

## Pigeonhole Episode 02

[bright ambient music]

### Introduction

CHORUS OF VOICES: Pigeonholed, pigeonhole, pigeonhole, pigeonhole, pigeonhole, pigeonhole, pigeonhole, pigeonhole.

[mellow electronica]

[downtempo lounge-y music]

CHERYL GREEN: This year, Caitlin Wood was invited to speak at her local Women's March in Fayetteville, Arkansas, the only disabled woman on the roster of speakers. The organizers, Blanca, Autumn, and Olivia went out of their way to make it a welcoming experience and a physically accessible one. In addition to Caitlin, Charis, a queer, disabled person [gave a speech at the Sacramento Women's March](#), bringing up how many people die waiting to hear if the Social Security Administration will grant them disability benefits and access to healthcare. And visit [Corbett O'Toole's website](#) for pictures of the disability contingent at the Oakland march.

I wanted to play you Caitlin's speech, but the recording was hard to hear. She agreed to come on the show and record the speech again. Afterward, we unpacked some of the local, and not unexpected, resistance some people in Fayetteville expressed when confronted with the news that having an accessible route was a priority for the march. The route was accessible, was safe, and welcomed 3,000 people representing a massive array of identities, experiences, and contributions to social justice movements. Here's Caitlin.

### Women's March Speech

[crowds cheer and applaud]

EMCEE: We have another pretty amazing woman coming up here, Caitlin Wood.

[cheers erupt]

CAITLIN WOOD: Thank y'all so much for coming out today. I'd like to dedicate this speech to all the disabled women here and all the disabled women who wanted to be here but couldn't.

[cheers]

Disabled people are the largest minority group in the world. We are 15% of the entire population. We are everywhere and yet somehow invisible. We are consistently and routinely missing from conversations about equity and oppression. This is one of the many cruel injustices rendered by ableism.

Many people I talk to have never heard the term. When I speak about ableism, I'm referring to the systemic oppression of disabled people. Ableism, like all types of oppression plays out in many forms. It is overt and covert, macro and micro. It reveals itself in attitudes and beliefs, language and behaviors, and in government policies.

Ableism tells us that to be disabled is, at worst, tragic, deserving of pity, and at best, a personal flaw. That we're defective in some way. It's revealed in the avoidance of and heartbreakingly low

expectations for disabled people. It's the refusal to acknowledge and examine nondisabled privilege, and to validate disability as a legitimate identity, and diverse community. It's telling me I shouldn't refer to myself as disabled while being unaware that I use that word with precise intent and pride. It's being taught disabled people must somehow "overcome" our disability in order to be accepted and valued. Instead of being taught to embrace and celebrate this part of ourselves, we're supposed to hide it, diminish it; to feel shame about our minds and bodies. We are expected to stay silent about our inequities. We are expected to accept the myths of normalcy and independence as fact. We are expected to apologize for our existence. While this is true for all of us, it is especially true for disabled people of color.

Ableism is evident in the disturbingly high rates of sexual violence we experience: 7 times the rate of nondisabled people if you are intellectually disabled. And this doesn't take into account those who've been institutionalized. There, the rate is higher. It is our erasure from history, and our erasure from the present. It's our omission from the media and our exclusion from all social spaces. It's barriers preventing disabled people from accessing a building, a march route or using a bathroom. It's the callous indifference and dismissal we encounter when we bring up these inequities. It's devastating cuts to mental health services and targeted assaults on health care. It's the fact that if I weren't here today speaking about this into a mic, many would go home from this incredible march never realizing anything was missing. It's the mass incarceration of disabled people, extreme levels of police brutality and the school to prison pipeline, all of which disproportionately harm disabled people of color and/or those with mental illness.

If you come away from this remembering only one thing, let it be this: **Ableism intersects with, and facilitates literally every oppression possible.** It is gendered, racialized and intrinsically entwined with class. It has been and is used to pathologize black and brown bodies, justify the forced sterilization of women, and classify being transgender as a psychiatric disorder by the American Psychological Association.

We can no longer exclude ableism from conversations around justice and equity. By refusing to acknowledge and validate the importance of disability identity and the divergent experiences it provides, we perpetuate oppression. We repeat our previous mistakes. We operate with an incomplete analysis and miss the opportunity for real change.

We must take an honest inventory of our ableism, with the understanding that while it's often an uncomfortable challenge to our egos, it's an integral component of progress.

In the words of black queer writer, Son of Baldwin, "If dismantling ableism isn't a part of our social justice platforms, then our platforms are suspect." It is imperative to integrate dismantling ableism into our frameworks of justice. It is essential that disabled people aren't included simply as a token gesture, but as respected leaders, directing conversations and actions around this topic. We are the experts on our own lives. And we have been fighting for years to defeat our invisibility.

We must redefine as a culture how we view disability itself. We must take the effects of ableism and nondisabled privilege seriously. We must continue to educate ourselves and each other. There are many amazing activists to learn from, particularly disabled people of color who are leading the disability justice movement through compelling art, writing and performance. Leroy Moore and Patty Berne of Sins Invalid, Alice Wong of the Disability Visibility Project, and activist Mia Mingus are just several I admire.

We're all a part of this movement. For some, marches and crowded events are simply not an accessible option. All avenues of resistance are valuable. All contributions, whether podcasts, letter writing, phone calls, protesting at politicians' offices and online marches, they are all part of the work. To my disabled family both known and unknown: When ableism lies to you and tries to convince you otherwise, remember: You are powerful. You are valuable. You are important. You matter. Tell your truth. The movement can't succeed without you. Thank you.

[cheers, applause]

### The controversy of ableism before the march

CHERYL: Caitlin Wood, it's really great to have you here today and get to talk to you about the Women's March in Fayetteville.

CAITLIN: Thank you, Cheryl Green.

CHERYL: [laughs] We got to hear your speech, which was beautiful. There was some controversy.

CAITLIN: One, the organizers had intentionally designed it to highlight women of color. So, I was the only white woman who spoke, as a speaker. And they had really made that a point because this is a very white area and because of previous Women's Marches, which you get a lot of white women, a lot of Hillary. And to each their own, but this was a point of highlighting marginalized voices.

So, with that said, there was a small but vocal group who got very angered on the Facebook page, the event page, because at the last minute, the organizers changed the route of the march to go on a more accessible route. So, the new route was more accessible but not as visible to traffic. But it was much safer because instead of say, 100 people there, there was actually 3,000. People got really mad, again, a very small group. I do have to say a small group, but they got real nasty, very ableist. And they were mad that cars would not see them driving by.

I was not going there so that a car would drive by me and see me with a sign. I was going there to be in unity and solidarity with other people, with other women who are marginalized, to talk about ableism, to hear people talking about racism and workers' rights. I was going there to learn, and also just feel maybe some inspiration in a time of such despair politically. And this small group, it definitely was about I don't even know what. I was literally reading these comments like, what is the problem? Is it the safety now? Is it the accessibility? And they did not seem to understand, quite literally, did not understand the importance of having an accessible route.

CHERYL: What caught my attention was that organizers and you and other people would step in and say, "Well, here's why we changed the route." And y'all just gave a straightforward answer. Here's why. It's about accessibility. We have people in the march who use wheelchairs. We have people with kids in strollers.

CAITLIN: Right.

CHERYL: We have, basically, we have people.

CAITLIN: Yes.

CHERYL: The rational answer is not what people are looking for. There's some kind of thing roiling below the surface for them, and they're arguing about, "Oh, nobody's gonna see us. What's the point of this?" Some people were like, "Let's break off and do our own separate thing on the original route."

CAITLIN: Mmhm. I did not get it, and it got to the point where it hurt my stomach, it hurt my heart. I just could not engage anymore. It was so demoralizing and upsetting and...ironic, given that my entire speech was about exclusion of disabled people and ableism! And kablammo. Here we go. You have illustrated my point perfectly. You have done my work for me. Congratulations. I mean, even now, I'm shaking my head thinking about it. It was just so, so ridiculous. It was so ridiculous and infuriating to be on that end. And I wondered, when these women are writing these comments, do you realize that disabled women and other disabled people are reading this? Do you care? Do you care that we're reading this, that we're seeing you for who you are? No. I guess you don't, you know?

CHERYL: It's not about how many people saw us. And in the age of social media, who cares if the news van saw you? Everybody's filming it on their phone and posting it and Facebook Live.

CAITLIN: Right.

[downtempo lounge-y music]

### Positive experiences and speakers at the event

CHERYL: So, you, Caitlin, you know that I hate positivity just for positivity's sake.

CAITLIN: I sure do.

CHERYL: Yeah. And I haven't changed that at all. Don't think that this next question means that I'm a positive person now. But I am curious to hear any experience that you had that really made your heart hurt less or made your heart feel good?

CAITLIN: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. I got such great feedback afterwards that, oh, thinking about it now, I'm almost, I'm getting teary. I met an older disabled woman who was super cool, and we had some kind of interesting parallels. She had lived in Portland too. She had a tattoo of a woman in chair that she's like, "I got this when I was 70 as a present to myself!" And she used [the word "disablism."](#) So, talking to her was awesome.

I had people come up after me, telling me that it was a great speech. And I had a woman--I was waiting on my ride after and--I had a woman drive by in her car, and she yelled out at me. She's like, "That was awesome!" And she said, "I learned so much." And then she said, "Seen and heard." And that, to me, was gratifying. We all wanna be acknowledged. And I got that from several people, that I felt like they really did hear me. At least I hope so, you know, maybe even a little bit. So, I felt like I did what I had come there to do.

CHERYL: Yeah. And were there other speakers there, presenters, who really stood out to you?

CAITLIN: Yes. I mean, honestly, I thought that everyone did an incredible job and that the organizers really did a wonderful job in getting those voices there. And my memory's terrible, so I wish I could remember some of the names.

Evelyn Rios Stafford was amazing. She is a trans Latina woman who's won two Emmys for being a journalist. She was absolutely fantastic. Raven Cook, who lives here, who is an African

American speaker, she did an incredible speech. She was talking about Carrie Mae Weems, who is one of my favorite artists. Blanca Esteves was one of the organizers. She did a great speech. I mean, everyone did a good job.

So, it was also just nice, I mean, I was the only one talking about disability. But I was also the only white woman, and I kinda felt like that's how it should be. I just was thinking about that when I was writing the speech, you know, another white lady in a wheelchair talking about disability. And what am I gonna do to kind of acknowledge that. I tried to use that platform to highlight the disabled people of color that I'm constantly learning from and who are the ones leading and creating this disability justice movement that has meant so much to me.

So, I hope that the people here who have never thought about disability heard [Patty Berne](#), [Leroy Moore](#), [Alice Wong](#), [Mia Mingus](#). Some people were sharing my speech later on Facebook. So, I hope that they went and did research on these amazing activists.

CHERYL: Caitlin, thanks so much for talking to me today.

CAITLIN: Thank you for having me.

CHERYL: Can you tell people where to find you and your work online?

CAITLIN: Sure. There is the [Criptiques Facebook page](#) and [Twitter](#). You can also buy [Criptiques online at Amazon.com](#).

CHERYL: And that's an anthology that you edited a few years back, right?

CAITLIN: It sure is! Featuring the works of Cheryl Green.

CHERYL: No! [laughs] Not featuring. Yes, I wrote one essay. It's true. It's true. [chuckles]

CAITLIN: Yes. Highlighting the works of Cheryl Green on Criptiques, yes.

CHERYL: [laughing] Brought to you by the world's best highlighter, Caitlin Wood.

CAITLIN: [laughs] Thanks!

### Wrap-up

Every episode is transcribed. Links, guest info, and transcripts are all at [www.WhoAmItoStopIt.com](http://www.WhoAmItoStopIt.com), my disability arts blog. I'm Cheryl, and...

TWO VOICES: this is Pigeonhole.

CHERYL: Pigeonhole: Don't sit where society puts you.

[bright ambient music]