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Script For *Relations of Care* Conference
Keynote Dialogue, "Poetry, Care, and Disability Justice," May 13, 2021

BIO:

Ellen Samuels is a queer disabled poet and professor in the departments of Gender and Women's Studies and English at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Her writing can be found in academic forums like *Disability Studies Quarterly*, *Signs*, and *GLQ*, and in literary journals like *Copper Nickel*, *Brevity*, *Rogue Agent*, and *Mid-American Review*. Her verse memoir *Hypermobilities* will be published by The Operating System in August 2021, and she is working on a new book titled *Sick Time: What Chronic Life Tells Us*.

UNUSUAL WORDS AND NAMES I MAY USE WHEN TALKING OFF SCRIPT:

Names:

Adrienne Rich, Cheryl Marie Wade, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, Audre Lorde, Alison Kafer, Travis Chi Wing Lau, Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, Laura Hershey

Unusual words/phrases:

Crip poetics. Political-relational identity. Poetic-relational identity.

SCRIPT: THANK YOUS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

- Thank you to all the conference organizers, and especially James McMaster for organizing this keynote dialogue, and Esaí Ortiz-Rivera for moderating.
- Thank you to the wonderful staff helping with the technology and other logistics, and to the interpreters and captioners.
- I'm honored to share this virtual stage with fellow poets T.S. Banks and Kay Ulanday Barrett
- I come to you today from the stolen ancestral lands of the Ho-Chunk people. In solidarity I acknowledge the inherent sovereignty of the Ho-Chunk Nation along with the eleven other First Nations of Wisconsin.
- I dedicate this reading and dialogue to the hundreds of thousands of disabled people who have died during the COVID-19 pandemic from malignant neglect, from warehousing, from medical discrimination, from the violence of poverty, racism, transphobia, and generational trauma, from police murder shielded by law, from fascist right-wing governments in this country, Brazil, and India, and from the legacies and current realities of settler colonialism that stretch from the Native reservations in this country to the Maori and other indigenous communities in New Zealand and Australia to the occupied territories of Palestine, and beyond. Named and unnamed, known and unknown, your lives were not and will never be disposable.

SCRIPT: POEMS I WILL READ:

To the Doctor Who Said I Was Not One of The

people who don't even
look at their feet, who
shuffle the dust-

darkness, uncaring,
unlistening, un-
understanding their

skin's own
speech. To the
doctor who told

me not to worry
my heel's numbness
could rift to

crevasse, who
explained I was not
one of the kind

who forgets how
to remember to
heal. To that doctor

who clasped
my naked, fractured
foot, tracing its

trails and minnow-
skin, I say

I am she: I am
he: I am they
who surface the

darkness between
your words. Claw
and fibula, hoof

and toe, schist jawing
out from dirt, tibia
to tarsal joint,

bunkmates, burrow
twins, rage-siblings
and sorrow-kin,

un-caring a way
together across
the cobble-

scattered path, un-
mazing the
signs, together

through the
28 bones
to find our way home.

*Title references the poem "I Am Not One of The" by Cheryl Marie Wade.

Yesterday, I Apologized

Yesterday, I apologized to the dog
for not being able to walk her,

anymore, to the moss-green lake
in the dappled light, her nose

tender against my palm, sampling
fish-reek and the wind's news.

Yesterday, I apologized to the middle
of my middle finger, the years-old

pebble under skin, bone-knot
bunched in memory's string. I said

I'm sorry to the skin's warp
and weft, to the nerve strung

tight on the knuckle's fret. I said I'm
sorry to the skin itself, curtain

roughly drawn across the body's
pink. I apologized to sacrum

and thighbone, to the hinge
unhinging where it used to

swing, striding next to the dog
on our afternoon walks.

Yesterday, I apologized
to the nightstand where bottles

jostle and crowd with
last year's books. I sent

my regrets to the rutted bed
where I knelt each summer

pulling sorrel and dandelion, snow-
on-the-mountain and creeping

Charlie, in the ripe dirt-
smell and welter of heat.

Last night, when I lay down
on the smooth relief of pillow

and sheet, I closed my eyes
and apologized to the insides

of my eyelids, as if two moths
having settled there, needed to know

what would happen next. Close
your wings, I said, stay with

me in the moon-wet night. We
have done all we can.

*

These last poems come from my forthcoming book *Hypermobilities* which is a memoir in verse, written as strict syllabic haiku which I mostly composed in my head during medical procedures such as MRIs, infusions, and surgeries. I'm going to read a few poems from the first section, "Hypermobility," which centers on my bodily experience as a person with Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome, and a few from the last section, "The Garden," which turns outward from the medical setting to move my body into the world, to re-reroot myself in the earth and connect my crip survival to that of the plants I care for there.

Hypermobility

No one is supposed
to bend that far. No one knows
why you don't just break.

Hypermobility of the Small Joints

To press a button
means fingers muscle past bone.
Yes, No, Enter, Yes.

Hypermobility of the Large Joints

If your legs were wings
they'd need to swing this far out.
And feathers. And sky.

Displacement of the First Rib

I am the garden
Eve never took back. Fist with-
in the bone, rising.

Early Blight

What dirt remembers
the leaves know also. Leopard
yellow, growl of spots.

Ankle Sprain, While Sleeping

Warm swell of pain, foot-
knuckle bruising. What dance did
you dream and forget?

Pruning Tomato

Snip at the stem-joint.
Feel where it hollows. Only
the bent wrists will fruit.