocates for resemble neighborhood-scale governance practices that have emerged in California following the 2017 wildfires. Activists remain unaware of newer strategies implemented by governmental agencies due to pre-existing distrust, which solidifies an assumption of misaligned values. For example, by writing neighborhood-level Community Wildfire Protection Plans, which have limited requirements, activists could secure funding from FEMA. While this approach has been criticized because planning requirements are too vague, it could work in activists' favor by giving them more wiggle room to design and implement unconventional changes. Stated plainly, fostering amicable relationships necessitates building a common language to describe the context within which disaster-related challenges persist.

Finally, among the multitude of definitions of vulnerability I encountered over the course of this research, stakeholders jointly agreed on the importance of interdependence, in conjunction with independent preparation. Approaches to building a heart- rather than fear-based support network—such as the 'Circles of Support' model that begins with the individual and extends to the family, community, and government—generally overlapped. According to my interlocutors, interdependence

also looks like forming relationships with local facilities, especially businesses with backup generators, because they are more likely to interact with individuals they already know during emergencies. Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018) offers an alternative vision of 'care webs.' What is notable is that care webs include support that is not only physical, but also virtual. Moreover, there is no assumption that the inner ring comprises family, mainly because so many queer, transgender, and crip people have no relationships with their biological families to begin with. Piepzna-Samarasinha describes care webs as follows:

> I want us to dream mutual aid in our postapocalyptic revolutionary societies where everyone gets to access many kinds of care—from friends and internet strangers, from disabled community centers, and from some kind of non-fucked-up non-state state that would pay caregivers well and give them health benefits and time off and enshrine sick and disabled autonomy and choice. I want us to keep dreaming and experimenting with all these big, ambitious ways we dream care for each other into being (65).

I next discuss where and how public opinions might be incorporated into institutional practices and plans.

INTERVENTIONS for INTEGRATING FEEDBACK

How can feedback be most effectively considered?

While I will not spend time rehashing all of the ways PG&E deflects accountability and bypasses incorporating feedback, I will describe the actions proposed during public meetings and independently by my research participants to streamline the process. To make sure that lessons stemming from firsthand experiences do not get lost in the shuffle, people from disability-focused groups persisted on aggregating and accessibly documenting content for future discussions with emergency managers and inclusion in emergency protocols. This entails looking across disparate wildfire preparedness and response activities and identifying helpful information that is universally applicable. The company has already tried reaching broader audiences by producing more culturally competent promotional materials and translating communications regarding power shutoffs into non-English languages, including Spanish, American Sign Language, and Indigenous languages. However, the success of these materials is yet to be determined. Just as the California Foundation for Independent Living Centers conducted an extensive survey involving hundreds of people with disabilities following the 2019 power shutoffs, it is now time to test the efficacy of PG&E's outreach efforts and programs by way of quantitative metrics *and* qualitative responses. It is not only the content of the feedback that needs to be considered though. The timeframe during which it is delivered is also crucial. When a period of relative calm follows a Public Safety Power Shutoff season, PG&E is more responsive to input and creative ideas. Yet if openings for feedback are only seasonal, then a challenge arises that needs to be considered: wildfire season is now year-round and atmospheric rivers bring an additional cause for deenergization.

A different strategy that bears repeating is for community and advocacy groups to provide targeted, clearly delimited, and actionable recommendations that come from a collective voice and can be easily integrated into institutional campaigns, plans, and policies. For example, when a community

group member enlisted residents to collect data and build case studies depicting the experiences and needs of older adults during emergencies, local officials who viewed the group's findings gained a clearer understanding of how to apply the lessons learned on the ground, as well as in state plans and policies. As is already the case, when community and advocacy groups infiltrate institutional spaces to exchange knowledge, they create openings in these orthodox structures for novel discourses and reforms. Given that the mission of the State Governor's Office of Access and Functional Needs is to pinpoint and incorporate the needs of people with disabilities throughout all aspects of California's emergency planning and management, this strategy is timely. What I want to emphasize, however, is that such a reformist approach is not one that has been—or I believe will be—adopted by activists championing liberation and transformation.

It is clear by now that people with disabilities and other forms of non-normative bodyminds are exceptionally adaptive and creative out of necessity and life experiences. This is a skill set that institutional actors could learn from if they took the time to do so. In design research, for example, user testing is paramount not only as a means to check whether products function, but to also gain an understanding of how people interact with artifacts and to make adjustments and improvements accordingly. Techniques like shadowing someone in situ or asking them to document their use of a product are embedded into the design process because the results can be so informative and enriching. Design research could certainly be taken up by those involved in the technical aspects of the DDAR program, which would save the time and energy devoted to troubleshooting later, especially during moments of crisis.

Another space from which feedback arises is that of virtual meeting platforms. Recorded virtual meetings enable people with non-normative bodyminds to reflect upon meeting content and generate additional individual or collective replies at a later time. If there are avenues in place for meeting facilitators to receive and act upon such responses—even if that is simply putting the input on a future meeting's agenda—people who rely on DME and AT could be relieved of the continuous pressure to uncomfortably disclose personal vulnerabilities to secure resources and support. The additional vulnerability, emotional labor, and risk that public sharing entails must be acknowledged by institutional actors. After viewing recorded sessions of meetings attended in real time or not, activists as well as community and advocacy groups could decide how they would like to synthesize and articulate the ideas of their members. An additional benefit of publicly available recordings is that they unwittingly address crip time. Crip time refers to perceptions of time that are not bound to capitalist logics of speed and progress. It considers the fact that people move through the world at different paces based on their own capabilities and capacities as well as the ableist physical and digital barriers that get in their way (Kafer 2013; Taylor 2017). That is to say, feedback mechanisms should not only account for perceptions of time that center normative bodyminds, but provide enough alternative options that factor in others ways of existing and navigating life. An inadvertent outcome of the pandemic was the proliferation of new gathering platforms and technologies. In the following section, I continue my discussion of the possibilities these virtual spaces and artifacts bring about.

INTERVENTIONS for ENGAGING TECHNOLOGIES

Which technosocial possibilities matter?

Before returning to the topic of virtual meeting platforms, I would like to point out that different iterations of technological optimism, as well as dependency on technological innovation, circulated through most, if not all, of the discourses I encountered. From installing microgrids in downtown areas and residential units to novel forms of power generation, stakeholders constantly examined avenues for longstanding rather than short-term Band-Aid solutions, such as backup batteries. DDAR program implementors, among many power-dependent individuals, researched out-of-the-box ideas on the market in addition to employing do-it-yourself fixes and hacks. While some believed that the market alone will reduce the costs of new technologies through brand competition, others argued that alternative energy sources should ultimately be classified as a public provision. Despite these differences, the shared goal of advocating for and implementing non-traditional energy sources, structures, and systems could draw disparate groups together.

Circling back to digital gathering platforms, as I mentioned earlier, institutional actors have much to learn from the ways in which people with disabilities have been using virtual spaces to socialize and organize for years. More recently, these platforms have evolved to cater to any type of environment for social interaction, with a plethora of features like breakout rooms and brainstorming tools. Methods for creatively utilizing different facets of these platforms are endless. What is important to pay attention to is how these online spaces morph, hybridize with the material realm, and produce unique publics and subjectivities. Locating the best sites for dynamic interactions to unfold, relationships to be built, and collaborative decision-making to transpire is key to shaping this power/knowledge regime in beneficial ways. The question becomes, how can digital and hybrid platforms be mobilized for liberationist ends that destabilize dominant discourses and publics to make way for alternative forms of being, thinking, and doing, rather than merely re-entrenching orthodox power relations?

IN CLOSING

Parting thoughts

To conclude, my hope is that the questions, ideas, and narratives presented in this dissertation and suggestions offered in this chapter serve as a jumping off point toward imaginative transformations in the realm of disaster governance; systemic and structural changes that shed light on rather than overshadow the experiences of people with non-normative bodyminds, and particularly those for whom access to electricity is life-saving. While crafting solutions requires bringing together various forms of expertise—be they professional, academic, emplaced, embodied, fragmented, and so on—what one dissertation can provide is a point of departure from sites of confusion, distress, isolation, contention, and lack of support. Although interpretations of my findings will inevitably differ and take readers on various mental excursions, my aim is to spark insights that inspire action from planners, policy-makers, advocates, activists, community groups, artists, and the like.

My research was conducted against the backdrop of escalating wildfires that offered the Bay Area a glimpse into the challenges posed by our climate-changing future. What this political and physical terrain also made clear is that the issues associated with leading vulnerable populations through the labyrinth of official advice, fledgling corporate and governmental programs, and self-guided preparedness will only increase. Therefore it is vital to not only understand the nuances and intricacies of these matters, but to simultaneously reassess the ethical frameworks, values, and forms of knowledge that presently underpin the environmental field. What comes next then is asking whether this is the present and future we want, and envisioning and manifesting a world that is expansive and imaginative enough for all bodyminds to thrive, during emergencies *and* regular days.

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