



## Biopluralism, Disability, and Democratic Politics

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## Biopluralism, Disability, and Democratic Politics

The rejection of disability as a tragic biological condition is central to affirmative disability politics in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century Anglo tradition. If disability were primarily tragic, then pity, prevention, and elimination are the most adequate responses. If disability were primarily a tragic *biological* condition, then medical science would be the best form of redress. In disputing that disability is a tragic biological condition, disability activists and scholars have articulated a variety of ways to redefine what disability is and why a political response to disability is vital. This paper focuses on one particularly widespread approach to disability as a political question: the universalization of disability. The *universalization of disability*<sup>1</sup> has two main components: 1) if a person lives long enough, they will eventually be disabled by age or accident (Bérubé 1996, Carlson 2009, Clifford Simplican 2015, Garland-Thomson 2009, Vogler and Breckenridge 2001) and 2) the universal condition of disability reveals disability exclusion from politics and justice as the result of prejudice and oppression and not legitimate concerns of appropriateness (Bérubé 1996, Clifford Simplican 2015, Davis 2013, Garland-Thomson 2012). There is an intuitive appeal here: many people have seen family and friends experience impairments of age or injury or have experienced them personally; the notion that previously qualified people are now disqualified from democratic citizenship seems, again intuitively, wrong.

I want to resist the intuitive simplicity of this claim for a politics of disability because it is productive of a problematic democratic politics. Securing disability's claim to politics through

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<sup>1</sup> Universalizing disability is related to but not the same as shared vulnerability. Shared vulnerability posits that there are human traits that make vulnerability part of the human experience. Universalizing disability makes a more fundamental ontological claim that what it means to be human is to become disabled if one lives long enough. One can refer to the vulnerability of human bodies to injury without claiming that disability is a kind of human destiny. This article is restricted to criticizing the latter.

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3 universal disability produces a political horizon of equality and sameness. It becomes the task of  
4 politics to (re)produce that basic human equality. Yet when politics inevitably fails to equalize the  
5 status of all persons in relation to their disabilities, the question of what a disability politics is and  
6 how to contest the anti-politics of disability remains unanswered. A reimagining of politics may  
7 produce new horizons for a democratic sense of disability.  
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14 This paper is an attempt at that reimagining. I posit that disability's difference, not its  
15 universality, secures a potentially more productive claim on democratic politics. I term this turn to  
16 disability's difference *biopluralism*. Biopluralism asserts that what we share as humans is that we each  
17 inhabit distinct bodies that condition but do not determine our relation to a shared world.  
18  
19 Biopluralism posits that disability is an inherent part of that pluralism but does not require that all  
20 people see themselves as potentially disabled in order to secure the claim that disability matters for  
21 democracy. Biopluralism transforms the Arendtian claims that "men, not Man, live on the earth and  
22 inhabit the world" (1958, 7) and that "plurality is the condition of human action because we are all  
23 the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived,  
24 lives, or will live" (1958, 8) to explicitly include the biological variation that makes disability a part of  
25 the human condition. We vary in chosen and unchosen ways such that creating meaning through the  
26 unchosen aspects of our variation enlarges how politics can grapple with disability itself. While  
27 biopluralism does not suggest any particular course of politics (e.g. securing a universal right to  
28 health care or transforming disability insurance), it does help in thinking about politics in its function  
29 as a space of collective deliberation and action. Namely, biopluralism accomplishes three tasks:  
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- 49 1. Makes clear the injustice of the exclusion of people with disabilities from political  
50 deliberation and action through placing disability as part of our shared world.
- 51 2. Deepens the potential meaning of "representation" in democratic politics such that the  
52 importance of narrative and making difference present in politics is crucial for disability  
53 citizenship even if an individual cannot represent themselves.  
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3 3. Makes clear that affirming disability is a political action; disability is not inherently valuable  
4 or valueless and the decision to affirm disability requires political action.<sup>2</sup>  
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6 To make these claims, I turn to Eli Clare who writes eloquently about disability, queerness,  
7 transness, and the earth. He exemplifies what a biopluralist politics might look like in relation to  
8 claiming disability as an entry into the messiness of human action.  
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### 11 Universalizing Disability and the Problem of Democratic Politics 12

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15 The impulse for theorists to universalize disability stems from disability's status as politically  
16 disqualifying. Liberal theory's investment in the autonomous, rational, and self-interested individual  
17 required the definition of the dependent, irrational, and undesiring as inimical to the functioning of a  
18 secure polity (Nussbaum 2006, Clifford Simplican 2015, Arneil and Hirschmann 2016). The vast  
19 infrastructure of institutions that segregated and isolated people with physical, intellectual, and  
20 psychiatric disabilities was central in American political development as was the attendant growth of  
21 eugenic thought that constructed people with disabilities as a threat to the national order (Noll and  
22 Trent 2004). How, then, to make the case that disabled people have political agency and ought to be  
23 participants in collective decision making and contestation?  
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36 Many scholars begin their answer by recognizing that definitions of disability as lack,  
37 inability, or biological abnormality are artifacts of an ableist ideology (Oliver 1990, Campbell 2009).  
38 Ableism posits the inherent inferiority of disabled lives and organizes the built environment, science  
39 and medicine, norms and customs, and individual affect with a construct of disabled lives as tragic,  
40 pitiable, and rightly avoided. Disability activism, then, contests this multi-faceted ideological and  
41 material formation.  
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51 <sup>2</sup> By contrast, universalizing disability posits the injustice as the exclusion of people with disabilities  
52 to be an issue of arbitrary delineations between temporarily able-bodied people and currently  
53 disabled people; may encourage a sense of direct representation on the basis that ability is not related  
54 to equality; and presumes that disability is inherently valuable, potentially shutting down democratic  
55 debate around preventing disability or compensating acquired disability.  
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3 In countering that disability is a condition of lack, several authors have claimed instead that  
4 disability, unlike many other identity formations, is not stable or temporally static. As Michael  
5 Bérubé has argued,  
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9 "disability" is the most labile and pliable of categories: it names thousands of human  
10 conditions and varieties of impairment, from the slight to the severe, from imperceptible  
11 physical incapacity to inexplicable developmental delay. It is a category whose constituency is  
12 contingency itself. Any of us who identify as "nondisabled" must know that our self-  
13 designation is inevitably temporary, and that a car crash, a virus, a degenerative genetic  
14 disease, or a precedent-setting legal decision could change our status in ways over which we  
15 have no control whatsoever. (1996, vii-viii)  
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25 It is the universal possibility of becoming disabled that challenges the stable categorization of  
26 legitimately excluded and included in political and social organization. Advocates of universalizing  
27 disability make appeals to logic (if we are all potentially disabled, then we all need rights protections)  
28 (Bérubé 1996), existentialism (the terror of the inevitably fallible body requires a psychic  
29 confrontation with one's construction of the disabled other as a failure of authenticity) (Clifford  
30 SImplican 2015), and deconstruction (disability is infinitely variable and thus dissolves the binaries of  
31 able/disabled and opens the possibility for radical *differance*) (Davis 2013; Shildrick 2009). Despite the  
32 differences in theoretical approach, the core of the claim remains the same: because disability  
33 circulates much more widely than is assumed, current politics of exclusion are unjustifiable and a  
34 new politics could emerge.  
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48 Building on previous work critical of this move to universalize disability, I offer two  
49 difficulties for such an approach to a new disability politics. I term the first the *sameness in difference*  
50 dilemma. On the one hand, positing the universal experience of disability asserts equality through  
51 sameness (because anyone could be disabled, we all deserve equal political inclusion designed for  
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3 people with disabilities). Bérubé asserts a natural equality (we are all equally susceptible to the needs  
4 associated with impairment) as a claim to political equality. Two problems arise here. First, there is a  
5 risk that associating disability with the inevitability of impairment reinforces the association of  
6 disability with lack that also remains a crucial disavowal for disability politics (Hughes 2007). The  
7 reduction of disability to the presence of impairment takes the beginning of politics to be an issue of  
8 redressing need rather than making space for the varied potential of disability within politics.  
9  
10 Second, the move to sameness requires a flattening of difference (that is, the imposition of a single  
11 categorical meaning to varied experience and existence). One can see the potential failure in trying to  
12 persuade someone with the flu that their dependence is the same as that of someone with cystic  
13 fibrosis. If disability is impairment and we are impaired to different degrees for different durations,  
14 political inclusion could be modeled for the impairments most easily integrated without displacing  
15 wider exclusions (Campbell 2005, Carlson 2009, 2010, Linton 1999).

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30 On the other hand, the universalization of disability stems from the fact that so many  
31 conditions are grouped under the label of disability. Spinal bifida, macular degeneration, Down  
32 syndrome, dwarfism, anxiety disorder, traumatic brain injury, and arthritis are all impairments  
33 associated with disability, yet experiences of types and severities of impairment, forms of social  
34 support, and individual outlook are endlessly variable. Some authors find political value in this  
35 absolute difference because it dissolves the binary logic of able-disabled (for if disability is infinitely  
36 varied, then no binary logic can account for lived reality) and forces each person to confront the  
37 illogic of disability disavowal (Shildrick 2009, McRuer 2006). Again, two issues confront such a  
38 move to absolute and irreducible difference. First, instead of rendering disability as a point of  
39 solidarity (we are all temporarily able-bodied), the reflection of one's potential disability might more  
40 realistically turn a person inward to consider their uniqueness as temporarily disabled (Heffernan  
41 2012). I may still understand my difference from others as a reason to pity those who are "*more*

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3 disabled,” rather than to join in common cause.<sup>3</sup> Whether solidarity or alienation is more likely is an  
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5 important empirical question that political psychology and social movement theorists are well-placed  
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7 to address. Second, irreducible and universal difference speaks against the possibility or desirability  
8  
9 of identity-based politics. While disability is often an imposed category, it is also a resource for self-  
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11 understanding, meaning-making, and normative resistance (Linton 1999). Simi Linton is particularly  
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13 worried about transforming disability from a claimed identity to a universal condition. If we are all  
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15 disabled, then no one is disabled, and so what difference does either the oppression of a group  
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17 called disabled, or their counter-assertion of disability pride matter? There is a potential willful  
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19 naivete at play if “I, too, am disabled/temporarily able bodied and do not care about accessible  
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21 buildings” is a resource for denying collective claim-making on political and social inclusion.  
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26 The second issue with universalizing disability is *undemocratic valuation*. The claim of the  
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28 universal status of disability often smuggles in an assertion of a new, positive valuation of disability.  
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30 For instance, Robert McRuer argues for disability as a contingent and temporally unstable universal.  
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32 There are moments where any given person is disabled, and, he claims, “*those disabled/queer moments*  
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34 *are desirable*” (157, emphasis in original). Similarly, Rosemarie Garland Thomson argues that a  
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36 biodiversity conservation model be applied to disability (2006). Just as environmentalists argue for  
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38 biodiversity as a crucial resource for sustaining the global biome, disability is part of human  
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44 <sup>3</sup> Some disabled activists argue against this objection, averring that disability difference is a source of  
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46 solidarity in practice. While this might be the case, imagining solidarity amongst able-bodied and  
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48 disabled people still remains theoretically elusive. But the source of solidarity may lay elsewhere.  
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50 During the 1977 occupation of a San Francisco federal building by disability activists demanding the  
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52 implementation of Section 504 protections, members of the Black Panther Party (BPP) brought in  
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54 meals for the protestors. Corbett O’Toole, one of the disabled protestors, recalls a conversation she  
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56 had with a member of the BPP where she asks why they would donate their very limited resources  
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58 to the disability sit-in: “You are trying to make the world a better place. And that is what we are  
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60 about. We are about making the world a better place for everybody. So if you are going to go to the  
trouble to stay here and sleep on this floor we are going to make sure you get fed” (*Crip Camp* 2020).  
Such sentiment seems to echo Wendy Brown’s rejection of identity-based rights claims (“I am”) in  
favor of articulating shared desires “I want this for us” (1995, 75).

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3 flourishing such that eliminating any particular type of disability has the potential of denuding  
4 democratic adaptability, all the worse for human survival.<sup>4</sup> But the assertion of disability's value is  
5 undemocratic because it presumes the value and meaning of disability prior to collective judgment  
6 over such claims.<sup>5</sup> This prior judgment has practical political consequences: how can we discuss  
7 physician-assisted suicide or impairment-selective abortion if all human variation is already valuable  
8 and must be conserved? Or perhaps more prosaically, how do we confront demands for  
9 uncontaminated drinking water, banning the use of landmines, or advocate folic acid for pregnant  
10 women if preventing disability is understood as the opposite of conserving disability or if disabled  
11 moments are desirable? The simple appeal of valuing disability as part of the universal human  
12 condition given the systematic devaluation of disability is difficult to resist. But societies must  
13 grapple with the messiness of the meaning and experience of disability if they are to be engaged in  
14 democratic politics.

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17 To summarize, universalizing disability as the basis for articulating disability politics provides  
18 a too simplistic starting point that distorts the lived experience of impairment and disability. The  
19 *sameness in difference dilemma* demonstrates that universalizing disability tethers political equality to an  
20 assertion of human equality in the inevitability of impairment. But when each person experiences  
21 impairment differently with different needs and interpretations, those claims to equality will lack

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<sup>4</sup> Note that neither of these authors are claiming the need to value disabled *people*; they appeal either to disability in terms of conditions or moments.

<sup>5</sup> Democratic here refers to the agonistic character of plurality politics; contestation and struggle over the value of disability has been at the heart of disability movements for several decades. Democracy here is not an appeal to majoritarian institutions. A simple referendum on the value of disability would, in most communities, likely reveal entrenched ableism. Rather, it is through political contestation that disabled people have shifted the terms of valuing disability; positing the value of disability as universal and unvarying denies this role of democratic politics. For instance, Nirmalla Erevelles argues that the radical potential of disability as an identity category beyond binaries is dependent on material conditions that are not available to the majority of people with disabilities. Valuing disability as a category without attending to the material deprivations that produce disability (war, imperialism, racism, capitalism, etc.) posits, at best, an empty universal good (2011).

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3 political efficacy, leaving disability exclusion intact and potentially undermining solidarity.

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5 *Undemocratic valuation* demonstrates a kind of naturalist fallacy at work where the universality of  
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7 disability implies the universal value of disability. But as with other naturalist fallacies, the collapsing  
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9 of the natural with the good is a poor guide for navigating the messiness of political decision making  
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11 that requires collective forms of judgment and action.  
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15         Against these objections, those who make use of universalizing disability could argue, quite  
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17 persuasively, that the empirics of their claims remain valid and that disability activists make use of  
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19 the same language (temporarily able-bodied) and the same logic (if someone lives long enough, they  
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21 will eventually be disabled), and so theory, here, is reflecting current practices of political solidarity.  
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23 On the empirical question, I can concede that there may be truth that if a person lives long enough,  
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25 they will experience impairment without also conceding that this fact should guide disability politics.  
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27 The second objection is more difficult. As this article focuses on disability scholarship, it does not  
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29 address the use of these claims in activist circles. Some of the criticisms offered here could be  
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31 empirically tested; survey experiments could verify whether non-disabled people experience shifts in  
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33 attitudes or affinities when presented claims of universal disability. Qualitative work with disability  
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35 activists could verify the degree to which these frames shape political demands and activity. But my  
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37 arguments move beyond describing political practice and provide critical analysis of the quality of  
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39 these discourses as forms of political practice. Not every practice of political actors ought to be  
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41 valorized because they are a part of political activism; assessing potential pitfalls provides new  
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43 resources for thinking democratic disability politics.  
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49         So how could we contend with the reality of “the body as both limit and potential” (Hughes  
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51 2007, 682) without running afoul of a reductionist and potentially undemocratic justification for  
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53 disability politics? One such alternative exists in reworking the thought of Hannah Arendt. Arendt  
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55 theorizes pluralism as a basic condition of politics, a claim I build on to think specifically about  
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3 disability and the importance of the body. *Biopluralism* posits that there is a facticity to the body,  
4 including the impaired body that is a condition that must be acknowledged but does not  
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6 overdetermine the actions of an individual. As such, disability politics based on biopluralism would  
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8 demonstrate the importance of sustaining narratives of the lives and actions of disabled people and  
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10 tie such narratives to a project of democratic disability inclusion. Biopluralism, by recognizing  
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12 embodied individuality that provides spaces of distinction for human communities, presents  
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14 collective choices of how the polity engages and values disability. Those choices can open new  
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16 possibilities for human relatedness more broadly.  
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## 20 21 Pluralism and Biopluralism 22 23

24 Humans are conditioned beings, but the conditions of our existence neither determine who  
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26 we are nor the direction of human politics. Against an essentialist human nature, Arendt posits a  
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28 human condition that allows us to understand the types of activities humans engage in. She  
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30 highlights several of these conditions: “natality and mortality, worldliness, plurality, and the earth,”  
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32 to which we could perhaps add impairment/disability (1958, 11), but she very clearly states that  
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34 these traits “can never “explain” what we are or answer the question of who we are for the simple  
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36 reason that they can never condition us absolutely” (1958, 11). Humans are not merely material  
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38 existences; there is an ineffable, unintelligible, excessive aspect of each human life that becomes  
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40 disclosed through the processes of public individuation. Such aspects constitute the “who” of each  
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42 person. Other, shared characteristics constitute the “what” of humans (for instance, a white, middle  
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44 class, heterosexual woman is identified through her shared traits with others (racial, economic,  
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46 sexuality, and gender categories). The “who” of politics “in plurality with others, reveals meaningful  
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48 dimensions of the shared world and of the agent’s contemporary and historical situation” (Tchir  
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50 2017, 5). That is, while there might be something that unites all women, that something is less  
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3 relevant for politics than the capacity of particular women to distinguish themselves through  
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5 political action.  
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8 The distinction between the “who” and the “what” is central for Arendt’s concept of the  
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10 political sphere as a distinct space where the administration of needs is a corrosive rather than a  
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12 central component. That is, when politics is a matter of the “what” (the sameness of human  
13  
14 identity), then the capacity of politics to exceed the needs of maintaining life is significantly  
15  
16 compromised.<sup>6</sup> Hannah Pitkin has argued that Arendt’s refusal of “the social question” in politics  
17  
18 renders her politics contradictory, amorphous, and potentially anti-feminist (Pitkin 1998). Similarly,  
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20 Kathryn Gines has argued that the refusal of social questions within politics informed Arendt’s  
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22 dismissal of central concerns of activism confronting anti-Black racism in the United States and  
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24 clouded her understanding of the effects of racial segregation as political issues (2014).  
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28 I do not dispute these criticisms, though other authors have found crucial resources for  
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30 rethinking both feminist and anti-racist projects in Arendt’s treatment of the social question (see  
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32 Zerilli 2005; LeSure 2015). Part of the problem might reside in the fact that “Arendt does not deny  
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34 the subject as embodied, but she does not know quite what to do with the body” (Zerilli 1995, 175).  
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36 On Zerilli’s account, Arendt understands both the overdetermination of the body and the attempt to  
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38 flee bodily existence as “a kind of worldlessness” (1995, 180). An excessive focus on the “whatness”  
39  
40 of the body turns one inward and produces the temptation to focus on one’s needs and desires as  
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42 stable, unchanging, and primarily biological. Biological necessity as a political question turns us  
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44 collectively against novelty and unpredictability as constitutive of human’s connection to the world  
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46 we hold in common.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, the repudiation of one’s embodied existence is productive  
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52 <sup>6</sup> The characterization of the Arendtitan political sphere as necessarily purified of all practical  
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54 interests can, of course, be overdrawn. See the edited volume by Berkowitz, Katz, and Keenan 2010.

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56 <sup>7</sup> “World” for Arendt is an artificial, fabricated, and shared, objective condition that connects  
57  
58 humans to one another. See Ella Myers (2013) for an elaboration of Arendt’s worldliness as the  
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60 condition of a democratic politics.

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3 of a deprived connection to the world and one which comes to require “violent injustice” and  
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5 “forcing one part of humanity into the darkness of pain and necessity” (Arendt 1958, 119). That is,  
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7 for some to flee their embodiment, they require others (historically, slaves and non-enslaved  
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9 women) to do all the work of bodily maintenance who are thereby excluded from political existence.  
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11 And so while the body is the “locus of radical heterogeneity and vitality... not the limit point but  
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13 rather the condition for the nonsovereign subject of Arendt’s action” (Zerilli 1995, 180), the body  
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15 remains largely undifferentiated in Arendt’s thought.  
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19 Biopluralism allows for a more robust place for the body in Arendt’s thought without giving  
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21 into the temptation of identity’s overdetermination of politics.<sup>8</sup> Biopluralism builds on the notion  
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23 that humans are conditioned beings and that plurality is an intangible aspect of the self that exceeds  
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25 materiality. We are all born into body-minds that no one else has ever been born into nor will ever  
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27 be born into in the future. Furthermore, we do not choose the body-minds we are born into. While  
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29 we may choose to alter them in both permanent and ephemeral ways, these body-minds form one of  
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31 the bases by which we enter into the world. Thus, we ought to think about how these body-minds –  
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33 in their unchosen plurality – serve to condition each individuals’ relation to the world. And if we  
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35 acquire impairments through the course of our lives, that too is part of what conditions our relation  
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37 to the world. Here, we can understand that the separation of the “what” from the “who” in Arendt  
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39 is both instructive and deceptive. On the one hand, we err when we take the conditions of bodily  
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41 difference as a justification to reduce other’s connections to the world. The justifications of “natural  
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43 slavery” in Aristotle, the assertion of women’s natural suitedness for domesticity, the construction of  
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45 racial hierarchy, and the fear of intellectual disability are all premised on the fact that bodily variation  
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53 <sup>8</sup> Some have suggested that my concept would benefit from reframing, as “bio” risks biologizing  
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55 disability, in the vein of biopolitics or bioethics. My claim here, though, is that politics needs to stop  
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57 fleeing the materiality of the body, and so the inclusion of biological without presuming its logical  
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59 compulsion is important for resisting these other “bio” frames.  
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3 requires exclusion from appearance in the public sphere.<sup>9</sup> The reduction of “who” one is to the  
4 “what” of these categories (sex, race, impairment) operates as the crux of multiple injustices. On the  
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6 other hand, the separation of the “who” from the “what” obscures how we engage in processes of  
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8 meaning making, interpretation, and interaction through the interplay of the body-mind with the  
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10 world and the ineffable, unsignifiable self. The forms of the unsignifiable self (desires, pleasures,  
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12 eudaimonia, etc.) that are irreducible to the reasoning mind are also interdependent with the body.  
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14 What would Achilles be without his mortal ankle, Oedipus without his club feet and self-inflicted  
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16 blindness? It is not that these heroes – their actions and speech – are determined by their bodies. It  
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18 is that their bodies are inseparable from the intangibles of who they are.  
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23 Eli Clare, the poet, essayist, and activist, elaborates embodied difference that demonstrates  
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25 the possibilities of biopluralism. While Clare makes no explicit references to Arendt, his work  
26  
27 provides insights into what an Arendtian politics of disability, modified by biopluralism, might look  
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29 like in our current moment. What characterizes Clare’s thinking on disability (as well as identity  
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31 more generally) is a sense that disability is messy. Messiness is experienced in his relation to medical  
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33 technology – which facilitated his birth after an ovarian cyst was removed from his mother’s  
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35 abdomen, diagnosed him as “mentally retarded,”<sup>10</sup> subjected him to painful corrective devices, and  
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37 facilitated his gender transition through top surgery. In narrating his birth, where “I am alive today  
38  
39 because of medical technology,” where he was born “no larger than a grapefruit,” Clare writes, “I  
40  
41 tell this story not as a tragedy, but a truth, a shrug of the shoulders, water over rock” (2017, 5). At  
42  
43 the heart of this truth is that dead brain cells produced his cerebral palsy, but “even if there were a  
44  
45 cure for brain cells that died at birth, I’d refuse. I have no idea who I’d be without my tremoring and  
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50  
51 <sup>9</sup> These are not inevitable conclusions when we think of the “what” of existence.

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53 <sup>10</sup> While this term is no longer in use and is considered by many to be an oppressive term, Clare  
54  
55 refers to the actual diagnosis he received as a child to highlight the continuity between medical  
56  
57 diagnoses with the slurs often used against him. I have retained his language with scare quotes to  
58  
59 accurately portray his writing.  
60

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2  
3 tensing muscles, slurring tongue” (2017, 6). This begins his meditation on cure, an ideology that  
4  
5 aims at “the restoration of health,” that can never help but fail at this notion of restoration *because of*  
6  
7 what I am calling biopluralism and what Clare takes as the interdependent nature of his disability and  
8  
9 who he is. Cure both speaks to why Arendt’s diagnosis of the social question as eroding politics may  
10  
11 have some relevance to disability politics (where “cure” manages the “needs” of the body and  
12  
13 justifies the exclusion of disabled people from politics) at the same time that demands for the social  
14  
15 provision of needs is central to disability politics.  
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18  
19 Clare outlines three tenets of the ideology of cure: “cure requires damage, locating the harm  
20  
21 entirely within the individual human body-minds...it grounds itself in an original state of being,  
22  
23 relying on a belief that what existed before is superior to what exists currently. And finally, it seeks  
24  
25 to return what is damaged to that former state of being” (2017, 15). Biopluralism rejects these tenets  
26  
27 of cure because it posits that the condition of the (impaired) body is not necessarily damage that  
28  
29 deviated from an original and superior state of being. For those like Clare, whose “damage” is natal,  
30  
31 a notion of Clare without a disability “arises from an imagination of what [he] should be like, from  
32  
33 some definition of *normal* and *natural*,” not from “[his] visceral history” (15). The ideology of cure  
34  
35 erases the legitimacy of disabled lives; it is a repudiation of biopluralism. Clare’s anger at the erasure  
36  
37 of disabled lives is palpable as he imagines the life Carrie Buck lived after her forced sterilization  
38  
39 became a test case for the constitutionality of eugenic sterilizations in the United States. It is  
40  
41 palpable in his rejection of the characterization of Terry Schiavo as a “vegetable” rather than a  
42  
43 woman whose inner life was unknowable after she fell into a coma. In these tales he also mourns  
44  
45 what could have been of these lives if they were not disqualified by the impossibility of cure. Yet  
46  
47 Clare also recounts a moment of deep inner rebuke to his railing against cure, when, at a talk, a  
48  
49 friend with cancer attends. Clare feels chastened, for what is the meaning of cure for his friend? It is  
50  
51 in his interpersonal exchange with her afterward that his “impulse to rant has vanished” (13). These  
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3 lives, then, speak to the messiness of a democratic disability politics that cannot simply affirm or  
4  
5 negate cure. Unlike a technocratic approach to cure or politics, the messiness of both disability and  
6  
7 democratic politics speaks to the need for inclusive engagement. Politics is messy because it creates  
8  
9 the openness to new futures that makes democracy appropriate for humans in their plurality. The  
10  
11 inclusion of disability perspectives enriches our collective capacity to come to judgment that  
12  
13 remedies the approach of strict good/bad binary logic that drive traditional relations to cure and  
14  
15 disability.  
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18  
19 Clare further articulates his own desire to sit with the messiness of his relation to cure when  
20  
21 recounting his pursuit of top surgery to remove his breasts. First, as opposed to the earlier diagnoses  
22  
23 of cerebral palsy, “mental retardation,” and schizophrenia, which were assigned to him, he actively  
24  
25 seeks a new diagnosis of gender identity disorder in order to qualify for surgery. He seeks out this  
26  
27 diagnosis for himself not “because I thought of my desire to reshape my gendered and sexed body-  
28  
29 mind as a disorder” (139), but because his surgeon wanted a letter of recommendation before  
30  
31 performing chest reconstruction. The diagnosis is a tool by which Clare can fulfill his desire. This  
32  
33 desire to medically alter a body, a disabled body it has taken Clare a lifetime to continually love and  
34  
35 reaffirm, places Clare squarely in the messiness of cure. But instead of trying to resolve it (trans  
36  
37 identity is distinct from disability, for instance), Clare asserts “I so need that messier story that allows  
38  
39 our body-minds and desires to be inexplicable...I can either try to fix the contradictions or embrace  
40  
41 them” (177).  
42  
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46 Clare’s meditations on cure, as an ideology with material effects for his and other disabled  
47  
48 lives, is one lens into biopluralism. First, Clare’s own understanding of his life struggling with and  
49  
50 against cure to affirm his body-mind shows the imbrication of the intangible self with the material  
51  
52 conditions of its existence. Second, cure, as an attempt to produce sameness in body-minds, is the  
53  
54 eradication of the bodily difference that makes up part of how Clare comes to distinguish himself as  
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3 an activist and writer. That is, Clare does not write poetry, engage in political activism, or speak in  
4 public *because* of his embodied self. But the expression of his desires and relatedness to the world are  
5 imbricated with his embodiment. Finally, part of the oppression of the pursuit of the sameness of  
6 cure is the eradication of the individuality of Carrie Buck, Terry Schiavo, and the countless unnamed  
7 people who were denied both personal access to the political and appearance in the human story of  
8 history. Instead of denying biopluralism, acknowledging disabled body-minds as part of the  
9 conditions of human existence creates a different horizon for disability politics.

### 19 Politics as a Distinguishing Space

21 When Arendt claims that pluralism is the condition through which politics emerge, she is  
22 claiming a relation between the human condition, action, and speech. Namely, “human plurality, the  
23 basic condition of both action and speech, has the twofold character of equality and distinction. If  
24 men were not equal, they could neither understand each other and those who came before them nor  
25 plan for the future and foresee the needs of those who will come after them. If men were not  
26 distinct...they would need neither speech nor action to make themselves understood” (175-176).  
27 Arendt’s plurality is more than otherness, which she says is just a basic characteristics of all things ( $x$   
28  $\neq y$ ); what makes plurality different is that “only man can express this distinction and distinguish  
29 himself, and only he can communicate himself and not merely something – thirst or hunger  
30 affection or hostility or fear” (176), or in other words, “men distinguish themselves instead of  
31 merely being distinct” (176).<sup>11</sup>

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49 <sup>11</sup> Some disability scholars have argued that Arendt’s focus on speech is itself disability exclusive (see  
50 Clifford Simpican 2015). Two aspects of Arendt’s thinking mitigate the force of this critique. As  
51 Simpican herself acknowledges, Arendt’s concept of plural and public action provides crucial  
52 resources for thinking of collective disability democratic action (2015, 100). Second, Arendt does not  
53 claim that each individual’s speech is what sustains their place in our collective world. Rather, it is  
54 the work of historians and storytellers that do the crucial work of sustaining distinguishing action.  
55 By not requiring equality of capacity as a condition of political action and speech, Arendt may help

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3 The distinguishing activity of people makes up the subjective content of politics. When  
4 people act and speak “directly to one another” then their words and deeds, while not tangible,  
5 constitute the “web of human relationships” (183). The objective content of politics arise out of  
6 “specific, worldly, interests,” so politics is “*about* some worldly objective reality in addition to being a  
7 disclosure of the acting and speaking agent” (182). The notion of interest, the *inter-est*, or what “lies  
8 between people and therefore can relate and bind them together” creates a tangible relation in  
9 addition to the intangible web of human relations constituted through the direct address.<sup>12</sup>

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19 Political acts thus include the disclosure of an unsignifiable uniqueness of the individual that  
20 can only happen between people. This requirement of the presence of others is because we disclose  
21 ourselves without knowing ourselves. There is an aspect of each person that is only apparent to  
22 others. There is risk in such disclosure: in the presence of others, one loses control of how such  
23 disclosure is taken up.

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Arendt’s conception of speech and action as crucial for the disclosure of the individual has  
some surprising relations to embodiment. The possibility of public disclosure is presented as an  
issue of life and death. Arendt describes a life lived without speech and action as a life “literally dead  
to the world; it has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men” (1958, 176).  
By the same token, “with word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world, and this

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us think of the relation of speech to politics as itself non-sovereign (my words do not have to be my  
own to “count” politically).

<sup>12</sup> Much of the scholarship of Arendt and political action has focused on the objective (often  
referred to as intersubjective) form of politics, leaving quite a bit of ambiguity surrounding what,  
exactly, the subjective form of politics looks like. There might be some hint in Arendt’s description  
of Karl Jaspers as possessed with *humanitas*: “something that was the very height of humanness  
because it was valid without being objective” (Arendt, quoted in Berkowitz 2010, 254). Roger  
Berkowitz contextualizes this description with reference with Jaspers refusal to leave Germany  
during World War II and appearing in public with silent resistance to the Nazi regime. The silent  
appearance in public speaks to the possibility of a solely subjective element of politics; Jaspers is  
enmeshed in a web of human relations, but there is no object held in common by his silent presence;  
it is the web of relations that give meaning to his act that well exceeds any reasoned or controllable  
aspect of the act.

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3 insertion is like a second birth” (176).<sup>13</sup> The meaningfulness of living in the world with others in  
4  
5 relations not solely determined by necessity is so important that it is a matter of life and death that  
6  
7 exceeds biology. Yet this second birth is how “we confirm and take upon ourselves the naked fact of  
8  
9 our original physical appearance” (176-177). That is, the relation between what we disclose to others  
10  
11 in speech, action, and judgment is a *confirmation* of our embodied selves. This confirmation is not the  
12  
13 same as a ratification (I am what I appear to be) but the capacity for relation between our intangible  
14  
15 self and our material existence.  
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18  
19 Read through biopluralism, an individual’s impairment (or the existence of impairment and  
20  
21 disability in the world) is related to but exceeds the conditions of encounter with others. The  
22  
23 appearance in public, the engagement in speech and action and judgment, confirms the impaired,  
24  
25 embodied self but one’s self is not reducible to that term of encounter. The capacity to distinguish  
26  
27 oneself requires a relation to the world regardless of one’s disability status. At the same time, one’s  
28  
29 intangible uniqueness of self may also be related to or even be best disclosed in relation to the  
30  
31 objective reality of impairment in the world. Politics can be recontextualized by disability and  
32  
33 impairment so that both the world (and its relation to producing impairment and disabling  
34  
35 conditions) and the individual (whose own body-mind may impair particular desired functions  
36  
37 regardless of the worldly conditions in which they exist) such that the world and the individual are  
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39 disclosed in disability politics.  
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44 Again, Eli Clare provides clarity for why thinking about the confirmation of our embodied  
45  
46 selves in our political action is useful. Clare provides a metaphorical lens for diagnosing a core  
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50 <sup>13</sup> There may be some worry that with this description, those without the capacity to communicate  
51  
52 or act are rendered by Arendt as not human. While this reading is understandable, there is a tension  
53  
54 between this reading and Arendt’s original assertion that no qualities are essential to counting as  
55  
56 human. Instead, I think we can read the capacity for presence in the public for non-communicative  
57  
58 people as an act in itself and the possibility of such individuals to live in the web of human relations  
59  
60 and crucial for rethinking the terms of a non-communicative inclusion in politics even if this far  
exceeds Arendt’s intent; see footnote 11.

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2  
3 frustration for living in a world with a disability: the imperative to overcome. In “The Mountain,”  
4  
5 Clare argues that there is an invocation for marginalized people that life at “the top” is grand and  
6  
7 that marginalized people are at the bottom of the mountain “because we are lazy, stupid, weak and  
8  
9 ugly” (2009, 1). But unlike other accounts of how the stratification of society heaps the marginalized  
10  
11 at the bottom while the top enjoy the best things in life (power, money, success), Clare’s  
12  
13 metaphorical exploration is focused on the imperative to attempt to climb the mountain and  
14  
15 overcome one’s marginalization. The imperative to overcome sets an impossible dilemma for many  
16  
17 marginalized people, and, in the context of disability, it is often the imperative to deny impairment.  
18  
19 That denial of impairment sets up the supercrip trope, where a disabled person who performs  
20  
21 ordinary tasks (like a person with Down syndrome who has a long-term girlfriend) or extraordinary  
22  
23 tasks (like hiking the Appalachian Trail) become remarkable *because* of a person’s disability. The  
24  
25 supercrip becomes the flip side of disability as tragedy; the person with the disability becomes  
26  
27 reduced to caricature instead of being understood in their uniqueness. Unlike the representation of  
28  
29 the few supercrips, for many disabled people, the imperative to overcome sets one up for the  
30  
31 possibility of denial and alienation. Clare posits an alternative to the mountain: creating the body as  
32  
33 home. Wherever one finds oneself on the mountain of achievement, at some point, the decision to  
34  
35 find community and comfort, beginning with comfort in one’s own skin, as opposed to striving and  
36  
37 self-denial, is necessary to create a new world of belonging.

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44 Clare’s invocation of the body as home contra the mountain of achievement demonstrates  
45  
46 the importance of seeking self-disclosure instead of adopting and conforming to the expectations of  
47  
48 achievement imposed externally. The fact that the body is seen as the potential for home  
49  
50 demonstrates a less alienating relation to the self where one can confirm one’s embodied self in its  
51  
52 relation to others. The idea of living a life in relation to the body as opposed to a life as an attempt  
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54 to overcome the body takes human uniqueness and a sense of a confirmed embodied self that allows  
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3 a different form of human distinction. Of central importance to politics, the body as home is also  
4  
5 about the capacity to create community with those with whom one shares a world. To make one's  
6  
7 body a home, especially a body that has been marked as disqualified from politics, requires collective  
8  
9 effort for its acceptance and maintenance.  
10

## 11 Conclusion

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14 Politics, the sphere of speech and action, is the sphere of heroes (1958, 186). Arendtian  
15  
16 heroes are not the heroes we typically think of. Instead, she is recuperating a Homeric sense of the  
17  
18 term, where a hero is the name "given each free man who participated in the Trojan enterprise and  
19  
20 about whom a story could be told" (1958, 186). The courage associated with the hero is, for Arendt,  
21  
22 the courage of self-disclosure through speech and action, "in leaving one's private hiding place and  
23  
24 showing who one is" (1958, 186). Politics, then, is the story of heroes who can never be the full  
25  
26 authors of their own story, who cannot be credited with beginning but whose difference is disclosed  
27  
28 in relation to the conditioned reality of their existence. But for heroes to persist beyond their own  
29  
30 self-disclosure, they must be memorialized through the act of storytellers. In fact, all action, whether  
31  
32 revelatory of the individual human or the worldly collective meaning, "reveals itself fully only to the  
33  
34 storyteller, that is, to the backward glance of the historian, who indeed always knows better what it  
35  
36 was all about than the participants" (192).  
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41  
42 Thinking of the role of heroes and storytellers in the human world of biopluralism, we can  
43  
44 come to a different appreciation of one aspect of what a disability politics could look like. First,  
45  
46 unlike the impulse to either reduce disability to a universal sameness or a predetermined absolute  
47  
48 difference, biopluralism finds unity in the difference of embodiment. That is, we do not need to give  
49  
50 into the temptation of inevitable disability to come to appreciate the ways in which all bodies, abled  
51  
52 and disabled, share other human traits. Those shared traits allow communication and shared  
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54 interests even as they do not overdetermine the forms of living together. Second, the value of any  
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3 particular abled or disabled life does not precede that life's entrance into the world of others. While,  
4  
5 again, we might be tempted to flee the instability of democratic judgment and valuation, that  
6  
7 instability is necessary for us to think about the (un)desirability of cure, the (in)justice of  
8  
9 institutionalization, and the alienation of overcoming. Finally, we can come to understand why the  
10  
11 work of someone like Eli Clare ought to be understood as profoundly political. In writing of  
12  
13 himself, he participates in self-disclosure by being placed in a web of relations and inserting his own  
14  
15 judgment of the messiness of the world into a shared capacity to judge and act. In writing stories of  
16  
17 other disabled people, he inaugurates them into our collective history and produces novel  
18  
19 opportunities for future relations. Their disabilities, which ableism used to produce profound forms  
20  
21 of exclusion from the public, a literal death for Arendt, become a new occasion for their entrance  
22  
23 into our shared world. These forms of inclusion keep bodies in relation to plurality and can point to  
24  
25 the importance of a democratic politics of disability representation.  
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30         What could biopluralism mean for the study of politics and disability? First, political science  
31  
32 too could tell the stories of disability politics to make clear the importance of the inclusion of  
33  
34 disability in thinking politically. Qualitative methods could help us consider the activity of disabled  
35  
36 activists and the politics of visibility, could analyze the collective frames of disability movements, or  
37  
38 could produce ethnographies of navigating street-level bureaucracy of disability services.  
39  
40 Biopluralism suggests that assumptions of the non-political nature of disability identity are troubling  
41  
42 at best and so quantitative opinion surveys ought to ask about disability identity alongside other  
43  
44 common identity categories while engaging in rigorous interrogation of what the category of  
45  
46 "disability" actually means for people responding to surveys. Much like gender and politics literature  
47  
48 has revealed how essentialist assumptions about women produced poor political understanding,  
49  
50 disability and politics literature could help identify and study assumptions about disabled political  
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52 actors to investigate the validity of ableist assumptions. Finally, if biopluralism is useful for political  
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3 science, it might also speak to the need to widen the task of political science to include normative  
4 questions of citizenship and exclusion which can widen the sites we consider to be political (nursing  
5 homes and prisons are two institutional settings where disability is both prevalent and politics  
6 remains understudied). What are the stories of politics in spaces of organized exclusion? Whose  
7 names should we know that have been written out of our shared political world? These questions  
8 highlight what might be at stake in thinking disability through biopluralism.

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17 These self-disclosing aspects of a biopluralist disability politics or political science in no way  
18 exhausts the need for further thinking and action. It's important to note that Arendt does not  
19 consider it the task of political theory to dictate what preferred political outcomes are. In that sense,  
20 the openness of biopluralism primarily calls political scholars to focus on the modes of making  
21 politics. As such biopluralism is not an aid in evaluating the relative merits of different schemes of  
22 health care provision, for instance. Instead, biopluralism might attune scholars to consider how the  
23 capacity for action and distinction through embodiment make previously unthinkable demands  
24 possible. Of course disability politics requires the creation of new institutions of living together,  
25 transforming older institutions of the administration of disabled and abled lives, and collectively  
26 organizing to contest disability injustice and unfreedom. The participatory and institutional  
27 dimensions of disability politics can productively include storytelling to help reify the importance of  
28 disability politics and to celebrate the ineffable uniqueness of disabled lives.

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