

## **Sing Ourselves Cherished: Confronting Capitalism, Ableism, and Disposability**

Eli Clare's keynote

April 17, 2026, 6:00-7:15 pm EDT

**Please do not distribute this PDF beyond this event. Thank you!**

- I am a poet, storyteller, and rabble rouser
- So this keynote is going to be one part poem and one part manifesto
- A mix of story and analysis

### **Disability is not the problem**

- Start by reminding us that when thinking about disability, queerness, and class; disabled, chronically ill, D/deaf, Mad, and neurodivergent people are not the problem to be fixed or solved
- Actually we—queer, trans, disabled, poor and BIPOC communities—are part the answer
  - Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha—the future is disabled
- Rather capitalism, ableism, disposability are gaping dystopian problems
  - Need to be dismantled
  - Long histories of resistance
    - Beyond resistance and rebellion, I want us to sing ourselves cherished

**Content note: material and social conditions of death in poem**

PRAISE

Let us praise  
our canes   braces   catheters  
our crutches   prostheses   wheelchairs  
our ventilators   air filters   hearing aids

Sing ourselves familiar.

*you who did not survive  
the denial of a kidney transplant*

Our stories  
strain   wisp   whirl  
out of us

stars dusting  
our lungs  
tongues  
pillows.

*you who did not survive  
health insurance greed*

Praise our medicine bottles and tinctures,  
ice packs and insulin pumps,  
spasms and unrelenting pain.

Sing ourselves gnarly.

*you who did not survive  
the psych ward*

We cook,  
laugh,

lay down  
to sleep.

Praise  
our withered legs  
feverish skin  
aching heads.

Sing ourselves essential.

*you who did not survive  
COVID and dementia alone in a nursing home*

Dream a history a rebellion  
a universe of love notes:

this too will be evidence,  
feathers and bones.

*you who did not survive  
police custody*

Praise  
our broken hearts.

Sing ourselves cherished.

### **Disability and class**

- Now let me back up
- Begin with the well documented correlation between disability and class, particularly poverty
  - For example, the National Disability Institute analyzes four large scale surveys from 2015.
    - Finds that 24% of white disabled adults are poor compared to 9% of white non-disabled adults.
    - And for Black and Latiné disabled people the poverty rates are unsurprisingly higher.
      - 40% for Black disabled folks
      - 29% for Latiné disabled folks
    - These numbers of course enraging and entirely unsurprising given the tangle of race, class, and disability in the US
    - We could spend this entire keynote exploring these numbers
- But I want to pivot
  - Talk instead about (racialized) capitalism and ableism
  - Systems of power

### **Ableism and capitalism**

- Capitalism depends on ableism
  - Wouldn't be possible without it
  - Needs to work people to the bone
    - Often means disability
  - Then dispose, rather than care, for those workers
- Ableism the mechanism for disposing of disabled workers
  - Ableism declares disabled workers
    - Worthless
    - Burden
    - Incapable/incompetent
    - Unproductive/unable to work
    - Utterly disposable

### **Story**

- Bring this conceptual framework about capitalism and ableism down into story:
- I grew up in a tiny logging town

- Wind scoured white working-class town on the western edge of the continent
- One blinking light
- I grew up the only disabled person in that town or so it felt
  - a spastic slurring gender non-conforming kid who didn't come out until after I left at age 18
  - But in actuality I was surrounded by disability
- Logging is a dangerous
  - On the list of top 10 dangerous jobs, it is number 3
    - Felling and milling big old trees
    - But also the working conditions
      - Non-unionized
      - Long hours
      - Fast, forced productivity
  - Many of the men I grew up with were disabled
    - Mel Rogers lost an arm in a mill accident
      - I tell you these details not to elicit pity
      - But to be real about the dirty work of plundering the planet under capitalism
    - Cricket broke his back on the clearcuts
    - Les Smith couldn't feel his fingers nor hear after decades of wielding a chainsaw
  - Capitalism chewed their bodies up
  - And ableism declared their disabled bodies worthless and disposable
  - But no one in town considered them disabled
    - What happened to Mel, Cricket, and Les was just the ordinary consequence of logging
  - And still ableism targeted them
    - Unable to work
    - Ableist capitalism jerked them and their families from the working class into deep poverty
    - Deemed them disposable
  - But because my body was out of the ordinary
    - Seen as wrong and abnormal,
    - I was understood as disabled
    - A disabled kid surrounded by disability but somehow the only disabled person in town

**Sing ourselves cherished**

- Mel, Cricket, Les and all the isolated lonely disabled kids
- Let's sing them familiar, sing them gnarly, sing them essential
  - the opposite of disposable and burdensome

### **Essential blunt truths**

- Ableism makes disabled people poor and
- Capitalism makes poor people disabled
- First ableism
  - Making many disabled people poor through:
    - Lack of employment
    - Lack of access
    - Lack of accessible housing and transportation and education
    - Social safety net
      - SSI, SSDI, SNAP (food stamps), Medicaid keep disabled people poor
        - Income requirements, restricting how much one can work before losing benefits (Medicaid)
- Racism compounding these conditions for disabled BIPOC
- Nothing inherent in disability creates poverty or disposability

### **Capitalism makes poor people disabled**

- And now for capitalism—the second of these blunt truths
- Capitalism makes poor people disabled
  - Meaning poverty itself doesn't make many poor people disabled
  - Rather capitalism does
    - Profit and:
      - Food
      - Housing (unsafe, unstable, unhoused)
      - Medical care
    - Daily grind of not enough material resources
  - Racialized capitalism compounding these conditions for poor BIPOC

### **Disposability**

- These connections between ableism and capitalism are fundamentally about disposability
- Before I talk more about disposability itself, let me tell another story
- This time about resistance:
- In 2019 Stacey Park Milbern with the Disability Justice Culture Club and Max Airborne with Fat Rose
- Developed the NoBodyIsDisposable campaign and

- Organized a San Francisco Close the Camps demo, attended by well over a hundred disabled and fat people
  - Protesting the widespread detention of immigrants during Trump 1.0
  - Including many children separated from their families
  - In inhumane, concentration camp-like conditions at the US border.
  - Remember this was 7 years ago in the white nationalist anti-immigration agenda
    - Our protest was fierce then as it is today
- As part of their organizing, Stacey and Max asked disability communities, fat communities, and queer/trans communities for words that are the opposite of disposable.
  - The list was long: kin, irreplaceable, worthy, valuable, wanted, treasured, sacred, and necessary, among many others
  - Words became placards at the Close the Camps demo
  - Connecting ableist, fatphobic, racist, and anti-immigrant disposability all together
- Stacey and Max also collected photos of people holding up signs printed with these words.
  - Among these photos is one of Stacey and the word *cherished*.
    - She sits in her wheelchair wearing a white tank top and dark-framed glasses.
    - She smiles, head cocked to the side, her trach and vent tube visible.
    - She holds a piece of paper in front of her with the word *cherished* written in black letters.
- From this photo comes my line of poetry, “Sing ourselves cherished”

Dream a history    a rebellion  
a universe of love notes:

this too will be evidence,  
feathers and bones.

*you who did not survive  
police custody*

Praise  
our broken hearts.

Sing ourselves cherished.

- Stacey and Max, thank you

### **Disposability**

- The disposability embedded in capitalism and ableism also rooted in many other institutions and systems of oppression
  - Operating on many different scales:
  - And made more visible by the pandemic
  - Woven with disability and poverty
    - Anti-trans legislation
      - Aimed at depriving trans/non-binary/gender non-conforming people public lives
      - Constricting of gender-affirming healthcare and constricting of reproductive healthcare
    - Attempted dismantling of the remaining shreds of the social safety net
    - Detention centers and deportations
    - Genocides
      - Most recently threatened in Iran
  - Overwhelming
    - So much from micro to macro
- And then there is our resistance to disposability
  - Resistance also on so many scales:
    - Palestinian journalism and art/poetry from Gaza
    - Pro-Palestinian solidarity
    - The work to stop ICE abductions and release folks from detention
    - Mutual aid
      - Keeping each other alive
      - Resource sharing—food, rent, childcare, transportation
      - Collective care of many kinds
  - And beyond resistance
  - There is us—familiar, gnarly, essential, cherished
  - Turning away from disposability

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