“WE HAVE A RIGHT TO REBEL”

Black Disability Politics in the Black Panther Party

On May 7, 1977, the cover story of the Black Panther, the weekly newspaper of the Black Panther Party (BPP), read, “HANDICAPPED WIN DEMANDS—END H.E.W. OCCUPATION.” The page included three images. The first photo features two Black men: a wheelchair user, Brad Lomax, and his fellow Panther member Chuck Jackson, who stands behind Lomax’s chair. The second image is of a blind Black man named Dennis Phillips holding up a protest sign that says, “You don’t have to see to know.” The third picture is of a crowd of people of various races outside of a building with a seemingly non-Black woman wheelchair user in the center of the frame. Cover stories are reserved for the most important or pressing news of a particular moment. The choice to place a disability rights activist win on the cover of a Black activist newspaper is undeniably symbolic. This cover reflects the BPP’s belief that the success of the occupation of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW), now more commonly referred to as the 504 sit-in or the 504 demonstration, was not merely important news but news relevant and connected to the Panthers’ own antiracist, anticapitalist, and anti-imperialist work. The placement of the success of the 504 demonstration on the cover of the Black Panther is in many ways the height of explicitly visible disability politics within the BPP. It is the most significant moment of coalition and solidarity with disabled people in the entirety of the paper’s...
publication between 1967 and 1980 and thus provides a launching point for my analysis of Black disability politics within the BPP.

The Black Panther Party was a revolutionary, antiracist, anticapitalist, anti-imperialist organization started in Oakland, California, in 1966 by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale. The Panthers originally focused the bulk of their activities on armed self-defense and patrol of police within Black communities, rapidly obtaining national and international membership and influence. Although the BPP is most known for the image of Black men wearing black berets and carrying guns, for the bulk of its existence, the BPP had a majority of women in its membership, and several women, such as Elaine Brown, Ericka Huggins, and Katherine Cleaver, took on major leadership roles.² In December 1968 the BPP had offices in twenty cities, and by the height of the BPP’s membership and influence in 1970, sixty-eight cities had party chapters of varying sizes.³ In 1969 the director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), J. Edgar Hoover, referred to the BPP as a “violence-prone black extremist group” and declared that the BPP, “without question, represents the greatest threat to the internal security of the country.”⁴ Over
the course of several years, the FBI, via its covert counterintelligence program (COINTELPRO), targeted members and suspected members of the BPP, men and women alike, for surveillance, harassment, incarceration, and violence with the aim of disrupting and discrediting the organization among the public, its allies, and its members. Despite this explicit governmental suppression of the BPP and the chaos that it caused within the organization, the BPP adapted and continued its cultural, political, and community work in a somewhat smaller though nonetheless influential and radical form until 1982.

I emphasize “nonetheless influential and radical” because the period of the BPP’s history I discuss in this chapter is often considered a period of “rapid decline” for the Panthers, one some scholars and activists do not recognize as radical or revolutionary. Scholarship on the Panthers predominantly focuses on the time between their founding in 1966 and the early 1970s, with many scholars considering the period of decline as beginning somewhere between 1972 and 1974. Decline here refers to a reduction in size and membership but is also used by some scholars to indicate a shift in the radical nature of the BPP after 1972. However, owing in large part to the work of scholars like Alondra Nelson and Robyn C. Spencer, more scholars are exploring the differently revolutionary work of the BPP from the mid-1970s to their official close in 1982. I believe a major reason that previous scholarship has ignored this period or considered it no longer radical is that the BPP at this time was predominantly led and run by women, and their focus was on local survival programs that attended to the health and well-being of the people, especially children, the elderly, and the disabled. Despite the fact that even BPP founder Huey Newton wrote about the survival programs as inherently part of the revolutionary agenda because they provided the basic conditions necessary (food, housing, medical care, education, and so on) for people to begin to organize and act for change, the value of the survival programs and the overall work of the Panthers between 1972 and 1982 is glaring underdiscussed in scholarly assessments of the BPP. There is, of course, much to say about those early militant years, but there is also significant value in the work of the Panthers after 1972, and we can learn critical lessons from how they organized for change after organizational splits, membership decline, and governmental suppression.

I contend that, in addition to the federal smear campaign that influenced mainstream perceptions of the BPP, sexist and ableist attitudes within academia have also strongly shaped our understanding of the revolutionary nature of the BPP throughout its existence. My work here aims, in concert with the above-mentioned newer scholarship, to help shift this
understanding of the BPP. I argue that the Panthers’ revolutionary ideology understood the relationship of racism, classism, and ableism, but their approach to disability politics did not always align with the language and tactics of the white mainstream disability rights movement. As a result, their work has been overlooked and underappreciated in disability studies, while the importance of disability and health to the Panthers in this latter period and the revolutionary nature of their work at this time have been similarly overlooked and underappreciated in Black studies.

The shift in the form and function of the BPP in the wake of governmental repression was reflected in changes to their ten-point platform, a document that defined the demands, beliefs, and investments of the Panthers. The first version of the BPP’s platform, drafted in October 1966, focused on freedom and the “power to determine the destiny of our Black Community” via calls for full employment, “land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice and peace.”¹¹ In March 1972, however, the platform was revised in two key ways that reflected changes in the ideology and activities of the BPP. First, point 1 was changed to call for freedom and the “power to determine the destiny of our Black and oppressed communities.”¹² Second, the ten points were expanded to include a call for “completely free health care for all Black and oppressed people.”¹³ These two significant changes to the political platform set the stage for increased and more explicit engagement with disability politics.

I base the majority of my claims in this chapter and the next on the way disability and health were discussed in the Black Panther, the BPP intercommunal newspaper, published from 1967 to 1980. The paper served as one of the BPP’s main political tools, providing a way to inform and politically educate members while also raising money. The ten-point platform, for example, was published at the end of every issue. The Black Panther included a wide range of news stories about injustices done to Black, Brown, and poor people across the country, from police brutality and unfair legal proceedings to discrimination in employment, housing, and health care. The paper also featured advertisements for Panther programs, political cartoons, educational and theoretical articles on social issues, and international news from other revolutionary anti-imperialist movements. At its height, the BPP printed 150,000 copies of the Black Panther weekly, with national and international circulation.¹⁴ By the late 1970s, the focus of this and the next chapter, the Black Panther had a circulation of around 5,500 copies per week and was distributed nationally in select major cities, such as Los Angeles, Chicago, Detroit, and Milwaukee.¹⁵ By this period in the BPP’s history,
however, the bulk of the copies were distributed in California, especially in the Bay Area, where the BPP was headquartered.

This distribution information about the Black Panther matters substantially to my arguments about the BPP because even though by the mid-1970s the BPP’s on-the-ground community work was happening almost exclusively in the Oakland area, the Black disability politics expressed within the paper still had a wide reach and influence. Archival records of inner-party memorandums indicate that members were expected to read the paper in full weekly. It matters that all members nationally as well as other Black people and non-Black supporters of the BPP read about disability rights and disability politics in the Black Panther as being integral to collective liberation. This framework likely influenced future Black activist approaches to and understandings of disability and health as political concerns. As Jane Rhodes argues, “The Panthers’ goal was often consciousness-raising rather than a particular set of actions; they sought to mobilize the frustrations of the black American underclass and turn these simmering emotions into a critical mass movement.” Thus, the ideas and values promoted via the BPP’s consciousness-raising apparatus, the Black Panther newspaper, matter substantially to our understanding of the BPP’s Black disability politics.

During the 1970s, as the BPP shifted from a primary focus on community-controlled, armed self-defense against police to community survival programs, the Panthers began to enact Black disability politics. This chapter begins the work of tracing how Black activists incorporated disability into their work and how they articulated the reasons for this incorporation. To make my arguments, I first discuss the 504 sit-in, the most explicit engagement of the BPP with disability rights, using the BPP’s own explanation of their involvement to argue that disability politics were part of their revolutionary liberation ideology. The 504 sit-in will likely be familiar to disability studies readers, which is why this chapter also includes a less explicitly disability rights-focused example of the Panthers’ Black disability politics: the Oakland Community School. This second, shorter example of how the Panthers integrated disability politics into their work demonstrates that Black disability politics are often enacted in ways that go under the radar for disability studies and Black studies scholars alike without a critical framework for understanding how Black cultural workers have engaged disability as a political concern. Together these two examples support my claim that the Panthers integrated disability into their revolutionary liberation ideology in a period typically considered less radical and in decline for the
This chapter then sets the stage for a more focused discussion of the Panthers’ antipsychiatry activism in the next chapter as another example of their Black disability politics.

The 504 Sit-In

The 504 sit-in was a major milestone in the disability rights movement. It was a twenty-five-day occupation of the San Francisco regional office of the HEW during which over a hundred protesters refused to leave until the national HEW secretary, Joseph Califano, signed into effect regulations for Section 504 of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act. The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 was the first piece of federal legislation dictating civil rights for disabled people. Section 504 specifically stated that programs receiving federal funds, such as public schools, universities, and hospitals, could not discriminate against or exclude people on the basis of disability. While the Rehabilitation Act was signed by President Richard Nixon in 1973, Section 504 remained ineffective without written, published regulations that defined who was disabled and what constituted discrimination. After years of delays, lawsuits, and broken promises, disability rights activists nationwide organized and created the American Coalition of Citizens with Disabilities to agitate for official regulations for Section 504 to be drafted and approved. When newly inaugurated President Jimmy Carter took office, his HEW officials attempted to create different regulations than those drafted under President Gerald Ford. In response, the coalition warned that if the regulations were not signed as is, the organization would stage sit-ins at HEW offices across the country on April 7, 1977. While the protests in Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Denver, Los Angeles, New York City, Philadelphia, and Seattle lasted for a few hours, and the relatively large protest in Washington, DC, lasted just over a day, the protest in San Francisco continued for weeks, thanks to careful planning and organizing by disabled activists in the Bay Area. The occupation of the HEW building in San Francisco garnered extensive local and national news coverage and has taken on legendary status within the disability history and disability activist communities for its innovation and power. The sit-in ended only when the regulations were finally signed. It remains the longest nonviolent occupation of a federal building in US history.

In most scholarly accounts of the 504 demonstration, the role of the Panthers is relegated to a brief mention that the BPP provided food throughout the twenty-five-day occupation of the San Francisco HEW regional office building. Though several scholars of the BPP have written about the
Panther’s community survival programs and health activism in the 1970s, I found no Panther scholarship that discusses their involvement in the 504 sit-in. Only two articles, Susan Schweik’s “Lomax’s Matrix: Disability, Solidarity, and the Black Power of 504” and Keith Rosenthal’s “The Intersections and Divergences of Disability and Race,” provide extended scholarly engagement with this history. However, recent publications by disability activists (some of whom were at the sit-in) and the Longmore Institute’s Patient No More traveling and digital exhibit on the 504 demonstration have added new details on the role of the BPP as well. This section builds on that work and further assesses the BPP’s engagement with the 504 sit-in, arguing that the Panthers supported the demonstration because disability rights and anti-ableism fit within their existing revolutionary ideology. As a major Bay Area activist group, the Black Panthers were involved with the 504 demonstration from start to finish, participating via the most commonly cited activity of providing daily food deliveries. The Panthers also, however, sent representatives to give speeches, put out a press release endorsement, supported two members of the BPP inside the protest, and published numerous articles in the Black Panther. I discuss each of these activities in turn.

Nearly all accounts of the sit-in note that a major part of its success was due to extensive coali tional support. This support came in the form of volunteers, donations, and endorsements from a variety of other activist groups and organizations focused on not only disability rights but also gay rights, women’s liberation, civil rights, and more. The organizers of the 504 demonstration secured this support in the planning stages of the protest and expanded their reach throughout the duration of the sit-in. While the BPP was not listed as part of the “504 Emergency Coalition” in the first press release issued by protest organizers, according to HolLynn D’Lil, who acted as insider photographer and press for the protest, BPP member Ellis White spoke at a rally on the first day of the demonstration. D’Lil quotes White as later saying, “We’ve always been involved. We’ve had reps here from the beginning. The issue is self-determination. More human rights. Whether handicapped people have a right to survive. Whatever they do to ensure survival, we support. Califano threw drug addicts and alcoholics out of the handicapped group. They belong too. The issue is money. It’s in keeping with our principles—survival.” Here White insists on not only the early involvement of the Panthers in the 504 demonstration but also how their involvement was directly in line with their principles, that is, the ten-point platform, which first and foremost called for freedom and self-determination for all oppressed communities. The BPP understood
disabled people, along with other people of color, people in poverty, women, and gays and lesbians, to be fellow oppressed members of society who had to fight for survival in an oppressive capitalist system. Indeed, despite having a cultural reputation for being sexist, masculinist, and homophobic, by the mid-1970s the BPP had explicitly and publicly supported the women’s rights movement and was the first major Black organization to come out in support of gay rights.  

The BPP’s solidarity with disabled people in general and with the 504 protesters specifically is further articulated in their April 8, 1977, press release, written and delivered by Michael Fultz, editor of the Black Panther. The statement reads, “Along with all fair and good-thinking people, The Black Panther Party gives its full support to Section 504 of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act and calls for President Carter and HEW Secretary Califano to sign guidelines for its implementation as negotiated and agreed to on January 21 of this year. The issue here is human rights—rights of meaningful employment, of education, of basic human survival—of an oppressed minority, the disabled and handicapped. Further, we deplore the treatment accorded to the occupants of the fourth floor and join with them in full solidarity.” 

Like White’s statement, the BPP’s official public endorsement also emphasizes human rights, survival, and solidarity among oppressed groups. The BPP’s role, however, was not limited to being a supporter in name alone; the Panthers also contributed in key material ways.  

First, two members, Brad Lomax and Chuck Jackson, the disabled and nondisabled Black men featured together on the May 7 cover of the Black Panther, were on the inside as part of the sit-in and also acted as two of the representative delegates to Washington, DC, for the 504 coalition. According to the Black Panther, Lomax “first discovered he had the symptoms of M.S. in 1969, when his legs collapsed from under him while selling Black Panther newspapers in the community. Despite the best medical attention available, Brad’s condition grew steadily worse, to the point where he is now both wheelchair-confined and legally blind. In spite of his medical problems, however, he has remained a member of the Black Panther Party.” As a disabled Panther, Lomax worked to incorporate disability politics into the efforts of the BPP by making connections with the Center for Independent Living along with Donald Galloway. Because Lomax was a rank-and-file member, however, his work still had to align with the goals and ideology of the BPP.  

According to former BPP leader Elaine Brown, Lomax’s participation in the 504 demonstration and his work at the Center for Independent
Living were considered part of his work for the BPP. Brown states that while Lomax and Ed Roberts, leader of the Center for Independent Living, brought awareness of disability rights to the Panthers, the BPP’s existing ideological position of focusing on systemic change for all marginalized groups meant that further transforming their thinking to include disability politics “wasn’t hard.” In fact, soon after being made aware of disability politics, BPP leadership ordered all BPP buildings to install wheelchair access ramps. This work, which Lomax took the lead on, is documented in the Dr. Huey P. Newton Foundation Inc. Collection in a handwritten report from Lomax to program coordinators on September 3, 1977, a few months after the 504 sit-in.

In the report Lomax provides an update on his progress with getting ramps installed in the BPP’s main office and grab bars installed in the bathrooms of the Oakland Community Learning Center, which also housed the Oakland Community School, discussed later in this chapter. He notes a future appointment he has with Judy Heumann (a white disabled leader of the 504 demonstration) and lists contacts he has made with disabled people and disability/accessibility professionals who might serve as volunteers for the BPP’s accessibility work. Lomax is therefore an example of how multiply marginalized individuals play a key bridge leadership role between groups due to his work to foster the further development of disability politics within the BPP after the 504 sit-in.

The archival material on Lomax and his ideas about the intersection of Blackness and disability is likely limited in part by his role as a rank-and-file member (Panther leadership work is far more frequently documented) but likely also due to his multiple marginalized identities. Multiply marginalized people in any movement are more likely to get burned out, have fewer resources (including time) to spare, have their intersectional concerns ignored, and, consequently, not rise to the levels of leadership that leave extensive historical evidence. For multiply marginalized people to lead, their needs and concerns must be centered and supported within the organization at all levels. As Mary Phillips writes in regard to women in the BPP, their hard work “deprived them of the luxury to debate and write about theory. Women acted on the ground as soldiers ready to die for the liberation just like the men. [Ericka] Huggins commented, ‘We didn’t have the time to write.’” Lomax likely had little time or support to write as well. And yet, despite the limited direct historical evidence he left behind, he is an essential figure for Black disability politics who undoubtedly fostered the BPP’s support of the 504 sit-in—their most direct involvement with disability rights.
Panthers’ involvement in the 504 demonstration could not have occurred, however, without the existing revolutionary ideology that undergirded all of their work. Lomax himself was politicized via the BPP before he became disabled, and it is likely his political understanding of disability was influenced by the radical liberation ideology he embraced as a Panther. In writing about Lomax, therefore, I want to at once recognize and honor his important historical role and acknowledge, as the rest of my work on the BPP will show, that the Panthers’ disability politics did not start, end, or rest entirely on the shoulders of one individual.

As most accounts of the Panthers’ involvement in the demonstration state, the BPP also contributed materially by donating food. More specifically, once it became clear that the sit-in was going to continue beyond a day or two, the Panthers began bringing daily hot dinners, such as fried chicken and meatloaf. The BPP also brought in mobile showers for the protesters and supplied a form of security as well. While the exact form of this security is unclear, it is apparent that members of the BPP, familiar with the tactics of federal agencies and the police, ensured that supplies got through the door. For example, one Black Panther article stated that more than a week into the sit-in, “with all incoming telephone service abruptly cut-off, and all food denied entry—Party members saw to it that a sympathetic guard ‘discreetly’ allowed the breakfast foods they had brought upstairs to the demonstrators.” Similarly, in her memoir Corbett O’Toole writes, “I happened to be in the lobby the first night that the Black Panthers brought us dinner. The FBI blocked them and told them to leave. The Panthers, being extremely sophisticated about how to manage police interactions, merely informed the FBI that they would be bringing dinner every night of the occupation. They would bring the food, they would set it up, and they would leave. If the FBI prevented them from doing that they would go back to Oakland and bring more Black Panthers until the food got delivered to the protesters. The FBI soon backed down.” Elsewhere, O’Toole more explicitly asserts: “I think the secret history of the 504 sit-in is that we never, ever would have made it without the Black Panthers. The Black Panthers fed us dinner—they fed 150 people of which only one was a Panther—every single night for the whole demonstration. We never would have survived without them.” Clearly, the material support provided by the Panthers in the form of members on the inside, food, and supplies was essential to the longevity of the protest. Additionally, the BPP provided extensive coverage of the demonstration in their newspaper, coverage that reveals the way the Panthers linked their
existing revolutionary ideology with disability rights to form their Black
disability politics.

The Black Panther provided the most national coverage of the 504
protest—only a local paper, the San Francisco Chronicle, covered it more
often. The BPP published ten articles and announcements of varying lengths
about the demonstration between April 16 and July 7, 1977. After the
demonstration ended, the 504 sit-in was mentioned an additional eight
times in the paper in related stories, such as “Protest Systematic Exclusion:
Disabled Sue A.C. Transit” and “Disabled Score Victory over Supermarket
Barriers: Blind Mother Fights Bias for Custody of Children,” which typically
featured events in which former 504 protesters were involved.

The Black Panther coverage of the demonstration is significant because it
meant that thousands of Black people were frequently informed of disability
rights over a period of several months in a way that framed disability politics
as directly connected to Black community concerns and liberation for all
oppressed communities. The impact of a major Black activist organization
directly supporting and increasing awareness of disability rights among Black
Americans cannot be directly calculated. The paper was mailed to homes
and to organizations and was sold directly on the street. Each of the ap-
proximately 5,500 copies was likely read by multiple individuals. What did
it mean, then, for Black disabled activists, intellectuals, and young people
across the country who read the Black Panther to read about Brad Lomax
and Dennis Phillips? What was it like to see their pictures on the cover,
learn of their activism, and read about them each proudly claim Blackness
and disability as identities? How did the paper’s coverage of the 504 sit-in
influence nondisabled Black people’s thinking about disability rights and
identity in ways historical records can never capture? How did it resonate
and reverberate in ways we can feel today? The national distribution of
the Black Panther’s coverage is incredibly important to our understanding of
Black disability politics in large part because it is a moment in which, rather
than distancing themselves from disability, as is so often the narrative about
communities of color and disability, Black people embraced and understood
disability politics as a necessary part of collective liberation.

The articles in the Black Panther portrayed the sit-in as an important act,
calling it “a powerful and significant protest for human and civil rights of
handicapped and disabled people.” The rhetoric in the paper makes clear
the connections between the disability politics being enacted in the sit-in
and the work the BPP had already been doing to increase the freedoms of
oppressed people. In the first article on the demonstration, for example, the paper noted that “despite stereotypes and stigmas, real and very much alive,” protesters “have embarked upon a serious drive to control and transform the oppressive conditions of their lives.”

The emphasis on oppression, stereotypes, stigma, and other sociopolitical concerns in the Black Panther’s representation of the 504 sit-in presented readers a social model of disability that paralleled the BPP’s own understanding of race and class oppressions. The social model of disability emerged from disability activism in the 1970s, particularly that of the Union of the Physically Impaired against Segregation in the United Kingdom. The social model proposes that disability is primarily a social issue resulting from the refusal of society to accommodate and include people with disabilities. A common explanation of this model was included in a Black Panther article via a quote from an unnamed 504 protester who stated, “If they’d take away the handicaps (like stairs, and others barriers for wheelchair-confined and otherwise disabled people), then we wouldn’t be handicapped.” As this quote indicates, the social model of disability—posed in contrast to the medical model, which understands disability as a purely mental or physical problem to be cured or treated—suggests that impairments (one’s mental or physical differences) become disabilities only when bodyminds interact with inaccessible environments.

While disability studies scholars have since critiqued and adapted this model to better account for pain, nonphysical disabilities, and attitudinal and behavioral (rather than just physical and sensory) access barriers, the BPP was clearly engaged with and influenced by the then-cutting-edge theorizing around disability as a social and political concern.

I contend that the Panthers took quickly to the social model of disability because it paralleled their own understanding of race and class oppression as stemming from the biases and failures of larger society rather than from the shortcomings of any individual or marginalized group. Throughout the Black Panther coverage of the 504 sit-in, the BPP regularly made connections between racism and ableism in an attempt at articulating solidarity. For instance, in an address at a victory rally after the end of the demonstration, a leading member of the BPP, Ericka Huggins, made the connection of oppressions explicit. Huggins is a former political prisoner who was denied adequate medical care during her incarceration and whose work with the BPP I discuss further in the next section. At the victory rally, she stated that “the United States has always had its niggers…. And they come in all sizes, shapes, colors, classes, and disabilities…. The signing of 504, this demonstration, the sit-in, this beautiful thing that has happened these past weeks,
is all to say that the niggers are going to be set free.” To the BPP, therefore, disability rights were an obvious part of their goal to obtain freedom and self-determination for all oppressed communities; here “niggers” was abstracted into a synecdoche for all those excluded and exploited within the United States rather than used as a term specifically tied to Blackness and race. As several scholars of race, gender, and disability have argued, oppression analogies (those in which one oppression is compared to another), while often intended to promote connection or identify similarity, can easily end up reifying one oppression in the name of fighting another, erasing the presence of people located at the intersection of multiple oppressions or appearing to rank one oppression as worse or more prevalent than the others. In the case of Huggins’s speech, however, I would argue that her use of nigger does not negate nor rank racism or ableism but rather leaves space for the intersection of Blackness and disability.

Additionally, in line with the Black Panthers’ frequent critiques of the federal government, the newspaper also highlighted the Ford and Carter administrations’ failures to follow through with implementing the 504 regulations. Unlike other nationally distributed papers, which often mentioned 504 regulations’ implementation costs and the rationales for resistance to it alongside coverage of the protest, the Black Panther focused on rights, access, and empowerment. The one time the newspaper did discuss the costs of mandating accessibility, it was in order to critique a cost-benefit model of decision-making. The editorial article sarcastically asks, “How much will it cost us for ‘you people’ to have your human rights?” before detailing the estimated costs alongside the profits “the newly-employed disabled people will add to the gross national product.” The article estimates that “to allow 35 million Americans to have an equal access/barrier-free environment necessary to live full and decent lives” will cost “a little over 8 ½ cents per disabled person. Not very much at all.” The editorial continues by stating, “How much? Well, from the human point of view, a great deal more than the racists and reactionaries are willing to give up without a fight. If the rednecks and the others don’t have ‘cripples’ to hate and make fun of anymore; if ‘niggers’ and the rest of the oppressed in this society aren’t the enemy anymore, then who will all that anger and frustration built up within the ‘silent majority’ be turned against?” Here once again, the BPP makes direct connections between the operation of racism and ableism, but in this article, with its overall supportive arguments and use of scare quotes around cripples and niggers, these connections are made in ways that seek not to compete or compare but rather to connect.
As with oppression analogies, one of the concerns when analyzing how marginalized groups discuss “other” forms of oppression is that those who are multiply marginalized are sometimes erased from the conversation. In the *Black Panther*’s coverage of the 504 sit-in, however, Black disabled people and disabled people of color were prioritized. In addition to the direct involvement of Black disabled Panther Brad Lomax, the newspaper published an interview with Dennis Phillips, the blind Black man pictured on the May 7 cover. In the interview Phillips encouraged his “brothers and sisters that are Black and that are handicapped” to “get out there, we need you. Come here, we need you. Wherever you are, we need you.”

The interview with Phillips was edited, so the choice of what to include was purposeful. It is particularly important that the editors included the following statement from Phillips: “I’m not a member of the Black Panther Party. I’d like to join the Black Panther Party. I am a member of the Black Panther Party as far as my own initiative and soul is concerned. They have fed us. They have given us respect. They have treated us as human beings.” This quote not only places the *BPP* in a positive light, emphasizing their coali tional work, but also suggests that the *BPP* wanted to highlight the potential for (more) Black disabled involvement and inclusion within their work via Phillips’s statement.

The *Black Panther* interview with Phillips and a later interview with Lomax together acknowledge the particularity of the lives of Black disabled people and other disabled people of color, demonstrating the centrality of intersectionality to their Black disability politics. A decade before the coining of the term *intersectionality*, Lomax referred to being Black and disabled as “multi-disabilities,” while in another article on the congressional hearings at the San Francisco HEW office, the *Black Panther* made sure to mention a minority panel of four people, “all of whom eloquently expressed the ‘double whammy’ experienced by handicapped minorities.” Throughout their coverage of the demonstration, the *Black Panther* interviewed, quoted, and named several other individual protesters, often protesters of color, alongside the main white disabled leaders of the protest, such as Judy Heumann, Kitty Cone, and Ed Roberts, who, along with HEW officials and politicians, were most often interviewed and quoted in other papers. The inclusion of so many rank-and-file protesters in the newspaper’s coverage of the sit-in reflects the *BPP*’s emphasis on the “power of the people” and the role that every individual has to play in a revolutionary agenda.

Further, the choice to include so many explicit representations of disabled people of color in their coverage of the 504 sit-in demonstrates the
BPP’s commitment to intersectional thinking, even as their work prioritized race and class as central concerns. Indeed, in much of the BPP’s work and in Black Panther articles like the above-quoted pieces using the terms multi-disabilities and double whammy, we can see the influence of feminist-of-color theorizing of the period, particularly Third World feminism and Black feminism. For instance, Frances M. Beal wrote about the “double jeopardy” of being a Black woman in 1969 in a pamphlet for the Third World Women’s Alliance that was later republished in Toni Cade Bambara’s groundbreaking 1970 anthology The Black Woman. Further, in April 1977, the same month as the 504 sit-in, the Combahee River Collective wrote their foundational Black feminist statement. The overlap and likely mutual influence are more apparent when we consider that Combahee River Collective member Demita Frazier had been a member of the Chicago chapter of the BPP, and, of course, iconic Black feminist Angela Davis had been involved with the BPP as well. By the mid-1970s, women dominated Panther membership and leadership. Former Panther women have since written and spoken about the role of gender and feminism in their work. When I write here about the intersectional disability politics of the BPP, therefore, I am also fundamentally writing about a Black disability politics informed by Black feminist theorizing and organizing.

My claims throughout this section about the radical, intersectional ideology of the Panthers as an example of Black disability politics are not intended to suggest, however, that there was no ableism within the BPP or within its representations of disabled people and disability rights. The Black Panther’s coverage of the 504 demonstration occasionally used ableist language, that is, language that promotes negative and oppressive attitudes toward disabled people, such as describing the protest as “inspiring” or “most poignant” and repeatedly referring to Lomax as being “victimized by multiple sclerosis.” Terms like inspiring and poignant are often perceived as patronizing, suggesting that disabled people are an inspiration to nondisabled people for existing with their differing bodyminds or for “overcoming” their disability to become political actors. These concepts present disability as a personal rather than political or social issue and obscure the role of inaccessible environments and attitudes. The term victimized would be read by most disability studies scholars similarly as suggesting that one is always a victim, suffering from or harmed by disability, rather than a person living with a disability—even if that disability may cause pain or difficulty. Disability studies scholar Susan Schweik, for instance, argues that this language in the Black Panther reveals “a general lack of disability consciousness” within
Schweik’s choice of the term _disability consciousness_ here is essential because it highlights that the Panthers were not yet fully aware of how language was being used and transformed within predominantly white disability rights communities even as they used a social model of disability and supported the work emerging from disabled activists.

While I agree that the use of this type of language suggests that writers and editors for the _Black Panther_ had not fully divested themselves of ableist thinking, I am interested in a closer interpretation of the language used in the _BPP_’s coverage of the 504 demonstration. Within the overall rhetoric used in articles about the sit-in, the language leans toward being progressive for its time, such as using both _handicapped_ and _disabled_ as descriptors. Furthermore, the intent predominantly aligned with a disability rights approach rather than with a medical model of disability. Of course, intention cannot be the sole basis for assessing ableist (or otherwise oppressive) language—harm can occur regardless of intention. Nonetheless, when analyzing potentially ableist language among people attempting to work in solidarity with disability communities, there is political and scholarly value in reading closely and in context, analyzing the intention of the overall text as well as the frequency, severity, and style of use of potentially ableist language. While disability studies scholars and disability rights and justice activists may want to eliminate words like _retard_ or _vegetable_ (I address the latter term in praxis interlude 1), other words, like _inspiring_, are not ableist in and of themselves but rather are often used in ableist ways. There is a need, therefore, for analyzing more closely how language is being used in a specific racialized context rather than merely identifying the existence of certain potentially ableist words (in the case of disability studies) or leaving such language undiscussed or eliminated from quotes (in the case of Black studies).

In the _Black Panther_’s coverage of the 504 sit-in, _inspiring_ was almost always used in conjunction with another adjective: “inspiring and powerful” protest, “tremendous, inspiring victory,” or “spectacular and inspiring victory.” While this does not completely negate the potentially ableist implications, these quotes suggest that what was inspiring was the protest’s power, length, and success more than merely the fact that it was done by disabled people. Importantly, the words _inspiring_ and _inspiration_ were never used to describe any disabled individual but rather were used exclusively in reference to the protest, the victory, and, once, the way the Black civil rights song “We Shall Overcome” was used as “an unofficial theme song” and as a “source of hope and inspiration” by the protesters. Reading the use of _inspiring_ and _inspiration_ in these specific contexts, then, and within the
larger scope of the BPP’s involvement with the 504 demonstration, I would not consider the use of these words ableist. I would consider the repeated references to Lomax as a victim of his multiple sclerosis representative of latent ableist beliefs in the BPP even as Lomax seemed to be clearly supported and respected as a member. That said, I nonetheless propose that, like inspiring, the word victim may not always be ableist, or at least not ableist in the way it is typically understood in disability studies thus far. Again, the term victim in disability studies is typically interpreted as implying one is always suffering from a disability (as I think the use of victim in reference to Lomax in these articles ultimately does). However, in the context of disabling racial violence, referring to a disabled person of color as a victim may be intended to draw attention to the way marginalized people are subjected to violence and neglect in ways that disable and debilitate their bodyminds. I would strongly advise against using the term victim today and encourage instead a focus on the systems and behaviors producing harm—an argument I flesh out further in praxis interlude 1. But when interpreting texts from the past, it behooves scholars of race and disability to pay attention to the nuances of the way victim is used in regard to disability as well. These rhetorical claims are not to deny the ableism that undoubtedly existed in the BPP. Instead, I want to encourage interpreting potentially ableist language within its specific racialized context to help us understand how Black disability politics might diverge at times from approaches to disability politics in white and wealthy communities whose experiences of disability are less likely to come from experiences of state violence and neglect.

The success of the 504 sit-in depended on a number of factors: the planning, tenacity, and creativity of the protesters; the extensive media coverage’s pressure on politicians; and even the ableism of employees at the HEW office, who deeply underestimated the resolve and capabilities of disabled people, notoriously patronizing the protesters the first day by serving punch and cookies.66 The occupation could not have lasted as long and as safely as it did, however, without the extended network of supportive groups and organizations, such as the BPP. Schweik argues that this support is often framed as coming from “other” activist groups in a way that erases the connections and overlaps between social justice organizations and individual identities. Taking up an expansive approach to identifying and analyzing Black disability politics addresses this potential erasure. Taken as a whole, while the Black Panther was perhaps imperfect in aspects of its rhetorical execution, the BPP strongly supported the 504 demonstration in material and ideological ways because of their existing revolutionary agenda seeking
freedom and self-determination for all oppressed people. The BPP’s support of the demonstration, in the form of public endorsements, member participation in the sit-in, delivery of food and other supplies, and extensive coverage in their newspaper, is representative of how the Panthers’ ideology included space for disability and more specifically of how they were articulating and enacting Black disability politics. The creation and management of their Oakland Community School represents another key example of this development of Black disability politics within the BPP, this time far removed from the explicit disability rights movement connections of the 504 sit-in.

The Oakland Community School

In 1973, four years before their explicit involvement in disability rights via the 504 demonstration, the Black Panther Party opened the Oakland Community School (OCS), a tuition-free, not-for-profit, community-organized child development center and elementary school for children ages two through twelve. The school was an evolutionary outgrowth of the BPP’s preexisting Intercommunal Youth Institute. The OCS was a nontraditional radical education space that used a culturally relevant, experience-based curriculum and a dialectical teaching method in which students were encouraged to ask questions, engage in discussion, make critiques, and find solutions in order to develop their critical thinking skills. The school had “no traditional grade levels, only group levels based on their academic performance,” so that each of the 50–150 students per year received “an education tailored to his or her specific needs and learning styles” in subjects such as “math, science, language arts (Spanish and English), history, art, physical education, choir and environmental studies.” The OCS was recognized for its innovations and achievements in education and was a training ground for many local educators. The school was in high demand; the waiting list for entry sometimes included pregnant women’s unborn children. The OCS closed its doors nearly a decade later, in 1982, in alignment with the formal end of the BPP.

Although the OCS does not seem to be directly or explicitly about disability, evidence shows that children with disabilities were included in the school. Former OCS director Ericka Huggins and BPP scholar Angela D. LeBlanc-Ernest write that at the school “a student’s ethnicity, economic class, learning style, or physical ability was never a criterion for entrance or retention” and that “OCS attracted the attention of other educators and community representatives who saw it as an effective educational program
for all children regardless of ability, ethnicity, or geographic location.” In regard to children with disabilities more specifically, the authors discuss an interview with a former BPP member who worked at the school who “recalled working with a group of students with reading difficulties. Curriculum and community combined to solve the problem when a special education consultant visited the school specifically to make an offer to help assess any student with reading and/or cognitive difficulties. These children were tested and determined to have different learning styles. Consequently, the plan for their individual learning was adjusted, as was the instructor’s teaching strategy.” This method of adapting teaching strategies to fit the educational needs of the students was based on the BPP’s ideological investment in providing empowering education for all youth, which would prepare them to be leaders and change makers in their communities. The OCS’s pedagogical methods also parallel approaches in universal design for learning, an anti-ableist educational framework developed in the 1990s that encourages a flexible, multimodal learning environment that supports various learning and communication styles.

While the exact number of children with disabilities at the school each year is unknown, the Black Panther Party’s OCS was founded to “challenge the concept of ‘uneducable youth’” and establish “a replicable model for education that was designed to empower whole communities.” JoNina M. Aborn writes, “Some children who came to OCS had been expelled from Oakland public schools, or were labelled hopelessly incorrigible or uneducable by teachers and officials.” While the BPP primarily understood the label of “uneducable” as tied to racist interpretations of Black children’s capabilities, communication styles, and behaviors in school, this term is also materially and discursively connected to disability. More specifically, the label of uneducable was used at this time to filter poor and racialized students into underfunded, segregated classrooms for the disabled, which demonstrates how disability gets racialized, how racialization can be disabling, and how the freedom of all of our communities, particularly for Black disabled people, depends on collectively resisting these mutually constitutive, mutually dependent oppressions. The BPP did just that in their work with the OCS and elsewhere.

For instance, although tests were used in the above example for assessing students struggling with reading, educators at the OCS resisted the use of standardized testing, except to prepare students for transitioning to public school for middle school. The OCS also completely rejected IQ testing, which was used in many public schools nationwide in a way that often lumped disabled children, nondisabled Black children, and children...
with English as a second language into undersupported, overcrowded special education classrooms where children sometimes had few to no educational lesson plans. In fact, in 1977 and 1978 the Black Panther published a number of articles on the overrepresentation of Black children in special education classes owing to culturally biased IQ testing. The articles primarily focused on testimonies and arguments from the class-action lawsuit *Larry P. v. Riles*, in which a group of Black parents sued on behalf of their children who were improperly labeled “mentally retarded” and segregated into special education classrooms. Although these parents were not directly involved with the OCS, the paper’s extensive attention to this lawsuit connects with the BPP’s existing work with the school.

Contemporary research continues to show the relationship of race, (dis)ability, education, and, increasingly, the prison industrial complex for Black youth. Yet asserting that Black children are being over- or misdiagnosed as disabled without rhetorically positioning disability as inherently negative remains difficult for contemporary activist work in this arena. The Panthers provide a potential model for this. The BPP was paying attention and responding to the impact of poverty, the educational system, and the prison industrial complex on disabled and nondisabled Black youth long before scholars were writing about the school-to-prison pipeline and the role of race and disability within it. The BPP’s Black disability politics involved clear arguments that public schools were failing Black, disabled, and Black disabled youth and that new teaching methods were required to address these failures of a one-size-fits-all educational model that centered white, middle-class, and nondisabled youth.

At the OCS, the BPP aimed to counter the violence and neglect in the public school system by educating children at their individual level, style, and pace in a way that also affirmed their cultural and racial identities, histories, and experiences. While the OCS was never conceived of as a school for disabled children nor promoted as a school inclusive of children with disabilities, the OCS did include disabled children, providing them concrete material assistance as needed and adapting to their educational needs, as the example of the students who had trouble with reading suggests. The OCS therefore is an example of how Black disability politics have been enacted by including issues of disability within intersectional Black activist work without necessarily explicitly naming or centering disability and anti-ableism. An understanding of the mutually constitutive nature of race and (dis)ability therefore undergirds how Black cultural workers contextualize and historicize their work on disability and health issues.
The Panthers’ OCS is also an example of the importance of multiply marginalized individuals who create connections between communities and encourage solidarity. One of the major reasons the OCS incorporated the learning needs of disabled students so well is the knowledge and labor of Ericka Huggins, who directed the school. Huggins has a long history of investment in disability politics and the education of disabled children in particular. In an oral history, Huggins states that she attended college in order to become a teacher. More specifically, she “wanted to open a school for disabled children” because her first boyfriend had a disabled brother, named Theophilis, or “T.” T had been institutionalized in a state home “because his parents couldn’t take care of him… They didn’t have money, and his mother couldn’t work full time and take care of him, and they couldn’t afford child care.” Huggins explains that she would visit T with her boyfriend on weekends, and they

would drive back crying, because T was always under cared for. His clothes weren’t right, he was mixed in with kids who had different disabilities but certainly not the one he had. Everybody was all clumped together. It was like a jail for disabled kids, it didn’t make any sense. And I said, “That’s it, I’m going to start a school…. [W]hen I get old, when I go to college I’m going to get my education. I’m going to start a school. You can’t put birth defective children and emotionally harmed children and mentally disabled children in the same dorm and give them the same treatment.”

Huggins further describes the conditions of T’s institution, explaining, “Some of the children were just there because they couldn’t walk. How could they be stimulated in the same environment with T? And T could walk, but he needed social contact to stimulate him. He wasn’t getting it. The staff were overworked, there weren’t enough of them. It went on and on, kids didn’t get baths. I mean, it just was a disaster.” This early firsthand experience of the failures to support the education and development of disabled children was impactful for Huggins. She states that she had an “epiphany in seeing that school where T went” and vowed to go to college in order “to serve people,” especially children. Huggins put this vow to serve into practice in her work with the BPP and was able to follow through with her investment in education for disabled children through the OCS.79

In addition to being the director of the OCS, in 1976 Huggins became “both the first woman and the first Black person to be appointed to
the Alameda County Board of Education, which serves children with cognitive, emotional and physical disabilities and incarcerated youth in the county’s many school districts.” During her tenure on the board of education, Huggins advocated for improvements in the education programs for disabled and incarcerated youth in the county. In a three-part interview for the *Black Panther* after her first year on the board, Huggins explains that when first elected she had to “beg . . . to be shown the special education programs.” Once introduced to these programs, Huggins identified several problems, such as the “horrendous” Deaf education program located in a “back hallway” room “only large enough for two small people” and the plans to build “the proposed North County Development Center for severely handicapped and mentally retarded children” on an earthquake fault line. In the interview Huggins notes that “educationally handicapped and occupational therapy classes are usually filled with young Black males, regardless of the ethnic breakdown in a particular community,” and she critiques “the abuse of drugs on children, such as speed drugs and amphetamines like Ritalin,” explaining:

> Officials in the county schools deny that children are given drugs. They say that if a child takes Ritalin or another drug, it is because his or her own family doctor has recommended it. I was told that there are some children who really need drugs. The prevalent attitude of school officials favors drug usage. . . . They just want to get the “problem” off their hands and move the child out of the way. Let him or her nod out on Ritalin. Who cares, as long as the child won’t be a problem in the classroom. This is the general attitude.

Like the OCS concern with and resistance to the notion of uneducable children, in her work on the board of education Huggins pushed back on the racist disability rhetoric used against Black children. At the same time, Huggins used her position to advocate for improved educational conditions for disabled children of all races.

Huggins’s work is an example of Black disability politics. In the interview she critiques the improper labeling of Black kids as disabled but does not engage in distancing from disability. Instead, she argues that both nondisabled Black children placed in special education and disabled children need better educational assistance and resources rather than the racist, ableist educational isolation and warehousing to which they were being subjected. In her work on the Alameda County Board of Education and as director of the Panthers’ OCS, Huggins played an essential role in the articulation and
enactment of Black disability politics by the BPP. Further, the publication of Huggins’s perspective in the Black Panther once again demonstrates not only how the ideology of the BPP included disability politics but also how their specific approach to Black disability politics was circulated nationally to other Black activists and cultural workers, likely including some working in educational spaces outside of Oakland. The BPP’s newspaper therefore critiqued the collusion of racism and ableism in the public education system and promoted the radical educational approach of the OCS, which was remarkably similar to universal design for education and other anti-ableist, inclusive educational models.

On the surface, the OCS and Huggins’s work do not seem to be about disability at all. The existing scholarship on the OCS and Huggins pays little to no attention to issues of disability. And yet evidence suggests the school’s individualized education style was inclusive of disabled children, and Huggins, who pursued a degree in education in the hopes of opening a school for disabled children, infused disability politics into her work as director as well as into her position on the Alameda County Board of Education. This work was then documented in the Black Panther so that the enactment of Black disability politics in the school and the articulation of Black disability politics in Huggins’s rhetoric regarding what she learned in her role on the school board were distributed widely to BPP members and allies nationwide. It is important to interpret the OCS’s educational approach, founded in response to racist and classist school systems, as an example of Black disability politics even as the language of disability access and rights is mostly absent from primary and secondary sources on the school. I discuss the OCS and Huggins here because their work illustrates how Black disability politics are often articulated and enacted in spaces not marked by explicit disability rights rhetoric and in spaces removed from the medical industrial complex. Further, the rhetoric employed in the Black Panther, particularly in Huggins’s three-part interview about her first year on the school board, demonstrates how Black people have not simply distanced themselves from disability but rather have at times understood disability and the treatment of disabled people as deeply political concerns inherently tied to racism and classism. Indeed, the OCS is another example of what can be missed in Black history if we do not learn to identify Black disability politics as different from how disability politics have typically been understood in the context of the white mainstream disability rights movement. Black cultural workers like Ericka Huggins, Brad Lomax, and others make clear that attention to Black political approaches to disability
model radical intersectional thinking that is useful for scholars and activists alike as we continue to study and fight back against the collusion of racism, ableism, classism, and other oppressions.

**Conclusion**

The Black Panther Party’s involvement with the §04 demonstration in 1977 was their most explicit engagement with the disability rights movement. The importance of the §04 sit-in and the iconic nature of the BPP, particularly among leftists, progressives, and radicals, mean that this specific moment of engagement with disability politics has been recognized in the historical lore of the disability rights movement, though scholarship on the Panthers almost never mentions their role in the demonstration. Detailing the BPP’s material and rhetorical support of the sit-in, particularly the role of Black disabled protesters like Brad Lomax and Dennis Phillips, is important for the historical record. To actually understand how the BPP incorporated disability politics into their work, however, we must look beyond this singular moment in history and examine how the Panthers engaged with disability less explicitly, such as within the OCS, where the BPP developed an alternative model of learning that centered the needs of disabled and nondisabled children of color, and in the *Black Panther*, where they critiqued the racism and ableism of the public school system.

To truly understand how Black cultural workers have articulated and enacted Black disability politics, we cannot limit ourselves to studying explicit engagement with disability rights by Black activists. Black disability politics are most often enacted within and alongside other, not-disability-exclusive concerns, in specific relationship to race, class, gender, and other major social issues without explicit or focused engagement with the methods and languages of the mainstream disability rights movement. This is apparent, for example, in the Panthers’ health activism via free clinics and awareness-raising ad and testing campaigns for sickle cell anemia. Indeed, Black activism within and against the medical and psychiatric industrial complexes, the subject of the next chapter, is perhaps the most obvious location within which to locate Black disability politics because the medical industrial complex has long been a primary battleground for disabled people. Importantly, however, the power of the (dis)ability system and the medical and psychiatric industrial complexes extends far beyond the explicit confines of doctors’ offices, clinics, and hospitals, into law, prisons, media, education, and other cultural arenas in which
disability politics may be enacted, as the example of the Oakland Community School demonstrates.

A scholarly understanding of Black disability politics requires expanding the locations within which we search for Black engagement with disability and adapting our parameters for how disability politics can be defined, articulated, and enacted. This includes interpreting engagement with disability by Black cultural workers within the historical, racial, and cultural contexts of the communities from which these Black disability politics emerge. Black studies scholars can contribute to this work by bringing their knowledge of Black history, Black activism, and Black culture into conversation with the politics and theories of disability studies to better understand where these fields overlap as well as where they might clash—and explore what such clashing might mean for both fields. Disability studies has long acknowledged it has a race problem, but Black studies has been far less likely to address its own ableism. We cannot have a deracinated disability studies, and we cannot have a discussion of Black activism and Black communities that does not consider disability, gender, class, or sexuality anymore. We cannot have a disability rights movement or an antiracist movement that does not closely and explicitly attend to intersecting systems of oppression. To move forward, we, as scholars, activists, and cultural workers, must continue to fight for critical, intersectional approaches to history, theorizing, scholarship, justice, and change.

In the next chapter, I continue my analysis of the BPP from a Black disability studies perspective. There I investigate the BPP’s fight against psychiatric abuse as another important historical example of Black disability politics. Further removed from the mainstream disability rights movement than the Panthers’ involvement in the 504 sit-in, and yet closer to issues of medicine and health than the OCS, the Panthers’ resistance to psychiatric abuse, such as psychosurgery and forced pharmaceutical treatment, was greatly informed by disabled activists and undertaken in solidarity with disabled people. The arguments published in the Black Panther, however, were primarily articulated through an understanding of the violence of racism within the medical, psychiatric, and prison industrial complexes. Like the examples of Black disability politics introduced in this chapter, the BPP’s battles against psychiatric abuse aid us in mapping the nuances of Black disability politics historically. Understanding these nuances benefits scholars, activists, and other cultural workers who seek to strengthen our contemporary approaches to studying, articulating, and enacting Black disability politics specifically and cross-movement solidarity more generally.