

Using the language of the elemental world, [Eli Clare] delineates a complex human intersection and transmutes cruelty into its opposite—a potent, lifegiving remedy.

—ALISON BECHDEL

creator of *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* and *Dykes to Watch Out For*

Eli's work detonates inside of you, right to the edges
where you balance.

—AMBER L. HOLLIBAUGH

author of *My Dangerous Desires: A Queer Girl Dreaming Her Way Home*

The books that move us most are the ones that help us make sense of our experience, that take pieces of what we already know and put it together with new insights, new analysis, enabling us to form a fresh vision of ourselves and our lives. For me, Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider* and Adrienne Rich's *On Lies, Secrets and Silence* were such books, and there were significant others along the way. And now there's Eli Clare's *Exile and Pride*.

—SUZANNE PHARR

author of *Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism*

Exile and Pride is ... an exhortation for each of us to examine our connection to and alienation from our environment, our sexuality, and each other.

—KENNY FRIES

author of *Body, Remember: A Memoir* and editor of *Staring Back: The Disability Experience From the Inside Out*

Eli Clare writes with the spirit of a poet and the toughness of a construction worker. The passion and skill of [his] writing will draw you inside a complex life and more deeply inside yourself.

—JEWELLE GOMEZ

author of *The Gilda Stories* and *Don't Explain: Short Fiction*

exile & pride

disability, queerness &
liberation

eli clare

with a new afterword by Dean Spade

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freaks and queers

I. NAMING

Handicapped. A disabled person sits on the street, begging for her next meal. This is how we survived in Europe and the United States as cities grew big and the economy moved from a land base to an industrial base. We were beggars, caps in hand. This is how some of us still survive. Seattle, 1989: a white man sits on the sidewalk, leaning against an iron fence. He smells of whiskey and urine, his body wrapped in torn cloth. His legs are toothpick-thin, knees bent inward. Beside him leans a set of crutches. A Styrofoam cup, half full of coins, sits on the sidewalk in front of him. Puget Sound stretches out behind him, water sparkling in the sun. Tourists bustle by. He strains his head up, trying to catch their eyes. Cap in hand. *Handicapped.*

Disabled. The car stalled in the left lane of traffic is disabled. Or alternatively, the broad stairs curving into a public building disable the man in a wheelchair. That word used as a noun (the *disabled* or people with *disabilities*), an adjective (*disabled* people), a verb (the

accident *disabled* her): in all its forms it means “unable,” but where does our inability lie? Are our bodies like stalled cars? Or does disability live in the social and physical environment, in the stairs that have no accompanying ramp? I think about language. I often call nondisabled people able-bodied, or when I’m feeling confrontational, *temporarily* able-bodied. But if I call myself disabled in order to describe how the ableist world treats me as a person with cerebral palsy, then shouldn’t I call nondisabled people *enabled*? That word locates the condition of being nondisabled, not in the nondisabled body, but in the world’s reaction to that body. This is not a semantic game.

Cripple. The woman who walks with a limp, the kid who uses braces, the man with gnarly hands hear the word *cripple* every day in a hostile nondisabled world. At the same time, we in the disability rights movement create cripp culture, tell cripp jokes, identify a sensibility we call cripp humor. Nancy Mairs writes:

I am a cripple. I choose this word to name me.... People—crippled or not—wince at the word *cripple*, as they do not at *handicapped* or *disabled*. Perhaps I want them to wince. I want them to see me as a tough customer, one to whom the fates/gods/viruses have not been kind, but who can face the brutal truth of her existence squarely. As a cripple, I swagger.²

Gimp. Slang meaning “to limp.” *Gimp* comes from the word *gammy*, which hobos in the 18th century used among themselves to describe dangerous or unwelcoming places. Hobo to hobo, passing on the road: “Don’t go there. It’s gammy.” Insider language, hobo solidarity. And now a few centuries later, one disabled person greets another, “Hey, gimp. How ya doin?” Insider language, gimp solidarity.

Retard. I learned early that words could bruise a body. I have been called *retard* too many times, that word sliding off the tongues of doctors, classmates, neighbors, teachers, well-meaning strangers on the street. In the years before my speech became understandable, I was universally assumed to be “mentally retarded.” When I started school, the teachers wanted me in the “special education” program.

My parents insisted I be given yet another set of diagnostic tests, including an IQ test, and I—being a white kid who lived in a house full of books, ideas, and grammar-school English, being a disabled kid who had finally learned how to talk—scored well. They let me join the “regular” first grade. I worked overtime to prove those test results right. Still I was *retard*, *monkey*, *defect* on the playground, in the streets, those words hurled at my body, accompanied by rocks and rubber erasers. Even at home, I heard their echoes. My father told me more than once to stop walking like a *monkey*. My mother often talked about my birth *defect*. Words bruise a body more easily than rocks and rubber erasers.

Differently abled, physically challenged. Nondisabled people, wanting to cushion us from the cruelty of language, invented these euphemisms. In explaining her choice of the word *cripple*, Nancy Mairs writes:

Differently abled ... partakes of the same semantic hopefulness that transformed countries from *undeveloped* to *underdeveloped*, then to *less developed*, and finally *developing* nations. People have continued to starve in those countries during the shift. Some realities do not obey the dictates of language.³

Differently abled is simply easier to say, easier to think about than *disabled* or *handicapped* or *crippled*.

Freak. I hold fast to my dictionary, but the definitions slip and slide, tell half stories. I have to stop here. *Freak* forces me to think about naming.

Handicapped, disabled, cripple, gimp, retard, differently abled. I understand my relationship to each of these words. I scoff at *handicapped*, a word I grew up believing my parents had invented specifically to describe me, my parents who were deeply ashamed of my cerebral palsy and desperately wanted to find a cure. I use the word *disabled* as an adjective to name what this ableist world does to us crips and gimps. *Cripple* makes me flinch; it too often accompanied the sticks and stones on my grade school playground, but I love cripp humor, the audacity of turning *cripple* into a word of pride.

Gimp sings a friendly song, full of irony and understanding. *Retard* on the other hand draws blood every time, a sharp, sharp knife. In the world as it should be, maybe disabled people would be *differently abled*: a world where Braille and audio-recorded editions of books and magazines were a matter of course, and hearing people signed ASL; a world where schools were fully integrated, health care, free and unrationed; a world where universal access meant exactly that; a world where disabled people were not locked up at home or in nursing homes, relegated to sheltered employment and paid sweatshop wages. But, in the world as it is, *differently abled*, *physically challenged* tell a wishful lie.

Handicapped, disabled, cripple, gimp, retard, differently abled, freak. I need to stop here. *Freak* I don't understand. It unsettles me. I don't quite like it, can't imagine using it as some politicized disabled people do. Yet I want *freak* to be as easy as the words *queer* and *cripple*.

Queer, like *cripple*, is an ironic and serious word I use to describe myself and others in my communities. *Queer* speaks volumes about who I am, my life as a dyke, my relationship to the dominant culture. Because of when I came out—more than a decade after the Stonewall Rebellion—and where—into a highly politicized urban dyke community—*queer* has always been easy for me. I adore its defiant external edge, its comfortable internal truth. *Queer* belongs to me. So does *cripple* for many of the same reasons. *Queer* and *cripple* are cousins: words to shock, words to infuse with pride and self-love, words to resist internalized hatred, words to help forge a politics. They have been gladly chosen—*queer* by many gay, lesbian, bi, and trans peoples, *cripple*, or *crip*, by many disabled people.

Freak is another story. Unlike *queer* and *crip*, it has not been widely embraced in my communities.⁴ For me *freak* has a hurtful, scary edge; it takes *queer* and *cripple* one step too far; it doesn't feel good or liberating.

This profusion of words and their various relationships to marginalized people and politicized communities fascinates me.

Which words get embraced, which don't, and why? *Queer* but not *pervert*. *Cripple*, and sometimes *freak*, but not *retard*. Like most of the ugly and demeaning words used to batter and bait marginalized peoples—racist, sexist, classist, ableist, homophobic slurs—*pervert* and *retard* nearly burst with hurt and bitterness, anger and reminders of self-hatred.⁵ I doubt LGBT communities and the disability communities respectively will ever claim those words as our own. In contrast *crip*, *queer*, and *freak* have come to sit on a cusp. For some of us, they carry too much grief. For others, they can be chosen with glee and pride. *Queer* and *crip* are mine but not *freak*, and I want to know why. What is it about that word? What bitterness, what pain, does it hold that *cripple*, with its connotations of pitiful, broken bodies, and *queer*, with its sweeping definitions of normality and abnormality, do not? I want to unravel *freak*, to pull on the thread called history.*

II. FREAK SHOW

The history of freakdom extends far back into western civilization. The court jester, the pet dwarf, the exhibition of humans in Renaissance England, the myths of giants, minotaurs, and monsters all point to this long history, which reached a pinnacle in the mid-1800s to mid-1900s. During that century, freaks were big entertainment and big business. Freak shows populated the United

* Since 1999, I've been taken to task by folks in BDSM and leather communities more than once for my analysis of the word *pervert*. In my 1999 endnotes, I try to soften my analysis by claiming that the word hasn't been "used to construct both individual and communal identities." But my reasoning is exactly wrong when seen from inside BDSM communities where claiming *pervert* has in truth been central to building a communal identity. The ways I have misread the word as an outsider to the BDSM world is a great example of how reclaiming the ugly words has so much to do with context. My original intent to find words in LGBT communities that were analogous to the word *retard* in disability communities becomes extraordinarily complex.—E.C., 2009