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Brilliant Interdependence

This essay was originally curated in 2021 based on Eli Clare's book, *Brilliant Imperfection*. The essay has been minimally updated to be accurate to this moment in time, but remains largely intact from its inception for feminist philosophy with Dr. Jenkins.

When reading *Brilliant Imperfection*, I was really struck by Clare's discussion of interdependence. So much of the dialogue on disability is focused on independence, and even goes so far as to pathologize dependent relationships. This kind of thinking is assumed as natural, but Clare details this as a product of white western society. Reflecting on this some more, I have traced connections between this thinking and capitalism, masculinity, and heteronormativity–all notable elements in white western society. Where have my perspectives failed me in this reflection? How has white supremacy and cultural ignorance also promoted this thinking in our culture? In recognizing the limitation of my own ideations, I will discuss these three connections to a rejection of interdependence.

Capitalism encourages independence and a maximization of productivity to increase the output of the working class. This shows up in a lot of western-capitalist values; someone who is able to provide for themself and not strain social time, effort, or resources in caretaking situations is socially above someone who will not or can not be self-sufficient. The connection between these values and capitalism becomes more apparent when examining the arguments from laissez-faire proponents, or even in discussion with liberal family members: the former do not want to fund social welfare, and the latter give preference to social welfare that promotes gaining skills and cutting of dependent relationships in exchange for self-sufficiency.

Masculinity is tied to a rejection of interdependence as men are expected to be providers, and thus able to take care of themselves or their family. This affects more than just men,

however. Because masculinity is valued more than femininity, interdependence is seen as a superior trait to dependence in a highly gendered way.

Heteronormativity, including the expectation of monogamous romantic relationships, reinforces a certain type of independence, namely independence of two partnered individuals from the rest of the world. Living with three women last year, all of whom were in heterosexual relationships, I saw firsthand how heteronormativity can actually act to cut individuals off from community. Our goal moving in together was to form a support network and live with our friends, but instead we became isolated and sought out only our partners for support. There was no logical reason for this, and we were all good enough friends. The structures of heteronormativity were so prevalent that they disrupted our plans for community, leaving us independent within the unit of each relationship, and disrupting an interdependent community more in line with what Clare describes. In other situations, platonic relationships are devalued, leading both to less commitment and also to a level of taboo if reaching out for support. This forces individuals not in a romantic relationship to intentionally seek out relationships beyond the heteronormate, or else be left without intimate and close relationships. Finally, polyamory is not socially accepted, although it offers yet another way to expand support network, due to heteronormative ideals.

Essentially, interdependence challenges many of the structures that white western society is based on. Clare describes the drive to reject dependency:

White Western culture goes to extraordinary lengths to deny the vital relationships between water and stone, plant and animal, human and nonhuman, as well as the utter reliance of human upon human. Within this culture of denial, when those of us who don't currently need help dressing ourselves or going to the bathroom try to imagine

interdependence, we fail. In conjuring a world where we need care to get up in the morning and go to bed at night, we picture an overwhelming dependency, a terrifying loss of privacy and dignity. We don't pause to notice that our fears reflect not the truth but the limits of our imagination.

This is especially poignant as it illustrates that independence is, to some extent, an illusion. Of course there are varying degrees of independence, but those which are prevalent in our society actually require a high degree of dependence. I think about successful men who are married to stay-at-home women. They are seen as providers for their ability to earn large incomes, but would they be able to do this at all if it were not for the women who married them? The profession of your spouse has a tremendous effect on your own success, yet this is not recognized as dependence. This example in particular shows how concepts of masculinity can shape our notions of independence.

Considering how dependence has been produced by the standards of white western society, Clare implores us to reflect on what we think dependency means: a loss of dignity and privacy. These values are situated within a white western cultural context, and especially dignity is further associated with masculinity. These associations are not questioned, and thus serve to perpetuate the valuation of independence. That said, Clare asks us to imagine interdependence.

I did my own imagining of this last year; as I originally wrote this essay, I sought "a closer-knit community to live with". In my words, this included having deep-rooted relationships with a multitude of people in my life, and seeking out mutual support. In addition, it involved a recognition that my life is greatly enriched by holding space for other social connectivity and being part of a vibrant and larger interdependent community. Since first writing this essay, when

I was in the process of seeking out such an environment, I am pleased to report back that I was non-trivially successful in cultivating those connections.

While I still struggle to accept support, I do so more readily now. Although heteronormativity still weighs heavily on where I draw care from, I continue to push back against the narrative that platonic relationships are less valuable and, furthermore, I now prioritize and hold space for my identity as a queer person in my romantic relationship. I, along with my relationships (which ultimately are also an essential part of me), am still a work in progress. That said, *Brilliant Imperfection* continues to be a huge help in defining and guiding me in doing that work. In imagining and achieving a future full of love, support, and happiness I have looked to Eli Clare's groundbreaking book.

In imagining interdependence, I have also identified the ways that concepts of independence have been harmful in my life. In many ways, independence has produced mental illness for me more than anything else; by nature of our society, I have striven to be as independent, and thus isolated, as possible. This example inspires theoretical consideration. Disability is defined as a level of dependence of others, but this constructs independence as natural and the ultimate goal. Ultimately, in making independence a requirement for being non-disabled, disability is further produced through social construction.

Taking into account both the connection between independence and oppression, as well as independence and the construction of disability that I have considered, I wonder what lives we would live if we leaned into interdependence? Would this challenge the existing structures of oppression in our society and allow us to live more enriched, compassionate lives? Would people living with disabilities be connected to communities essential to their happiness and survival,

instead of the relentless pursuit of independence that leaves so many individuals worse off? I am

grateful to Clare for encouraging our imaginations of this world.