Black Disability Politics
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PRAXIS INTERLUDE ONE

Anti-ableist Approaches
to Fighting Disabling Violence

*Cultural representations can condemn violence while reaffirming the ideology of ability that provides its support.*
—Julie Avril Minich, Accessible Citizenships

Content note: This praxis interlude contains a brief description and discussion of police violence as well as an extended engagement with ableist language.

While the Black Panther Party (BPP) generally avoided distancing Blackness from disability to emphasize shared concerns with disability rights groups about forced treatments, their rhetoric was not without issue. Most prominently, the *Black Panther* articles on psychosurgery and psychiatric abuse repeatedly use the word *vegetable* to describe the potential result of psychosurgery and forced pharmaceutical treatments. The paper’s use of this term differs from the use of *inspiration*, discussed in chapter 1, because *vegetable* is used in a clearly ableist way whereas the BPP’s use of the words *inspiration* and *inspiring* in their coverage of the 504 sit-in is not actually ableist in the way these terms are frequently used regarding disabled people. This distinction warrants a closer engagement with the term *vegetable*. Across twenty-two articles on psychiatric abuse, forced pharmaceutical treatment, and/or psychosurgery published in the *Black Panther* between June 1971 and October 1977, the word *vegetable* is used seven times total. Four of the seven uses of *vegetable* specifically refer to Lou Byers, and two of those four uses occur in the first article on Byers, which was a reprint of an article originally
published in *Black Thoughts* and thus not written by a member of the *Black Panther* staff. While the term *vegetable* is not overwhelmingly prevalent, the word’s repeated use indicates a disconnect between the Panthers’ intentions and their rhetoric around disability politics, despite their connections and collaborations with various disability activist groups. The Panthers’ use of *vegetable* as an ableist term for a disabled person warrants more extended exploration because it reflects a larger issue in cross-movement organizing and solidarity with disabled people: how to protest disabling violence without making disability into a frightening, sad, or dangerous specter that exemplifies the injustice of that violence. This first praxis interlude takes a critical look at the ableist language the *BPP* used in its fight against psychiatric abuse and offers alternative rhetorical approaches that can be taken up by activists today as well.

To analyze the ableism within the *Black Panther*’s use of the term *vegetable*, I first place this term in its historical, medical, and linguistic context—a key practice of Black disability politics. Figurative uses of the word *vegetable* to refer to a person date back to the seventeenth century; however, these early uses of the word primarily described “one who leads an uneventful or monotonous life, without intellectual or social activity” and were generally devoid of medical or disability connotations. It was not until the mid-twentieth century that the second figurative use of *vegetable* emerged, defined as “one who is incapable of normal mental or physical activity, esp. as a result of brain damage.”¹ One might imagine, as I myself did initially, that this use of *vegetable* derives from the medical term *vegetative state*, coined in 1972 to refer to a brain-damage condition in which a person appears awake, with limited ability to move, but is considered to not be aware or conscious.² Figurative and colloquial uses of *vegetable* or *human vegetable*, however, occurred in medical and popular debates about the potential impact of psychosurgery and lobotomy in the 1940s and 1950s, well before the existence of *persistent vegetative state* as a medical term.³ *Vegetable*, therefore, had a clear history of decades-long use as an ableist term in mainstream US society in the 1970s.⁴ The *BPP* was not necessarily out of the norm in using it; nonetheless, their ableist rhetoric warrants retrospective analysis and critique so we may do better in the present and the future.

The *Black Panther* first used *vegetable* in the figurative sense, as detailed above, occurred in January 1973 in their first article on psychosurgery; the article stated that psychosurgery would be used to save money on prisons by sending people “back into society as vegetables” rather than paying to incarcerate them.⁵ As this example suggests, the Panthers’ use of *vegetable*
appears more aligned with its use in midcentury debates about psychosurgery, which were reemerging in the 1970s, than with the medical language coined around this same time. The use of the word *vegetable* mars the overall solidarity the BPP exhibited with disabled people subjected to psychiatric abuse by drawing on ableist fears of disability to increase the rhetorical and emotional effect of their arguments. While identifying, critiquing, and eliminating ableist language is important in and of itself, understanding and analyzing the underlying logic of this tactic the Panthers employed is equally important to understanding and enacting Black disability politics.

The *Black Panther*’s figurative use of *vegetable* exemplifies a common larger issue in activist organizing efforts: how social justice movements sometimes use disability produced by oppressive violence as a seemingly self-explanatory symbol for how horrible and wrong such violence is. This tactic is commonly used by charity and nonprofit organizations in the form of the disabled poster child, but it also appears among social justice activist groups as well, especially in regard to environmental hazards, poverty, and social neglect. Alison Kafer, writing about environmental activism, argues that we need “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,” asking, “How can we continue the absolutely necessary task of challenging toxic pollution and its effects without perpetuating cultural assumptions about the unmitigated tragedy of disability?” Similarly, Eli Clare analyzes an advertisement by the Sierra Club against coal mining that includes the words “Asthma. Birth defects. Cancer. Enough.” over an image of a power plant billowing smoke. Clare argues that the ad appears to ask viewers “to act in alliance with the people most impacted by the burning of coal. But digging down a bit, the Sierra Club twists away from solidarity, focusing instead on particular kinds of body-mind conditions—asthma, birth defects, cancer, learning disabilities—transforming them into symbols for environmental damage. This strategy works because it taps into ableism. It assumes that viewers will automatically understand disability and chronic illness as tragedies in need of prevention and eradication, and in turn that these tragedies will persuade us to join the struggle.” Kafer, Clare, and other disability studies scholars have critiqued how social justice activists, nonprofit organizations, and public health campaigns often employ ableism in their fight against other forms of oppression. My arguments here build on this existing work and are intended to make clear why activist rhetorical approaches matter so much. Black feminists have a long history of insisting
on activism and scholarship that attend to all of the intersecting oppressions that impact our lives, and Black feminist theorizing has consistently provided new frameworks and approaches for making sure no one gets left behind or is told to wait their turn in liberation movements. I ground my work here solidly in this legacy.

In the case of the Panthers, the BPP articles use the specter of the “human vegetable” to emphasize the potential danger and harm of psychosurgery and forced pharmaceutical treatments for Black, poor, and incarcerated people, especially in regard to nondisabled activists whom the BPP believed were targeted for such treatment by being labeled violent, insane, or delusional. As mentioned in the previous chapter, historical evidence from scholars like Jenell M. Johnson and Jonathan Metzl highlights how people of color were targeted for psychiatric abuse under the auspices of reducing biologically innate violent tendencies.10 The Panthers’ rhetorical reliance on the specter of disability, however, represents disablement as the ultimate harm and the most dangerous effect of white supremacist control. It suggests that disabled lives are lost lives, unable to continue any form of social protest or activism, completely defeated by larger oppressive forces. In other words, this rhetoric implies that one cannot be a disabled “human vegetable” and also be an activist. The use of the word vegetable, especially in direct reference to Byers, a disabled Black man who had undergone psychosurgery, relies on ableist fears of disablement, incapacitation, and loss of autonomy for its rhetorical effect on readers. This approach contrasts with the rest of the rhetorical tactics of the Black Panther in protesting psychiatric abuse, which generally sought alliances with disability activism by consistently emphasizing the connections between mental hospitals and prison spaces. My goal here, however, is not merely to identify and critique the ableism embedded in the Black Panther’s figurative use of the word vegetable but rather to think through what other options they may have had—in the hope that theorizing alternative approaches may be useful to current and future Black activism that seeks to include disability justice.

What, then, is the alternative to this use of disability as symbolic of oppression in social justice organizing and awareness-raising efforts? Should disability be removed from these efforts entirely, distanced from any suggestion of trauma or negativity? Nirmala Erevelles contends that a purely celebratory and pride-based approach to disability and disabled identity cannot be the solution to this issue when disability is so “inextricably linked to the violence of social/economic conditions of capitalism” for so many
people, especially for people of color. Erasure of the fact of disability from activist approaches to resisting violence and oppression that can and do result in disablement for marginalized people would avoid rather than solve this dilemma. Instead of critiquing rhetorical approaches alone, we must also imagine and offer alternatives.

Clare does this reimagining in his analysis of the Sierra Club ads, envisioning “a slightly different series of billboards and commercials, integrating a broad-based, multi-issue politics of chronic illness and disability. They would locate injustice in many places all at once; in coal burning; in extracting fossil fuels from the ground; in poisoning the planet and the many beings that make home here, including humans; in the racism and classism that force poor people and people of color to live and work near environmental destruction. Cancer and asthma would become not symbols, but lived realities amidst injustice.” Clare’s imagined alternative here implicitly suggests two possible approaches that I would like to make explicit. First, this imagined new series of ads identifies the various forms of violence and neglect that unnecessarily produce disability as the problem to be solved, not disability itself. Second, Clare’s alternative ads emphasize the multiple, complicated, and intersecting social justice issues at play, refusing the notion that one can fix one area of social injustice, such as the environmental effects of coal mining, without addressing the other concerns with which it is deeply intertwined, such as racism and capitalism. In addition to these two approaches drawn from Clare’s imagined replacement Sierra Club ads, I suggest a third way for social justice and nonprofit groups to protest injustice and violence without making disability a symbolic specter of oppression: fighting for concrete efforts to support those already disabled by this violence with their financial, medical, emotional, and community needs. These three tactics collectively form an alternative approach for social justice movements to protest and raise awareness about specific forms of violence and oppression that can result in disablement without making disability the symbolic specter of injustice to evoke ableist emotional responses from the audience. To reiterate, these tactics are (1) focusing on violence as the problem, not disability; (2) emphasizing the intertwined nature of multiple social justice issues; and (3) supporting people disabled by social injustice and violence. One contemporary example of where this alternative approach applies is the story of Jacob Blake.

On August 23, 2020, Jacob Blake, a twenty-nine-year-old Black man, was celebrating his son’s birthday in Kenosha, Wisconsin, when a fight broke out.
out between the mother of Blake’s children and a neighbor. Blake broke up the fight and then tried to leave with two of his children, but their mother called the police to prevent Blake from leaving with her vehicle. Blake had an outstanding warrant, so when the police arrived, they immediately attempted to arrest him without explaining why or reading him his rights, according to Blake. The police officers grabbed Blake, and he pulled away. They wrestled with him before tasering him twice, as nearly twenty people outside yelled at them that they had the wrong person, according to a witness. Blake, who had been beaten by police as a teenager when he was sneaking into his house after curfew, stated in an interview that he “resisted to being beat on” because he “didn’t want to be the next George Floyd . . . didn’t want to die.” Blake removed the taser prongs, picked up his pocket knife that he had dropped, and walked around to the driver’s door of the vehicle to put the knife away and check on his children. The police officers followed, and Officer Rusten Sheskey grabbed the back of Blake’s shirt and shot him seven times in the back in front of Blake’s children, who were still in the car. Blake, believing he would die, counted his breaths and said to his sons, “Daddy loves you no matter what.”

Shot. Seven times. In the back. In front of his children.
Sit with that. Don’t rush past it. Feel for Blake. Feel for his children.
He was shot seven times in the back by a police officer in front of his children.
Shot. Seven times. In the back. In front of his children.
“Daddy loves you no matter what.”
Sit with it. Don’t rush past it. Feel.

The entire incident was filmed by a neighbor and quickly went viral, resulting in mass protests in Kenosha. Sheskey claimed the shooting was in self-defense, and no charges were filed against him. Blake miraculously survived the shooting, but two of the bullets severed his spinal cord, resulting in paralysis from the waist down and neuropathy, a condition that causes sharp nerve pain. Blake’s colon, small intestine, kidney, and liver were also damaged. While in the hospital, Blake, a newly disabled Black man recovering from massive gunshot wounds and unable to walk, was initially handcuffed to the hospital bed with deputies constantly watching him until Blake’s father brought the issue to the public, causing enough outcry, including condemnation from Disability Rights Wisconsin, that police removed the handcuffs and deputy presence.
Take a moment to sit with the layers of trauma here. Handcuffed to a bed and denied privacy to process after being shot and paralyzed. Handcuffed to a bed and denied privacy after being shot and paralyzed. Handcuffed. Denied privacy. Shot. Paralyzed. Sit with that. Don’t rush past it. Feel.

There is much to say about the disabling police violence that Blake experienced and about how Blake’s personal history and behavior at the scene were used by right-wing and mainstream media, as well as by the public, to excuse this violence. For the purposes of discussing how to enact Black disability politics here, however, I focus specifically on how to apply the three tactics for fighting disabling violence in this contemporary case. I chose to include this contemporary example because when the news broke that Blake had survived but could no longer walk, I saw multiple news outlets such as CNN use phrases like “suffering from paralysis” and read several social media posts where people called Blake’s injuries horrific, a tragedy, and a fate akin to death. The emphasis on pain in public discussions of Blake stems partially from Blake’s social media message (via his lawyer’s Twitter account) on September 5 in which he mentions being in constant pain. Most news and social media reactions failed to acknowledge, however, that anyone, with or without a spinal cord injury, would be in pain thirteen days after being shot in the back seven times. The physical pain Blake was experiencing, and continues to experience with the neuropathy, is not synonymous with paralysis, spinal cord injury, or disability, but these things frequently get conflated in an ableist world that believes most or all disabled people are constantly suffering because of their disabilities. When it comes to Black disability politics, however, we must work to acknowledge and empathize with the reality of Blake’s pain without making pain and disability the entire focus. The first tactic in approaching Blake’s story as a Black disability political issue is to focus on the excessive violence by the police—two instances of tasering and seven gunshots to the back—as the problem, the source of the harm.

One way to retain the focus on police violence as the problem is to acknowledge that Blake’s physical injuries are not the only harm caused by Officer Sheskey’s unconscionable violence. Blake, his children, and the nearly twenty eyewitnesses to the shooting (not to mention the millions who watched the shooting video online) will have experienced psychological harm and potential
psychiatric disability as a result. This emotional and psychological harm is rarely recognized in media coverage, even though in a news conference, Blake’s attorney, Ben Crump, explicitly stated that Blake’s sons “are going to have psychological problems for the rest of their lives,” while Blake’s father described the children as “stuck right now,” repeatedly asking him, “Why did police shoot my daddy in the back?”

In one of the few pieces to attend to this issue, Rhea Boyd details some of the short- and long-term effects on children’s physical and mental health when they witness or experience violence, framing the continual exposure of Black, Latinx, and Indigenous children to police violence as a public health issue. Boyd carefully attends to how children of color and disabled children are more likely to witness and directly experience police harassment and violence. In doing so, Boyd articulates a form of Black disability politics that acknowledges how disability can be both the impetus for and the result of police violence, keeping the focus on the violence that causes harm rather than the potential disability resulting from harm.

To enact the second tactic for fighting disabling violence without being ableist, we must also attend to the multiple oppressions at play in the Blake shooting, namely, anti-Black racism and classism. Blake’s race and class were signaled in news coverage and opinion pieces through images and frequent references to his previous encounters with police, his children outside of marriage, and other details of Blake’s life that have nothing to do with the fact that he was shot. Identifying how anti-Black racism and classism shaped not only how officers responded to Blake but also how the public responded to the shooting is an essential part of enacting Black disability politics. Calling out and naming the multiple intersecting oppressions at play forces us to reckon with the mutually constitutive nature of oppression and in particular how certain populations are more likely to be subjected to disabling and debilitating violence. We must be vocal and clear that no one deserves to be shot seven times in the back, no matter what they have done previously. No one.

Finally, the third tactic is to provide material and social support for the people disabled by violence. This would include Blake, his children, and the other witnesses. Material support in this case could include fundraisers for Blake and his family, the provision of free medical and mental health care, or pro bono legal support for Blake’s federal civil rights lawsuit against Officer Sheskey. Social support might include engaging in public vocal support for Blake, his family, and the lawsuit; continuing to call for Sheskey to be removed from the police force; and connecting Blake and his family with
people with similar experiences: other survivors of police violence, other Black disabled men, other people with spinal cord injuries, and so on. This latter form of social support is particularly important for newly disabled people to help them see a future for themselves and encourage them to ask questions of those with similar lived experiences. If, collectively, Blake’s immediate community and the larger movement for Black lives could enact such anti-ableist tactics for addressing and fighting back against disabling police violence, we could continue the work of abolishing prisons and police in a way that aligns with disability justice. This is simply one brief contemporary example to help illustrate my arguments; these tactics can also be used to understand how the BPP could have done better in their fight against psychiatric abuse.

In the case of the Black Panther articles, I argue that their figurative use of *vegetable* is quite unnecessary to their overall arguments. In each of the seven uses of the word, *vegetable* can easily be replaced by more specific, less hyperbolic and figurative language. For instance, in “New Vacaville Drug Control Program Makes Vegetables out of Inmates,” the author could have replaced “makes vegetables out of inmates” (used in both the title and the body of the article) with “seeks chemical control of inmates,” in order to focus on the oppressive control of an already disempowered group via forced pharmaceutical treatment as the problem to be addressed. In the other articles using the word *vegetable* to describe the effects of psychosurgery, more specific, less figurative language would reduce or eliminate the use of ableism for emotional effect. Instead of describing inmates subjected to psychosurgery as “vegetables” and Lou Byers as “nearly a human vegetable,” these articles could have described the effects of psychosurgery more neutrally and accurately as brain damage, cognitive impairment, or mental disability while also arguing more directly about the intersection of incarceration, medical control, and violence toward racialized populations. I use *accurately* here not because there is a standard effect of psychosurgery but because, when one is discussing specific cases, the language could be more precise. For instance, although Byers is described twice as “nearly a human vegetable,” the articles also state that he speaks, moves, and interacts with people, even as his memory, language, and cognitive functions are less strong than before the psychosurgery. This is representative of how the hyperbolic use of *vegetable* as an ableist term departs widely from the specifics of the vegetative state as a particular medical condition.

As a whole, the term *vegetable* is used infrequently across the body of work on psychiatric abuse published in the Black Panther, but its use is unnecessary. While the articles use the ableist emotional responses to disability that
*vegetable* evokes, the articles don’t actually rely on or require these ableist emotions to further their arguments. In many ways the articles collectively tend to partially enact the anti-ableist approaches outlined above. They generally focus on the medical and prison industrial complexes as the problem, consistently highlighting the intertwined nature of these systems and their relationship to race and class, as well as to the military industrial complex in the case of Byers. These arguments, in lieu of using the word *vegetable*, could have been strengthened with increased focus on the impossibility of noncoerced consent to medical procedures and research among inmates and mental hospital patients who are involuntarily confined, or with more attention to the vague parameters for psychiatric diagnosis and treatment. In fact, these arguments are already performed more obliquely in the articles via the scare quotes around words like *incorrigibles*, *psychotic*, *violence control*, *treatment*, and *volunteer.*

Last, while most of the articles are predictive, suggesting what *could* happen should certain laws and programs be approved and implemented, in the case of Byers, there was an actual Black disabled person living with a disability resulting from psychosurgery. In the two articles on Byers original to the *Black Panther*, the *bpp* briefly, yet importantly, enacts the third anti-ableist approach to protesting disabling violence: insisting on and providing concrete support for those disabled by social injustice, oppression, and violence. One article states that “the Black Panther Party’s Free Legal Aid and Educational Program is looking into various resources so as to assist Lou Byers,” and the final article adds that Byers’s mother, “with the aid of the Black Panther Party, is seeking legal and medical help for her son. The law offices of *bpp* chief counsel Charles Garry are investigating young Byers’ case.”

It is clear that the *bpp* was invested in not only protesting and stopping the disabling violence of forced pharmaceutical and psychosurgical treatments but also highlighting the interconnected nature of multiple oppressions and social systems that permit such violence, and seeking justice, care, and support for people disabled by this violence.

The *bpp*’s work was neither perfect nor without ableist missteps. One of the challenges of studying Black disability politics is acknowledging the good—what worked and how it worked—while also being clear about where the efforts faltered, could have been better, or engaged in ableist tactics. This is why scholars of Black studies and disability studies need to be conversant in each other’s theories, methods, and lexicons and why antiracist and anti-ableist activists must do the same with one another. Of course, even disability rights organizations have been accused of ableist behavior by engaging in a disability hierarchy, so identifying these issues does not mean wholesale
rejection or condemnation; rather, it entails being realistic about liberation movements and the people within them, who each have their own internalized and unrecognized biases. It means learning from these mistakes and moving forward together. We can learn from the Panthers’ missteps and aim to engage in less ableist rhetoric in our own work, and we can remain aware and staunchly critical of such ableist rhetoric when we witness it in our academic and activist communities. Contemporary social justice movements can increase engagement with disability justice by taking up these anti-ableist approaches to fighting disabling violence and oppression, as the Panthers imperfectly model in their fight against psychiatric abuse. For Black activist movements and organizations in particular, the Black disability politics of the BPP explored throughout the first two chapters and this praxis interlude provide models for how antiracism and anti-ableism can be combined and also give examples of ableist pitfalls to avoid.

For instance, scholars and activists today, building on existing work in disability studies, can use and adapt the approaches of the BPP when identifying, raising awareness about, critiquing, and fighting various forms of disabling violence in our world without making disability the symbolic specter of injustice. That is, rather than using the image of disability to represent the wrongness of social ills, such as environmental destruction, medical discrimination, or war, thereby relying on ableist emotional responses to disability, we must instead take a different approach that balances the lived realities of disabled people with attention to how the intersections of larger social systems of oppression produce additional disablement and make living with a disability increasingly difficult. This change in activist argumentative, representational, and rhetorical approaches includes three tactics I’ve articulated by building on the work of Kafer and Clare. First, focus on violence as the issue/problem to be solved, not disability. Second, emphasize the interconnected nature of social justice concerns. Third, incorporate material support for people disabled by the violence of injustice and oppression.

These alternative tactics for fighting disabling violence apply beyond Black activism alone but are especially important for antiracist work since so much racial violence, from police brutality to racism within medical care to environmental hazards situated in poor and nonwhite neighborhoods, debilitates and disables people of color. These tactics need to be implemented now in Black liberation work because, as the example of how police violence disabled, debilitated, and harmed Jacob Blake, his children, and the community members who witnessed Officer Sheskey shoot him seven times in the back shows, disabling violence is viciously ongoing for Black people in
the United States. We must resist these injustices, but if we fight back by relying on emotional responses to disability as pure tragedy or lost life, we reify ableist oppression in the name of fighting racial, class, and other oppression. This common approach also erases the reality of disabled lives and the possibility of a happy and fulfilling life with a disability instead of envisioning an oppression-free world that is fundamentally free of disabled people. We owe this to Jacob Blake and his children, who can live full lives with their disabilities with the right support, medically, financially, and socially. We owe it to all Black people who have been physically and mentally disabled by police violence, lead poisoning in the water, medical neglect, and more. We can and must do better because this all-too-common approach of using disability as an ableist rhetorical device within our fight against disabling violence fundamentally cannot lead to the collective liberation we need.

In the next two chapters, I continue my exploration of how Black cultural workers have articulated and enacted Black disability politics by analyzing the work of the National Black Women’s Health Project, a Black feminist health activist organization started in the early 1980s. This continued analysis of disability politics within Black activism historically provides further evidence that Black people have long engaged with disability as a social and political concern but have used approaches that diverge from the white mainstream disability rights movement. The work of the National Black Women’s Health Project is similar that of the BPP in ways that further support my identification of the four central aspects of Black disability politics.