

Disability Justice – a working draft by Patty Berne

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In recent years, on websites and new media locales, on flyers and in informal conversations, I've witnessed people add the word "justice" onto virtually everything disability related — from disability rights based services and access audits to disability scholarship — while doing nothing to shift either process or end goal, thinking that the word change alone brings that work into alignment with disability justice.

Not so. So when Jane Dunham with the [National Black Disability Coalition](#) asked me to write "What Is Disability Justice" for the 2015 SDS Pre-Conference [Disability and Social Justice Summit](#), even though SDS was demonstrating NO commitment to Collective Access for those of us who cannot pay, physically or financially, for ableist transportation, I appreciated Jane's valuing my voice and contribution, and her efforts struggling with the unspoken and passive aggressive liberal racism of the academe, so I agreed. Plus, I really like Jane ♥. I wrote the following also knowing that it would serve as a good draft for the upcoming Sins Invalid project writing a Disability Justice statement, which will certainly be different and better after being worked through by the crew here.

However, I wanted to put it on this blog to continue my individual process of decolonization from ableist heteropatriarchal capitalism which tells me to keep a low profile lest I be hurt. So, with the deepest thanks and acknowledgements to [Aurora Levins Morales](#) and David

Langstaff for their words intertwined with mine, and with gratitude to Aurora Levins Morales, [Cara Page](#), [Lisa Weiner-Mahfuz](#), Stacey Milbern, Kiyaan Abadani, [Micah Bazant](#), Leroy Moore, seeley quest, Ernie Cath, David Langstaff, [Nomy Lamm](#), [Kay Ulanday Barrett](#), [Laura Hershey](#), [Leah Lakshmi Peipzna-Samaransinha](#), Natasha Simpson, [Lateef McLeod](#) and so many others who have all held fierce conversations and sleepy eyed dreams of what we building together....

I'd like to start off with a quote from Aurora Levins Morales' book [Kindling](#):

"There is no neutral body from which our bodies deviate. Society has written deep into each strand of tissue of every living person on earth. What it writes into the heart muscles of five star generals is distinct from what it writes in the pancreatic tissue and intestinal tracts of Black single mothers in Detroit, of Mexicana migrants in Fresno, but no body stands outside the consequences of injustice and inequality...What our bodies require in order to thrive, is what the world requires. If there is a map to get there, it can be found in the atlas of our skin and bone and blood, in the tracks of neurotransmitters and antibodies."

There was phenomenal and historic work to develop the disability rights movement in the U.S., and it had many successes in advancing a philosophy of independent living and opening possibilities for people with disabilities through the establishment of civil rights for people with disabilities. Like other movements, the current disability rights movement

includes advocacy organizations, service provision agencies, constituency led centers, membership based national organizations, as well as cultural and academic spaces.

And, like many movements, it is contextualized within its era of emergence and left us with “cliff-hangers”: it is single issue identity based; its leadership has historically centered white experiences; its framework leaves out other forms of oppression and the ways in which privilege is leveraged at differing times and for various purposes; it centers people with mobility impairments, marginalizing other forms of impairment; and centers people who can achieve rights and access through a legal or rights-based framework. The political strategy of the disability rights movement relied on litigation and the establishment of a disability bureaucratic sector at the expense of developing a broad-based popular movement.

While a concrete and radical move forward toward justice, the disability rights movement simultaneously invisibilized the lives of peoples who lived at intersecting junctures of oppression – disabled people of color, immigrants with disabilities, queers with disabilities, trans and gender non-conforming people with disabilities, people with disabilities who are houseless, people with disabilities who are incarcerated, people with disabilities who have had their ancestral lands stolen, amongst others.

In response to this, in 2005, disabled activists of color, originally queer women of color incubated in progressive and radical movements that did not systematically address ableism – namely, myself, [Mia Mingus](#), and Stacey Milbern, soon to be

joined by Leroy Moore, [Eli Clare](#) and Sebastian Margaret – began discussing a “second wave” of disability rights and ultimately launched a framework we called Disability Justice.

Given the isolation enforced by ableism and classed boundaries, many of us have often found ourselves as agents of change from within our respective communities and isolated from in-person community with other disabled people of color or queer or gender non-conforming crips, finding “liberated zones” instead online. In many ways, Disability Justice is a nascent framework that some call a movement, still identifying the “we” – sometimes in fluid spaces and sometimes in each others’ hoped and spoken words, touching each other through the echoes of those we mentor close by.

Given this early historical snapshot, I assert that Disability Justice work is largely done by individuals within their respective settings, with Sins Invalid, the NYC-based Disability Justice Collective, Seattle’s Disability Justice Collective, and Vancouver’s Disability Justice Collective being notable exceptions. Some voices may emphasize a particular component of the framework over another, as can be expected in early movement moments. However, what has been consistent is the leadership of disabled people of color and of queer and gender non-conforming disabled people.

Disability Justice activists, organizers, cultural workers understand that able-bodied supremacy has been formed in relation to intersecting systems of domination and exploitation. The histories of white supremacy and ableism are inextricably

entwined, both forged in the crucible of colonial conquest and capitalist domination. We cannot comprehend ableism without grasping its interrelations with heteropatriarchy, white supremacy, colonialism and capitalism, each system co-creating an ideal bodymind built upon the exclusion and elimination of a subjugated “other” from whom profits and status are extracted. 500+ years of violence against black and brown communities includes 500+ years of bodies and minds deemed dangerous by being non-normative – again, not simply within able-bodied normativity, but within the violence of heteronormativity, white supremacy, gender normativity, within which our various bodies and multiple communities have been deemed “*deviant*”, “*unproductive*”, “*invalid*.”

A Disability Justice framework understands that all bodies are unique and essential, that all bodies have strengths and needs that must be met. We know that we are powerful not despite the complexities of our bodies, but because of them. We understand that all bodies are caught in these bindings of ability, race, gender, sexuality, class, nation state and imperialism, and that we cannot separate them. These are the positions from where we struggle. We are in a global system that is incompatible with life. There is no way stop a single gear in motion — we must dismantle this machine.

Disability Justice holds a vision born out of collective struggle, drawing upon the legacies of cultural and spiritual resistance within a thousand underground paths, igniting small persistent fires of rebellion in everyday life. Disabled people of the global majority — black and brown people — share common ground

confronting and subverting colonial powers in our struggle for life and justice. There has always been resistance to all forms of oppression, as we know through our bones that there have simultaneously been disabled people visioning a world where we flourish, that values and celebrates us in all our myriad beauty.

From my vantage point within Sins Invalid, where we incubate both the framework and practice of Disability Justice, this burgeoning framework has ten (10) principles, each offering new opportunities for movement builders:

- The first, a primary principle of Disability Justice, is ***Intersectionality***. We know that each person has multiple community identifications, and that each identity can be a site of privilege or oppression. The fulcrums of oppression shift depending upon the characteristics of any given institutional or interpersonal interaction; the very understanding of disability experience itself being shaped by race, gender, class, gender expression, historical moment, relationship to colonization and more.
- Referenced earlier, the second principle is the ***Leadership of Those Most Impacted***. It reflects our understanding of ableism in the context of other historical systemic oppressions, thus we are led by those who most know these systems.
- Like the above principles, Disability Justice shares two additional principles with other justice-based movements — an ***Anti-Capitalist Politic*** and a ***Commitment to Cross Movement Organizing***. We are anti-capitalist as the very

nature of our mind/bodies resists conforming to a capitalist “normative” productive standard, with the actual construction of “disability” derived from the exploitation of the body in an economy that sees land and human as components of profit, deriding the integrity of our very real crip labor. Necessarily cross movement, Disability Justice shifts how social justice movements understand disability and contextualize ableism, lending itself toward a united front politic.

- The fifth principle of Disability Justice is a newly articulated contribution to justice-based movements, **Recognizing Wholeness**, meaning that we value our people as they are, for who they are, and that people have inherent worth outside of commodity relations and capitalist notions of productivity
- Sixth is the crippled principle of **Sustainability**, that we value the teachings of our lives and understand that our embodied experience as a critical guide and reference pointing us toward justice and liberation.
- Seventh we hold a **commitment to Cross Disability Solidarity**, valuing and honoring the insights and participation of all of our community members and therefore are committed to breaking down ableist / patriarchal / racist / classed isolation between people with physical impairments, people who identify as “sick” or are chronically ill, “psych” survivors and those who identify as “crazy”, neurodiverse people, people with cognitive impairments, people who are a sensory minority, as we

understand that isolation ultimately undermines collective liberation.

- Eighth we have an awareness of ***Interdependence***, as we were taught before the massive colonial project of Western European expansion. The disability rights call for independence pried disabled people from systems of patronage and being spoken for and about, in companion to the ideas of self-determination and community. From this starting point, we can widen and deepen our analysis, as this state was never set up to serve brown and black people. We can see the liberation of all living systems and the land as integral to the liberation of our own communities, as we all share one planet. We can attempt to meet each others' needs as we build toward liberation, without always reaching for state solutions which inevitably then extends its control further over our lives.
- A ninth principle is ***Collective Access***, that as brown and queer crips we bring flexibility and creative nuance to engage with each other, that we value exploring and creating new ways of doing things that go beyond able-bodied/minded normativity. Access needs do not need to be held in shame — we all have various capacities which function differently in various environments. Access needs can be articulated within a community and met privately or through a collective, depending upon an individual's needs, desires, and the capacity of the group. We can share responsibility for our access needs without shame, we can ask our needs be met without compromising our integrity, we can balance autonomy

while being in community, we can be unafraid of our vulnerabilities knowing our strengths are respected.

- Lastly, the tenth principle is the path and goal of **Collective Liberation**, in which we hold the question “How do we move together” – as people with mixed abilities, multiracial, multi-gendered, mixed class, across the orientation spectrum – where no body/mind is left behind.

This is Disability Justice, an honoring of the longstanding legacies of resilience and resistance which are the inheritance of all of us whose bodies or minds will not conform. Disability Justice is a vision and practice of a *yet-to-be*, a map that we create with our ancestors and our great grandchildren onward, in the width and depth of our multiplicities and histories, a movement towards a world in which every body and mind is known as beautiful.