

# SKIN, TOOTH, AND BONE

The Basis of Movement is Our People



A Disability Justice Primer  
by Sins Invalid | Second Edition

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**A DISABILITY JUSTICE PRIMER**

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# What is Disability Justice?

Adapted from Patty Berne's  
"Disability Justice - A Working Draft"

In recent years, on websites, on flyers and in informal conversations, we've witnessed people add the word "justice" onto everything disability related – from disability services to advocacy to disability studies. This is done without a significant shift in process or goals, as if adding the word "justice" brings work into alignment with disability justice. It doesn't.

What follows is a working draft definition of disability justice. This is a living document that grows and changes along with our emerging movement. It marks a point of departure rather than a destination. It is an invitation to those of us working on disability issues, to continue to support one another to find a language as powerful and expansive as our movement's vision.



We'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."*

## Next Stage in Movement Evolution



Prior to the Disability Rights Movement, if people with disabilities were mistreated, there were no legal repercussions. Most public places weren't accessible and it was expected disabled people would not participate in society. There was important historic work done by

disabled people and allies to develop disability rights in the U.S., and it had many successes in advancing a philosophy of independent living and opening possibilities for people with disabilities. The US Disability Rights Movement established 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 a product of its time and left us with some “cliff-hangers” that have yet to be resolved.

- Disability rights is based in a single-issue identity, focusing exclusively on disability at the expense of other intersections of race, gender, sexuality, age, immigration status, religion, etc.
- Its leadership has historically centered white experiences and doesn't address the ways white disabled people can still wield privilege.
- It centers people with mobility impairments, marginalizing other types of disability and/or impairment.

At its core, the disability rights framework centers people who can achieve status, power and access through a legal or rights-based framework, which we know is not possible for many disabled people, or appropriate for all situations.

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. Popular movements often begin when people develop political consciousness and name their experiences. Rights-based strategies often address the symptoms of inequity but not the root. The root of disability oppression is ableism and we must work to understand it, combat it, and create alternative practices rooted in justice.

While a concrete and radical move forward toward justice for disabled people, the Disability Rights Movement simultaneously invisibilized the lives of disabled people of color, immigrants with disabilities, disabled people who practice marginalized religions (in particular those experiencing the violence of anti-Islamic beliefs and actions), 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.



## ARTICULATING A MOVEMENT

In 2005, disabled queers and activists of color began discussing a “second wave” of disability rights. Many of these first conversations happened between Patty Berne and Mia Mingus, two queer disabled women of color who were incubated in progressive and radical movements which had failed to address ableism in their politics. Their visioning soon expanded to include others including Leroy Moore, Stacey Milbern, Eli Clare and Sebastian Margaret. These conversations evolved over time, at



**“Disability Justice is contextual, it’s improvised, it changes. Just because a person has privileges here, depending on the climate or the governmental office or the housing situation, it shifts. Together, as a collective, our dynamics, moment to moment, each interaction is based on complication and nuance, and whatever equations or formulas we think that we may have down, they’re going to pivot or shift together, depending on where we are together. Fuck systems and their shame.”**

**— Kay Ulanday Barrett**

conferences, over the phone, formal and informal, one-on-one and in groups. While every conversation is built on those that came before it, and it's possible that there were others who were thinking and talking this way, it is our historical memory that these were the conversations that launched the framework we call disability justice.

Given the isolation enforced by ableism and capitalism, many of us have often found ourselves as leaders within our various communities, yet isolated from in-person community with other disabled people of color or queer or gender non-conforming crips. Many of us have found "liberated zones" online that celebrate our multiple identities. Disability justice is a developing framework that some call a movement. We are still identifying the "we," touching each other through the echoes of each other's hopes and words.

Given this early historical snapshot, we assert that disability justice work is largely done by individuals within their respective settings, with Sins Invalid and the Disability Justice Collectives based in NYC, Seattle, and Vancouver, B.C., being notable exceptions. These groups and organizing structures often come into being, fall apart and regroup with different names and configurations over time. Online groups like Sick & Disabled Queers can offer opportunities

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for people with disabilities to communicate and create new norms together. Some voices may emphasize a specific aspect of disability justice over another, which can be expected in all early movement moments. However, what has been consistent across disability justice - and must remain so - is the leadership of disabled people of color and of queer and gender non-conforming disabled people.

Disability justice activists, organizers, and cultural workers understand that able-bodied supremacy has been formed in relation to other systems of domination and exploitation. The histories of white supremacy and ableism are inextricably entwined, created in the context of colonial conquest and capitalist domination. One cannot look at the history of US slavery, the stealing of Indigenous lands, and US imperialism without seeing the way that white supremacy uses ableism to create a lesser/"other" group of people that is deemed less worthy/abled/smart/capable. A single-issue civil rights framework is not enough to explain the full extent of ableism and how it operates in society. We can only truly understand ableism by tracing its connections to heteropatriarchy, white supremacy, colonialism, and capitalism. The same oppressive systems that inflicted violence upon Black and brown communities for 500+ years also inflicted 500+ years of violence on bodies and minds deemed outside

the norm and therefore “dangerous.”

Furthermore, racism, anti-Islamic beliefs, ableism and imperialism come together to feed us images of the “terrorist” as a dangerous Brown enemy, an “other” who is sexually and mentally “wrong.” All this is compounded by the ways ableism, along with queer-hatred and the violence of the gender binary, label our bodies and communities as “deviant,” “unproductive,” and “invalid.”

A disability justice framework understands that:

- All bodies are unique and essential.
- All bodies have strengths and needs that must be met.
- We are powerful, not despite the complexities of our bodies, but because of them.
- All bodies are confined by ability, race, gender, sexuality, class, nation state, religion, and more, and we cannot separate them.

These are the positions from which we struggle. We are in a global system that is incompatible with life. The literal terrain of the world has shifted, along with a neo-fascist political terrain. Each day the planet experiences human-provoked mudslides, storms, fires, devolving air quality, rising sea levels, new

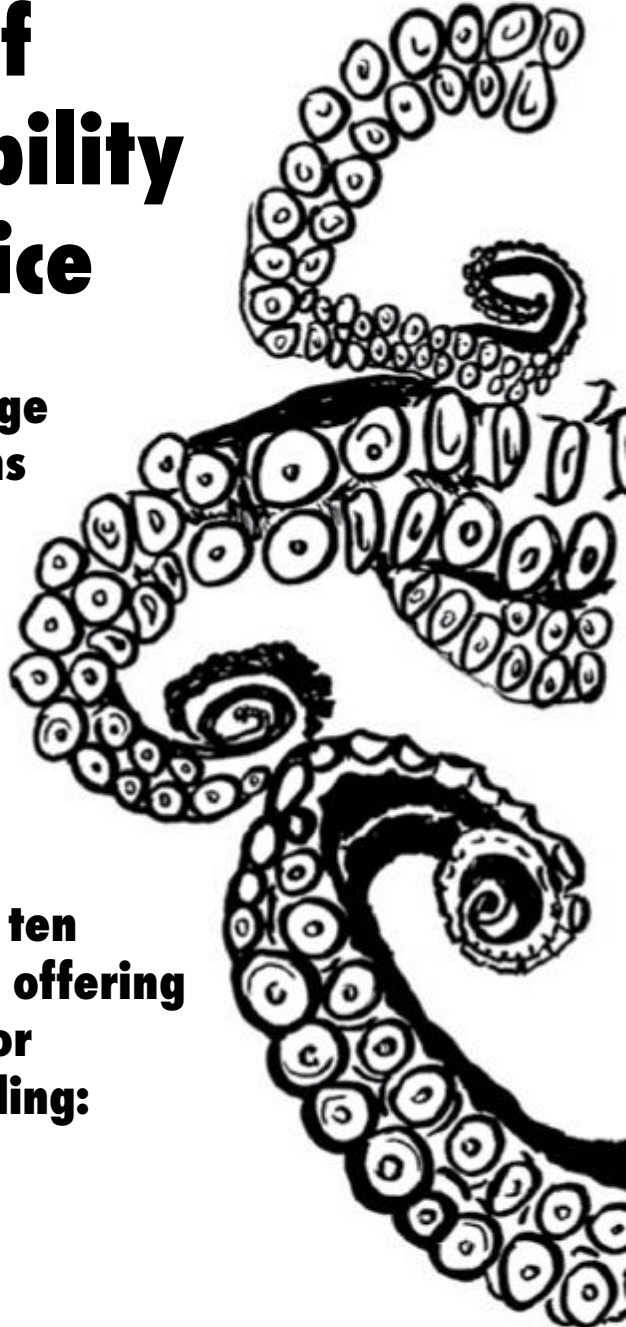
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regions experiencing freezing or sweltering temperatures, earthquakes, species loss and more, all provoked by greed-driven, human-made climate chaos. Our communities are often treated as disposable, especially within the current economic, political and environmental landscapes. There is no way to stop a single gear in motion – we must dismantle this machine.

Disability justice holds a vision born out of collective struggle, drawing upon legacies of cultural and spiritual resistance. Within a thousand underground paths we ignite 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 in our bones that there have also always been disabled people visioning a world where we flourish, a world that values and celebrates us in all our beauty.

# 10 Principles of Disability Justice

**From our vantage point within Sins Invalid, where we incubate the framework and practice of disability justice, this emerging framework has ten principles, each offering opportunities for movement building:**



## **1. INTERSECTIONALITY**

Simply put, this principle says that we are many things, and they all impact us. We are not only disabled, we are also each coming from a specific experience of race, class, sexuality, age, religious background, geographical location, immigration status, and more. Depending on context, we all have areas where we experience privilege, as well as areas of oppression. The term “intersectionality” was first introduced by feminist theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 to describe the experiences of Black women, who experience both racism and sexism in specific ways. We gratefully embrace the nuance that this principle brings to our lived experiences, and the ways it shapes the perspectives we offer.

## **2. LEADERSHIP OF THOSE MOST IMPACTED**

When we talk about ableism, racism, sexism & transmisogyny, colonization, police violence, etc., we are not looking to academics and experts to tell us what’s what – we are lifting up, listening to, reading, following, and highlighting the perspectives of those who are most impacted by the systems we fight against. By centering the leadership of those most impacted, we keep ourselves grounded in real-world problems and find creative strategies for resistance.

## **3. ANTI-CAPITALIST POLITICS**

Capitalism depends on wealth accumulation for some (the white ruling class), at the expense of

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others, and encourages competition as a means of survival. The nature of our disabled bodyminds means that we resist conforming to “normative” levels of productivity in a capitalist culture, and our labor is often invisible to a system that defines labor by able-bodied, white supremacist, gender normative standards. Our worth is not dependent on what and how much we can produce.

### **4. CROSS-MOVEMENT SOLIDARITY**

Disability justice can only grow into its potential as a movement by aligning itself with racial justice, reproductive justice, queer and trans liberation, prison abolition, environmental justice, anti-police terror, Deaf activism, fat liberation, and other movements working for justice and liberation. This means challenging white disability communities around racism and challenging other movements to confront ableism. Through cross-movement solidarity, we create a united front.

### **5. RECOGNIZING WHOLENESS**

Each person is full of history and life experience. Each person has an internal experience composed of our own thoughts, sensations, emotions, sexual fantasies, perceptions, and quirks. Disabled people are whole people.

### **6. SUSTAINABILITY**

We learn to pace ourselves, individually and collectively, to be sustained long-term. We value the teachings of our bodies and



experiences, and use them as a critical guide and reference point to help us move away from urgency and into a deep, slow, transformative, unstoppable wave of justice and liberation.

### **7. COMMITMENT TO CROSS-DISABILITY SOLIDARITY**

We value and honor the insights and participation of all of our community members, even and especially those who are most often left out of political conversations. We are building a movement that breaks down isolation between people with physical impairments, people who are sick or chronically ill, psych survivors and people with mental health disabilities, neurodiverse people, people with intellectual or developmental disabilities, Deaf people, Blind people, people with environmental injuries and chemical sensitivities, and all others who experience ableism and isolation that undermines our collective liberation.

### **8. INTERDEPENDENCE**

Before the massive colonial project of Western European expansion, we understood the nature of interdependence within our communities. We 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 work to meet each other's needs as we build toward liberation, without always reaching for state solutions which inevitably extend state control further into our lives.

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### **9. COLLECTIVE ACCESS**

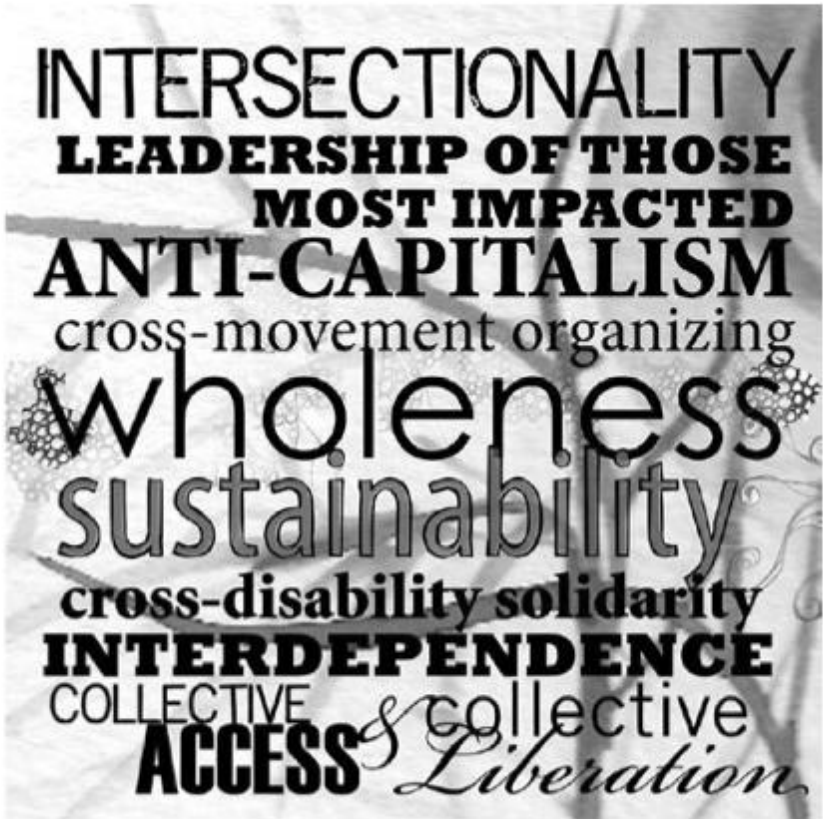
As Black and brown and queer crips, we bring flexibility and creative nuance to our engagement with each other. We create and explore ways of doing things that go beyond able-bodied and neurotypical norms. Access needs aren't shameful — we all function differently depending on context and environment. Access needs can be articulated and met privately, through a collective, or in community, depending upon an individual's needs, desires, and the capacity of the group. We can share responsibility for our access needs, we can ask that 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.

### **10. COLLECTIVE LIBERATION**

We move together as people with mixed abilities, multiracial, multi-gendered, mixed class, across the sexual spectrum, with a vision that leaves no bodymind behind.

This is disability justice. We honor the longstanding legacies of resilience and resistance which are the inheritance of all of us whose bodies and minds will not conform. Disability justice is not yet a broad based popular movement. Disability justice is a vision and practice of what is 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.



[Image Description: Words of various fonts on a watercolor background with veins that look like trees, and layered clusters of bubbles that look like alveoli in the lungs. Text reads: INTERSECTIONALITY. LEADERSHIP OF THOSE MOST IMPACTED. ANTI-CAPITALISM. CROSS-MOVEMENT ORGANIZING. WHOLENESS. SUSTAINABILITY. CROSS-DISABILITY SOLIDARITY. INTERDEPENDENCE. COLLECTIVE ACCESS. COLLECTIVE LIBERATION. Text by Patty Berne and Sins Invalid. Design by Nomy Lamm.]