

[Daen on Clare, 'Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure'](#)

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Eli Clare. *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017. 240 pp. \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-6287-6; \$84.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-6276-0.

Reviewed by Laurel Daen (College of William & Mary) **Published on** H-Disability (June, 2017)
Commissioned by Iain C. Hutchison

Brilliant Imperfection has been long awaited and highly anticipated. Eighteen years ago, in 1999, Eli Clare published *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness, and Liberation*, a book that established him as a leading thinker in the fields of disability studies and queer studies and provided a model for intersectional politics and approaches. In that text, Clare showed readers how disability justice was inseparable from racial and sexual equality, and how issues of class informed and complicated trans identities and environmental ethics. The product was, as Suzanne Pharr described in her foreword to the book, a “complex analysis” that did not “escape into confusion,” but rather pointed “toward a way of seeing and thinking that can lead us to a humane approach to political action.”[1] In short, Clare’s first book galvanized a radical queer disability politics and philosophy that insisted on the recognition of shared struggles and the complexities of identity, leaving scholars and activists alike eager for more.

Clare’s second book, *Brilliant Imperfection*, is exactly what many readers, myself included, have been hoping for. Twining history and memoir, philosophy and poetry, he explores the concept of “cure”—the notion deeply ingrained in Western society that bodies and minds deemed to be unnatural, abnormal, and defective must be corrected according to medical and cultural standards. As in *Exile and Pride*, Clare always considers issues of disability, sexuality, gender, race, class, and the environment in tandem. Moving from reflections on skin-bleaching creams to analyses of medicinal hot springs, agribusiness cornfields, and cochlear implants, he exposes the enormous power that cure holds over so many aspects of our lives—our relationships with our bodies as well as our communities, politics, economy, and society. The result is neither an anti-cure diatribe nor easy acceptance of medical and cultural fixing. Instead, Clare truly and honestly grapples—as the title suggests—with significant consequences for disability, queer, and cultural studies.

One subject of Clare’s grappling is the connection between disability and injustice. His ruminations stem from a series of Sierra Club advertisements. In one, the slogan “Asthma. Birth defects. Cancer. Enough.” is superimposed onto a smoky power plant. In another, a pregnant woman’s belly is captioned: “This little bundle of joy is now a reservoir of mercury” (p. 55). Clare describes the harm that these campaign materials inflict on disabled people. The ads transform particular physical and intellectual conditions into symbols of environmental degradation, he declares, “conflat[ing] justice with the eradication of disability” (p. 56). At the same time, however, Clare reminds readers that important connections exist between illness and environmental destruction, and toxic chemicals hurt all matter—human and animal, organic and inorganic. “How do we witness, name, and resist the injustices that reshape and damage all kinds of body-minds ... while not equating disability with injustice?” he ponders. How do we “bear witness to body-mind loss while also loving ourselves just as we are right now” (p. 60)?

Another area of focus is the reckoning of the right of individuals to seek cure with social justice politics. For much of the book, Clare exposes the violence of the ideology and practice of cure. He discusses how the concept of defectiveness has served to justify slavery, imprisonment, and institutionalization; and he looks at how sterilization laws and prenatal genetic testing have sought to eradicate disability before it appears. Yet Clare also recognizes that many people embrace cure as a tool for improving their lives. He engages with disabled feminist thinker Susan Wendell, who writes that “some unhealthy disabled people ... experience physical and psychological burdens that no amount of social justice can eliminate” and thus “want to have their bodies cured, not as a substitute for curing ableism, but in addition to it” (p. 61). How can we expose the dangers of cure without shutting chronically ill people out of disability politics? Clare asks. How do we cultivate a social movement that allows for the possibility of medical intervention, but also insists on the dismantling of racism, sexism, poverty, and environmental injustice?

At the end of the book, Clare’s grappling with individual choice and its consequences for social justice becomes intensely personal. He explores his simultaneous rejection of medicine to ameliorate aspects of his cerebral palsy and his pursuit of medical technology to reshape his gendered and sexed identity. Clare recalls yearnings from his childhood in which he wanted “to amputate his shaky right arm, to be done with tremors I couldn’t hide” (p. 174). What is the difference, he queries, between this feeling and his desire to amputate his breasts? Is medical fixing justified if the latter arises from self-love rather than self-hatred? Working through these questions and contradictions, Clare finds that he decides to pursue medical intervention but ultimately cures nothing. “I found body-mind comfort” after surgery, he writes, but nevertheless “cured nothing because there was nothing to cure” (p. 180). “*This, this body-mind, is what I want,*” he asserts (p. 174).

Brilliant Imperfection is an honest, moving, and deeply thoughtful engagement with some of the most difficult and significant questions in disability, queer, and cultural studies. Rather than shying away from ambiguity and complexity, Clare faces these realities head on, working through them in search of complicated answers to complicated, far-reaching problems. One area that Clare might have explored further is change over time. One wonders, for example, whether the “medical-industrial complex”—a term he uses to describe all those who promote, manage, and profit from cure, from physicians to nursing home administrators and government bureaucrats—is becoming more or less entrenched as the Internet facilitates access to medical information. Furthermore, does the burgeoning medical specialty of palliative care signal changes ahead? One can only look forward to Clare’s next book to find out. In the meantime, *Brilliant Imperfection* is sure to become required reading for scholars of disability and queer studies, revealing the multiple, often contradictory meanings and consequences of cure and the importance of work for social justice.

Note

[1]. Suzanne Pharr, foreword to *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness, and Liberation*, by Eli Clare (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1999), ix.

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