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Section 3 FOOD JUSTICE

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Disabling Justice?

The Exclusion of People with Disabilities
from the Food Justice Movement

Natasha Simpson

What, exactly, is the connection between disability and food justice? Despite rampant food insecurity among people with disabilities, the food justice movement has yet to significantly acknowledge the barriers for disabled people in achieving food justice that is based in an understanding of ableism, or disability oppression.¹ Ableism, or the oppression of disabled people, operates in part through “deeply rooted beliefs about health, productivity, beauty, and the value of human life, perpetuated by the public and private media, [which] combine to create an environment that is hostile to those whose abilities fall outside of the scope of what is currently defined as socially acceptable” (Rauscher and McClintock 1996, 198). Although there is overlap between the food justice and disability justice movements, which I will illuminate, a disability justice framework is necessary to deepen the food justice movement’s intersectional analysis of oppression. Ableism is not only pervasive; it is also bound to other systems of domination. Infusing food justice organizing with this understanding means that nuances of oppression within the food system become clearer, as do more possibilities for mobilization. Both the food justice and disability justice movements arose from the realities and priorities of people of color and both implement intersectional praxis; this leads me to articulate the potential for more explicit connections between them.

Disability justice, named in the vein of other justice-based social movements, was developed by Patricia Berne initially with other disabled queer women of color and later joined by other disabled people like Leroy Moore, is defined as a movement-building framework that emphasizes the leadership of disabled people of color and disabled queer and gender-nonconforming people. Disability justice includes people with chronic illnesses or who identify as sick as well as others not traditionally recognized as disabled (Allen 2013; Lamm et al. 2015; Berne 2015). This movement distinguishes itself from the disability rights movement in intentional and specific ways.² Berne points out that while disability rights undoubtedly have had positive impacts on the lives of people with disabilities, they fail to include many people with disabilities who are marginalized in multiple ways, and also fail to address structural oppression, instead mainly emphasizing the attainment of rights through legislative means rather than through a broader social movement (Allen 2013; Lamm et al. 2015). It is this specific framework that I am referring to when I refer to disability justice throughout this essay.

The radical Black origins of food justice also illustrate the importance of widespread cultural and political shifts and building across social movements. The Black Panther Party understood Black struggles for food access both as a manifestation of the structural oppressions Black people face in the United States and as a site where many of these structural oppressions converge. Government interference and, later, co-optation of the Free Breakfast for School Children Program, run by the Black Panthers, effectively ended it (Potorti 2014), and the most popular representations of the movement have continued shifting toward reform rather than revolution. For instance, unfortunately, “structural critiques of capitalism and racism that were integral to the Black Panther’s political work” are less visible in food justice today (Holt-

Gimenéz and Wang 2011, 89). My aim in revisiting these origins is to honor this historical and continuing vein of food justice and to imagine the liberatory potential of food justice for disabled people, especially those who are multiply oppressed.

The food justice movement is rightfully meant to center the experiences of poor Black communities and other communities of color; however, it also often centers specific notions of health, which can erase food access struggles experienced by disabled people, including disabled people of color, as being an expression of ableism. Conceptions of food access can be expanded within the context of ableism. I believe this recognition and, further, the potential for more mobilization around this is particularly vital. Most importantly, the food justice movement has the potential for transforming society *beyond* increasing food access; through a disability justice politic, food justice is a site where ideals privileging “normal,” “healthy” bodyminds can be challenged.

Methods

In 2015 I analyzed the online mission statements of four food justice organizations based in Oakland, California, that explicitly articulated race and class as dimensions of food access struggles, and I have traced their discourses regarding health, illness, and disability to ableist ideologies that have potentially harmful impacts on food access for people with disabilities. As I stated above, ableism is pervasive, and it is for this reason, and because of the potential for food justice organizations and the movement more broadly to be receptive to this analysis, that I do not find it useful to single out the organizations by name.

Ableist discourse within the food justice movement is often centered around chronic illnesses, which I also refer to here as nonapparent disabilities; for this reason I conducted interviews regarding experiences of ableism with chronically ill people/

people with primarily nonapparent disabilities. I received four responses to my posts on social media from potential interview participants, and I interviewed those who responded: four cis-gender women with nonapparent disabilities. Three of the four women identify as white; one identifies as a mixed-race Latina. Two of the women openly identify as queer. The interviews conducted were semistructured. I draw only on themes of the interviews here due to space considerations. The women articulated experiencing intense pressures to perform abledness as well as lack of recognition of access needs (a term I learned from *Sins Invalid*) that, they feel, stem from their disabilities presenting as nonapparent. The reach of ableism, especially through notions of “healthy,” “normal” bodyminds, affects many people, not only those who “look” disabled to the abled.³ Although I am examining discourses and their underlying ideologies, this essay is very much rooted in furthering the understanding of their material implications, illustrated by the struggles in food access that disabled people experience.

Why Disability?

A wealth of information has been gathered regarding the impacts of race, class, and, to a lesser extent, immigration and migration status in the food system, which has led to the common acknowledgment that “certain populations of bodies are structurally recognized as less worthy of sustenance” (Slocum and Saldanha 2013, 1). Judith Carney (2013, 74) echoes this, stating, “The right to a meal has been used in specific historical periods to deny some people their fundamental humanity.” It is surprising in this context that questions about the role of disability in the food system have, until relatively recently, been absent. The USDA reports that not only are households that include an adult with a disability considered “food insecure” at rates

alarming higher than households without, but also experience more severe food insecurity; the utilization of disability assistance programs and food and nutrition programs were found not to be wholly effective in ensuring food security for disabled people (Coleman-Jensen and Nord 2013).⁴ Additionally, higher rates of food insecurity are the case even for moderate-income households that include an adult with a disability (Coleman-Jensen and Nord 2013).

These conditions, however, have not stimulated an ableism-informed analysis within the food justice movement. While the movement's primary food access concerns are proximity to food, affordability of food, and knowledge about food (Oakland Food Policy Council n.d.)—all also relevant to disabled people—this conception of food access is not enough to encompass additional barriers to food access that people with disabilities experience. There is a range of potential additional considerations for disabled people in accessing food, such as experiencing social isolation and being homebound; inaccessibility of transportation options and inaccessibility of grocers; difficulties transporting groceries and preparing and cooking food (Webber et al. 2007; Coleman-Jensen and Nord 2013). While these barriers are often framed as being a result of disabilities themselves, effectively depoliticizing disability, I would argue that they are all evidence of systemic oppression within society, in which myths of independence, expectations of economic productivity, and abledness are glorified. This type of depoliticization obscures ableism as a root of these barriers to food access. Where connections to systemic oppression in the food system are commonly present in other analyses, they seem to be absent in regard to disability. Alison Kafer (2013, 10) asks questions I believe are useful to begin to deconstruct this: "How has disability been depoliticized, removed from the realm of the political? Which definitions of and assump-

tions about disability facilitate this removal? What are the effects of such depoliticization?”

The strategy of linking communities’ material conditions to structural inequities, thereby politicizing marginalized communities’ experiences, is of particular value in working toward a food justice movement informed by disability justice; this strategy was also fundamental to the food justice work of the Black Panthers.

I aim to illustrate that, much like inequities along the lines of other facets of identity, the barriers that people with disabilities face in the food system can also be read as a result of ableism in society. I consider the impact of ableism intersectionally, intertwined with those other facets of identity. Referring to women, people of color, and immigrants, Douglas Baynton (2001, 33) asserts, “The concept of disability has [also] been used to justify discrimination against other groups by attributing disability to them.” This use of ableism as further justification of oppression against marginalized communities potentially provides a context for the absence of an analysis of ableism within the food justice movement. Delving into the origins of food justice elucidates why its activism is situated uniquely in its ability to affect transformation beyond food access.

Radical Black Origins of the Food Justice Movement

“The long black freedom struggle has repeatedly underscored the cultural and political significance of food, explicitly calling attention to structures of racism and social inequality” (Potorti 2014, 45). Carney (2013) illustrates this long black freedom struggle by characterizing enslaved African people’s relationship to food in the context of the transatlantic slave trade and the ensuing realities of slavery. Indigenous African foods and related knowledge of food production sustained enslaved Black people and many others, but food was also strictly controlled and exploited by

“plantation capitalism” (71–73). These, among others, are origins of unjust circumstances from which a Black politics around food in the United States, and throughout the African diaspora, sprung.

I believe it is fruitful to revisit and highlight the more radical Black legacy of food justice in order to illustrate how the politicization of food access was utilized to connect a range of issues and supported political actions from consciousness-raising to informing other types of political organizing. As early as the Great Depression the Alabama Sharecroppers Union organized against the race- and class-based oppression of Black sharecroppers within a radical communist framework (Potorti 2014, 45), but my focus here will be on the food justice programs of the Black Panther Party. The Party’s Free Breakfast for Children Program, initially based in Oakland, California, synthesized their radical political analysis with the program’s practical reach. It fed 250,000 children each day before school, nationwide, through forty-nine Party chapters, in partnership with other organizations (Holt-Gimenéz and Wang 2011, 89). This and their other food justice programs were a means to raise communities’ consciousness by explicitly connecting “capitalism [and] social stratification [to] their own material deprivation and political marginalization” (Potorti 2014, 46, emphasis added). Of importance here, in addition to critiquing capitalism, the Party members demonstrated alternatives by sustaining this large-scale breakfast program solely with donations (45, 47).

The government sought to disrupt the food justice work of the Black Panther Party precisely because it was explicitly political rather than humanitarian (FBI as cited by Potorti 2014, 46); these disruptive tactics included shaming accusations of sexual deviance and sexually transmitted infections; harassment, questioning, and arrest; frivolous public health citations; and the destruction of food (46). The Black Panthers understood that concerns

about obtaining the basic sustenance necessary for survival could divert Black communities' attention and energies away from linking a lack of sustenance to other "manifestations of egregious racism such as underemployment, economic exploitation, police brutality, and a skewed criminal justice system" (Holt-Gimenéz and Wang 2011, 89). Therefore they did not view food access as a goal in itself but as a necessary step on the way to Black liberation (Potorti 2014, 46).⁵

Observing this historical context can provide promising directions for food justice praxis, or the application of this knowledge, as it connects to realizing food justice for people with disabilities. First, however, it is important to take into account the influences of the environmental justice movement and the mainstream food movement on modern food justice (Alkon and Agyeman 2011, 7) in order to illustrate what further sets it apart from mainstream food and environmental movements.

Environmental justice breaks away from mainstream environmentalism, whose ideologies, discourses and practices have historically been aligned with colonialism and eugenics.⁶ The environmental justice movement developed out of the civil rights tradition, with Black, Indigenous, and other women of color, particularly mothers, at the forefront of the fight to gain protection from and provide input about a number of their communities' environmental concerns, such as land and water rights, exposure to toxins, and unsafe living and working conditions (Alkon and Agyeman 2011, 7–8; Stein 2004, 2–3). While mainstream environmentalism asserts that nature is separate from (certain) humans and ranks nature above humans, "the environmental justice movement has instead defined the environment as 'where we live, work, play, and worship'" and firmly integrates humans with nature (Stein 2004, 1). The movement's strat-

egy often employs data from community-based research to prove environmental and bodily harm and to advocate for legal protections and stewardship of their communities (Alkon and Agyeman 2011, 7). This framework is evident in the food justice movement's focus on the disproportionate food insecurity in poor communities of color, as well as in many activists' insistence that communities should determine how their food system operates (8). The centering of poor people and people of color in the food justice movement is also, in some ways, a rebuttal to the "predominantly white and middle-class" priorities of the mainstream food movement (2), which focuses "more on what people eat than how food is produced, works through the market, and for the most part punts on the question of inequality" (Guthman 2011, 141).

Although it is often referred to as the sustainable or alternative food movement, I will refer to it as the mainstream food movement to reduce confusion. (For instance, the food justice movement can also be considered a sustainable or alternative food movement.) Historically associated with the leftist counter-culture of the 1960s, when initial concerns about increasing corporate consolidation and environmental exploitation in the food system began to appear, mainstream communal, organic, and local food operations came out of this framework (Guthman 2011, 142). While adopting similar operations but with less emphasis on organic, the food justice movement has drawn attention to the mainstream food movement's privilege since its strategy generally entails encouraging people to buy fresh, local, and organic food without consideration for the fact that the cost or availability may be prohibitive (Alkon and Agyeman 2011, 2–3). The food justice movement, however, has an opportunity to center the impact of ableism on food access for people with disabilities.

Politicizing Disability within Food Justice

In analyzing the mission statements of four Oakland-based food justice organizations, I became particularly interested in the discourses they contain regarding health, food access, and what constitutes food justice activism to ascertain the potential implications of these discourses in inhibiting or advancing food and disability justice.

The majority of the mission statements define health in ways that perpetuate the undesirability of disability, essentially defining disability as the antithesis of health. All four organizations explicitly posit restoring health, not ever explicitly defined, as one of the aims of their work; three of the four organizations position illness or disease as the opposite of health and, in doing so, employ the language of medicine and public health, specifically referring to “diet-related diseases,” diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease alongside obesity and asthma. Categorizing people experiencing illness and other disabilities as unhealthy, and therefore abnormal, in need of fixing or curing, has been and continues to be a prominent ideology that fuels the oppression of disabled people.⁷

Scholars have finally joined disability rights, disability justice, and fat activists in drawing attention to the fact that this concept of health is not apolitical,⁸ that it is “a term that speak[s] as much about power and privilege as about well-being. Health is a desired state, but it is also a prescribed state and an ideological position” (Metzl 2010, 1, emphasis added). Health as “a prescribed state and an ideological position” is an offshoot of ableism, and the depoliticization of this concept as such is in opposition to the vein of food justice that the Black Panther Party engaged in. If health is a defined goal of food justice activism, and health is the absence of illness or disease (which can include disability),

then the root of food insecurity (ableism) of those who cannot attain health by this definition is obscured and normalized rather than recognized as a manifestation of ableist oppression. This depoliticization is a danger to disability justice much like the depoliticization of food justice was for the Black Panther Party.

Health, in this context, actually entails a normative state, and this can be directly traced to eugenics, and normalization impulses within medicine and public health. Although Guthman (2011, 41) set out to contribute a “political ecology of obesity,” I am applying her insights regarding how “normal . . . became normative” in the context of disability. Guthman tracks this notion of “normal” bodies to the nineteenth-century application of statistical methods, particularly the bell curve, in public health and then medical practice; this led increasingly to the belief in the “average” within the population as the norm. Even further, the comparison of people based on “average” bodies made any outliers abnormal and pathological, the bodies against which normal was defined (41–42). Baynton (2001, 36) writes, “Although normality ostensibly denoted the average, the usual, and the ordinary, in actual usage it functioned as an ideal and excluded only those defined as below average.” Medicine and public health are two factors in shaping bodily norms, often dominating society’s views of what truly “healthy,” “normal” bodies are, but bound with them is the legacy of eugenics.

Eugenics is “the social engineering project that sought to eradicate defective traits from a nation’s hereditary pool” (Mitchell and Snyder 2010, 187). People primarily within marginalized communities have been targeted based on nonnormative traits of the bodymind, and eugenics programs have spanned and intersected with gender, race, and other identities—not just because of disability but also due to the perception of disability. Society’s

ableism has permitted science and medicine license to commit injustices in the name of health and normality, namely involuntary medical procedures and institutionalization, among other “cures” based in eugenics, against people with disabilities as well as others perceived to be defective (Wendell 2001; Gabel and Peters 2004; Mitchell and Snyder 2010). It is from these experiences that the social model arose, “the result of resistance to the medical model, to the oppression of disabled people, and to ableism” (Gabel and Peters 2004, 592). These ideologies are apparent in references to “diet-related” illness and disease, which imply that through appropriate diet one can—and, more importantly, should—“cure” oneself of diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease. This erases the agency of people who are sick and disabled, shames them, and does not take into account, for example, those for whom diet is not a primary cause of illness or disability, those who cannot be “cured” by adopting a produce-rich diet, or those who don’t desire to be cured to an abled standard. Susan Wendell (1996, 94) refers to this as the myth of control, which also stems from and is perpetuated by medicine and public health, that “by means of human actions” we can control the near inevitability of illness and disability and the definite inevitability of death. This myth supports an increasingly common expectation that people “control” their bodyminds by whatever means necessary, which advances the notion that health is a matter of personal responsibility (Guthman 2011, 47). This idea of health as a matter of personal responsibility is abundantly clear in the case of antifat discourse within the food justice movement; Sonya Renee Taylor asserts, “We must ask who benefits from a war against people’s bodies. Does it benefit communities to be at war with their bodies? If the benefit is not to the communities we serve then what makes the model a justice movement?” (qtd. in Duong 2013).

Because disability or perceptions of disability were, and often still are, used to justify continued oppression of multiply marginalized groups, it potentially clarifies why the food justice movement might hesitate to adopt a disability justice framework. Black experiences, as well as the experiences of other people of color, with medicine, public health, and eugenics (although by no means monolithic), have included medicalization and other ableist violences. This has often been characterized by simultaneous hyper-visibility and invisibility or neglect, for example through forced medical experimentation as well as a lack of desired medical care (Nelson 2013, xiii).⁹ For people who are already marginalized due to race, gender, sexuality, and more, distance from disability has been a method of gaining rights (Baynton 2001, 34)—but at what cost? This has translated into “a lot of people that are functionally disabled [but] who don’t identify as disabled” (Patricia Berne as cited by Allen 2013) where there is a possibility for becoming “politically disabled” (Mingus 2010); this depoliticization and distancing from disability limits possibilities for mobilizing against ableism.

To illustrate just how far-reaching these normative ideas of the bodymind are, I interviewed four chronically ill women about their experiences with nonapparent disabilities. Because people make the determination of disability on the basis of “function and appearance” (Lennard Davis as quoted in Baynton 2001, 48), the impact of ableist ideals of the “normal,” “healthy” bodymind feels intensely present for these women with nonapparent disabilities. There were three common threads among their experiences: people discount their disability or are skeptical of its existence or suspicious of the severity of their impairments; this denial of disability identity impacts whether their needs for access are taken seriously, let alone met; they must navigate others’ expectations of the functioning of their bodymind based on social norms of

abledness, exaggerated because, to others, they do not “look” like they have impairments; and they experienced difficulty claiming their agency because doctors encouraged them to use medical treatment to make them as “normal” as possible so they could pass as abled. Clearly ableism has a broad reach; however, by working toward politicizing disability and toward disability justice within the food justice movement, we may begin to resist disability as a basis of justification for oppression. Idealizing “healthy,” “normal” bodyminds clearly stems from ableism and contributes to the oppression of people with disabilities.

Conclusion

As is now clear, the discourse of these select food justice organizations stem from particular ideologies advanced by medicine, public health, eugenics, and capitalism, even alongside the organizations’ race and class analysis. It is important to contend with the material impacts of these ideologies in order to work toward disability justice as well as food justice. By engaging with a disability justice framework, I believe, the food justice movement can be a site for transforming oppressive beliefs about health and bodyminds. But what exactly does this look like?

The food justice movement’s lineage from environmental justice often means that inequities in food access are articulated particularly through their impacts on the body, as previously illustrated. Kafer (2013, 158, emphasis added) aptly concludes, “What is needed, then, are analyses that recognize and refuse the intertwined exploitation of bodies and environments without demonizing the illnesses and disabilities, and especially the ill and disabled bodies, that result from such exploitation.” This is an essential foundation to further analyses in regard to disability.

All of the food justice organizations I’ve included here have programs for community and political education; learning from those

engaged in disability justice as part of their established political education efforts is one important aspect. Should the food justice movement deepen its analysis, and broaden the accessibility of its organizing, this could facilitate connections across movements and further the meeting of food and disability justice.

Also important to bringing food justice and disability justice together is a broader conception and practice of access. Food access is often defined in terms of proximity, cost, and education, but this is not enough when thinking about disability. I hope that this essay has illustrated that the scope of these barriers is wider than is usually articulated. Disability justice within this movement means there should be alternatives to solely labor-intensive methods of engaging with food production and organizing.¹⁰ It means forms of transportation that are comfortable and reliable for a multitude of bodies and accessible options for people who are homebound or otherwise have difficulty getting to and/or preparing food. It entails incorporating more accessibility once people do get there, such as rest areas, Braille, and more affordable organic foods for those who experience injury from pesticides and other chemicals; it entails organizing against ableism throughout the food system, from production to reuse with a firm understanding of how ableism colludes with other forms of oppression, and how capitalism further impacts accessibility in this context.

This inherently also expands to relationships with other people, and interdependence is critical: what about those who are fed by others, or those with feeding tubes (Wilkerson 2011)? What about those whose pain or fatigue limits the cooking they can do, or who can consume only limited produce because fiber makes them ill (Sarah 2014)? These are all contexts that food justice can address if informed by disability justice, and my hope is that this increasingly will be the case.

NOTES

1. Food insecurity is defined by the USDA as “a household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to food.” Low food security entails reduced quality, variety, or desirability of diet, with little to no indication of reduced food intake; very low food security indicates disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service. 2015). I diverge from this definition to claim that food insecurity is structural, affected on the household and even individual levels by systems of oppression.
2. See Berne (2015) of Sins Invalid, a disability justice organization cofounded with Leroy Moore, for the ten principles of disability justice.
3. Ableism creates hierarchical distinctions between abled and disabled as well as false distinctions between apparent and nonapparent disability. I do not seek to employ these types of neat distinctions. Rather I attempt to illustrate how these distinctions function to deny access to all people with disabilities, which can create fissures in relations across disability, as well as how they function to coerce chronically ill and nonapparently disabled people into what is in some ways a liminal space between abled and disabled should they not comply with performing ableness.
4. This could mean that food insecurity is actually much higher among disabled people, as those who, for myriad reasons, are not utilizing these programs are not represented. USDA Economic Research Service data from 2009–10 found that 33 percent of households that included an adult with a disability who was unable to work, and 25 percent of households with an adult with a disability that did not prevent him or her from working were food insecure, compared to 12 percent of households without an adult with a disability. The data also showed a whopping 38 percent of households including an adult with a disability had very low food security, as defined in note 1 (Coleman-Jensen and Nord 2013).
5. I define food access as the ability to easily produce or obtain, prepare, and consume food that nourishes on the physical, mental, emotional, cultural, and spiritual levels.

6. For more on the influences of colonialism and eugenics on mainstream environmentalism, see Ray 2013.
7. Like many others, I assert that being fat is not in and of itself an illness or disability; medicalization is, however, common among both people who are fat as well as those who are disabled, and fatness is also a basis of oppression.
8. The desire of disabled people to utilize agency as a way to care for our bodyminds, whether through medicine, food, or other means, does not invalidate this or automatically imply internalized ableism.
9. Washington (2008) provides a thorough history of forced medical examinations. The Black Panthers also organized to address the medical mistreatment of Black Americans (see Nelson 2013).
10. Credit to Toi Scott (<http://www.afrogenderqueer.com>) for being essential to initiating this conversation for me.

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