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Buying time: The s/pace of advocacy and the cultural production of autism

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Abstract: This paper addresses contemporary neoliberal time and its normative understanding of developmental time. As autism is framed as a growing risk to the ‘good life’ of neoliberal development, autism advocacy emerges as that which must neutralize this risk by targeting individual bodies and minds to secure ‘better’ (i.e., more normative) futures for all. I ask: how is the space and pace of advocacy working to constitute the relational subjectivities of both the ‘advocate’ and the ‘advocated for’? I examine and analyze two cultural artifacts: one mundane (a special series Starbucks coffee cup aimed at raising autism awareness) and the other spectacular (the United Nations’ World Autism Awareness Day resolution). I read these artifacts as prolific, productive and powerful sites of meaning making that shape collective experiences of the passing of time (i.e., as either too slow or too fast) as well as our understandings of bodies in time (i.e., as being either ‘on time’ or ‘late’).

Keywords: autism, development, neoliberalism, capitalism, commodification, advocacy, temporality, futurity, child studies, cultural studies, disability studies

Buying time: The s/pace of advocacy and the cultural production of autism

In the summer of 2007, one of the many places where one could learn about autism and autism advocacy was on the side of a special series of paper Starbucks coffee cups. The over 5 million cups that were put into circulation across North America displayed a statement from Bob Wright, the founder of the self-proclaimed “world’s largest” autism advocacy organization, *Autism Speaks*. Wright’s statement read as follows:

Every 20 minutes – less time than it will take you to drink your coffee – another child is diagnosed with autism. It’s much more common than people think, with one out of every 150 children diagnosed. Learn the early warning signs of autism, and if you’re concerned about your child’s development, talk to your doctor. Early intervention could make a big difference in your child’s future (Autism Speaks, 2007).

What meaning might we make of knowledge expressed on the sides of paper coffee cups? “Every 20 minutes”. “Early intervention”. “1 in 150”. A venti latte, no foam, two warnings and a prescription. How do these words, these numbers, come to matter? How do they make matter the bodies they grasp as well as the bodies that, quite literally, grasp them? While these particular Starbucks cups tell us a great many things, one thing is certain: they tell us that a clear relationship exists between autism, advocacy, time and consumption.

In his Starbucks cup statement, Wright characterizes autism in terms of “warning signs” and “concerning” development – a state of being off-tempo with the normative meter of human development. Late development. Missed milestones. And, just as autism is narrated as a state

of being stuck in the infantile past, its meaning, simultaneously, becomes enmeshed in notions of futurity: autism's developmental anachrony, Wright informs us, is "concerning" precisely because it threatens all the possibilities the future holds. What is more, instances of autism's 'too slow' development, the statement tells us, are happening too fast. "Every 20 minutes", Wright reminds us, "*another* child is diagnosed" (my emphasis). The speed at which autism is happening is underscored by numerical measurements of its prevalence: "it's much more common than people think," the coffee cup reminds us, "with 1 out of every 150 children diagnosed".

The ticking clock that counts down appearances of autism delivers autism advocacy, too, as a function of time. Wright's statement addresses the potential autism advocate in the imperative. It says: "Learn the early warning signs of autism, and if you're concerned about your child's development, talk to your doctor". Now is the time for immediate action, the coffee cup suggests. Act now, for the earlier autism's warning signs are noticed and identified, the faster biomedical help can be enlisted to remediate autism's developmental untimeliness: "early intervention could make a big difference in your child's future". Evoking understandings of lingering pasts and eclipsed futures, too fast appearances of too slow bodies, late milestones and early interventions, Wright's Starbucks cup statement demonstrates how the meaning of autism and advocacy get tied together by the ticking of the second hand.

This article performs a reading of two cultural artifacts – a mundane disposable coffee cup and a spectacular international resolution. I demonstrate how such artifacts function as productive and powerful sites of meaning making that have much to teach about the cultural meanings we ascribe to specific embodied subjectivities, particularly the subjects of the 'advocate' and the 'advocated for' within neoliberal discourses of autism. Throughout this

article, I focus on the cultural appearance of forms of autism advocacy in ‘neoliberal times’. To frame neoliberalism as a ‘time’ is to consider it as, at once, a particular historical moment – an economic system of governance of the late 20th and 21st centuries with characteristic emphasis on privatization, individual responsibility and the unrestricted flow of capital – and as a tempo – a political rationality that manages the movement of bodies in time. Engaging recent discussions of materiality and temporality in the fields of disability studies, cultural studies, child studies and queer theory, I ask: how do the particularities of ‘our times’ – our particular historical and political time and contemporary understandings of the normative meter of time itself – provide the conditions of possibility for the appearance of dominant versions of autism and autism advocacy today? How do temporal representations of autism and autism advocacy shape our experience of the passing of time (i.e., as either too slow or too fast) and our understandings of bodies in time (i.e., as being either ‘on time’ or ‘late’, ‘timely’ or ‘untimely’)? I begin this endeavor, then, by taking a (quick!) look at the broader context of contemporary neoliberal times.

Getting with our (coffee) times

We no doubt live in fast and furious times. In a contemporary neoliberal context where ‘timing is everything’, there is, as we often say, ‘never enough time’ and we are, it seems, perpetually ‘running late’. In these times of so little time, time is most often framed as some ‘thing’ we, collectively, want more of and of which we can never have enough. In neoliberal times, then, time is often treated as a desired and desirable commodity. It is common, for example, to hear talk of the desire or need to ‘take’, ‘keep’, ‘buy’, ‘spend’ and ‘save’ time. We are regularly and routinely informed that we just need to ‘make more time for ourselves’ and, to

this end, we are offered a barrage of ‘time saving tips’ and a variety of products that will help us to better ‘manage’ and ‘budget’ our time. If time is a commodity – if it is has become a ‘thing’ that can be and is bought, sold and circulated – it is, perhaps, the quintessential commodity insofar as without it no other commodity is within reach. And so, under neoliberalism, time becomes a kind of capital; ways of ‘saving’ and ‘spending’ time are deeply morally coded and, so, are associated with a spectrum of rewards and punishments. We encourage and privilege some ways of spending time as ‘time-wise’, while we discourage and even stigmatize others as a ‘waste of time’.

Commonsense understandings of the importance of grasping and keeping hold of time, the collective awareness that time is always running out as well as the moral organization of how we use our time deliver us into the heart of a very particular culture; a culture, as many theorists have noted, that is in the grip of a near constant and seemingly limitless state of acceleration (Harvey, 2007; Virilio, 1986; Castells, 2009; Hassan, 2009). It seems that in speeding up (our movements, our desires, our responses, our tasks, our pace of living) – in other words in being ‘time efficient’ – we might, somehow, secure more time. This notion of time efficiency has, of course, taken on very particular meaning in the contemporary moment. Gone are the days of rigid industrialist efficiency. In an always moving, border-hopping, forward-thinking, globalized and globalizing neoliberalism, time efficiency, no doubt, requires flexibility (Kvande, 2009). “To be efficient is also necessarily to be flexible” writes Hassan (2009) “to be physically, cognitively, psychologically, and metaphorically able to ‘move fast’ when the time comes” (p. 19). Neoliberal time may, for example, permit us to move slowly from time to time (to ‘take time’) but only with the ultimate aim of moving forward, and fast. Adapt quicker, our culture demands,

think faster, understand immediately, innovate continuously, develop earlier, learn younger, look further, work more, produce more, consume more. And do it now.

“Time binds a socius” observes Freeman (2010); bodies and minds are made meaningful in and through the regulatory flows of time (Freeman, 2010, p. 3). Hassan (2009) describes this regulatory process as one that is mediated by the cultural signs and symbols of our time:

This is a life where one’s whole subjectivity blends into a flow of blurring and accelerated tasks. Obligations, incursions, commitments and projects are constantly juggled and foreshadowed toward a short-term horizon. In the 24/7 chronoscopic world that surrounds us, its signs and symbols, signifiers and referents restlessly flicker and buzz to impress their urgency on our daily existence, compelling us to synchronize our lives to the increasing tempo of the overarching economy of speed (p. 23-24).

Hassan provides us with a snapshot of an (our) ‘economy of speed’ that is “borne of the interactions of globalization, neoliberalism and information technologies” (p. 23). Indeed, much of western modernity’s ‘cultural acceleration’ has precisely to do with the infiltration of market rationalities into the social order of the everyday. “The ‘need for speed’” Hassan remarks “is tied to the basic need for the capitalist to derive profit” (Hassan, 2009, p. 56). Time is money, as they say. The fast-paced ‘produce more, consume more, live more’ ideology of the market seeps into our lives and propels us along at great speed thus orienting our consciousness of time as well as governing our actions and reactions in time. For Hassan, contemporary subjectivities get swept up – are shaped by and, in his words, ‘blended’ with – the restless buzzing and flickering of

mediated 'signs of the time', "impress[ing] their urgency on our daily existence". Ticking Starbucks coffee cups bind us to life as a question of time, they help us to find this way of life sensible and even necessary. And while paper coffee cups are surely mundane cultural artifacts of the first order, following Puar (2007), "the trivial must be attended to precisely because marking it as such may mask or obfuscate its deeper cultural relevance" (p. 67). The disposable 'autism awareness' coffee cup regulates us as subjects by altering the rhythms of our bodies as well as our understandings of ourselves and others.

The disposable Starbucks coffee cup – a 'sign of the times' to be sure – orients, explicitly, to time. As Tucker (2011) notes, coffee has long been "infused" with "social and symbolic meanings" (p.6). In the neoliberal West, there are a great many normative understandings of 'coffee time'. Coffee is, for example, often understood in everyday life as that which eases the transition between the stasis, and so, the non-productivity, of sleep and the movement and productivity of the work or school day. 'Don't talk to me before I have my morning coffee', 'I need to have my caffeine fix before I get to work', are common refrains of daily life. Coffee – a stimulant – wakes us up, speeds us up, helps us to 'get going'. The disposable character of the 'to go' coffee cup anticipates and even encourages this as it permits the consumer to consume the beverage on the go. 'Move on', the cup hints, 'be on your way'. Now is the time for hurried movements down crowded streets with paper coffee cups in hand. Drink 'on the go' to ensure that you are 'on time' for the neoliberal demands of more production and more consumption. Buying a coffee-to-go might even 'buy you some time' for other things. Be flexible, the paper cup directs, multitask. In these times of so little time, don't waste time *only* drinking coffee. Consume while you move, while you work, while you socialize, while you read. And, as we consume our coffee on the go, we also become available to consume other

things. We might also consume a fact or two about autism, for example. The paper coffee cup, thus, not only orients us to drink on the go, 'the medium of the Starbucks cup is the message', to take liberties with McLuhan (1967) as it permits and even encourages us to learn about autism while we drink, and so, to learn about autism 'on the go'.

This fast-paced temporality is not conducive to high-maintenance reusable coffee cups or leisurely coffee breaks. Neither is it conducive to the significant time necessary for thinking through the complex ways we imagine ourselves and others or how we relate to and across difference. Now is not the time for slow encounters with autism's meaning or for deep consideration of the difference autism makes in our culture and in our lives. In their Marxist analysis of autism as commodity fetish, Rebecca Mallett and Katherine Runswick-Cole observe: "labourers, and thereby consumers, perceive products like autism to be beyond human making or changing and, as such the commodity is perceived as a fixed, static and ahistorical 'thing'" (Mallett & Runswick-Cole, 2011, p. 44). Indeed, on the side of the Starbucks cup, autism's multiple meanings – individual meanings we endow it with, cultural meanings we ascribe to it and so on – are streamlined, simplified, fetishized, made easily accessible and quickly transferable. Autism is distilled down to a series of 'bad' signs and 'good' responses, 'too fast' rates and 'too slow' bodies, punctuated statistical odds – highly consumable 'facts' that can rapidly be exchanged, bought, sold and circulated in and through a fast-paced consumer culture that is always seeking to ease the speed of exchange and circulation in the name of efficiency and, of course, profit. It is, therefore, hardly insignificant that a message informing us of autism's developmental deviancy and the need for advocacy to assure autism's more timely development through swift and early intervention, is delivered to us on the side of a paper coffee cup. The disposable cup, together with its message, functions chrononormatively in the disciplining of

bodies and minds “toward maximum productivity” (Freeman, 2010, p.3). I now turn to another instance of contemporary autism advocacy – a 2007 United Nations resolution that expresses the need for an international autism awareness day. I read this spectacular international resolution alongside the mundane Starbucks coffee cup message, a move that reveals how both cultural artifacts are functioning rather continuously as they follow the lines and logics of a time-driven market.

Market Timing: Autism advocacy in neoliberal times

On December 17th 2007, the United Nations General Assembly adopted resolution 63/139, which declared April 2 to be ‘World Autism Awareness Day’ “in perpetuity” (Autism Speaks, 2011a, para. 1)¹. As I will demonstrate, the resolution makes it clear that raising public awareness about autism is equivalent to raising public awareness about a biomedical problem in need of a range of biomedical solutions. The resolution also hints at how a neoliberal ideology – an ideology grounded in the logic of the market – underpins discourses of autism advocacy and governs the formation of those subjects permitted to dwell within these discourses.

As I have argued elsewhere, awareness of autism is always oriented; it is inseparable from other, prior awarenesses (McGuire, 2011). Awareness is always and inevitably shaped, in other words, by the social, political, historic and economic particularities of a culture. According to the UN’s World Autism Awareness Day (WAAD) resolution, the impetus for the creation of a

¹ Declaring April 2 as autism awareness day ‘in perpetuity’ suggests a commitment to having autism in our midst forever. Yet, the promise of contemporary autism advocacy discourses – including the discourse surrounding World Autism Awareness Day – is that autism can be treated if not cured. This disjuncture, of course, begs the question: is the search for better treatments and/or cure for autism a perpetual one?

designated day for autism awareness is premised on three prior awarenesses. The first of these is the:

Aware[ness] that autism is a lifelong developmental disability that manifests itself during the first three years of life and results from a neurological disorder that affects the functioning of the brain, mostly affecting children in many countries irrespective of gender, race or socio-economic status, and characterized by impairments in social interaction, problems with verbal and non-verbal communication and restricted, repetitive behaviour, interests and activities (United Nations General Assembly 76 Plenary Meeting, 2008, para. 4).

The document quickly, concisely and in no uncertain terms states that we might recognize the need for increased autism awareness only once we become aware that autism is a “lifelong” biomedical problem; located in the (any) body of children (i.e., the document narrates an autism that freely transgresses borderlines of nation, race, class and gender); attributable to biological blunder (i.e., it states that autism is caused by a malfunctioning brain); and manifests itself through a series of developmental deficits or delays (i.e., autism is narrated as the sum total of its developmental ‘signs’ - impaired social interaction, restricted interests, problems with communication and so on). As with Wright’s statement on the Starbucks coffee cup, we are, here again, confronted with an awareness of autism as a state of pathological ‘underdevelopment’. The UN resolution frames the autistic body as ‘untimely’ insofar as it is characterized as (1) an ‘inflexible’ body, biologically ill-equipped to perform quickly and efficiently in neoliberal time regimes (i.e, a neurologically dis-ordered body with impaired

communication and social skills and rigid, restricted behaviours, interests and activities) and, because of this, as (2) a quintessentially ‘late’ body (i.e., a body that does not arrive ‘on time’ to the normative milestones of social, emotional and behavioural development).

Next, the UN resolution makes us aware that a second impetus for the creation of a world autism awareness day is the awareness of the:

Deeply concern[ing]...prevalence and high rate of autism in children in all regions of the world and the consequent development challenges to long-term health care, education, training and intervention programmes undertaken by Governments, non-governmental organizations and the private sector, as well as its tremendous impact on children, their families, communities and societies. (United Nations General Assembly 76 Plenary Meeting, 2008, para. 5)

The UN resolution moves from narrating autism as an individual problem to expressing it as a problematic (developmentally ‘too slow’/‘inflexible’) group of bodies. The need for more autism awareness is seen to be premised on the prior awareness of a “deeply concerning”, “prevalent” population trend, a trend that is occurring too quickly (at “high rates”), transgressing state borders and thus, threatening to slow down social and economic development in “regions all over the world”. Autism, the resolution indicates, “challenges” the fast-paced, flexible and forward-moving work of development and modernization by negatively “impacting” its foundational institutional building blocks (families, communities, societies). Awareness of autism, the resolution hints, is awareness of autism as a too-costly population and, so, as a threat to the social and economic development of a neoliberal modernity.

The UN resolution thus rehearses the dominant understanding that more autism awareness is needed only insofar as autism is understood as both a biomedical problem that threatens the (good/timely) development of the body and as a prevalent problem population trend that threatens the (good/timely) development of the state. The resolution goes on to inform us that the ‘solution’ to both the social and individual ‘problem’ of autism – the third and, perhaps the ultimate impetus for autism awareness – is to target and alter the body of the individual autistic person through “early” diagnosis and “appropriate” (biomedical) interventions aimed at catalyzing a normative, timely development. The resolution states:

...early diagnosis and appropriate research and interventions are vital to the growth and development of the individual. (United Nations General Assembly 76 Plenary Meeting, 2008, para. 6)

Yet, what follows from the resolution, and what it fails to address, is how the move to develop (i.e., speed up/make flexible) autism’s purported untimely state of underdevelopment (e.g., through biomedical therapies) also and most significantly works to develop private and public economic interests in a number of interrelated ways. As I explore in the second half of this article, in neoliberal times, there are considerable vested interests underpinning the desire for fast and flexible subjects. The relationship between the development of the individual body and that of the state became all too evident, just over 3 months after the General Assembly passed its resolution, on the first ever World Autism Awareness Day.

Investing in Good Stock

April 2, 2008 – the inaugural World Autism Awareness Day (WAAD) – was observed in cities across the globe as a day to: “[shine] a bright light on autism as a growing global health crisis” (Autism Speaks, 2008). In New York City, Autism Speaks took this imperative quite literally when organization volunteers and supporters rang the opening bell of the New York Stock Exchange and, amidst a multitude of flashing and scrolling lights, ushered in another trading day. That the world’s largest autism advocacy organization spent the very first moments of the very first World Autism Awareness Day on the New York Stock Exchange trading floor – perhaps the nexus of speed and consumption, *par excellence* – holds both material and symbolic significance. Indeed, the stock exchange represents: (1) a substantial amount of private and public funds invested in autism treatments and/or cures (e.g., biomedical research, treatment and intervention programs); (2) the potential economic productivity/profitability of autistic people, the desired ‘end-products’ of the latest in biomedical research and its early intervention programs; and (3) the cultivation of the speed-driven temporality of urgency where capital – biomedical capital (i.e., research and intervention therapies) and biological capital (i.e., the bodies produced by research and intervention) – are produced and circulated within increasingly narrow time margins. Autism Speaks’ ringing of the market bell in New York – now an annual event, which, in 2010, chimed in chorus with opening and closing trading bells around the globe² - gestures toward an undeniable blending of dominant contemporary versions of autism advocacy, increasingly global economic imperatives and neoliberal market rationalities. To better understand the material and symbolic implications of this ‘blending’ of market rationalities

² On April 2, 2010, the *Dutch Autism Association* rang the closing bell at the NYSE Euronext Amsterdam, *Autism-Europe* rang the opening bell at NYSE Euronext Brussels and Paris and the *Federação Portuguesa de Autismo* and the *Associação Portuguesa para as Perturbações do Desenvolvimento e Autismo* rang the closing bell at NYSE Euronext Lisbon (New York Stock Exchange, 2010).

with advocacy work, I turn to a consideration of how several key market principles – notions of investment, risk and security – are working to govern the field of autism advocacy today.

In contemporary times, autism is commonly brought into conceptual association with notions of social and/or economic investment, where ‘investment’ is conventionally understood as the provision of resources (e.g., time, energy, money and so on) with the expectation of future ‘return’ or profit. And, as the association between autism and investment is made and re-made, autism itself is (re)invested, as we shall see, with very particular cultural meanings and values. Returning to the WAAD resolution, we can note how it’s appeal for greater public awareness of autism is rhetorically framed in terms of an appeal for investment in our collective (global) future. Recall how the UN’s declaration of the need for greater awareness of autism is premised on several other awarenesses, namely, the awareness of autism as an individual problem body, the awareness of autism as a problem population that effects the social body, and the awareness of the need for biomedical solutions that target the individual body but work to secure a better future for both the individual and the social body. With this in mind, the document issues its resolution in four parts:

The General Assembly,

1. *Decides* to designate 2 April as World Autism Awareness Day, to be observed every year beginning in 2008;
2. *Invites* all Member States, relevant organizations of the United Nations system and other international organizations, as well as civil society, including non-governmental organizations and the private sector, to observe

World Autism Awareness Day in an appropriate manner, in order to raise public awareness of autism;

3. *Encourages* Member States to take measures to raise awareness throughout society, including at the family level, regarding children with autism;
4. *Requests* the Secretary-General to bring the present resolution to the attention of all Member States and United Nations organizations.

(United Nations General Assembly 76 Plenary Meeting, 2008, para. 7-10).

Using enticing and coaxing verbs that seem to bestow upon the addressee the freedom to choose (e.g., the general assembly ‘invites’, ‘encourages’, ‘requests’ etc.) – and, so, mirroring the promises of freedom, liberty and choice that are so central to neoliberal logic and the functioning of the free market – the WAAD resolution calls on nations, governmental and non-governmental organizations and, indeed, the whole of “civil society” to “appropriately” observe World Autism Awareness Day and to do this in the name of more timely (individual and social) development outcomes. While neither the WAAD resolution, nor the Starbucks cup quote makes explicit reference to ‘investment’ per se, these cultural artifacts function as investment appeals, by appealing to the potential advocate for both ideological and monetary support in the name of ‘better’ future ‘returns’. Bracketing out, for the moment, the notion of the advocate as investor, let us think through what is being framed up as (a good) advocacy investment.

To invest in something (or someone) is to commit an asset – e.g., money, love or time – in the hope of securing a profit, a more valuable return. In this way, any notion of investment is premised, first, on some version of an economy of exchange. If I was to invest in the stock market, for example, I might examine and appraise my investment options, weigh their potential

risks against their potential benefits, and buy up those stocks that I think will, as time passes, go up in value so as to ensure that my initial investment will turn a profit. In other words, sacrifices are made in the present time (we part with valuable resources), but only with the expectation of rewards in the future time (we gain desired outcomes). A key implication of this investment logic is that we do not necessarily invest in what is valuable now, but, rather, we invest in what *could* be valuable in the future. In this way, investments have precisely to do with the imagining of futures and desirable ones at that.

It is interesting and certainly revealing to note that the subject of the autistic ‘advocated for’ is figured by the coffee cup, as well as by the WAAD resolution, almost exclusively, as a child. Indeed, the figure of the child is cited, in both examples, as the primary focus and motivation for the need to invest in autism awareness. For example, referencing “children with disabilities” and the need for the child’s “active” participation in the community and “full” enjoyment of human rights and freedoms, the UN resolution goes on to state that autism “mostly [affects] *children*”, that there is a “high rate of autism in *children* in all regions of the world” and, finally, that UN member states ought to take “measures to raise awareness throughout society...regarding *children* with autism” (United Nations General Assembly, 76 Plenary Meeting, 2008, *my emphasis*). Similarly, on the coffee cup: “Every 20 minutes...another *child* is diagnosed”.... “if you are concerned with your *child*’s development” and so on. Indeed, the autistic child – and not the autistic adult - is the primary referent object of an overwhelming majority of dominant contemporary enactments of autism advocacy.

It almost goes without saying that the figure of ‘the child’ is conceptually bound to notions of futurity (Berlant, 1997; Edelman, 2004; Spivak 2004; Muñoz, 2009; Berlant, 2011; Mollow, 2012). Edelman (2004) writes, “the Child has come to embody for us the telos of the

social order” (Edelman, 2004, p.11); it is the “preeminent emblem of the motivating end” compelling and, so, propelling us toward the possibility of ‘better’ futures (Edelman, 2004, p.13). The ubiquitous presence of the figure of the autistic child (and the conspicuous effacement of the autistic adult) within dominant discourses of autism advocacy references a very particular – and highly functional – temporal environment where notions of futurity get collapsed with the immediate present; where we must invest ‘now’ for better ‘laters’. While the constitution of childhood is surely open to endless theorizing, in western/ized culture and in neoliberal times, one way of understanding childhood is to understand it as a time. The normative time of childhood – understood, simultaneously as a biological time of growth and development and as a sentimental/nostalgic time of innocence and hope – is precisely that time of seemingly infinite ‘laters’; the child is positioned as ‘early on’ on the (normative) biological timeline and therefore is understood as having *more* of that desired and desirable commodity of time, *more* future yet-to-be-realized. In a neoliberal regime where ‘time is money’, the child is figured as ‘time-rich’ and so represents a good investment opportunity indeed. Underscoring a logic of exchange – a logic that, as we have seen, is central to any conception of investment – both the UN resolution and the Starbucks coffee cup resonate with the promise of ‘better’ futures and the necessity of investing in (some) children.

Despite this relentless association between the figure of the child and the future imaginary, Wright’s Starbucks quote indicates that “futures”, are not something all children have as a matter of nature or right. After all, one of the most rudimentary of stock market principles is that the potential for gain bears within it the seed of potential loss. While potentiality is often oriented toward desired outcomes – the potential for ‘better futures’, economic gain and so on – it is also and because of this vulnerable to risk. As Evans (2010)

writes, “children’s bodies are absent-presences within hoped-for utopias” (p. 34). Because of this, she continues, they also represent “threatening dystopias” (Evans, 2010, p. 34). Time-rich and, thus, as we have seen, rife with the potential for good return, the (normative) figure of the child, thus, also comes to represent the potential for loss: the child might not grow in the ‘right’ direction; might not move ‘forward’ on the developmental timeline fast enough, might not ‘go far’ in life. The child might, to borrow from Stockton (2009), take on those “elegant, unruly contours of growing that don’t bespeak continuance” (p.13). In relation to stringent cultural ideals and their inflexible measures, the child might fail to ‘grow up’, growing instead “to the side” of these ideals (Stockton, 2009, p.13). “The future is only the stuff of some kids”, writes Muñoz (2009) in his critique of Edelman’s child figure, “racialized kids, queer kids are not the sovereign princes of futurity” (p. 95). And to this list we must also add disabled kids. Indeed, under neoliberalism, categories of race, queerness and disability are finely imbricated; such categories and the bodies they mark threaten to disrupt the forward motion of a normative (and so white, middle-class heterosexual, able-bodied) development and the subsequent promise of a productive and consumptive future time (see Mollow, 2012; Chen 2012).

As the time-rich and time-efficient body of the (normative or ‘normally developing’) child gets inaugurated as the primary site of neoliberal investment, autism is introduced as a risk, a variable that might divert investment gain into loss. Autism, in other words, is framed as that risk which may – in the absence of biomedical control – potentially divert the normative, productive course of a time-rich child by causing them to squander their temporal wealth: by ‘wasting’ or ‘losing’ temporal riches with the inefficiency of ‘developmental delays’, by arriving late (or not at all) to ‘milestones’ and so to (productive and consumptive) futures. This risk of a dystopic autistic future is indicated by Wright as he alludes to individual children’s futures being

“at stake” in the absence of early biomedical intervention. The WAAD resolution broadens Wright’s not-so-subtle threat by painting a picture of an ‘underdeveloped’ child that poses “consequent development challenges” to governmental and non-governmental initiatives and to the private sector. While the resolution does not explicitly say how the one (individual development) is connected to the other (social and economic development), we must assume the logic, as a matter of commonsense. We might assume – and it would seem, the resolution expects us to assume – that the logic goes as follows: the inefficiency of a too-slow/inflexible individual autistic body – or, perhaps more accurately as autism is referenced as a “prevalence”, the inefficiency of *multiple, individual autistic bodies* - represents a costly social burden that works to slow down the development of “long-term health care, education, training and intervention programmes”. Autism is made to represent the possibility of expensive social services, costly and ongoing medical evaluations and treatments, specialized education programs and so on.

Yet, the resolution’s logic does not end with the conceptualization of the autistic body as an excessive cost. The WAAD resolution optimistically reminds us that the need to invest in autism awareness is motivated, at least to some degree, by the promise of a better future where individual autistic children’s bodies can be helped to “grow” and “develop” in a more timely way by “early diagnosis and appropriate research and interventions” and presumably, in this way, be placed in a better position to more “fully realize” (and even, as I expand on in a moment, “enjoy”) their “human rights and fundamental freedoms”. Drawing on the UN *Conventions on the Rights of the Child* and the UN *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, the resolution paints a utopic picture of a non-autistic future where all individuals are free to lead a “full and decent life”, to be “self-reliant”, to “actively” participate in the community and so on.

The resolution reminds us that investing in autism awareness – e.g., learning/identifying the warning signs of autism and seeking to minimize, if not eliminate autism – is necessary so as to ensure that all children are able to “fully realize” and even “enjoy” their “human rights and fundamental freedoms”. This, of course, begs the question: As we realize our freedoms and “enjoy” our human rights, what or who are we free to become? And, what rights must we enjoy along the way?

The Price of Rights

Rose (1999) points out that “only a certain kind of liberty – a certain way of understanding and exercising freedom, of relating to ourselves individually and collectively as subjects of freedom – is compatible with liberal arts of rule” (p. 62). There are, in other words, limited permissible ways of performing and exercising our rights and freedoms in neoliberal times. Drawing attention to the ways rights discourse works to regulate particular historically specific cultural values and ideals, including those market-driven values and ideals of the contemporary neoliberal state, Jo Boyden (1990) observes: “the norms and values upon which this ideal of safe, happy and protected childhood are built are culturally and historically bound to the social preoccupations and priorities of the capitalist countries of Europe and the United States³” (p. 186).

And, indeed, as Spivak (2004) teaches us, rights discourse often serves as an “alibi” for a whole host of (historically/economically/politically mediated) interventions (p. 524). Far from being simply ‘fundamental’, ‘guaranteed’ or ‘naturally endowed’ to all humans, human rights and

³ And, as Sharon Stephens (1995) points out, in an increasingly global and globalized world, “it is not only modern European national citizens who should have a particular sort of childhood, but populations around the world, in need of ‘civilization’ and ‘development’” (p. 16).

freedoms are granted or withheld or even revoked – they are, in other words, socially, historically, politically and economically determined. And they function to determine the shape of their bearer.

As the WAAD resolution explicitly states:

...children with disabilities should enjoy a full and decent life in conditions which ensure dignity, promote self-reliance and facilitate the child's active participation in the community, as well as the full enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms on an equal basis with other children. (United Nations General Assembly 76 Plenary Meeting, 2008, para. 2)

Rights and freedoms, here, are revealed as something other than what one simply 'has' as a matter of nature or even as a matter of law. Rights and freedoms are, as I have gestured toward earlier, framed as something one "should" "fully enjoy". For a subject to be granted human rights and freedoms – and so to be regarded as living a "full" or 'good' life – the subject ought to enjoy his/her rights and freedoms in particular (and thus limited) ways. In neoliberal times, an individual is only recognized as enjoying their human rights and freedoms if they move in time with neoliberal values and its market rationalities; if they "enjoy" or consume goods – coffee, for example – and so participate the s/pace of production.

According to the WAAD resolution, there exists a pressing need for greater awareness of autism as a biomedical problem and for more biomedical research and corrective therapies, for all children, including children with autism, ought to be free/ have the right to lead and enjoy 'full lives', to achieve their "full potential" and to do these things – as per a refrain of

neoliberalism – independently (to be “self reliant”) and efficiently (abiding by a timely tempo of development and a time flexibility that invariably leads to “active participation” in the economic development of the greater global community). The child, in other words is *made* free, but only to, following Ruth Lister (2003), become a “cipher for future economic prosperity and forward looking modernization” (p. 433). This imaginary of the “future worker-citizen,” she points out is “the prime asset of the social investment state” (p. 433). The child ‘with’ autism⁴, then, becomes framed as needing to be separated or ‘freed’ from a biological condition of autism (via biomedical intervention) so as to be free to become a ‘good’ neoliberal subject well positioned to enjoy human rights by participating in and, indeed, enjoying a “full” life of production and consumption.

Most interestingly, as the advocate heeds the UN’s ‘encouragement’ and becomes more aware of autism, as she accepts the WAAD resolution’s ‘invitation’ and chooses to “appropriately” observe April 2nd (by ringing the bell at the stock exchange, for example, or by buying an autism awareness coffee, pin or t-shirt) as the advocate, in other words, exercises her freedom and realizes herself as a good advocate, she is also and simultaneously engaged in the realization of bodies that are less free. These bodies – autistic bodies – are characterized by the WAAD resolution as first requiring early diagnoses and interventions before being able to fully realize and “enjoy” their rights and liberties, bodies that need help to live their (good, neoliberal) lives and achieve their “full” potentials. And, so, as the advocate realizes herself as an advocate, she also engages in the realization of herself as a good neoliberal subject – a timely (and so,

⁴ As autistic activist and writer Jim Sinclair has argued (in chorus with many other scholars and activists in the neurodiversity movement), the phrase ‘person with autism’ plays an important role in supporting the dangerous biomedical presupposition that autism is somehow separate and separable from a person ‘with’ it (Sinclair, 1999; McGuire, 2011).

necessarily, non-autistic) subject who consumes/enjoys goods while learning about the signs of good developmental timing; a subject, moreover, who is engaged in the work of producing the good neoliberal subjects of the future by working to develop/speed up autism's presumed 'bad timing'. In this way, the freedom and rights of autistic subjects are constructed as dependent (and thus contingent) upon the good choices of good advocates.

Investing in interventions that work to speed up untimely development and, thus, to ensure the flexible efficiency of children's bodies are investments with the expectation of good (profitable) return. As per the WAAD resolution, we ("civil society") must invest resources in the present to ensure the production of future-citizens that are both timely (i.e., that make good use of time) and time-rich (i.e., that still have much time). Of course, these are bodies that are also highly valuable – and indeed lucrative – to a market economy; they arrive 'on time' to their milestones and thus are better positioned to flexibly, efficiently participate in the processes of production and consumption and to otherwise contribute to (or, at least, not slow down) the timely development (modernization) of the state. This logic not only assigns economic value to normative human development, transforming the body of the normatively developing child into a material asset; it also works to dangerously produce the non-normatively developing body as non-valuable and, perhaps even, as non-viable in the contemporary market-driven economy.

Finally, let me return to the material significance of the Starbucks cup. That autism's too-slow/inflexible development represents a significant economic burden to the public and private sectors, and so poses a threat to better economic futures, indeed seems to be a fact that the WAAD resolution takes for granted. However, the Starbucks cup (a consumer product) makes it apparent that the business of investing in better futures is one that is absolutely dependent upon the untimely autistic body and the time sensitive response of advocacy. Despite the constant

lament that autism is just too costly – a significant or so-called “crippling” economic burden for the social whole – the production of the time-rich but not time-efficient body of the autistic child has generated a multi-billion dollar industry comprised of public and private investment interests that benefit economically from raising awareness and otherwise ‘helping’ this untimely body to catch up to its milestones and to its (and, apparently, everyone else’s) better future. Thus, we must take note of how neoliberal versions of advocacy – populated by advocates who participate in, consume and even enjoy the work of noticing the differences between autistic and non-autistic compartments and who are involved in for-profit trade of treatments for such differences – *already* represent a ‘good’ and very profitable ‘return’ on an awareness investment. The Starbucks cup, World Autism Awareness Day and the sheer breadth of the ‘autism industrial complex’ all gesture towards the cultural fact that, under neoliberal rule, social and/or economic investment in the untimely autistic child is not just an investment in the realization of the ‘future-citizen-worker’ but in the potential for its realization. In one unbroken – and clearly very lucrative – move, our market-driven times, at once, produce *and* regulate, create *and* constrain conducts that are beyond the norm.

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