



Perspective

## Seizing this COVID moment: What can Food Justice learn from Disability Justice

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Abstract

It is now a shameful truism that COVID-19 functioned as a big reveal, exposing, and amplifying the structural inequalities Canadian society is built upon. We are now a year and a half into the global pandemic. I am writing from Toronto, where “hot spots” (neighbourhoods with high infection rates) is code for racial and economic inequality (Wallace 2021) and public health guidelines have rendered low income “essential workers” disposable, amidst ballooning food insecurity rates, especially in low-income racialized communities (Toronto Foundation 2020; CBC News 2020). We are all in the same storm but in very different boats, as the new saying goes. I want to suggest that this moment, as Canadians are poised to step out of lockdown and return to ‘normal’, is a particularly useful one for Food Studies to consider what we could learn from Disability Justice movements in order to address a glaring hole in our collective scholarship and analysis.

Keywords: Disability justice; food justice; ableism

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## Introduction

It is now a shameful truism that COVID-19 functioned as a big reveal (at least to some), exposing and amplifying the structural inequalities Canadian society is built upon. We are now a year and a half into the global pandemic. I am writing from Toronto, where “hot spots” (neighbourhoods with high infection rates) has become code for racial and economic inequality (Wallace, 2021) and where public health guidelines have rendered low income “essential workers” disposable. All of this is amidst ballooning food insecurity rates, especially in low-income racialized communities (CBC News, 2020; Toronto Foundation, 2020). While we are all in the same storm, we are in very different boats, as the new saying goes. For food scholars and activists, the pandemic has served as a grim pedagogical exercise, focusing public attention on some of the structural injustices baked into the architecture of the global industrial food system, as well as its related vulnerabilities (Hendrickson, 2020). COVID exposed the unacceptable living and working conditions of migrant farm workers who come to Canada through the temporary foreign worker program, as well as the dependence of Canadian farms on their exploited labour (Haley et al., 2020; Weiler et al., 2020). Outbreaks at meat processing plants underlined the extreme concentration of corporate ownership in supply chains and its consequences for workers’ rights, animal welfare, and for the stability of our food supply (Dryden & Reiger, 2021; Fraser, 2020; Garcés, 2020; National Farmers Union, 2020). The very emergence of the virus highlighted the ecological consequences of intensive livestock production and of continued deforestation to make way for expanding industrial agriculture—both of which create breeding grounds for novel viruses (not to mention their violation of animal rights or their impacts on Indigenous and peasant communities) (Akram-Lodhi, 2020; Garcés, 2020; Wallace et al., 2020).

I would like to argue that our embodied experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic might offer a different kind of pedagogical exercise, one that calls our attention to the need for food studies to deepen an analysis of the ways ableism shapes both food systems, and food movement praxis. I offer this insight as someone with a relatively newly acquired invisible disability following a series of life-changing concussions. One of the more valuable insights that navigating the world of concussion and invisible disability has given me is an embodied understanding of ableism and the many ways our society excludes, stigmatizes, and devalues people with bodies and minds that fall outside a culturally constructed norm. Feminist standpoint epistemology tells us that due to their experiences of intersecting structural injustices, marginalized groups hold positions of epistemic privilege; that experience can offer a powerful lens through which to identify and analyze structural power (Haraway, 2004; hooks, 2000). For many people, COVID-19 offered a first-hand experience of being disabled by their environment. I would like to suggest that these experiences—viewed through the lens of critical disability studies—could offer some of us an embodied glimpse at the pernicious ways ableism structures our worlds; and that these insights could help deepen conversations between food justice and disability justice, and expand our analysis of the transformative change needed to build food

justice. I do this first by providing a brief introduction to critical disability studies and disability justice movements, then by giving an overview of some impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ways it created disabling environments for many people previously untouched by ableism. I then present an overview of the food justice and food sovereignty literature that has animated my own practice, a body of literature which critiques the impacts of settler colonialism and racial capitalism on the global food system, and food movement praxis. Finally, I show how an engagement with critical disability studies might expand the horizons of food justice to better account for the ways structural ableism buttresses the structures of power that shape the global food system, and the cultural shifts that will be needed to bring a more robust vision of food justice to life.

What is disability justice?

Simpson (2017), Hall (2014, 2017) and Gerber (2007) are among a small number of scholars who work at the intersections of food and critical disability studies. For most food scholars this conversation is new, so I will begin with some basic terminology. While the medical model of disability locates physical or cognitive impairment as the source of a person's disability, the social model of disability (Oliver, 1990, 2013) focuses on barriers due to the ways our society and built environments are structured. Critical Disability Studies and Crip theory distinguish between impairment and disability and hold that people are disabled by a world that is structured by ableism. Like whiteness, disability is a category that has shifted with time in relation to white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and settler-colonialism, as these are the dominant discourses that define "normality". This is illustrated by the fact that enslavement of Africans was once "justified" by the supposed cognitive limitations, muted experience of pain, and exceptional strength of Black bodies (Schalk, 2017); that homosexuality has been considered a disorder worthy of conversion therapy and given a designation of mental illness; and by the ethnic cleansing project of Indian Residential Schools (TRCC, 2015).

Disability justice is a practice and a movement first articulated by the Sins Invalid collective (Berne, 2015). This collective centres the experiences, leadership, and brilliance of queer and BIPOC disabled people who critique the disability rights movement for its single issue, rights-based focus that overlooks intersectional experiences of disability. While state-centred gains such as the American Disability Act or the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act are crucial, they are insufficient and dangerous in that they curtail broader political mobilization and extend state control deeper into the realm of the personal. As Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (2019) writes, "our focus is less on civil rights legislation as the only solution to ableism and more on a vision of liberation that understands that the state was built on racist, colonialist ableism and will not save us, because it was created to kill us" (p. 23). Liberal framings of "inclusion" are not enough. In the words of disability justice activist Mia

Mingus (2011), “we don’t want to simply join the ranks of the privileged; we want to dismantle those ranks and the systems that maintain them.”

Jay Dolmage (2017) has demonstrated the shameful role the academy has played in buttressing ableism—from contributing intellectual labour, to its social construction, to the elitism that defines the notion and practice of “higher education”, which is embodied in its built environment and the ways of knowing enforced within its walls. Dolmage (2017) tracks the persistent ableism of our current neoliberal moment, epitomized by token accommodations and diversity without empowerment, that refuse the transformative potential of embracing disability—not a problem to be fixed, but as a valuable way of knowing and as a site of knowledge production. What if we considered our embodied experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic as a valuable site of knowledge production?

## COVID-19

In March of 2020, when COVID-19 began spreading and much of urban Canada went into lockdown, many people lost a previous sense of control over their lives. Those with the privilege of being “non-essential” workers, became housebound. Projects were upended, cherished plans cancelled, and preferred ways of being, doing, thinking, and working became off-limits. We were called on to function through the cognitive haze of increased stress and anxiety (Boals & Banks, 2020; Hogan, 2021)—an emotional burden born more heavily by women, and in the low income and BIPOC communities where the pandemic hit hardest (Maffly-Kipp et al., 2021; Vindegaard & Benros, 2020). The borders between our public and private lives evaporated. As schools and daycares closed, toddlers interrupted team meetings. On-line classes became group therapy sessions, and the weight of our personal circumstances made punctuality and deadlines impossible. In other words, we were disabled by the pre-existing structures that no longer fit the reality of our lives. If disability is like being hit by a bus, as Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (2020) put it, paraphrasing a “bad joke” circulating in her disability community, then with COVID-19 we were “all hit by a bus in different ways.”

The pandemic magnified a plethora of structural inequalities. The pivot to remote work was a luxury offered, for the most part, to middle and upper classes; and was smoothest for those with the privilege of high-speed internet and homes large enough to carve out a quiet office. Women and single parents exited the work force or reduced their work productivity in alarming numbers to care for children and elders, rolling back decades of gains in gender equality in workplaces (Desjardins & Freestone, 2020; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2021). Similar trends were reported for academics from racial and ethnic minorities, where COVID compounded the ‘minority tax’ paid by BIPOC faculty who take on the invisible double duties of pushing for diversity and inclusion in their workplaces (Sandi & Carey, 2021; Trejo, 2020).

Despite the structural conditions COVID amplified, it was neoliberal, individualized coping strategies that abounded. At my university, colleagues and I braced ourselves with grim humour for the “wellness Wednesday” emails that cautioned us against excessive screen time and championed the benefits of yoga, as our job descriptions ballooned to include learning new technologies and pedagogical strategies, supporting community partners staggering under the weight of the pandemic, while caring for our children, elders and/or chosen families fulltime (Sandi & Cari, 2021; Trejo, 2020;). In other words, we were asked to continue to ‘perform’ under capitalism as atomized, disembodied subjects, despite the impossibility of doing so due to the non-negotiable realities of our personal and collective circumstances.

Then all of a sudden, the internet was flooded with articles about the impacts of stress on the nervous system and on cognition (Hogan, 2021; Keay, 2020; Sarner, 2021). All of a sudden, the kind of flexible workplaces and accommodations that so many of us need for so many different reasons—and were often denied—materialized. We were encouraged to bring compassion to work, knowing our colleagues or students might be struggling (Corbera et al., 2020). In my own faculty, we created a roster of colleagues who could provide guest lectures or entertain young children over zoom to help those of us teaching while homeschooling. In other words, the academy, which can be a competitive, atomizing kind of place, where we are trained to value ourselves, our colleagues, and our students based on a very particular form of productivity (the epitome of a certain type of ableism), experienced a cultural shift, at least in parts.

And mixed with the grief and fear and outrage as so many lives were lost or placed in danger by government pandemic strategies that rendered “essential workers” disposable, I had a horribly inappropriate feeling of relief as my able-bodied colleagues entered a world I know well. The rhythms of work and life began operating on what Alison Kafer (2013) calls ‘crip time’, which “bends the clock to meet disabled bodies and minds” (p. 27) rather than the inverse. Work proceeded, and meetings were run with flexibility and understanding, making space for our extraordinary circumstances and our differences. In short, and seemingly overnight, we developed a cultural of care, previously uncommon to competitive and ableist university settings.

In writing this, I do not mean to suggest that these subtle and welcome shifts were enough. I do not mean to discount the very pernicious effects this mass transition to on-line work and learning will have: the ways remote learning disadvantaged already marginalized students (Toronto Foundation, 2020), or the ways shifting academic teaching to platforms like “eclass” and “moodle” come with increased threat of managerial surveillance and the erosion of intellectual property rights (Noble, 2002). Flexibility is also a neoliberal buzzword; and as Naomi Klein’s *Shock Doctrine* (2007) has demonstrated, capitalism loves a crisis. I do not mean to overlook the medical ableism and triage protocols which threatened that disabled people would be denied ICU beds if resources had to be rationed, or the ‘k’ recovery we will no doubt witness aggravating already existing inequalities (Meng & Abdool, 2021). But I do want to suggest that our experiences of COVID-19, which could offer so many of us an embodied glimpse at ableism, might be generative in ways that expands the horizon of food studies to

better include questions related to disability justice. My comments here are fractured and preliminary and mirror the embryonic state of scholarship linking food and disability justice

## Expanding food justice

In my own research and teaching, I have tended towards a historical materialist analysis of the global industrial food system, drawing on the work of Friedmann (2016) and Patel (2007) to consider the food system as a reflection of, and a driving force of global capitalism. Mintz (1986), Choudry & Smith (2016) and others have helped me understand this history as deeply entwined with white supremacy, the Atlantic slave trade, and indentureship. Carter (1990) and Daschuk (2013) have convincingly positioned the agri-food system as a driving force of settler-colonialisms' dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their Lands and ways of life. The Indigenous Food Sovereignty work of Morrison (2011, 2020) and Pictou (2017) are among those who have demonstrated the ontology and worldview this severs. Racial capitalism thrives on divisions, pitting the interests of different groups against one another. The architecture of the global food system has positioned the interests of Indigenous peoples, settler farmers, and workers in opposition since its inception, demanding farmers produce at well below cost so that workers' wages can be kept low, while dispossessing Indigenous peoples of their Lands and waters (Mintz, 1986; Patel, 2007). The political ecology of food studies I am familiar with has generally focused on the contradictions and fault lines produced by this intertwining of capitalism, white supremacy, and settler colonialism. And while these are critical queries, where do they leave the question of ableism?

Grounded in her work with *Sins Invalid*, Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (2019) proposes a deeply intersectional understanding of ableism:

“The histories of white supremacy and ableism are inextricably entwined, both forged in the crucible 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 leverages ableism to create a subjugated ‘other’ that is deemed less worthy/able/smart/capable... We cannot comprehend ableism without grasping its interrelations with heteropatriarchy, white supremacy, colonialism and capitalism. Each system benefits from extracting profits and status from the subjugated ‘other’.”(p. 20-1)

Her analysis applies equally in Canada. If we, as food scholars, consider the global food system as shaped by the same toxic juggernaut of power relations, how might examining the food system in relation to structural ableism deepen our analysis? What groups of people are we excluding as a result of this blind spot? And how might taking their experiences seriously deepen our work?

One of the many sites of food and ableist entanglement is eugenics, a historical social engineering project that took “race betterment” as its goal (Kelly et al., 2021; Moss et al., 2013). Ian Mosby’s (2013) work exposing the use of nutrition experiments in Indigenous communities and residential schools, and Travis Hay’s (2021) work critiquing the “thrifty gene” hypothesis and settler-colonial scientific study of diabetes in Indigenous communities both expose sites of this sinister confluence and point to ways food and eugenics have been used as tools in the settler colonial project. Considering the discourses of authenticity and purity in relation to local organic food (Wilkerson, 2021), and the persistence of healthism (Power, 2021) within dietetics and food studies, is it a coincidence that the study of eugenics in Canada emerged in agricultural colleges and farmer organizations (Kelly et al., 2021; Moss et al., 2013)? At their worst, food movements can be a preachy, privileged, judgmental, and exclusionary. Would examining the historical entanglement of food, eugenics, and settler colonialism reveal the roots of a disguised, normalized white supremacy encoded in the language of organic and local food? Might this history give us stronger analytic tools to understand the “white farm imaginary” (Alkon & McCullen, 2011, p. 938) that haunts normative food movements? Could exposing such a history provide us with tools to help exorcise that beast?

### Connecting food and disability justice

Food Justice and Disability Justice hold similar tensions within their theories of change with respect to the role of the state. State-centred solutions in the form of food policy (MacRae, 2011) and income redistribution (Dachner & Tarasuk, 2018; Kirkpatrick & Tarasuk, 2009; Swift & Power, 2021) are crucial for ensuring food sovereignty and food security. However, our racialized and Indigenous colleagues have consistently pointed to the ways white supremacy and on-going settler-colonialism are operationalized by the state (Morrison 2011, 2020; Settee & Shukla, 2020) and unwittingly deployed within the well-intentioned food movement (Indigenous Circle, 2010) in ways that threaten the very survival of their communities and nations. A food justice lens demands our movement expand our understanding of the work involved in food system transformation. Existing literature has made a convincing case that challenging neoliberal capitalism must involve dismantling the white supremacy and settler-colonialism it reflects and reinforces at institutional and interpersonal levels (Coulthard, 2014; Pictou, 2017); but the role ableism plays in this sinister mix has been largely unexamined, as have the experiences of disabled people navigating the food system and the food justice movement. For example, processed and packaged foods are often shunned as seductive evils of the capitalist food industrial complex (Pollan, 2006). But what about the disabled people unable to prepare meals from scratch? How does this discourse further stigmatize and exclude disabled persons from normative framings of health (Hall, 2014)? And how might disabled-led initiatives within the food movement analyze and confront these phenomena?

Building a just and sustainable food system will require no end of political mobilization, research, anti-racist education, community-based solutions, and policy changes. It will also require a cultural shift. Here, I believe, we have much to learn from the hard-earned insights of disability justice activists and scholars.

Food is sacred (Food Secure Canada, 2013; Indigenous Circle, 2010), a relative with whom we have reciprocal obligations of care and live with in profound interdependence (Kimmerer, 2013). This is a reality that is encoded in the language, laws, and ways of life of Indigenous peoples (Borrows, 2018) and an insight that challenges the bedrock of capitalism that treats nature as an alienable resource to be owned, sold, and exploited. This is a lesson our Indigenous colleagues have been trying to teach the settler-dominated food movement for decades (Indigenous Circle, 2010; Stiegman, 2012), and a cultural shift the food justice movement must make if it is to work in true solidarity with Indigenous peoples and challenge settler-colonialism in the food system and beyond. But how are we, as settler-colonial subjects, to absorb this teaching when we are steeped in a worldview that instrumentalizes all of life—including human life? Under racial capitalism some lives are more disposable than others; COVID-19 has brought this fact into horrifyingly sharp relief. But capitalist ideology devalues all of us in that it teaches us to value ourselves and others in terms of our individual capacities to produce. Those of us with bodies that defy capitalist expectations of productivity know this all too well.

Capitalism creates, exploits, and celebrates us as individuals; specifically, straight, white, male, able-bodied subjects with wives and/or paid help to take care of any needs related to social reproduction. “Whose oppression and exploitation must exist for your “independence”?”, asks disability justice activist, Mia Mingus (2010). The farther one falls outside socially constructed white, heteropatriarchal, ableist norms, the harder it is to thrive within our economic system. The relationship between “normal”, and the ideal of independence is another area where disability justice activists have particularly rich insights. Mingus (2017) continues:

“The myth of independence reflects such a deep level of privilege, especially in this rugged individualistic capitalist society and produced the very idea that we could even mildly conceive of our lives or our accomplishments as solely our own...the Myth of Independence is not just about the truth of being connected and interdependent on one another; it is also about the high value that gets placed on buying into the myth and believing that you are independent; and the high value placed on striving to be independent, another corner stone of the ableist culture we live in.”

In place of independence, disability justice theorizes, celebrates, and practices interdependence, liberatory access, and collective care. Disability is understood not (just) as a medical experience, but as a political one, where access needs are not seen as individual needs, but rather fault lines that reveal ableism (in relation to multiple other power relations) at work in the everyday world. Disability justice proposes a world where access needs are not seen as a



burden, or the task of making space for someone who cannot fully contribute, but as a fundamental practice of being in community and one that explodes narrow heteronormative ideas of relationships, family, and kinship that are themselves conditioned by and hold up interlocking systems of power (Erickson, 2020; Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2019; Mingus, 2017).

In their scoping of literature linking food insecurity and disability, Schwartz et al. (2019) found multiple studies pointing to a correlation between disability and household food insecurity and that a robust analysis of the factors mediating that relationship had yet to be articulated. They note studies by She and Livermore (2007) that point to increased levels of poverty among disabled people, and by Huang et al. (2010) that suggest increased income proves less protective for disabled peoples' household food insecurity - a pattern also noted by St-Germain and Tarasuk (2017) and Coleman-Jensen and Nord (2013). Huang et al. (2010) found that energy intensive "coping strategies" such as bargain hunting or cooking meals from scratch are inaccessible to disabled people, resulting in a greater reliance on highly processed and/or pre-cooked foods that are often more expensive and less nutritious. Schwartz et al. (2019) also note that food literature tends to examine the causal relationship between household food insecurity and disability (in terms of chronic illnesses) but rarely the inverse, and, more rarely still, by taking a critical lens to disability.

Analyses of food deserts (McClintock, 2011), or food apartheid (Bradley & Galt, 2014) and their links to the obesity 'epidemic' (Shannon, 2014) provide a telling example. Food Justice literature has developed a compelling analysis of the neoliberal underdevelopment and structural racism that have created food apartheid, and the barriers to food access these create for marginalized and often racialized communities, as well as the related negative health outcomes. But as Natasha Simpson (2007) points out, existing analyses overlook the additional barriers faced by disabled people, which include social isolation and a lack of accessible transportation and/or grocers. Simpson (2007) argues the existing discourse that does consider food access and disability does not do so critically, thus compounding ableist barriers and producing a less robust analysis. She writes: "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" (Simpson, 2007, p. 407). Simpson draws from Crip theorist, Alison Kafer (2013), for a path forward who argues that "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" (p.158).

How can food studies and the food movement respond to this necessary provocation? We are getting better at designing programs, developing studies, and crafting analyses that take the question of race, settler-colonialism, gender and class into account. How will including disability justice as a necessary frame improve our work? What will food studies look like through a lens that includes critical disability justice? The seeds of a food and disability movement exist in the

work to champion a Universal Basic Income, to advocate on behalf of migrant farm workers who experience pesticide exposure and workplace injuries, in the emerging discourse around body positivity, and in the countless food-related mutual aid initiatives in disabled communities. How might developing a self-conscious field of study and action linking food and disability justice create linkages between these projects, and new understandings of both power and resistance? I do not have answers to these questions, but I look forward to our collective work in exploring them.

Acknowledgements:

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