

foreword to the 2015 edition

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THERE IS A KIND OF ART that acts on me like a bell. It vibrates through me, filling me with harmonics. Some creative act arising out of another life stirs the deep place where my own creativity wells up and has me frantically searching my pockets for scraps of paper, so I can scribble down the fragments of fresh language that bubble up to answer it.

It isn't triggered by talent or insight alone. I encounter fine writing, exquisite music, and visual art every day that I appreciate, without feeling that pulse of stillness, that stirring of wings. It happens when the artist's courage has stripped away everything false. When what is left rings so true that the true things I ache to say hum in response. *Exile and Pride* is that kind of art.

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I am writing this the day after nationwide demonstrations once more filled the streets with outrage at the impunity of racist violence. I am writing this at the end of a year in which my heart ricocheted between Gaza, Ayotzinapa, and Ferguson, in which I became physically ill from rage, grief, and fear that had no outlet, frustrated by my body's inability to march and shout; the poetry

choking in my throat from the seeming impossibility of complex truths in the face of such atrocity.

I, a tortured child who wrote about not abandoning the humanity of my torturers, have been unable to write about what lies at the root of the horrors committed in Gaza, of young Israelis chanting *Kill Arabs* and cheering as they watch shells fall on Palestinian homes. Outrage silences nuance, and I can't find the air with which to speak of how European elites set Jews up to become this, how anti-Semitism tangled with racism and European colonialism to create these perpetrators, how Zionism mobilizes terror into entitlement and hate. To point to the complexity behind the stark reality of merciless assault seems insulting, useless, as if to say *there is more to the story* is to collude.

But these are precisely the moments in which we need more to the story, need multiple voices, long views, complex analyses, the challenging alliances that take so much sweat and sophistication to hammer out. We need to be willing to know ourselves, become more and more fully conscious of all that we bring to the table, speak honestly and accountably from our specific, many layered lives. So this is where I begin, a bisexual, chronically ill, mixed-class Puerto Rican Jew, reading a book that makes me ring like a bell.

There are some striking resemblances between Eli Clare's life and mine, and many equally striking differences. We both grew up marginally middle class in poor rural communities where a landscape we loved ("with a rumbling in our bones") was being ransacked by distant corporate powers, who wreaked their havoc with and upon the hands and hungers of the people we also, ambivalently, loved.

For Eli the place was Port Orford, Oregon, a white, working-class logging and salmon fishing town. For me it was Indiera Baja, at the border of two coffee- and banana-growing townships in

western Puerto Rico, among poorer than working-class Indo-Afro-Euro-Caribbean people directly targeted by imperialism. Both of us grew up with broken cars in people's yards and affection for the details, the smells, sounds, and colors ("wood chips flying, coffee berries fermenting"), and respect for the hard work and skill of our neighbors, laboring in industries that put food on tables and destroyed the land. Both of us were left with clear-cut slopes like great wounds across the natural world that gave us solace, and crumbling economies that left our communities desperate.

Both of us were sexually assaulted and tortured through many years. Eli by his father and his father's friends, I by a ring of child pornographers and traffickers through my school, both of us in ways that are inescapably and intricately bound up with larger systems of social control.

We are both migrants from forests to cities, with all the loss that entails, but for Eli it was also an escape. For me it was unchosen and, bitterly, unreservedly mourned, and yet ultimately migration granted me my writer's split tongue, made harsh and sweet by uprooting. In the cities where we landed, Eli writes about confronting class and urbanism. I write about confronting racism and sexual violence, changing countries, climates, and languages.

Eli's family was part of the bigoted, conservative world in which he grew up. My radical family was targeted by anticommunism, and the political rifts in my life were never with my parents. Both of us think about the meaning of exile, which "implies not only loss, but a sense of allegiance and connection—however ambivalent—to the place left behind," about how the pursuit of individual sovereignty is so weighted with losses. What it takes to construct collective sovereignties without exiles.

Eli found a place to belong among urban, politicized dykes. For me, being bisexual in the '70s, '80s, and '90s meant never being fully welcomed there, and while queerness is an important part of my identity, it's never been my main source of comfort and belonging. Instead I have relied on pockets of solidarity and rest whose demographics vary: Jewish radicalism, Latin American

revolutionaries, feminists of various kinds, circles where queer-ness, disability, and brown skin overlap.

Eli was disabled from birth, in easily perceivable ways. My disabilities began as illnesses and are easily overlooked or disbelieved. As we each navigate the slippery business of naming, Eli wrestles with the complicated history and impact of the word *freak*, as I do with a constellation of words surrounding sickness and trauma.

The specificity of Eli's telling, its blunt honesty and sensory detail, is what draws me in, wins my respect and trust. But what sends me scrambling for a pen, what interrupts my reading over and over with the urge to write, is neither the familiarity of what we share nor my curiosity about what we don't. It's not just the *what*. It's the *how*.

In his introduction to the second edition of *Exile and Pride*, Eli writes that this book is about home and clarifies: "I mean how we have fled from and yearned toward home. In the end I mean a deeply honest multi-issue politics that will make home possible." Then he goes on to say:

Body as home, but only if it is understood that place and community and culture burrow deep into our bones. . . . Body as home, but only if it is understood that bodies can be stolen, fed lies and poison, torn away from us. . . . Body as home, but only if it is understood that the stolen body can be reclaimed.

But only if it is understood that complexity, contradiction, ambiguity, ambivalence are *what we need*. Whether the topic is the disdainful classism of urban environmentalists, characterizing loggers as stupid, brutish, and to blame, or the layered meanings of sexual objectification for disabled people, what Eli requires of us as readers, again and again, is that we enter into a place of tension, and stay there, vibrate with it, take in the multiple points of view that tug at us. "Building a politics that reflects all the multiplic-

ity in our lives and in the world isn't optional," he declares, "but rather, absolutely necessary."

My father, an ecologist and fifth-generation radical, taught me this: "When two legitimate needs seem to be in conflict, neither side is asking for enough." We need an economy that saves both trees and people, a sexual culture that honors desire and sovereignty in all humans. Our job is not to discover the single issue that trumps all others, to fight for the priority of what presses on our own skin. It's to seek out the places where those skins rub, the spark-filled junctions where we could find ways to say a bigger yes, where we can add layer upon layer of meaning, rejoice in the complexity of our lives and use it to expand our desires beyond the limits of what we thought possible.

Eli credits the work of radical women of color with his early political education, naming the Combahee River Collective and the anthology *This Bridge Called My Back*. Speaking for myself, that work, of which I was a part, grew from our passionate rejection of single-issue organizing, pressed to choose between sexism and racism, to divide ourselves for the sake of other people's ease. It grew from standing in doorways we couldn't enter with our whole selves, where our multiple loyalties were attacked as treason instead of being recognized as the richly generative forces they are. I well remember those literal rooms full of argument where we struggled for alliance, often bitterly, urgently, angrily, reaching, nonetheless, for a politics that was both expansive and sharp.

In *Exile and Pride* Eli Clare brings us into one such room after another, to tangled moments that pit potential allies against each other, where the contradictions are deep and painful. In beautifully crafted prose that is both intensely vulnerably personal, and incisively analytical, he invites us to step up, to confront the shifting contexts and mixed allegiances that undermine self-righteous certainties, and go for something more difficult and rewarding.



In the center of the book, halfway between its covers, at the “jagged edge where self-hatred meets pride,” lies an essential question: How do we construct and reconstruct self-love in the face of the corrosive dehumanization and abusiveness oppression inflicts? How do we sift our traumatic histories for what we can celebrate and be proud of, for nuggets of inspiration, affirmation, self-respect? When can a derogatory term be repurposed into a vehicle of self-affirmation, and when does the stench of its history prove too intolerable?

Scanning a catalogue of examples, including *queer* and *crip*, which he embraces, Eli stops at *freak* to unravel his gut reactions and intellectual probing. He asks us to consider the freak show, simultaneously a site of both unabashed exploitation and degradation, and a sometimes sparkling defiance and agency. While proponents and detractors alike tend to simplify the freak show story to one of victimhood or heroism, Eli’s exploration is nuanced and contextual.

The collective history is hard to reduce to a pure story of resistance and subversion that I want to celebrate and use. . . . This collision of histories leads me to think about the act of witnessing. Are there kinds of freakdom . . . that we need to bear witness to rather than incorporate into our pride? How does witness differ from pride?

For me as well as for Eli, *crip* and *queer* slide much more easily into the realm of pride, and *freak* makes me wince. My body only intermittently proclaims my freakishness. Only for the few minutes, once every few years, that I am actually convulsing on the ground, tongue bloody, garments soaked with urine, am I exhibitable as that kind of strange. It’s the tip of an intricate, often beautiful iceberg of neurological difference that, most of the time, no one else can tell is there. But in spite of a long history of epileptics being confined and hidden from public view, the people who abused me provoked and exhibited my seizures. In some way, my

neurology contributed to my value in the international industry of child pornography and prostitution. So in spite of my normative body, I have a stake in the discussion.

But as Eli leads us, step by step, through the contradictions of that century-long phenomenon—the financial success and professional control of some freak show stars and the price paid for it, the impossibility of autonomy or reward for the unnamed Africans and indigenous people exhibited as savages, the toxicity of the stares and of the fictions woven around their bodies, the collusion of freak show managers and performers to exploit the gullible rubes, the affirmation of their normalcy that audiences sought and paid for, and the subsequent rise of a horrifying contemporary medicalized freakdom dominated by doctors and telethon hosts, of medical stripping and institutional incarceration, with few avenues for defiance—I find myself reaching for my pencil to sketch a parallel inquiry into words like *sick*, which the chronically ill have begun reclaiming, and *invalid*, which so far we have not.

Sparks of questions fly off the page where our lives collide: What do the profound differences between disability and illness mean for organizing? What does it mean for our political work that more and more illnesses, from epilepsy to Ebola, are linked with environmental causes, that the binding of land and body is not just metaphorical, but profoundly physical? Has tourism, with its underbelly of sexual exploitation, taken up some part of the freak show's racist legacy? (As I write this I remember the cruise ships docking in San Juan, the camera dangling hordes rushing through the streets, posing whomever they can grab beside palm trees or holding coconuts, the avid gaze devouring the exotic and making my skin crawl.) What are the reasons, historical and visceral, that mark the words I will and will not accept? When do we celebrate, when do we howl with rage, when do we witness and mourn?

In a talk I gave this year in Havana, called “Histerimonia: Declarations of a Trafficked Girl,” I wrote of the place where I was born, a rural section of the township of Maricao. The word *maricao* means the suffering or sacrifice of a woman named Mari. It’s also a tree of the ever more deforested highlands of my country. The place where I collided with two kinds of violence, sexual and ecological. For me, the destruction of the land and the poisoning and violation of my body are inseparable, wound together on the spindle of a conquest that from the beginning was narrated as a sexual act.

In the final section, Eli digs deep into the body’s traumas, detailing how, through sexual and physical abuse “adults teach children bodily lessons about power and hierarchy.” He goes on to say, “At the same time, our bodies are not merely blank slates upon which the powers that be write their lessons. We cannot ignore the body itself: the sensory, mostly non-verbal experience of our hearts and lungs, muscles and tendons, telling the world who we are.” It’s an affirmation of resilience.

Writing in 1998 about the ways that land becomes a metaphor in the politics of migration, colonialism, national liberation, I say something similar: “whenever I sit here listening to the wind in the trees, the haunting cry of the lizard cuckoos in the valley proclaiming the coming downpour, smell the sunbaked ferns and decaying banana leaves and feel the dense clay under me, the symbol begins to unravel. Slowly, as I listen to it, the land becomes itself again.” Wounded and alive, body, earth, and the kinships we build from them remain our deepest sources of renewal.

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“Gender reaches into disability; disability wraps around class; class strains against abuse, abuse snarls into sexuality; sexuality folds on top of race . . . everything finally piling into a single human body. To write about any aspect of identity, any aspect of the body, means writing about this entire maze.”

Whenever I find myself unable to write my way through the maze to where I thought I was going, I write about why I can't write. I turn toward the wound and listen. This is the practice that shines throughout this book: Eli Clare keeps turning us toward the obstacle, the wound, the complication, and in doing so, turns us toward each other. Turns us toward the place of passionate disagreement, the seeming conflict of real needs.

So I turn again to the land and to our bodies, to the broken cedar and guayacán, and our bodies' theft by sexual violation, to mudslides and erosion, nightmares and scars, and the possibility of reclaiming our bodies, lands, and peoples. To this truth: "But just as the stolen body exists, so does the reclaimed body . . . a bone once fractured, now whole, but different from the bone never broken."

I was asked, once, "how do you live with so much fracturing, so much loss?" *The story of what is broken*, I answered, *is something whole*.

"The stolen body, the reclaimed body, the body that knows itself and the world, the stone and the heat that warms it: my body has never been singular. Disability snarls into gender. Class wraps around race. Sexuality strains against abuse. *This* is how to reach beneath the skin."

Skin of our bodies and skin of the world. This is how to understand the land as well as the flesh. To be unsingular, fractured and whole, grieving and proud, in universal solidarity and difficult alliance, never to allow urgency or burning injury to keep us from demanding the whole, intricate, inclusive story.

Exile and Pride doesn't provide us with answers, but neither does it only pose questions. Instead it keeps issuing this challenging invitation: to bring our whole broken selves to these problems within which we struggle and engage them with all of our beings. Search your pockets. Start jotting it down, your own map of contradictions. I have to go now. Everything is humming. I need to write.