



## *Can't Stop Change: Queer Climate Stories from the Florida Frontlines*

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### DISCUSSION

- Vanessa:* Thank you all for agreeing to this conversation. To start us off, Yarrow, since you are now the lead organiser on the documentary's impact campaign, could you briefly introduce the documentary and what we have been trying to do through its creation?
- Yarrow:* Absolutely. Over the past several years, Florida's legislative violence against marginalised communities, including queer and

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trans communities, has appeared frequently in the headlines. For this project, we wanted to go beneath the headlines to look more deeply at how LGBTQ2S+ communities are *also* on the frontlines of accelerating climate change and build a narrative that could support intersectional organising. To do that, *Can't Stop Change* weaves interviews with 15 LGBTQ2S+ artists, organisers, and educators across Florida (and the new Florida diaspora) into an intersectional climate justice narrative.

Our impact campaign strategy for *Can't Stop Change* furthers the work of disaster justice by supporting queer and trans communities responding to climate crises and political disasters. We see *Can't Stop Change* as an organising tool that can both uplift and support LGBTQ+ resistance movements across Florida. For instance, we have been materially resourcing folks through a mutual aid fund, which has helped our film collaborators in Florida through yet another devastating hurricane season this year.

We also see *Can't Stop Change* as an educational tool, especially for those outside of Florida. The film shares stories of 'the real Florida' that push back against negative mainstream media depictions of the state. We provide screening hosts with a detailed resource guide that includes readings and suggestions for curricula around the film.

Lastly, we see *Can't Stop Change* as a way to build bridges between LGBTQ+ and environmental organisations that too often exist siloed from each other.

*Vanessa:* Bringing environmental and LGBTQ+ communities together in a shared audience is also the longer-term goal of our work through Queers for Climate Justice. Natalia, could you share how we started working together?

*Natalia:* You know I can! I live in Borikén, mostly known by its colonial name, Puerto Rico. Vanessa had been working on a documentary here about queer and trans experiences since Hurricane Maria.

*Vanessa:* Yes, *Fire & Flood: Queer Resilience in the era of Climate Change*. I am still working on that film. That project started with my experience of the Tubbs Fire in Northern California in 2017, which was just after Hurricane Maria hit Puerto Rico.

*Natalia:* Exactly. You showed how Puerto Rico was impacted much more and received less support. The 'disaster' of Maria was not

just because of the hurricane, but because of our colonial status and the U.S. imposed 'Fiscal Oversight Board.' People talk about Puerto Rico as part of the U.S. but fail to recognise the colonial status. We have to fight against the U.S. imperial interests in order to care for our land and each other. Your work documented our reality of how climate crisis, gender, and class intersect, so I reached out to you.

Through Queers for Climate Justice, I have been bringing these ideas to new spaces, while adding race, disability, and political status to the conversation as a Black, disabled, queer, femme Boricua.

*Vanessa:* I am grateful for all you've taught me! I have been thinking about LGBTQ+ vulnerability to disasters for close to 10 years, and I am concerned about how much of this work points towards one-dimensional solutions, such as updating the policies of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to include non-discrimination protections for Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity. One-dimensional solutions like these tend to address the needs of predominantly affluent LGBTQ+ people for whom their gender or sexuality are their only experience of marginalisation. Often, these narratives ignore the disproportionate poverty among LGBTQ+ people and how systems of impoverishment create vulnerability among people of all genders and sexualities.

Puerto Rico is a fitting example of that. Getting a non-discrimination protection through FEMA for LGBTQ+ people does not change the fact that FEMA has routinely failed communities in the U.S. colonial territories in the wake of disasters. Queer Boricuas are vulnerable, with or without these non-discrimination 'rights.'

*Natalia:* Multi-dimensional problems can't be solved long term with one-dimensional solutions. To restore the balance and live in tune with the planet, we must understand that our experience is not the only one that matters. Creating multi-dimensional solutions will require learning from others and our more-than-human kin. We must think holistically, *with* the Earth, about our problem-solving approaches. That's when community-building comes in, because connecting with each other helps us exist in solidarity.

*Jess:* Hearing Natalia's answer, I think of so many connections to my experience growing up in Georgia, which is in the former Confederacy and deeply shaped by racial capitalism. My embodied experiences as a disabled, queer, gender non-binary, working-class Latine Southerner, combined with what I have seen as a community organiser for housing and immigrant justice, have emphasised the complex contours of 'vulnerability.'

For instance, relief mobilisations after hurricanes often don't attend to the needs of un(der)documented Spanish-speaking immigrants who are ineligible for government aid or are distrustful of organisations at a time of escalating anti-immigrant violence in the U.S. That includes queer and trans immigrants. People who are multiply marginalised in different ways must be at the forefront of climate change responses, decision-making, and also crafting the narrative, because our experiences embody that intersectionality.

*Vanessa:* I agree. I want to shift us to thinking about how this project started back in April 2023. Natalia and Yarrow, could you share more about that pivotal meeting we had?

*Natalia:* It was serendipitous. Vanessa and I had been invited to speak at Florida Atlantic University. Vanessa was sharing the media analysis of Hurricane Ian, and my presentation was about environmental crises in Puerto Rico linked to our colonial status and how the LGBTQ+ community has been organising to resist and thrive. The U.S. military is the biggest polluter on Earth. To this day, Vieques is waiting for the U.S. military to clean up its toxic wastes, which contribute to high cancer rates and perpetuate hurricane vulnerabilities.

*Yarrow:* At the time Vanessa and Natalia visited Florida Atlantic University (FAU), I had been a graduate student there for close to two years and experienced the rise in anti-trans and anti-queer legislation across Florida. These policies significantly shifted the field of education across Florida, including my Master's in Education in Environmental Education. These policies negatively affected my life as a queer, trans, and non-binary educator, and disrupted my research as a student studying queer ecopedagogies.

Vanessa and I already knew each other through a screening of *Fire & Flood*, and they reached out to ask if I could introduce them to folks involved in disaster response after Hurricane Ian. I immediately thought of my friend Jimmy Dunson with Mutual Aid Disaster Relief (MADR). In 2019, I collaborated with Jimmy on a disaster preparedness training in Atlanta that centred queer and trans folks, and we have maintained a friendship ever since. I reached out to Jimmy and made plans for myself, Natalia, and Vanessa to travel to Orlando to meet with him and Robin Harris, a Black, queer, mutual aid organiser with Central Florida Mutual Aid.

*Vanessa:* I still have the recording of that conversation. It was powerful. Yarrow, I remember us driving back after that meeting. We were both already over-committed and exhausted, but we didn't need to talk ourselves into doing it. It was more like resigning ourselves to the fact that we were always already going to do it.

*Yarrow:* And we did it quickly. Within the week after you left Florida, you found a fiscal sponsor, Southern Documentary Fund, and a week or two later we had our first rapid grant.

*Vanessa:* Urgent Action Fund! It's interesting to note that we never received any traditional documentary grants. It was social justice movement rapid grants that made this project possible. With that rapid grant and funding support from Out for Sustainability and the Centre for Cultural Power's 'Climate Woke' programme, we had enough to start planning.

*Yarrow:* A little more than a month from that conversation with Robin and Jimmy, you were back down in Florida and we were recording. The timeline was wild.

*Vanessa:* It really was. Once we received funding, that is when Jess and Shoog got involved.

*Jess:* Yes! Vanessa and I are partners and live together. When they got home from their FAU trip and recounted the idea of the film, I immediately offered to join the team as an audio technician. I had already done some sound work with Vanessa on interviews for *Fire & Flood*. As a person with difficulties in verbal communication, I prefer writing and listening, which are also central to storytelling.

The production road trip began on an early Saturday in May; Vanessa and I rented a van in Athens, Georgia, and travelled south to pick up Shoog outside of Gainesville, Florida. Shoog is a Southern, queer, non-binary, fat photographer and artist, who joined as our cinematographer. The three of us continued to West Palm Beach on Sunday to pick up Yarrow and then to Miami, where we joined Natalia. Upon checking in at the hotel, we gathered in a room to plan. That was the first time all five of us talked about the technical details of what we were about to do.

*Yarrow:* That next day we had two interviews. Libre met us bright and early in one of our hotel suites, and then that same day, we also drove out to the Everglades for the interview with Lee and Houston.

*Jess:* Like you said, the timeline was wild. It took a toll on our bodies.

*Yarrow:* As a group with a number of disabilities, that was the biggest challenge.

*Jess:* But somehow, it was really fluid, like the water that accompanied us throughout the road trip. The next day, we had a walking interview with Barbara along the polluted canal behind the hotel, then that afternoon, learnt from Rebecca and Nasim about the creation of those canals and the importance of water to Florida's ecology. That evening, we ended the day at Miami Beach for a photo shoot celebrating queer and trans joy. Water was everywhere.

Wednesday morning, the five of us re-packed 'Roxanne the Van' to meet with Jimmy in Tampa and then Robin and Osvaldo in Orlando on Thursday. Water kept moving with us. On Friday, we returned to Shoog's house for a day of rest and swimming at the nearby Springs. Before saying goodbye on Saturday, we stopped at a popular birding spot by a sinkhole and watched the water flow back down into the Earth.

*Yarrow:* Again, this was all one week.

*Jess:* It took all five of us to make it happen.

*Vanessa:* The whole process was collaborative: Instead of thinking of ourselves in specific roles like 'audio technician' or 'cinematographer,' we created a Co-Director structure where we shared multiple responsibilities as a team. We contracted with others for specific roles, like Hamza Acevedo's work on edit-

ing, but Co-Director collaborations continued in post-production, as we shared roles in transcribing, illustrating, editing, translating, captioning, and beyond.

*Yarrow:* This queerly collaborative process also included the people we interviewed, giving them some agency over how their stories were told. We sent collaborators a draft transcript and a loose storytelling structure, then hosted a series of focus groups (with choice of English or Spanish). These focus groups provided a space for collaborator input early in post-production, which was critical to the story's development, prompting us to conduct further interviews beyond our one-week road trip.

After completing the rough-cut, we kept working with collaborators to organise 'first look' screenings in Miami, Orlando, Tallahassee, and Lake Worth Beach, to see how the film was received by the communities it represents. Unfortunately, these 'first look' screenings did not meet our goals due to ongoing political and climate disasters. For instance, Hurricane Idalia hit Florida during this period, with some film collaborators experiencing personal upheaval and property damage.

However, that was also a moment where I felt the queer climate justice vision was really coming to life: Co-Director Shoog and collaborator Jimmy, who had met through *Can't Stop Change*, worked together to distribute mutual aid supplies. It emphasised for me that we weren't just creating a film product but also crafting a process that connects people and supports new organising.

*Vanessa:* Absolutely. Despite these early set-backs, this process also helped us create a product that is now reaching and resonating with people far outside of Florida. I would love it if we could each share something about the story and what makes it a climate justice narrative.

Coming from my media analysis of Hurricane Ian, I was interested in building a narrative that situated Ian within other ways that environmental harm pervades queer and trans lives. The first third of the film is structured around the road trip, covering sea-level rise in Miami and biodiversity loss in the Everglades before we journey to Fort Myers, when Jimmy begins to narrate the impact of Hurricane Ian. The story of Ian continues to unfold as the road trip moves inland to Orlando. Robin takes us on a walk through the predominantly immigrant neighbourhood of Orlo Vista. Although far

from the coast, this neighbourhood flooded due to the state's failure to maintain pumps in a nearby pond. Robin insists that the 'disaster' was not the hurricane: It was political, economic, and social systems that made Ian disastrous for marginalised communities.

One of my favourite sections to use in teaching is when our road trip approaches Tallahassee, and the multi-dimensional story of state violence emerges through narration from Valencia Gunder, founder of the Freedom Lab. Valencia weaves together attacks on education, critical race theory, abortion, and transgender people into what she calls a 'policy disaster.' My students really click with this idea of 'policy disaster.' It is a simple but powerful concept.

*Yarrow:* For me, what's most compelling about *Can't Stop Change* is that it is both deeply place-based and transcends colonial borders. *Can't Stop Change* uplifts the social and ecological diversity of Florida, combining personal narratives with archival footage and current events media to create a film that feels thoroughly Floridian. Yet the themes of the film are relevant to communities across the South and even across the globe in a time of rising global fascism, intensifying climate crisis, and increased attacks on LGBTQ+ and other marginalised groups.

For instance, the middle chapter of the film, titled *What Lies Beneath*, connects these many issues by highlighting the role of fossil fuels and extractive industries. We start with Miccosukee Two-Spirit artist and organiser Houston Cypress, who describes the impacts of fossil-fuel infrastructure on the Everglades and efforts to stop their expansion. Environmental educator Rebecca then brings in a historical analysis, highlighting how the colonial settlement of Florida modified the landscape to extract wealth, particularly under the leadership of Henry Flagler, founder of Standard Oil. This development harmed natural systems that now make people more vulnerable, especially when the various pumps and canals imposed on the swamp to accommodate dense housing are then not maintained in marginalised communities—which connects back to that story from Robin about the pond flooding during Ian.

Climate justice narratives often centre colonialism, capitalism, and fossil fuels. *Can't Stop Change* adds a gender analysis to this. In our interview with graduate student Barbara Perez, she describes her experience teaching the Gender and Climate Change class at Florida Atlantic University

that has been specifically derided by Florida lawmakers. She provides an ecofeminist layer to this story, highlighting the patriarchal logics of the colonial mindset: ‘Marginalised genders, women, people of colour,’ said Perez, ‘they have all been connected or associated to the environment through the Western construction of knowledge. And that association has justified the exploitation of the environment, but at the same time justified the exploitation of all of these marginalised groups.’

Moving from the past to the present, we wrap up that section with Lakey Love of the Florida Coalition for Transgender Liberation, who describes the power of fossil-fuel money in anti-trans legislation, as channelled by Koch Industries and the American Legislative Exchange Council.

*Vanessa:* That interview was particularly moving for me. I want to share the quote from Lakey that we used to close that chapter on *What Lies Beneath*: ‘If you’re separating the battle, that the fight for LGBTQ and trans liberation, the fight for racial justice, and the liberation of black and brown people and immigrant people, and the fight for the land for the air and the water ... If you’re separating them ... it’s because you’re too close to the mosquito netting. If you pull it away from your face, then you can see that they’re woven together ... for one paradigm and one purpose, which is white, patriarchal corporate poVwer.’

*Yarrow:* It’s a powerful analysis. I often say that ‘What happens in Florida doesn’t stay in Florida,’ since Florida is a test state for legislation that has spread to other conservative states and which is now reflected in federal policy.

The fight for climate justice is simultaneously local and global. Climate disasters are not bound by colonial borders; neither are the responses to them.

*Jess:* I agree. One way that we demonstrate a queer climate justice analysis is how we situate Florida ‘as a construct’ which is a quote from Houston Cypress. We show the many Floridas in between the Caribbean and the U.S. South, queering the colonial borders and reintegrating the land into the continuous ecosystems beyond state lines.

This is important because these violent systems also cross state lines. It was really illuminating when Jimmy discussed disaster militarisation and the way that the National Guard is an increasingly important part of disaster response in the U.S. We fund our military and police much more than social services, including disaster relief.

My favourite part was adding the additional interview about this with Terra in the garden in Tallahassee.

*Vanessa:* That was an interview that only made it into the film because our collaborators told us during the focus groups that we needed a more balanced depiction of North Florida, since so many interviews were in South Florida. We listened to our collaborators, and that led us to Terra, whose story crossed Florida's border into Georgia.

*Jess:* Terra was a close friend of Manuel Teran, also known as Tortuguita, who travelled to Atlanta, Georgia, to be part of the Stop Cop City movement, which was defending the Weelaunee forest from being cut down for the building of a police training facility. They were killed by Atlanta police officers while defending the forest. This is really the climax of the film. As this section draws to a close, the audience is left with the dystopian image of rising authoritarianism in response to climate instability.

*Natalia:* We don't shy away from this. State violence is not only in legislation, it is also through the police. That is something that climate justice movements have been talking about a lot. We have seen the way the police respond to protestors. It is clear who they are there to defend: the billionaires and the extractive system enriching them. Then we're supposed to believe the police are there to 'save' us after a hurricane?

If I'm honest, while these parts are important, it's always the ending that makes me cry. Alongside the trauma this violent system inflicts on us individually and collectively, we also profile LGBTQ2S+ artists, ecologists, and visionaries dreaming for a liberated future. This section weaves stories of queer ecologies, community care, and cultivating queer and trans belonging in nature. We want audiences to experience the many ways queer and trans communities maintain resistance by creating spaces of joy. These efforts are blossoming all across the state.

It's a narrative that inspires audiences to craft creative coalitions that work with the changing planet to shape more liberatory futures. In the conclusion, Valencia and Jimmy describe how disasters—whether hurricanes or policy disasters—are an important time to bring people into our movements. Disasters create cracks in the power structures, and we can plant our seeds in those cracks to break it further from the ground up.

*Vanessa:* Like Shoog wrote to us after reviewing the first look edit: 'the sad is so sad, but the joy is so joy.' We hope this representation can inspire audiences to hope not for technological quick-fixes that prop up the violent status quo but for the possibility that ecologically rooted, community-based strategies can world a habitable future.

*Yarrow:* *Can't Stop Change* screenings are the most essential component of honouring the stories in the film and doing the work of 'shaping change'—an idea from science fiction novelist Octavia Butler that frames the conclusion. These screenings are places for organising, building relationships, disaster preparedness strategising, and even resource distribution.

*Natalia:* The *Can't Stop Change* screenings so far have been all that and more. Despite the disappointing way the weather impacted the 'first look' screenings, the film has now made it into festivals and Universities all over the U.S. and even Europe! In all of these spaces, audiences have received it eagerly, and we have already seen it lead to new connections and more opportunities to organise.

*Jess:* It has been meaningful to speak with audiences outside of the South. The U.S. South is home; I've lived in the region all my life. To me, the film represented an opportunity to 'restory' the South. It disrupts representations of this region and its peoples as damaged, oppressed, and 'backward,' and honours the long histories and ongoing work of Black and brown resistance. It is healing to share the South that I know and love and to rally support for our communities.

*Yarrow:* I agree. I've had the opportunity to attend *Can't Stop Change* screenings across the country and am consistently moved by audience reflections. People without Florida roots are regularly surprised to learn about the incredible diversity of Florida and its legacies of queer and trans resistance. Those with roots

in Florida frequently share how powerful it is to see their communities represented and celebrated.

Moving forward, I want to focus on our organising within Florida. I am excited to see how we can more fully utilise screenings as spaces for disaster preparedness, like distributing resources to vulnerable communities.

*Vanessa:* Thank you all for this conversation. I started this whole conversation with you by talking about the idea of wedges and bridges. To me, this film is a bridge. We are making sure our climate justice narratives recognise intersectionality and don't leave out the queer and trans voices needed for collective liberation. And we are letting our LGBTQ+ community see themselves *in* nature and *as* nature, and to imagine futures outside of colonial capitalism and outside of homonormativity.

We hope this vignette may help others imagine different ways of telling stories of queer and trans disaster experiences to disrupt normalised violence towards bodies and lands, and offer glimpses of collective liberation for people and the planet. As we say at the end of the credits: May this work be in service of healing and transformation.

For information on how to book a screening of *Can't Stop Change*, please visit [queerproject.org/cant-stop-change](http://queerproject.org/cant-stop-change). Follow @queers4climatejustice Instagram page for recent updates.

**Conflict of Interest** The four authors are all describing a documentary that they created. The documentary is for educational use, fiscally sponsored by a non-profit organisation, and does not generate profit for the directors.

Vanessa Raditz is the author of another chapter in this volume, which discusses research that is thematically connected to the content of the film described in this vignette.