



## CRITICAL COMMENTARY

### The Rise and Fall of the Plastic Straw: Sucking in Crip Defiance

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*[Scene. Exterior. Campfire in a moonless night. A wizened Asian American wheelchair user wrapped in a shawl tells a story to children gathered by the flickering light.]*

“There was a day when plastic straws, plastic bendy straws, straws by the pack and individually wrapped, roamed the earth. Some used it for boba, others for their iced coffee. Access was everywhere....and then there were The Bans. The Bans said plastic was bad. The Bans made plastic straws disappear. The Bans wanted to create a gateway to zero waste (Ives, 2017). The Bans intended to remove single-use disposables from this planet. The Bans came in cities big and small, from Seattle to San Francisco, and from companies like Starbucks (Archie & Smith, 2018; Ho, 2018; Starbucks, 2018). Celebrities praised the #StopSucking campaign with the fervor of fornicating sea turtles. Out of the Internets, oozing from the muck and dumpster fires, arose #SuckItAbleism...disabled people telling their stories on social media. These two tags of hash were in an epic

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narrative battle over the right to be disabled in public, wholly and unapologetically. With each story and selfie, disabled people created culture, knowledge, and visibility against an ableist tsunami of interrogation, disbelief, and dismissal.”

*[Camera pans to children spellbound by the tale, their eyes wide with terror and fear. From the west, a dust storm sweeps through the camp, extinguishing the fire as the children and the old wheelchair user retreat to a cave nearby. Interior. Cave. The wizened storyteller coughs, continuing her story.]*

“Like canaries in a cave mine, the Disabled Ones said, ‘We need plastic straws to drink, for nutrition and hydration. We deserve access without requests. Exemptions by the non-disableds cannot protect us.’ And like this howling wind, the voices of disabled people were drowned out as accessibility was sacrificed for a zero-waste life, not knowing the value of single-use plastics would have to save the human race post-plague. Now we search high and low for straws for first aid and other plastics to stay alive while the alien strain claim more of our kind everyday. We, the Disabled Ones, had stockpiles for our survival as the Soft Ones [a.k.a. The Non Disableds] withered away with their hemp bandages and pasta straws. We are still here, fighting for everyone. What is the lesson, my little ones?”

*[All the children reciting in unison against a backdrop of a makeshift clinic.]*

“Believe disabled people!”

*[Sounds of a wolf howling. Fade to black. Roll Credits.]*

I often wonder how disabled people will survive in a post-apocalyptic world, whether it is from the arrival of aliens or the emergence of a zombie virus. What I do know is that disabled people are creatures of adaptation that design and build worlds that work for them. The skills that we have reimagining/hacking/surviving hostile ableist environments would serve us well in any dystopian future.

When is a straw more than a straw? It depends on who you ask. A plastic straw is an access tool I use for nutrition as a person with a neuromuscular disability. When sipping a latte at my favorite cafe, I use a plastic straw because I am unable to lift a drink to my mouth and it is safe for hot liquids. Plastic straws are now seen as harmful and outmoded by environmentalists who are in favor of “safer” products (e.g., compostable, biodegradable plastics made of polylactic acid, silicone). Some of these safer products are not safe at all for disabled people for various reasons, and this brings us to the conflict at hand (Packwood, 2018).

Currently, I am a reluctant participant in the Great Plastic Straw Debate of 2018 (Wong, 2018). I did not imagine spending the summer defending my usage of plastic straws, but this where we are. Never mind my futuristic fantasies—there are some serious issues underlying the growing movement of plastic straw bans by governments, companies, and food service providers happening in the present.

The popularity of plastic straw bans, and the subsequent crippling of narratives about these bans by disabled users, is a fascinating example of *crip technoscience* in action. Aimi Hamraie writes in a 2015 review essay, “Crippling Feminist Technoscience,”

The term *technoscience* conveys that scientific knowledge and technological worlds are active constructions of entangled material, social, and historical agents....Crippling actively resists compliance with supposedly normal embodiment, behavior, and desired futures. Instead, it understands disability as productive possibility and resource. (p. 307)

The facts and arguments for plastic straw bans are situated in a capitalist system where sustainability and zero waste are on trend and in response to consumer demand. Environmental activists, celebrities, corporations, and agents of the state promulgate the selection of plastic straws as a social prop and test case for future policies on waste (Ives, 2017). All of these efforts come up against disabled bodyminds that challenge these attempts to change consumption patterns and individual behavior in public

spaces.

Plastic pollution is a problem, no doubt. Environmentalists want to engage the public and raise awareness on the need to reduce, reuse, and recycle. I believe all of this can be accomplished without steamrolling over disabled people. The entire conversation about plastic straws is about power: who knows best, who decides how change is made, who is centered in all of these activities. One example of this power is the moral reframing of plastic. The simplistic binary of plastic = bad / compostable = good obscures the intimate complexity of plastic in every person's life, including mine. I cannot live without access to electricity for my ventilator or plastic in the machine's tubing and mask.



But it only takes one to choke a bird.

There are many possible solutions and the thought people put into fighting and arguing could be put towards finding the simplest one.

7:15 PM - 19 Jul 2018

Figure

1. "But it only takes one to choke a bird." Screenshot from a tweet by Enamelled Pepper Mill @GodOfTheGallows on 7:08 pm, July 19, 2018: "...No it isn't actually single use plastic straws account for 0.003 percent of non recyclable waste. Why is it that environmental campaigns disenfranchise the disabled but never address corporatal pollution." Below this tweet is a reply from Jemaine Clement @AJemaineClement, on 7:15 pm, July 19, 2018: "But it only takes one to choke a bird. There are many possible solutions and the thought people put into fighting and arguing could be put towards

finding the simplest one.”

There has been a strong response to straw bans on social media by disabled people (Pepper Mill, 2018;) and much of that labor and expertise has been met with doubt (Clement, 2018,) interrogation, and/or demands for “proof.” The crip push back on Twitter by disabled people is significant, with numerous people telling their stories (Rodriguez-Cayro, 2018), blogging (Barbarin, 2018), publishing op-eds (Escalona, 2018), writing articles (smith, 2018), or being interviewed by major media outlets (Molloy, 2018). Disability culture, facilitated by social media platforms, provides diverse nuanced narratives in opposition to campaigners who focus on harm of plastic straws on marine life. How we inhabit and present our bodyminds in public spaces actively resists the ableism of today and the future. Having our own space to connect, share, and find power in one another has been, dare I say it, inspirational (e.g., Cortland, 2018).



Figure

2. Screenshot from a tweet showing a young white man, Matt Cortland (user name MedicaidMatthew, Esq.), drinking out of a glass mug with a straw with the words

#SuckItAbleism beneath in rainbow glittery colors. Shared with permission by user.

The bendy plastic straw was invented by Joseph B. Friedman, who saw his daughter struggle drinking her milkshake (Real, 2018). With the advent of bendy plastic straws, “His first sale didn't go to a restaurant, but rather to a hospital, where glass tubes still ruled. Nurses realized that bendy straws could help bed-ridden patients drink while lying down” (Thompson, 2011, para. 9). The plastic bendy straw may have its origin in hospitals, but then it went mainstream as plastic straws became available in many establishments. With the bans, there is a return to medicalizing these aids. The current language in San Francisco’s Food Service Waste Reduction Ordinance (City and County of San Francisco, 2018) cites “medical needs” in their exemption from banning plastic straws. The power dynamic shifts from a consumer who has access to a straw as they would a napkin or fork to a situation where individuals must disclose a need of some sort when requesting one with wait staff or bartenders who become de facto gatekeepers of access. The San Francisco ordinance passed with little outreach or consultation with the disability community, resulting in two stakeholder meetings and a follow-up call after it passed for “input” on an amendment to their opaque exemption (San Francisco Department of the Environment, n.d.). This is the opposite of “Nothing About Us, Without Us,” a phrase used by disability rights activists that highlights the exclusion of disabled people in decision making, representation, and participation in society.



Figure 3. Environmentalism as performative wokeness. An Asian American woman wearing a black jacket, wearing a BiPap mask over her nose, and holding a paper coffee cup with a straw at her mouth. On the right, an illustration of a cup in black with a bendable straw with text that reads, "Shove your performative environmental wokeness in a cup and suck on it with a straw. [#SuckItAbleism](#) [#StrawBan](#) @SFdirewolf."

Suggestions by well-meaning lovers of the earth that disabled people can afford to stock up on plastic straws for their own use, bring and clean their own reusable straws when they are out, or rely on the kindness of others for assistance are oblivious to the lived intersections of class, poverty, and disability. Environmentalism that shames disabled people is ableist and exclusionary (Bynoe, 2018). This type of environmentalism is not a movement that brings people and marginalized communities together in collective action. Plastic straw bans are neither environmental or disability justice.

Eighteen years after the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990), I see these bans as regressive, not progressive; they place additional hurdles for people with disabilities to participate in society like everyone else (Wong, 2018). The withholding and hiding of plastic straws in public spaces sends a message that people who use them are deviant consumers marked with a number of moralistic labels (e.g., wasteful, turtle killer, irresponsible). Its aim is to make our worlds smaller and less accessible. On eugenics and the conservation of disability, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2018) writes, "the shape of the shared material world we design, build and use together both expresses and determines who inhabits it now and in the future and

how we use it to exercise the duties and privileges of belonging within that world” (para. 7). The crippling of science, technology, and culture is an integral in creating inclusive worlds by reasserting/claiming space, amplifying the visibility of disabled people, and presenting alternate ways of being to the “normate” masses (Garland-Thompson, 1996).



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I noticed a thing while on vacation. Every time I took my bendable, plastic straw out in public, I momentarily felt like people were judging me.

No one should have to feel uncomfortable about using assistive tools to live.

So, again, fuck the [#StrawBan](#), and [#SuckItAbleism](#).

10:27 PM - 25 Aug 2018

Figure 4. Fuck the #StrawBan. Screenshot from a tweet by Erin Hawley @GeekyGimp on 8:27, August 25, 2018, “I noticed a thing while on vacation. Every time I took my bendable, plastic straw out in public, I momentarily felt like people were judging me. No one should have to feel uncomfortable about using assistive tools to live. So, again, fuck the [#StrawBan](#), and [#SuckItAbleism](#).”

Abled supremacy continues to exert its power, disciplining disabled bodies, social spaces, and public discourse (Hawley, 2018). It is a continual struggle to be seen, taken seriously, and accepted as an organic part of the social landscape. We are always in the process of repairing and building what writer Nancy Mairs (1997) calls a “habitable world,” a world where disabled bodyminds are wanted and valued by society. What gives

me hope (and life) is knowing I am not alone and that our stories will build a better world. The questions I continue to ponder are who will tell our stories and who will learn from our crip wisdom?

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## Bio

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