

From the Ending Racism Task Force

Ableism and Racism: Roots of the Same (Sick) Tree

By Michael Black-Smith and Erik Younge

In August, the Ending Racism Task Force hosted a Sunday program on being “woke.” To launch the discussion, several members read poems from Mahogany L. Browne’s book *Woke: A Young Poet’s Call to Justice*. One poem, “The Ability to Be,” addressed discrimination against people with disabilities. As a Black man and a man living with a disability, the two of us found personal resonance in the reading. Together, we began exploring the intersection of racism and ableism.

Racism and ableism are “roots of the same tree,” according to Rebecca Cokley, founding director of the Disability Justice Initiative at the Center for American Progress. Those roots stretch back to slavery. In 1851, a physician named Samuel Cartwright suggested that enslaved people who tried to escape suffered from an acute mental illness called “drapetomania,” characterized by “rude and ungovernable behavior.” To flee was irrational, Cartwright posited, because enslaved people were treated so well. Black slaves dissatisfied with their condition must therefore have disabilities.

Both racism and ableism are embedded in a broad, society-wide framework of experience, participation, and expectation. A doorway that’s too narrow or the presence of a few steps are obvious and explicit manifestations of ableism. Similarly, such microaggressions as a storeowner following around a person of

color clearly are racist. But those harmful examples of prejudice are just the tip of the iceberg.

Disability activists Talila Lewis and Dustin Gibson define ableism as “a system that places value on people’s bodies and minds based on societally constructed ideas of normalcy, intelligence, excellence, and productivity.” Such false norms are leveraged to attack people of color as well as people with disabilities. Consider the recent midterm campaigns. *The New York Times* reported on Republican ads portraying Black candidates as “different” and “dangerous.” Lieutenant Governor John Fetterman suffered a stroke in May that affected his auditory processing and verbal communication, though not his intelligence and executive functioning. Still, opponents dismissed him as unfit for office because he did not meet an ableist standard of debate performance.

All people in the disabled community experience exclusion from full participation in an ableist society. But people of color with disabilities suffer more frequent and severe harm. Children of color have less access to health care and, consequently, are more likely to experience health issues that result in disability. Students of color are more likely to be segregated into special-education classes than their white peers, who often receive in-class accommodations. A 2021 Bureau of Labor Statistics study shows that people of color with disabilities are less likely to be employed than white people with disabilities.

Perhaps most troubling, people of color with disabilities are likely to have more frequent and lethal encounters with law enforcement, according to a Ruderman Family Foundation

report. In North Carolina in 2016, police shot Keith Lamont Scott even after his wife screamed that he had a traumatic brain injury. Freddie Gray, who died after a “rough ride” administered by Baltimore police, had a developmental disability. The autopsy report on George Floyd led many to think that he died from “underlying conditions” rather than police violence. Black people with disabilities also are more likely to be put to death for a crime, reports the Death Penalty Information Center.

"As a society, we are uncomfortable with disabled people and too often cast our irrational prejudices onto Black bodies," wrote Nick Winges-Yanez, a professor at the Texas Center for Disability Studies, in an article for *The Hill*. "Recognizing ableism is the only way we can ever ensure that Black Lives matter. Or, as disability rights advocates remind us, that nobody is disposable."

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