

*Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure.* By Eli Clare. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017. E-book, \$25.95.

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Poet, essayist, and activist Eli Clare's *Brilliant Imperfection* is an essential contribution to disability studies, as well as to emerging philosophical work at the intersections of feminisms, queer theory, critical animal studies, environmental humanities, post-colonial, and decolonial theories. Clare writes from his personal experiences of disability and his complicated relationship with the ideology of cure. Like other disability scholars, he questions the assumed need and desire for cure, as well as the "belief that we would all be better off without disability" (Clare 2017, 6 and 13). However, his analysis does not provide simple answers. Rather, the text stretches across and complicates academic, conceptual, and political boundaries.

Structurally, *Brilliant Imperfection* is a mosaic—"vibrant, fractured, whole" (Clare 2017, *xvi*). A dynamic assemblage of shards, it shows cure and disability in their shifting and conflicting relations. In the process, it also sheds light on the intertwinings of (dis)ability, racism, classism, heterosexism, and environmental degradation. The text unfolds across ten chapters, each composed of smaller segments that can stand alone, but when pieced together, reveal larger patterns and connections related to the text's broader critical exploration of cure and to each chapter's overarching theme. Interspersed between the chapters are brief musings and recollections. These tell of Clare's affective and "intimate, wordless relationships" with trees, animals, technologies, people, stones, and shells (Clare 2017, 33). Breathtakingly blurring the boundaries of reality and fiction, time and place, human and non-human, these poetic intervals are the mortar of the text.

That Clare decenters the "human" in *Brilliant Imperfection* is made evident to readers before they reach the table of contents. The book's cover features stones of gray and vivid green—a nod to one of Clare's poetic reflections on the blending of stone and skin (Clare 2017, 49). Clare also dedicates the book to "the tallgrass prairie and the cripp communities that have sustained me." The text itself begins with a brief introduction, followed by a thoughtful meditation on trigger warnings. In the intro-

duction, Clare draws from the work of disability studies scholars, such as Margaret Price and Alison Kafer, as well as communities and spiritual traditions that resist a Western mind-body dualism. To this end, he outlines two concepts: *body-mind*, or the inextricable relation of body and mind (Clare 2017, *xvi*), and *brilliant imperfection*, “a way of knowing, understanding, and living with disability and chronic illness . . . rooted in the nonnegotiable value of body-mind difference” (Clare 2017, *xvii*).<sup>1</sup> These concepts—transhuman in potential—prove foundational to Clare’s critique of curative ideology, which he argues presupposes human exceptionalism.

Throughout *Brilliant Imperfection* Clare thus addresses, challenges, and, most importantly, listens to a wide variety of beings: some human, some animal, some vegetable and mineral, some alive, some dead, some known personally by Clare and others only imagined. With these expansive interactions, Clare is not adopting a relativist position in which he is open to hearing out all sides. Instead, he asks readers to take seriously the “brilliant imperfections” that emerge when we move with rhythms of trembling touch, “call upon the spirits,” talk to trees, and “listen to stones” (Clare 2017, 169). In this way, he shows that practices of survival and resistance can be sustained not only by human communities, but also by connections with ecosystems, dogs, ambiguities, imaginal transformations, and apparitions.

In Chapters One through Four, Clare conjures the ghosts of Christopher Reeves, Terri Schaivo, Molly Daly, and his friend Bear. Rather than fixing these figures as static scapegoats or symbols around which Clare’s arguments might revolve, Clare instead summons them into the text as animate and complex, although not necessarily uncontested, interlocutors. In Chapters Five and Six, Clare listens to members of the muscular dystrophy, chronic fatigue, immune dysfunction syndrome, and deaf communities. This he does not to justify his own views on cure, but to complicate them by attending to the dissonant rhythms that emerge in the overlapping of these disabled voices. In Chapter Seven, in what is Clare’s most sustained and profound spectral engagement, he makes space for the imagined voice of Carrie Buck (of the infamous case *Buck v. Bell*) whom he calls upon to tell *her* story (Clare 2017, 103–112). In this chapter, Clare also addresses Ota Benga and the orangutan, Dohong, and in a particularly powerful moment, lets his rage and compassion scramble the delimitations of a weaponized personhood:

I refuse to abandon the many people who have been exhibited, studied, written about, photographed, imprisoned as *monkeys*. Refuse to forget the dozens of Black, intellectually disabled men and women who worked as

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<sup>1</sup>For more on bodymind, see (Price 2015, 1–2). For more on ways of knowing rooted in living with disability, see (Kafer 2013, 25–46). For recent scholarship on disability and non-western knowledges, see “Indigeneity & Disability: Kinship, Place, and Knowledge-Making,” Special Issue. *Disability Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 41.4. <https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v41i4>.

the ‘What-Is-It?’ and the “Missing-Link.” Refuse to turn away from Krao Farini and Ota Benga, Dohong and Polly. (Clare 2017, 118)

In Chapter Nine, Clare engages another contested voice—that of a man known only as the father of a cognitively disabled girl named Ashley—a man whom, like Reeves, Clare bears a great deal of anger toward (Clare 2017, 153).<sup>2</sup> As with Reeves, Clare attempts to engage Ashley’s father on his own terms, moving to consider his claim that the decision to prevent his “pillow angel” from developing into womanhood was motivated by paternal love. At this juncture, however, Clare arrives at one of the few unambiguous moments in the text. Overtaken by fury, he rages: “*Love? You dare to call this love? I refuse to engage you on your terms*” (Clare 2017, 156). Yet, almost immediately, Clare’s anger morphs into desire, turning him toward Ashley, herself: the girl in pink and lavender, poised to join a legion of “intellectually and physically disabled women, sterilized-without-their-consent-women” (Clare 2017, 156). For Ashley, Clare yearns. In remaining chapters, Clare walks with old friends, nature, his mother, and readers alike, drawing us in while also drawing out our prior enmeshments in cure. He lovingly beckons: “*come join us—a multitude of mad, sick, disabled, and deaf people*” (Clare 2017, 186).

In Clare’s creative, trembling hands, there is something beautiful, not only about disability and resistant body-minds, but also about cure as that unrelenting, messy knot of lived and ideological contradictions that binds together a broad and divergent community. This is not to say that Clare condones the curative ideology of the white, western, medical-industrial complex. He unearths and challenges the many ways in which we may find ourselves bound up with the logic and temporality of cure, whether this be through dieting, utilizing skin lighteners, donating to charity organizations, or undergoing transformative surgeries (Clare 2017, 77, 89, and 180). Clare is enraged by, and pointedly critical of, the extreme violence that cure effects on disabled, racialized, and nonhuman lives. He rejects the forced imprisonments and institutionalizations, exhibitions and exploitations, marginalizations and mockings, environmental destructions and deaths that are caused by cure (Clare 2017, 184). Given the gravity of these injustices, some readers may expect normative judgments and activist-oriented suggestions from Clare. However, he remains consistently true to the lived, ambiguous grounds of his project, and in this, resists easy answers and clean determinations. He opts instead, *as a mode of resistance*, to wade through the contradictory, ambivalent muck of cure, calling upon an expansive, transhuman community to aid him.

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<sup>2</sup>Clare explains that, in 2006, when Ashley was six, her father and mother elected to have her uterus and breast buds removed and her body flooded with estrogen. For another critical engagement with “Ashley X,” see (Kafer 2013, 47–68).

Through his poetic voice in particular, Clare movingly models the ways that love can resistantly hum in the midst of painful, shifting, multi-dimensional, and irresolvable contestations—its vibrations holding space for acts of faithful witnessing and collective healing (Clare 2017, 183).<sup>3</sup> Lingering in these spaces, Clare gestures toward possibilities of being at home in diverse body-minds and in dynamic, relational, transhuman processes. Deeply vulnerable, humble, and compassionate, the text is at its best when it shows itself to be an expansive project of community building that is not the work of a single, human author. In such moments, Clare lets the text exceed his authorship and authority, allowing it and him to be guided by the experiences, insights, and provocations of both real and imagined, human and non-human, relations. He takes direction from others' lived experiences of disability and cure, even if these make him uncomfortable or require him to inhabit ambiguity and contradiction without seeking resolution. This makes for a critical approach to ableism that remains oriented by the complex realities of disabled *and* non-disabled lives.

In this way, Clare reconfigures the “crip” community as one formed not around an identity, but around divergent entanglements with the ideology and lived realities of cure. Although I wish Clare drew out the racial element of his critique further, his approach to community reminds me of queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz's notion of “brown commons.” For Muñoz, brown commons revolves around identity-in-difference and diverse experiences of marginalization. Like Clare, Muñoz understands “brokenness” as the grounds of resistant ways of living/knowing, and sees tenacity, adaptability, and playfulness as assets of the oppressed (Muñoz 2020, 1–7). In these respects, *Brilliant Imperfection* can be seen as an opening to forms of resistance and coalition that exceed social-political identities, discrete forms of oppression, and modern, colonial delimitations of the “human.” This could bring Clare into conversation, not only with Muñoz, but also with scholars influenced by María Lugones's decolonial feminism, as well as the work of Sylvia Wynter (see Lugones 2010; Wynter 2003).<sup>4</sup> It also suggests Clare's relevance to recent interventions in queer/disability studies and postcolonial theory, such as those made by Jasbir Puar, Sunaura Taylor, and Zakiyyah Iman Jackson (see Puar 2017; Taylor 2017; Jackson 2020).

For scholars interested in critiquing the “human” as informing mechanisms of oppression, Clare's attention to the intersections of human and environmental issues may also be illuminating. This is especially true because Clare does not let what Nancy Tuana calls “ecological indifference” determine the limits of his project (cited in Rivera 2022, 243).<sup>5</sup> By this, I mean that, at a time of intensifying social, political, and climate crises, Clare resists the disposition to see the environment as only for

<sup>3</sup>I am thinking here of Lugones' notion of “faithful witnessing” (Lugones 2003, 7).

<sup>4</sup>For more on the intersection of Lugones' decolonial feminism, animality, and disability, see (Cicoria 2021).

<sup>5</sup>See Nancy Tuana. *Racial Climates, Ecological Indifference: An Ecointersectional Approach* (Oxford University Press, Forthcoming 2022).

the sake of the human. Through the language of Tuana, I read Clare as showing that ecological indifference is deeply interconnected with ableism, in addition to other forms of social and environmental injustice. This suggests the possibility of bringing Tuana and Clare together by mobilizing ecological indifference as a pivotal concept within disability studies.

Furthermore, *Brilliant Imperfection* has broader philosophical implications for recent work in continental philosophy, including feminism, aesthetics, phenomenology, and hermeneutics. For example, Clare's poetic writings resonate with Gloria Anzaldúa's Chicana feminist spiritual activism and discussions of imagination. Anzaldúa's conceptions of the "dreaming body" and "nepantla" are helpful for understanding the liminality from and of which Clare writes, while Clare's accounts shed light on how Anzaldúa's insights may relate to disability (Anzaldúa 2015, 23-46).<sup>6</sup> The non-human centered and spectral aesthetic sensibilities of the text also pair well with Alejandro Vallega and Omar Rivera's decolonial aesthetics (see Vallega 2014; Rivera 2020; 2021). This is apparent when, for instance, Clare writes about sensibilities shaped by his experience of cerebral palsy:

My relationship to gravity is ambivalent. On mountain trails, I yearn to fly downhill, feet touching ground, pushing off, smooth and fluid. Instead on steep stretches I drop down onto my butt and slide along using both my hands and feet, for a moment becoming a four-legged animal. Only then do I see swirl marks that glaciers left in the granite, tiny orange newts climbing among the tree roots, otherworldly fungi growing on rotten logs. My shaky balance gives me this intimacy with mountains. (Clare 2017, 88)

Here, Clare sheds light on the aesthetic dimensions of his resistance to cure, including his making peace with his visceral self and seeing in "shaky hands and shaky balance" something unequivocally valuable (Clare 2017, 87). To me, he also suggests the relevance of the concept "brilliant imperfection" to decolonial aesthetics.<sup>7</sup>

*Brilliant Imperfection* can also inform phenomenological approaches that take direction from lived experiences of disability. To this end, like Kim Q. Hall, I see *Brilliant Imperfection* as a valuable resource for "crip phenomenologies" that seek to go beyond engaging disability merely as a means of outlining the nondisabled body-mind (Hall 2021, 13 and 26). Moreover, I also see Clare's work as a resource for non-western and non-human-centered phenomenologies. For example, Clare's concept of "brilliant imperfection" may speak to disability within the context of

<sup>6</sup>For more on Anzaldúa and disability, see (Pitts 2021, 87–122).

<sup>7</sup>I also gesture toward the relevance of crip temporalities, mobilities, and knowings elucidated by queer/disability studies scholars for decolonial aesthetics. In addition to Kafer, see, for instance, (Samuels 2017).

Rivera's non-western phenomenology of "eco-sensibilities" (Rivera 2022, 244–246). Finally, while disability/queer studies and rhetoric scholars have called into question the ableist and anthropocentric dimensions of western communication, Clare's dialogue with nonhumans could also contribute to emerging interventions in the field of hermeneutics (see Vallega 2021).<sup>8</sup>

Overall, *Brilliant Imperfection* is a remarkable approach to disability, one haunted by ghosts of past, future, and present—human and nonhuman alike—that emerge from and are brought together by the tumultuous dynamics of cure. These apparitions tell of brilliant imperfections: diverse body-mind possibilities of sensible, affective configurations that are not organized according to the temporality of cure or its "human-nonhuman" difference, and whose emergent livings, knowings, and pleasures undo the parameters of "normal" and "natural." In collaboration with the spectral yet eerily concrete presences he conjures, Clare radically reimagines a queer, crip community that takes brilliant imperfection as its grounds. Embedded resistantly in this healing community, readers of *Brilliant Imperfection* will experience with Clare "no pity, no tragedy, no standing ovations, no over-the-top inspirational human-interest stories in the local paper; just the two of us moving slowly and steadily, defying gravity" (Clare 2017, 190).

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<sup>8</sup>For critiques of communication within queer/disability and rhetoric studies, see, for instance, (Puar 2017, 25–31). See also (Chen 2012, 112; Yergeau 2017, 1–31). In terms of non-human-centered interventions into hermeneutics, I have in mind not only Vallega, but also Muñoz, and Marisol de la Cadena's accounts of unconventional communication, although the latter two might not identify themselves as working within hermeneutics (de la Cadena 2015, *xxiii–xxvii*; Muñoz 2020, 137). For me, what links these figures is that, through turns to affect and non-western ways of knowing, each disrupts traditional western, human-centered delineations of meaning, understanding, and communication.

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