

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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