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The Rhetorical Stakes of Cure

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Abstract: This review of Eli Clare's *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure* (2017) and Eunjung Kim's *Curative Violence: Rehabilitating Disability, Gender, and Sexuality in Modern Korea* (2017) shows how both Clare and Kim critique the politics of cure in the U.S. and Korea. Specifically, these texts reveal the (at times) violent ways that cure has been forced on disabled bodies, and unpack longstanding debates within the political, cultural, and medical sectors about eliminating disability at all costs, and refusing cure. Although both works are oriented towards the field of disability studies, this review highlights the intersectional aspects of both texts and the concrete, practical ways that rhetoric and composition scholars and teachers can benefit from this discourse.

Clare, Eli. *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure*. Duke University Press, 2017. 218 pp.

Kim, Eunjung. *Curative Violence: Rehabilitating Disability, Gender, and Sexuality in Modern Korea.* Duke University Press, 2017. 300 pp.

As a type 1 diabetic who specializes in disability studies, I have a precarious relationship with the field that I work within. I have always used my work as both a scholar, and a teacher, to advocate for disability rights and to reveal the underlying discriminatory bias behind common representations of disability. For the sake of clarity, I use and define disability in accordance with the "social model of disability" that is largely endorsed within disability studies. This model defines disability, and the culturally negative stigma attached to it, as social constructs. Furthermore, the social model asserts that the social, political, and economic barriers put in place for those with physical and mental impairments, transform these conditions into debilitating disabilities. Thus, these impairments, in and of themselves, are not necessarily disabling liabilities.

In my own courses on disability studies and literature, I try to get students to consider the ways that their previous notions of disability have been shaped by these socially-ingrained biases. However, once I separate the work that I do from my personal life, I find myself dealing with a contradictory longing for a cure for diabetes, and a desire to no longer be bothered with counting carbs, pricking my body with needles every day, and being dependent on an all-too-expensive hormone just to stay alive. I have always struggled with the question of how I can be an advocate for disability rights, when sometimes the desire to no longer deal with my own disability surfaces in my mind? How do we make sense of these contradictions? Is there any way to reconcile the historically relentless effort to eliminate disability and the anti-cure camp that fights for self-love amongst the disabled, inclusion, and equal access?

Eli Clare and Eunjung Kim tackle these issues around narratives of cure in their respective monographs, *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure* (2017) and *Curative Violence: Rehabilitating Disability, Gender, and Sexuality in Modern Korea* (2017). There are some impulses within disability studies to criticize and reject the narrative of cure because of the history of disabled people being exploited, victimized, and even killed for the sake of cure. However Clare and Kim both do an excellent job of teasing out the nuances and finding the space between cure and anti-cure narratives, instead of taking a definitive stance in either camp.

Although *Brilliant Imperfection* and *Curative Violence* aren't explicitly geared towards those who specialize in rhetoric and composition studies, composition and rhetoric teachers, scholars, and program administrators can certainly benefit from these works. For *Composition Forum* readers who are invested in the scholarly discourse and research in rhetorical studies, greater effort to incorporate disability into the conversation needs to be made. Thus, *Brilliant Imperfection* and *Curative Violence* offer an opportunity to place disability studies in conversation with composition and rhetoric. The disability issues that Clare and Kim address enrich the field of composition and rhetoric

demonstrating the harmful ways that power and language, the very heart of rhetorical studies, operate to materialize and empower certain bodies, while disenfranchising and demonizing disabled bodies.

If investigating the connection between power and language is a major goal in composition and rhetoric, then I urge scholars and teachers to take note of Clare's and Kim's groundbreaking works in order to examine the ways that the social structure and mainstream discourse interpret and discipline *all* bodies, including the disabled. What is additionally relevant to composition and rhetoric scholars and teachers is Clare and Kim's focus on the legibility or lack thereof in the disabled body. The two scholars examine how cure requires the disabled body, conventionally thought to be the antithesis of rhetoric and language, to demonstrate cure by producing rhetoric and becoming readable in an ableist-leaning society. Ultimately, this analysis of legibility would appeal to scholars interested in embodiment and the performative rhetoric of bodies.

The work that *Brilliant Imperfection* and *Curative Violence* accomplish in examining the politics, the policing, and the effects of ableist cure could thus be put in conversation with composition and rhetoric works like that of J. Blake Scott, who analyzes the infrastructure of the health and medicine industry as well as the rhetoric of cure and disease in science and media. Juxtaposing these scholars could draw a much-needed connection between the ideology of cure (via Clare and Kim's work) and its praxis in everyday life (via Scott's work). Too, Kim's interrogation of gender performance and cure connects with Rebecca Dingo's transnational feminist work on globalization and public policy could be very productive as well. While the education system is different in many ways from and the healthcare industry that Clare and Kim explore, as do medical institutions, educational institutions enforce broad, one-size-fits-all standards and benchmarks that presume that students all learn the same way, and that teachers all teach the same way. Thus, educators (including composition teachers and WPAs) would benefit from understanding the punitively destructive stakes of normalization and standardization, and the ways that eliminating difference is deeply ingrained in the social fabric.

In what follows, I provide a brief overview of the major points in *Brilliant Imperfection* and *Curative Violence*. After that, I explore the ways that Clare and Kim use intersectionality to trouble the binary of cure versus anti-cure politics, and highlight the ways that the rhetoric of cure and disability studies can be put into conversation with race, gender, and feminist theory. Then, I unpack the ways that cure operates in each text as a means of social control, policing bodies through stigma and violence at the medical and sociopolitical levels. Lastly, I consider the dominant theme of temporality in the two works, and the ways that this issue of cure can connect to those with interests in composition and rhetoric.

Eli Clare's *Brilliant Imperfection* weaves together poetry, personal narrative, and critical theory in order to think through the rhetoric, cultural perceptions, and politics behind the concept of cure. Instead of reinforcing this binary between cure and anti-cure, Clare argues that a solution to the ableist preoccupation with cure is "a broad-based grappling" with the ways that cure and anti-cure narratives inform one another (14). In the bulk of the book, Clare looks at a range of texts, from historical disability rights cases to the racial politics of cure in the pharmaceutical industry, to show the ways that ableism, a belief in the superiority of the able-bodied over the disabled, saturates the concept of cure and stigmatizes bodily variety. In the final chapter, "Promise of Cure," Clare brings out more complexities and questions than definitive answers, inviting the readers to reach their own conclusions in regards to disability and cure.

Eunjung Kim's *Curative Violence* takes a transnational feminist approach to analyzing disability and cure in various Korean films, literary pieces, and policies from the era of Japanese occupation (1930s) to the contemporary moment. Overall, she asserts that in Korean popular culture, cure and disability are not separate and distinct. Rather, cure is a socioeconomic process that is defined by violence, in which the stigma of disability remains connected to the body both before and after cure. In chapters 1 through 3, Kim looks at short stories like "The Ugly Creature" (1936) and the film *The Song of Songs* (2000) to explore the ways that the policing of disability and the violence of cure are shaped by gender politics. The final two chapters further enrich the intersections Kim makes between gender performance (as a sign of normativity) and cure by examining films such as *Pink Palace* (2005) and the cultural attitudes these pieces reveal about disabled sexuality.

In considering the major themes connecting *Brilliant Imperfection* and *Curative Violence*, one shared approach is intersectionality. Clare incorporates an extensive number of body-mind conditions, corresponding cures (from diabetes to cerebral palsy), and many social and legal issues (historically and more recently) into a number of poems, essays, and personal narratives. At times, these ruminations lack direction and a clear purpose. But the way that *Brilliant Imperfection* seems to aimlessly wander from anecdotes of different marginalized conditions, to re-imaginings of historic figures, and countless other issues simply mirrors one of the major points of this text. Just as *Brilliant Imperfection* is at times disjointed and untidy, Clare suggests that identifying in ways that differ from the Western ideal of able-bodied, white, heteronormative masculinity can be just as contradictory and messy, and that is okay. For him, those within the disabled community should be leery of calls for absolute pride and pure self-love

because we can't "separate ourselves that definitively from oppression and privilege, stereotypes and shame." Ultimately, the messy "story that allows our body-minds and desires to be inexplicable" is greatly needed (177).

Clare doesn't explicitly state this; however, his point clearly echoes the reality that many African American writers have struggled with, beginning with W.E.B. Du Bois's theorization of double consciousness. In parallel to black scholars who have illustrated the impossibility of living in America without being affected in some way by the rhetoric of white supremacy that is deeply-ingrained in this nation, Clare similarly notes the difficulty disabled people face in establishing a sense of self that is completely divorced from the negative, marginalized value society projects onto their bodies. The moves Clare makes beyond whiteness in *Brilliant Imperfection* in order to think about how racism and ableism work together to oppress are much-needed contributions to the field of disability studies that get the reader to think about the ways that disability and non-white identities overlap.

Curative Violence takes an intersectional approach as well, crossing the strategies of the feminist disabled women's movement with cure and violence. Many of the creative works that are discussed in *Curative Violence* make gendered assumptions about sexuality, courtship, and the appropriate gender roles within a family that has disabled members. Consequently, Kim does the crucial work of exploring how gender roles and power dynamics influence disability. However, her concentration on gender relations at times felt a bit limiting. Some attention to how class and access function in the selected primary texts would have made for an even more nuanced analysis.

The connections Clare and Kim make between disability, gender, and many other markers of identity create a rich context for discussing stigmatized embodiment. Clare asserts that eliminating the negative, overdetermined meaning attached to bodily difference is a greater priority than trying to exist in a proverbial bubble, ignoring ableism and developing a purist sense of self-pride. He suggests in Chapter 8 "Moving Through Cure," that he wants to "imagine discarding the concepts of disorder and defect, and developing other means of accessing medical technology beyond white Western diagnosis. Yes ... a rebellion" (142). Thus instead of taking either side in the cure/anti-cure debate, the solution Clare offers is the dismantling of normalcy as a value system. According to Clare, normalcy is what privileges the able-bodied as superior to the disabled, and what justifies the Western understanding of cure as a coercive corrective. For Clare, removing the stigmatized differences that create distinctive gaps between the disabled and the non-disabled is a major problem, not necessarily cure.

In contrast, Kim might argue that it's impossible to completely get rid of stigma. Kim's *Curative Violence* looks at the rhetoric of cure as well, although the central binary that she unpacks is that between cure and disability. In looking at filmic and literary representations of cure and disability in Korea (from 1930s Japanese-occupied Korea to the contemporary moment) Kim parallels Gloria Anzaldua's thematic attention to liminal identities and 'in-between' spaces. This text essentially examines "disability's presence before and after cure, existing in between the past and the future and in between otherness and normality. In these in-between spaces, cure and disability coexist as a process" (9). On the one hand, like Clare, Kim examines the ways that cure and disability are inextricably bound up with one another and dependent on each other to exist. On the other hand, even as cure potentially rids the body and/or mind of disability, the stigma of disability (in this case, of once having a disability in the past) still persists and demarcates formerly disabled bodies from non-disabled bodies. Although Kim imagines a future in which people with disabilities no longer have to measure their self-worth by the stereotypes that society dictates, it's not quite clear in *Curative Violence* whether it's possible to purge an ableist nation like Korea of these principles.

Despite common perceptions of cure as rehabilitative and restorative, another core theme in Kim and Clare's works is that of the violence of cure. Kim and Clare both argue that this violence doesn't just occur when medical treatments and procedures are imposed on the bodies and minds of disabled patients at all costs, including death. This violence also takes place when policy and social practices are enacted that eliminate disability or relegate the disabled to the margins rather than being inclusive and making space for disabled lives in mainstream society.

Considering the ways that differences are eliminated as a means of social control, Clare and Kim additionally highlight that despite common belief, cure is not a natural, objective phenomenon. Nor is it something that is always "unequivocally beneficial and necessary" (Kim 41). Cure, instead, is a product of social, political, and economic relations. For Clare, what lies at the root of this politicized notion of cure is normalcy. He argues that because normalcy is presented as ideal, any deviations from this standard are consequently demonized, and attempts are made to eradicate these aberrations through cure. This connection between cure and normativity is something that would be familiar to many who specialize in disability-rhetoric and composition because the moral and ethical values that are attributed to normative bodies are often the simultaneous reason for the stigmatization of disability.

Kim takes a different approach and asserts that cure and the violence that it validates are grounded in gendered normalcy, instead of being a solely medical issue. Thus, according to Kim, cure in many Korean works hinges on the disabled subject's ability to perform heteronormative gender roles rather than embody normalcy themselves as Clare suggests. For disabled women, this gender performance includes being able to produce able-bodied children (which

Kim explores in Chapter 1, “Unmothering Disability”) and for disabled men this encompasses being able to carry out sexual conquests (which is examined in her last chapter, “Curing Virginity”). By highlighting the compulsion in Korean cure narratives to perpetuate normative masculinity and femininity, Kim is able to gesture towards the ways that the male and female body (disabled and non-disabled) and the family that they perpetuate (or fail to) are seen as extensions of the nation and nationalism.

Clare’s and Kim’s inclusion of temporality into the cure/disability binary is the most compelling critique that the two make against ableist societies in the West and the East. Their ruminations on time could contribute to the discourses of power in composition and rhetoric by showing how power doesn’t just shape and occupy physical spaces, but also structures our relationship to time. As *Brilliant Imperfection* and *Curative Violence* each prove, this understanding of time has imperative consequences, as it makes meaning of differences and shapes policy. For Clare, time manifests in the narrative of cure as a pre-occupation with eliminating disability in the future, at the cost of creating policy in the present to improve the lives of those with disabilities. Kim more concretely addresses temporality as she explores the concept of folding time throughout *Curative Violence*. Un/folding time is an “insistence on making the present disappear by replacing it with the normative past, simultaneously projecting onto it a specific kind of normative future” (4). Folding time is a Westernized, ableist understanding of cure where the goal is to eliminate disability and return the subject’s body-mind to the past (before s/he acquired a disability) and/or to the future where the impairment no longer exists. Kim’s fundamental objective is to unfold time and essentially establish a notion of cure that allows for the disabled to exist in mainstream society without the threat of erasure or relegation to the margins.

Ultimately, when I reconsider my personal struggles with cure and disability studies, *Brilliant Imperfection* and *Curative Violence* reveal that cure is not necessarily the antithesis to the goals of disability activism. Ableism has tricked many within disability activism into thinking that cure and disability are diametrically opposed because we live in a society that dictates normalcy at all costs (even death), and cure as the essential means of establishing this normalcy. However, these intersections that Clare and Kim make between cure and time, race, and many other socially significant categories reveal that cure and disability can co-exist without one erasing the other. Furthermore, in considering the ways that these two works can intersect with composition and rhetoric, Clare and Kim contribute to the interrogation of power as they analyze medicalized cure and rehabilitation as extensions of this complex, all-encompassing power system. While this examination of cure touches on medical issues and not really anything academic, teachers and program administrators could benefit from Clare’s and Kim’s examination of the social intolerance of difference and the devastating impact of this prejudice. A curriculum that is informed of the ableist history Clare and Kim outline and that acknowledges the stakes of erasing difference, whether it’s in the medical industry or in education, can more effectively address the wide-ranging needs of students and educate based on need, not standard.

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