

# DISABLED RADICALS

Disability Action Research Kollektive



Disabled people have existed for as long as humanity. They have been active parts of every society and liberatory movement. Yet when history is written, disability is often erased or stigmatised. This zine aims to celebrate the lives of disabled radicals. To frame disability not as an individual shameful failure that undermines one's agency, legitimacy and personhood, but as a neutral characteristic within the natural variation of humanity.

“Ableism is a system of assigning value to peoples bodies and minds based on societally constructed ideas of normalcy, productivity, desirability, intelligence, excellence and fitness. These constructed ideas are deeply rooted in eugenics, anti-blackness, misogyny, colonialism, imperialism and capitalism. This systemic oppression leads to people and society determining people's value based on their culture, age, language, appearance religion, birth of living place, “health/wellness”, and/or their ability to satisfactorily re/produce, “excel” and “behave.” **You do not have to be disabled to experience ableism**” (By *Talila A. Lewis*)

“Ableism must be included in our analysis of oppression and in our conversations about violence, responses to violence and ending violence. Ableism cuts across all of our movements because ableism dictates how bodies should function against a mythical norm—an able-bodied standard of white supremacy, heterosexism, sexism, economic exploitation, moral/religious beliefs, age and ability. Ableism set the stage for queer and trans people to be institutionalized as mentally disabled; for communities of color to be understood as less capable, smart and intelligent, therefore “naturally” fit for slave labor; for women's bodies to be used to produce children, when, where and how men needed them; for people with disabilities to be seen as “disposable” in a capitalist and exploitative culture because we are not seen as “productive;” for immigrants to be thought of as a “disease” that we must “cure” because it is “weakening” our country; for violence, cycles of poverty, lack of resources and war to be used as systematic tools to construct disability in communities and entire countries.” (From *Moving Toward the Ugly: A Politic Beyond Desirability* by *Mia Mingus*)

“Since the political revolutions of the eighteenth century, social and political thinkers have challenged ostensibly rational justifications for inequalities based on gender, race, and ethnicity. Disability has been largely absent from that effort, despite its prominence in debates over equality. Not only has disability justified the inequality of disabled people but of other groups as well. In the three great citizenship debates of the 19th century and early 20th centuries: women’s suffrage, African American freedom, and immigration restriction, disability played a substantive role. Opponents of equality for women cited their supposed physical, intellectual, and psychological disabilities: physical frailty, irrationality, and emotional instability. Supporters of racial inequality and immigration restriction invoked the supposed disabilities of particular races and ethnic groups. Thus, while disabled people are one of the minority groups historically assigned inferior status, disability has functioned for all such groups as a justification of that status.” (From the Disability and the Justification of Inequality Essay by *Douglas Baynton*)

The depoliticization of disability allows capitalism to blame individuals for the social problems created by capitalism. It defines how the lives of individuals are to be valued, and those who are less productive for the owning class are dehumanised to the point where their suffering and deaths are seen as unavoidable outcomes of a neutral system. But the existing exclusion of disabled people from society is neither natural nor inevitable. Disability is fundamentally political and is actively socially constructed through discrimination and exclusion.

Disabled people are the largest and most diverse political minority group. Structural, social and medical discrimination makes becoming disabled more likely if you are black, female, LGBTQIA+, poor, or incarcerated. When many oppressed groups sought liberation and equality, they denied the existence of disabilities in their groups, rather than challenging the notion that disability itself justified unequal treatment. There are about to be a lot more disabled people, as the unmitigated spread of SARS-COV-2 continues to make permanent impairments more likely with each additional infection. Disability politics is becoming increasingly harder to ignore. Radical disability politics aims to build a new movement founded on equality, community, and solidarity. Disabled radicals offer a glimpse of what a unified, intersectional political movement might look like.



**Aaron Bushnell (1998-2024)** was an anarchist and anti-imperialist who protested against the invasion of Gaza by self-immolating himself outside of the Israeli Embassy. He was a cyber defence specialist in the United States Air Force and was autistic. He discouraged people from using words like crazy, insane, or lame, saying that they had their roots in ableism.

His friends described him as kind, compassionate, and principled. He became increasingly critical of the military and US support for Israel's actions in Gaza. In his livestream, he said that he could "no longer be complicit in genocide" and shouted "Free Palestine" as he set himself on fire. He died from his injuries later that day.



**Alejandro Finisterre (1919-2007)** was an anarchist and poet who invented table football. He joined the Spanish Revolution early on but was severely injured when his home was bombed. He spent the rest of the war in hospital and had mobility issues for the rest of his life. While in a hospital in Catalonia, he saw many injured children and worked with carpenters to build the first 'foosball' table for them.

While exiled, he was arrested by fascist agents, he hijacked the plane by wrapping a bar of soap in silver paper and pretending it was a bomb. He won over the support of the crew who dropped him off in Panama. He said: "I believe in progress: there is a human impulse towards happiness, peace, justice and love, and that world will one day arrive!"



**Benjamin Lay** (1682-1759), was an anti-slavery activist, feminist, quaker, and vegan who had restricted growth. For a time he lived in a cave with his wife, and likely owned the largest book collection in the USA. He was uncompromising and was cast out of many communities for his dramatic protests. Some of these included smashing expensive tea sets, walking barefoot in the snow and splattering slave-owners with fake blood.

He believed that “We must truly and sincerely desire the present and eternal welfare and happiness of all mankind, all the world over, of all colours and nations”



**Bradford Lomax** (1950-1984) was an American disability and civil rights activist. He set up a free health clinic and founded a Centre for Independent Living which he planned to be a radical disability-centred community hub. He was a member of the Black Panther Party, had multiple sclerosis and used a wheelchair. Lomax and 100 others took part in the 504 Sit-In protest that occupied a government office building for 26 days.

He mobilised the Black Panthers to support the protest with food, supplies and publicity. The protest led to increased accessibility to federally funded programs like schools. A fellow activist said, “Without the presence of Brad Lomax and Chuck Jackson, the Black Panthers would not have fed the 504 participants occupying the H.E.W. building... without that food, the sit-in would have collapsed”.



**Charles Lothian** (1868-1941) was a Scottish organiser for the National League of the Blind (NLB). In 1892, he married Mary Reggan Murphy and had four children: Daniel, Isabella, Sarah and Charles. He was an asylum worker and involved in the Glasgow strike in late 1918. He was one of twelve workers at the Glasgow Asylum, who demanded better conditions for blind workers and sacked shortly after. The strike lasted over two months, with the Asylum finally agreeing to their demands on New Year's Eve.

As an agitator, Lothian was an active organiser and writer, publishing poetry and contributing to newsletters such as *The Blind Advocate*. He was also successful in his political lobbying, pushing the then Prime Minister David Lloyd George for meetings in 1919 with other NLB members.





**Evgenia laroslavskaja-Markon** (1902-1931), was an anti-Soviet revolutionary who had prosthetic legs. She worked as an anti-religious academic lecturer, and later as a fortune teller and thief. She was an active anti-government and anti-authoritarian activist who also helped storm a prison to release political prisoners.

While at a gulag in Siberia, she threw a stone at the head of the officer who had executed her husband and paid for that with her own life. She believed that “Everyone is innocent, sinless and not responsible for their acts, character is created by a chain of causation, that depends on everything in the world, not on the single person”



**Fannie Lou Hamer** (1917-1977) the youngest of 20 children of a sharecropper family, was an African-American activist. She was a key figure in the voting, women's, and civil rights movements. She served as vice-chair of the Freedom Democratic Party, was an organizer of Mississippi's Freedom Summer, and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and was a co-founder of the National Women's Political Caucus.

She was disabled by polio, the effects of police brutality, and a non-consensual hysterectomy. She was a wife and mother of 4 children, whom she adopted. Hamer was illiterate, leaving school at age 12. Her tombstone reads "I am sick and tired of being sick and tired."



**Greta Thunberg** (2003), is an environmental activist who works to address the climate crisis. She is autistic and has said that some of the best things to come from her activism are people finding purpose, friendship and community. She directly confronts world leaders in her speeches and criticizes inaction on the climate crisis, calling out hypocrisy and urging stronger policies.

She organised a school strike and has been involved in peaceful civil disobedience and protests across the globe. She has been arrested several times for blocking roads used to transport oil. “I want to feel safe. How can I feel safe when I know we are in the greatest crisis in human history?”



**Harriet Tubman** (1822-1913) Was a chief architect in the underground railroad, an organisation that directly involved itself in the emancipation of slaves; aiding them in escaping southern oppression. Tubman was born into slavery, but escaped at 27. She acted as an armed spy for the Union in the American civil war, and, in her later years became a champion for woman's suffrage. Tubman suffered a head trauma as a child, when an overseer hit her head with a metal weight. She suffered periodic dizziness and chronic head pains. In the 1890's she had a doctor saw open her skull with no anaesthetic to relieve pressure.

She once said "Every great dream begins with a dreamer. Always remember, you have within you the strength, the patience, and the passion to reach for the stars, to change the world."



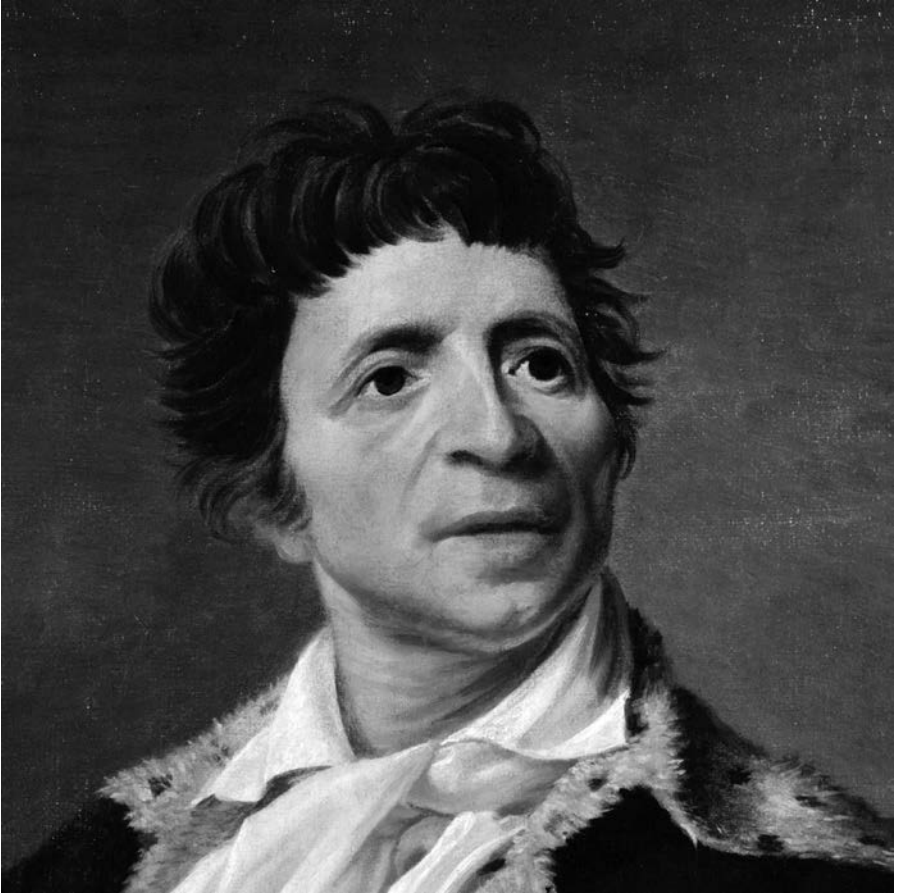
**Jazzie Collins** (1958-2013) was an American community organiser and equality activist. She was an active campaigner for tenants, LGBTQ+, ageing, disability and labour rights. Jazzie was a black transgender woman who was HIV positive. She led a community food pantry, that fed people and helped them resist evictions.

She was remembered as being fearless, inspiring and loving. She once said “I am a veteran and have earned the right to be heard. I am not the loudest person in the room but I will speak up when something isn’t right. And try to make everyone laugh”



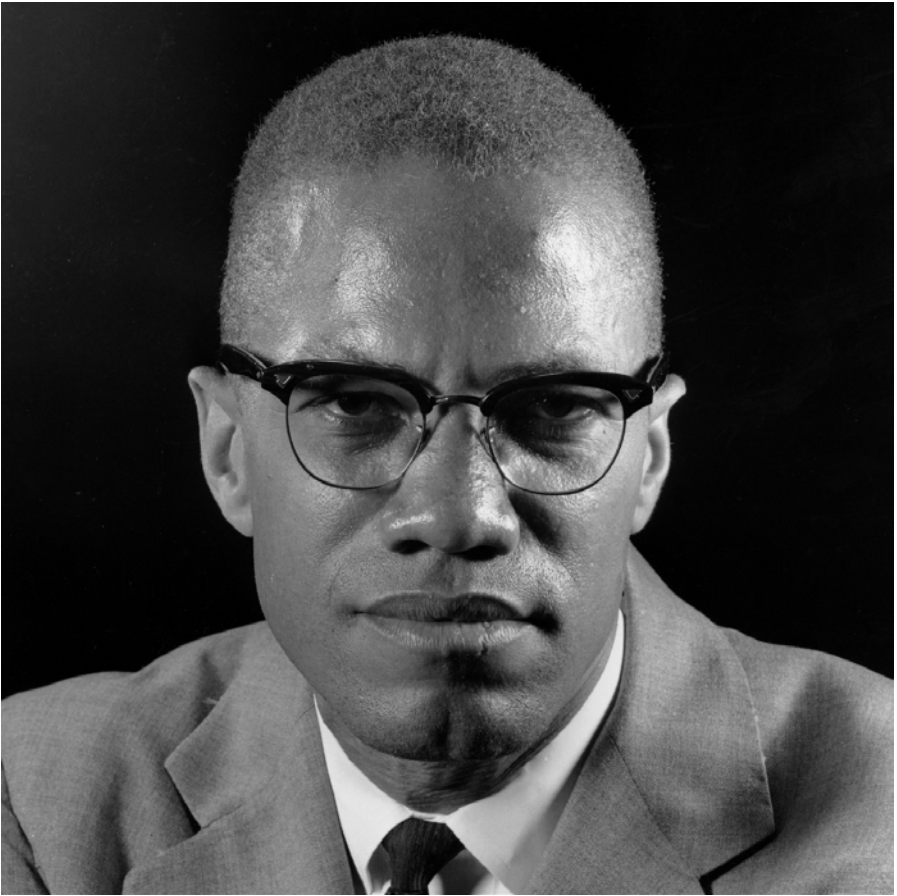
**Jean Zethu Nala** (1942-2006) was an anti-apartheid activist from South Africa. She was a central figure in her community and worked on many social projects. This included baking bread, growing food in communal gardens, supporting labour union workers, and running a sewing cooperative that made school clothes for children whose families couldn't afford them. After developing polio as a child, and without access to healthcare resources, her community built her crutches.

She was regularly harassed by security forces because she helped raise the children of activists who were in hiding or incarcerated. Whenever she was interrogated by the police, she never gave away information on her comrades. She would say "Even if you go and fetch PW Botha [The President] the answer will still be the same!"



**Jean-Paul Marat (1743-1793)** was a doctor, scientist and political theorist who was involved in the French Revolution. Marat was an uncompromising and outspoken critic of revolutionary leaders. His political work argues that society should provide for fundamental natural needs such as food and shelter, and that the same laws should apply to everyone.

He had a short stature and a painful and debilitating skin condition. He spent a lot of his life taking medicinal baths, which is what he was doing when he was assassinated. "It is the height of stupidity to claim that men who for a thousand years have had the power to berate us, to fleece us and to oppress us with impunity, will now agree, with good grace, to be our equals."



**Malcom X (1925-1965)** Was a polarizing but charismatic Civil Rights figure. Malcom had a profound reverence for the cultural ancestry of African-Americans. Opposed to the legalistic reform approach, Malcom was in juxtaposition with Dr. King. Malcom was a Black Separatist seeking to bring a sense of pride and joy to Black people. He rejected white moderates, believing they would stymie the independence of the African-American people. Malcom identified intersectionality between the struggle of Black and Disabled people, via discriminatory language, (i.e., “black” as a synonym of “bad.”) Malcom, who had dyslexia, was an autodidact; teaching himself to read by copying bible verses. “I have no mercy or compassion in me for a society that will crush people, and then penalize them for not being able to stand up under the weight.”





**Marsha P Johnson (1945 – 1992)** was a gay liberation activist, drag queen and sex worker who fought for LGBTQ and sex worker rights. She was a key figure in the Stonewall uprising, which was a catalyst for the gay rights movement in the USA. She was part of ACT UP which engaged in direct action in schools, churches, hospitals, government buildings and the stock exchange to get access to AIDS treatments.

She founded an organisation that provided food, shelter and clothes to homeless transgender people, including disabled people and sex workers. She identified as having both physical and psychiatric disabilities, she also had brain trauma as well as HIV-AIDS. She once said: “I may be crazy, but that don’t make me wrong.”



**Rosa May Billinghurst** (1875-1953), was a suffragette, activist and social worker from Lewisham who campaigned for women to get the right to vote. She chained herself to the railings at Buckingham Palace, damaged post-boxes and hid rocks in her wheelchair for people to smash windows with. She would distract horses and charge police lines, using her chair as a battering ram. The police would often tip her from the chair or let the air out of her wheels.

When she was arrested, she persisted in her hunger strike even after they broke her teeth to force-feed her. She once said: "In these situations I am invaluable, a wheelchair is highly useful, the hard metal of this clumsy thing is no match against policemen's shins!"



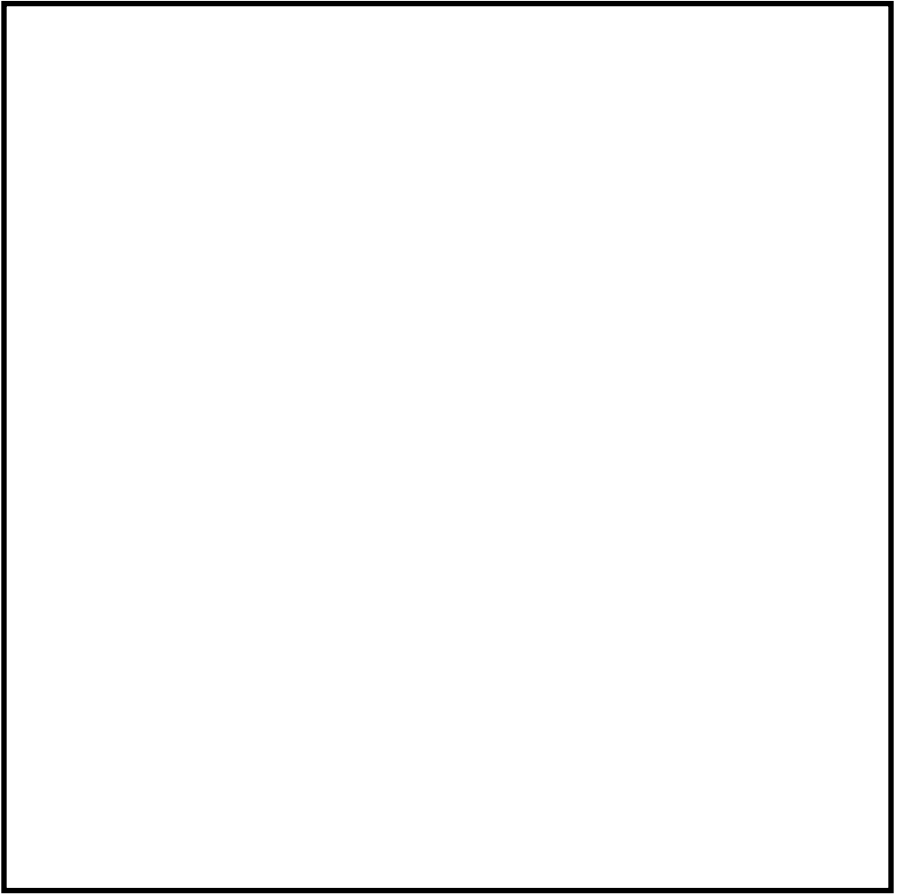
**Sojourner Truth** (1797-1883) was an abolitionist and women's rights activist. She had mobility problems with her right hand, which was injured by slavers. She escaped slavery with her daughter, having to leave some of her children behind. Sojourner went to court to get one of her children back, becoming the first black woman to win a court case against a white man.

She toured the country giving speeches for women's rights and against slavery. During the American Civil War, she worked as a nurse, scout and spy. She also helped recruit black troops to fight against the South, who were fighting to keep slavery. She once said "The rich rob the poor, and the poor rob one another"



**William Cuffay** (1788-1870) was a democratic and labour rights activist. He had restricted growth, was the son of a former slave and faced discrimination throughout his life. As a trade unionist, he won reforms like employers not imprisoning workers for quitting. Cuffay was considered one of the most militant leaders of the Chartist movement, which fought for the right to vote. He was convicted of trying to lead an armed uprising and was exiled, but was then later pardoned.

He said “Remember the past, fight for the future”. Reynolds Political Instructor described him as “He was “loved by his own order, who knew him and appreciated his virtues, ridiculed and denounced by a press that knew him and not, and had no sympathy with his class, and banished by a government that feared him.”



Tell your story

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

# Would you like to know more?

## Disability organisations you can join:

DPAC (UK) - <https://dpac.uk.net/>

ADAPT (USA) : <https://nationaladapt.org/>

## Free Essays

10 Principles of Disability Justice by *Sins Invalid*

Collected Works of Paul Hunt by *Luke Beesley*

Impairment as a human constant : Cross-Cultural and Historical Perspectives on Variation, by *Scheer & Groce*.

Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History, by *Douglas Baynton*.

## Activism Books

Beautiful Trouble - A toolbox for revolution by *Andrew Boyd*

Mutual Aid - Building solidarity during this crisis and the next by *Dean Spade*

## Disability History Books

The Fearless Benjamin Lay: The Quaker Dwarf Who Became the First Revolutionary Abolitionist by *Marcus Rediker*

Black Disability Politics, by *Sami Schalk*

Empire of Normality: Neurodiversity and Capitalism, *Robert Chapman*.

How to Survive a Plague: The Story of How Activists and Scientists Tamed AIDS by *David France, Rory O'Malley, et al.*

The Right to Maim - Debility, Capacity, Disability by *Jasbir K. Puar*

Disability Praxis - The body as a site of struggle by *Bob Williams-Findlay*

No Limits - The Disabled People's Movement by *Judy Hunt*

The War on Disabled People: Capitalism, Welfare and the Making of a Human Catastrophe by *Ellen Clifford*

Rights Not Charity: Protest Textiles and Disability Activism by *Gill Crawshaw*

## Video Documentaries

Crip Camp: A Disability Revolution (2020)

Then Barbara Met Alan (2022)

United in Anger: A History of ACT UP (2012)

## Online disability history resources:

(Library) <https://disability-studies.leeds.ac.uk/library>

(Reading group) <https://ukdishithub.mystrikingly.com/>

(Reading group) <https://marxismdisability.wordpress.com/>





This zine is produced by the **Disability Action Research Collective (DARK)**, which is a disabled-led group working to make disability perspectives, history, and research more accessible to a general audience. We are always looking for disabled (and non-disabled) volunteers to help write, edit and share their perspectives. Be part of something bigger than yourself, join us in the DARK today!

This zine features work by  
**Richard Amm, Jacob Prince, Alexandra Morris,  
Kirstie Stage and Jabu Nala-Hartley.**