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The Race of the Dis-qualified: Literary Representations of the Intersection of Racial and Neurological Otherness

La course des personnes disqualifiées : représentations littéraires de l'intersection entre altérité raciale et altérité neurologique

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Abstract

Historically speaking, autism has been severely pathologized as an undesirable developmental disorder, leading to the dehumanization of autistics. However, recent scholarship in the field of disability studies has sought to revolutionize the older biomedical understanding of autism, re-presenting it as an alternative neurological and sensory processing system rather than as a deficit. While several disability scholars have studied autistic autobiographical writing, research on autism has primarily focused on cultural productions from the Global North, privileging stories of white, urban, upper-class heterosexual men and women. This has led to the erasure and silencing of narratives of people of colour, queer people, and individuals from lower-income groups on the autism spectrum. This article critically analyses literary representations of the experiential reality of being autistic as recorded in self-narratives of autistic people of colour in the 2017 anthology titled *All the Weight of Our Dreams: On Living Racialized Autism*, edited by Lydia X. Z. Brown. Employing theoretical tenets from the interdisciplinary methodological frameworks of postcolonialism, race studies, disability studies, and feminism, this paper examines textual representations of the intersection of various aspects of selfhood such as race, class, gender, sexuality, privilege, access to diagnosis, resources, care, and relationality in the context of autism. Such an analysis explores the heterogeneity of autistic modes of living and self-expression generated by diverse socio-political positions, shedding light on the foundational discourses that construct the material reality of autism differently in different socio-political, cultural and economic contexts.

Résumé

D'un point de vue historique, l'autisme a été fortement pathologisé en tant que trouble du développement jugé indésirable, ce qui a conduit à la déshumanisation des personnes

autistes. Toutefois, les travaux récents en études du handicap cherchent à transformer l’ancienne conception biomédicale de l’autisme, en le reconfigurant comme un mode non normatif de fonctionnement neurologique et sensoriel plutôt que comme un déficit. Bien que plusieurs spécialistes du handicap aient analysé des écrits autobiographiques de personnes autistes, la recherche sur l’autisme s’est principalement concentrée sur des productions culturelles issues du Nord global, privilégiant des récits de personnes blanches, urbaines, aisées et hétérosexuelles. Cette focalisation a entraîné l’effacement et la mise sous silence des récits de personnes racisées, de personnes queers et de personnes issues de milieux à plus faibles revenus sur le spectre de l’autisme. Cet article propose une analyse critique des représentations littéraires de la réalité vécue de l’autisme telles qu’elles apparaissent dans les récits autobiographiques de personnes autistes racisées réunis dans l’anthologie de 2017 *All the Weight of Our Dreams: On Living Racialized Autism*, sous la direction de Lydia X. Z. Brown. En mobilisant des principes théoriques issus des cadres méthodologiques interdisciplinaires du postcolonialisme, des études de la race, des études du handicap et du féminisme, cet article examine les représentations textuelles de l’intersection entre divers aspects de la personne, soit la race, la classe, le genre, la sexualité, le privilège, l’accès au diagnostic, les ressources, les soins et la relationalité, dans le contexte de l’autisme. Une telle analyse met en évidence l’hétérogénéité des modes de vie et des formes d’expression autistes façonnés par des positions sociopolitiques diverses, en éclairant les discours fondamentaux qui construisent la réalité matérielle de l’autisme de manière différenciée selon les contextes sociopolitiques, culturels et économiques.

Keywords

Access; Autism spectrum disorder; Crip; Disability; Neurodivergence.

Mots-clés

Accessibilité; trouble du spectre de l’autisme; *crip*; handicap; neurodivergence.

Introduction: Racial Passing and Autistic Masking

You are standing on the edge of the starting line, and everyone around you already seems to have a head start. Pow, goes the gun, and the very sound of it makes you flinch and stagger. Everyone starts to run forward—their determined eyes fixed on the finish line in the distance. You stand there dazed and confused, waiting for some kind of instruction. You can sense something is wrong, and in a feeble attempt to remedy it you start copying the ones ahead of you. You start to clumsily trot forward towards the bodies that have now almost reached the end of the line—but the audiences start pointing their fingers at you and laughing. The referee says you have stepped on a “wrong lane,” and you did not even know there were lanes. Too bad, you are now “disqualified.” No one explained the rules of the race to you, and somehow that too is your fault. This, among many other feelings, is perhaps how it feels to be an autistic individual in a neurotypical world!

Autistic individuals have historically been pathologized, marginalized, infantilized, pushed to what Kim Davies (2016) identifies as “the edges of the boundary of human-being-ness” (132). However, autistics of colour are doubly ostracized and disenfranchised due to their neurological as well as racial otherness. Indeed, when it comes to racial passing or caste concealment (in the Indian context), or the closeting of deviant sexuality, autistic masking (hiding one’s neurodivergence) shares a common impulse with these experiences: the desire for survival in a threatening environment. In the world of autism scholarship led by or in collaboration with autistics, Amy Pearson and Kieran Rose define masking as “the conscious or unconscious suppression of natural responses and adoption

of alternatives across a range of domains including social interaction, sensory experience, cognition, movement, and behavior" (53). Known by various names such as adaptive morphing, compensating, camouflaging, passing, or mimicking, autistic masking has been further described, for example by Felicity Sedgewick, as the use of "strategies to hide [...] autistic differences from other people" (15). Observing the primary reason behind autistic masking, scholars such as Pearson and Rose use *Social Identity theory* to comment on how autistic individuals are forced to adopt "impression management strategies" (54) by rigorously monitoring how they appear to others to present only the socially acceptable parts of one's self and to avoid stigma, bullying, and marginalization. Autistic masking can involve forcing oneself to make eye contact, putting on a smile when one is under sensory overload, or scripting entire conversations to appear able-minded. In the words of various autistic individuals, as Sedgewick goes on to record, masking feels like "putting on a character" (25), or "hon[ing] something of a persona" (26), or "cultivat[ing] an image" (26), or "taking the role of the actor" (26). It involves copying other people's speech patterns and even their body language, gestures, and movements. The mask therefore both stages and hides the subject: while performatively constructing a certain version of a subject, the autistic must erase as much as they can of the traits which are recognizably autistic, especially the so-called negative traits like social awkwardness, clumsiness, and stimming.

Especially resonant with the concept of masking is that of "passing," "mimicry," and "performativity," in the context of race, colonialism, and gender. Probing the intersection between these axes of oppression allows us to explore disability as a co-occurring basis of

disenfranchisement and systemic violence. In fact, the experiences of impersonation and passing recounted in narratives of autistic masking also resonate with the experiences of other minorities, especially in the case of race. Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* writes about the problematic ontological status of the black man, whose "moment of inferiority" (110) is ushered in through the presence of the colonizing white man. In this context, he speaks of the process of "denegrification," which aims to "make it possible for the miserable negro to whiten himself and thus to throw off the burden of that corporeal malediction" (111). He likens this process to a kind of "amputation, an excision, a hemorrhage" (112). This idea gives us forceful ways of thinking of not just acts of autistic individual of colour, but the very autistic act of grafting or cutting off the rough edges of their character to fit in with the majority. Fanon's book represents a clarion call to move beyond the shame and stigma and the "supposed inferiority" (Fanon 115) which the white man levied on the black person, and to rediscover and reassert black identity. Just like Fanon's black man, the autistic subject as the neurological other also acquires the status of a "phobogenic object" (112) that threatens to trigger and expose the anxieties and insecurities of the majoritarian neuronormative population.

Representations of autistic masking bear an eerily close resemblance to portrayals of racial passing in African American literature, such as the instances narrated in William Wells Brown's *Clotel; or, The President's Daughter* (1853), Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929), George S. Schuyler's *Black No More* (1931), or Langston Hughes' short story "Who's Passing For Who?" (1956). In fact, autistic authors

such as Julia Bascom even go so far as to imagine autism itself as a kind of race, tracing the cause of her marginalization to "some sort of weird ability-based xenophobia" (194). Other texts by autistic authors also describe experiences of masking, sometimes even borrowing the terminology of racial passing, such as Vivian Amanda Forest's short essay "Passing as Ethics: A Primer". Although critical race studies, caste studies and queer studies have explored the multiple nuances and layers of passing, concealment and closeting, autistic masking has largely gone unnoticed in the critical world. Whereas some clinical psychologists have examined case-studies of masking and its relationship to diagnosis, gender, and sexuality, individual experiential narratives of masking, especially in people of colour, are yet to be taken up seriously as objects of analysis. This article seeks to complicate the intersection between race and neurodivergence by analyzing texts by autistic authors of colour to determine how the experience of racial otherness problematizes representations of neurological divergence. For instance, the doubly-jeopardized situation caused by the overlap of race and autism is narrated deftly by Melis Leflef in "Passing Through," which describes the experience of being a (neurological but also a) geographical migrant arriving to Ireland from Turkey as an "unspeaking, odd, impossibly tanned" (150) foreigner to the culture and language of the Dubliners. Further, the brief prose piece titled "The Silencing Invisibility Cloak" by the biracial author Shane Bentley also links the ability of passing with "systematic erasure" (299), an idea of reduction that can be read as reverberating with Franz Fanon's idea of the amputation or "revision" (112) of the black man: "I took myself far off from my own presence... What else could it be for me but an amputation, an excision, a haemorrhage?" (112).

The Truth of Deception: De-essentializing the myth of the *Inner*

Autistic Self

In her essay titled “Translation and Untellability: Autistic subjects in autobiographical discourse,” Jenny Bergenmar writes that most autistic autobiographies at best fulfil the function of “translators or interpreters of autistic experience” (62) as they merely create a window into the insider’s perspective of an autistic mind in a manner that the curious neurotypical majority can make sense of it. This is true for narratives by white authors, such as Donna Williams’ *Nobody Nowhere* (1992) and *Somebody Somewhere* (1994), and Temple Grandin’s *Emergence: Labeled Autistic* (1996) indicate, these memoirs recount an autistic individual’s journey towards legitimacy, personhood, and subjectivity. Mediated in the voice of the first-person, the autistic autobiography’s truth claims and its general aim of *revealing* the operations of the autistic mind invoke the author-narrator’s privileged position of interiority. Styled as a locus of embodied perceptions, sensory experiences, and self-reflection, the autistic autobiographical subject is constructed as an agentive entity with access to, as Udaya Kumar writes (about all autobiographical subjects), an “interior realm inaccessible to others” (10).

This inside-outside dichotomy is dramatized succinctly in two short, anthologized prose pieces in the anthology titled *Stim* (2020), which comprises short prose and poetic pieces by autistic authors: “Becoming Less” by the Scottish author Robert Shepherd and “Stripping While Autistic” by the Brooklyn-based autistic writer Reese Piper. In both narratives, the presence of the sartorial invites the critic to untangle and undo the narrative

threads that weave the tapestry of the text together. Shepherd imagines a sleek cloak that magically brings out his true autistic self, and layers of skin that have been shed and stuffed away, which signify the (literally closeted) truth about his selfhood. Piper, whose consciousness is perhaps understandably pervaded by images of clothes due to her occupational obligations as a stripper, also uses different types of clothes to capture different modes of self-expression. The repeated insistence on acts of dressing and undressing also serves to reveal the theme of *authenticity* and *inauthenticity*, of covering and uncovering a *true self*. The metaphor of clothing and unclothing constructs the *authentic autistic self* as one that already exists underneath layers of performance which can be unclothed and unmasked to reveal a true inner self that is *unapologetically autistic*. In fact, the inner world of the autistic is often elevated to the status of a fantasy (in Grandin or Williams, for example)—it is a magical world bubbling with colours and overflowing with sensory data—laid out like a finished work of art on a static canvas in a museum for the fascinated observer's fancy.

The autistic autobiographical text itself engages in another kind of masking by communicating in a language that is alien to the autistic (therefore restrictive and inadequate), by translating their experiences into a language that conforms to neurotypical rules and norms of grammar and syntax that have been created for the non-autistic experience, perhaps in the hope of qualifying for the human race. Whether deliberately or otherwise, these autistic texts therefore enact masking on a literary level as well. The self that is projected by the white autistic autobiographer seems to embody what Glenn Adams calls the "atomistic" (184) version of the self, founded on the principles of privacy,

interpersonal separation, and “socially disembodied experience” (188). Shepherd’s as well as Piper’s stories are instances of narratives that foreground the individual, catapulting the private desires, ambitions, struggles, and achievements of the protagonist to the center of the text. While Piper tangentially touches upon the discrimination faced by her due to her gender, neither of these texts contextualize their disability in relation to other socio-political aspects of selfhood which function as axes of oppression for individuals, such as class, race, sexuality, and economic background. These narratives therefore obscure the role of cultural ecologies, socio-political systems, linguistic and literary practices, embodied and perceptual abilities across geospatial locations.

Towards an Unmasked Autistic Aesthetic?

Critiquing mainstream (white, liberal) disability scholarship for overlooking the experience and contributions of black disabled people to the disability justice movement, Sami Schalk in *Black Disability Politics* emphasizes the necessity of exploring “the relationship between race and (dis)ability as systems of privilege and oppression” (5). Arguing that white supremacy and ableism are intertwined and derive their power from colonialist conquest and capitalist domination, Schalk observes that the black disability justice framework is rooted in interdependence, anticapitalism, anti-imperialism, and intersectional and interdisciplinary approaches to history, culture, and politics. In fact, mainstream autistic autobiographies and anthologies (such as the one we discussed earlier), may be found to be equally guilty of overlooking and therefore silencing the narratives of black autistic

people. As Morenike Giwa Onaiwu writes: "we—the autistics of colo[u]r—are seldom acknowledged. Our faces, bodies, and voices are conspicuously absent from not only literature and media, but also from much of the discourse surrounding race and [...] autism" (xi).

It is precisely this blindedness to black autistic narratives that the anthology titled *All the Weight of Our Dreams*, edited by Lydia X. Z. Brown, avowedly chooses to redress. As the subtitle *On Living Racialized Autism* indicates, this is unmistakably a collection of texts that foregrounds the significance of race as a determining factor in the degree of oppression that an autistic individual undergoes. The overlap of race and autism also plays a significant role in the formulation of a different kind of construction of autobiographical texts. Brown writes black autistics possess diminished access to educational facilities, economic resources, and training in articulacy. In "A Note on Process," Brown throws light on some significant editorial choices that marked the compilation of the anthology. They write that the editors have emphasized "substance over style" (Brown viii). Brown recognizes the violence engendered by neurotypical expectations of what constitutes "publishable material" (viii) and acknowledges that forced conformity to linguistic/syntactical norms, grammatical appropriateness, and "proper" spellings only serves to reinforce "white, wealthy, educated 'norms' of language and communication while devaluing and erasing language usages of racialized, poor and working-class, and un- or informally educated people" (viii). Brown's suggestion that using conventional syntax and grammar is strictly neurotypical while stylistic experimentation is always decidedly autistic, however, must be taken with a grain of salt. Unconventional stylistic patterns and

experimental forms of expression, such as the use of hyperbolic, multisensory figures, line breaks and enjambments, or visionary language, are not particularly unique to autistic writing and have been used by multiple practitioners of diverse literary traditions, contemporary and modern.

In 2021, the editor of the anthology announced the discontinuation of the volume because of "several grave errors in publication," such as the inclusion of narratives by a few white authors and writing that were not aligned with the values that were originally part of the anthology's intention. They claimed responsibility for these mistakes and sought to repair the harm done and are currently working on a revised edition of the anthology, and rather than signaling an error in judgment, their acknowledgment testifies to the ongoing and dynamic nature of learning and unlearning and underscores the necessity of similar projects which focalize narratives from racial and neurological margins. This article specifically analyses texts by black autistic authors who centralize their racial difference in their narratives. Even though the volume was discontinued, this article identifies the anthology as an initiative that marks a landmark in the history of autistic writing since it was the first, and possibly the only, collection of works by autistic persons of colour, which granted a voice to a historically silenced group of individuals.

Anthologized in *All the Weight*, the autobiographical prose piece titled "Blood, Sweat & Tears: On Assimilation" by Pretty Eyes Ellis revolves around the necessity of having to assimilate neurotypical norms of behavior and speech to secure one's survival. To walk without a "hampered gait" (24) or make eye contact or to speak "like human beings" (24), the author-narrator confesses that she has had to do "hundreds and perhaps thousands of

hours of research" (24) to "copy you like a cat" (24); she has "made neurotypical friends and copied them in a near-slavish manner" (27). The use of the word "near-slavish," an obvious hint to racial hierarchies, also reveals the imbalance in the power-dynamic between the author-narrator (who can merely copy and mimic) and her neurotypical friends, who naturally possessed privileged access to the norms and conventions of neurotypical behavior. These lines about autistic scripting and emulation of non-autistic manners of speech and behavior also expose neurotypical behavior to be reproducible: by following norms and social expectations according to which neurotypicals behave, the author-narrator mimics a set of codes that are foreign to her. In fact, the narrative carries repeated references to the process of autistic scripting, and the rote-learning and replication of neurotypical codes that it relies on. The copying, she asserts, was aimed at figuring out "what to say and what to do in this world where what you say and what do is more important than how you think or feel" (24). Another method of scripting that the author-narrator engages in is to "copy-paste from a book [she] had read or a television show [she] had seen" (25).

Elsewhere, Ellis goes on to compare "social interaction [to] a code that you can crack" (27), framing neurotypicality in the cast of a puzzle or an enigma that can be solved through practice and intelligent application. The author-narrator describes the process of masking quite poignantly, noting the many naturally occurring autistic modes of self-expression that she was forced to stifle. Ellis writes:

I hid my face from the world and put on a mask, a mask that I was afraid to take off
even when I was alone in the still of the night, when my hands wanted to dance

across the windowpane making shadows in the moonlight, when my body wanted to rock back and forth for no other reason than that it was comforting and predictable, when my lungs wanted to howl and shriek instead of talk in a civilized manner (27).

These lines draw a clear contrast between the two opposing pulls experienced by the author-narrator, between how her body wanted to act and how she forced herself to act, producing a kind of *double consciousness*. The embodied acts of stimming, such as running her hands across the windowpane or rocking back and forth or howling, have to be willfully checked to present a version of normalcy that is *civilized*, well-behaved, and tame.

For the anonymous autistic author-narrator of "Becoming Autistic, Becoming Disabled," participating in social activities, going to college, and completing their master's degree were all activities that "proved [their] normalcy, [their] worthiness" (155). Here we clearly observe the pervasive and powerful influence that the capitalist ideology of productivity and progress exerts on socio-cultural conceptions of the *normal*. As a person belonging to a neurological minority, they experience a sense of two-ness, being forced to mask their disabled self with a self that appears abled. The author-narrator even talks about the idea of "doublethink" (155) —or simultaneously holding two irreconcilable thoughts in their mind. They note that it was as if they were holding two different individuals within their body: the autistic person and the one who masked the autism to pass for a 'normal' individual. The reference to 'doublethink' may be read as an allusion to George Orwell's dystopian novel *1984*, which narrates the harrowing experience of existing in a totalitarian state. Although the autistic narrator does not anticipate consequences as

severe as physical torture or even death, as Orwell's protagonist Winston Smith does, the gnawing threat of exposure still torments them constantly.

This splitting of the self into two different human beings with contradictory and opposing pulls is also enacted by the black author Pharaoh Inkabuss, whose text I have discussed later in this chapter. Inkabuss, a black autistic person, invokes the work of W.E.B. DuBois in *The Souls of Black Folk* to capture the state of "floating between two or more identities" (162). Du Bois writes:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double- consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others [...] One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.
(DuBois 8)

A similarly painful fissuring of the self into two is also a constant source of internal turmoil and psychological strain for the author-narrator of Reese Piper's essay "Stripping While Autistic," which is also part of the anthology *Stim*. Always masking her difference and pushing herself to be someone she is not, the autistic stripper eventually feels: "I [am] two separate people"—at once the gregarious, genial, and socially adept person she aspired to be and "the awkward, incapable, terrible person who haunted me" (Piper 117). The sense of estrangement from herself is so extreme that 'the I' of the text observes how "[she] had never felt more isolated from [herself]" (Piper 122). This line enacts a psychological split between who the author-narrator pretends to be and the autistic self that she hides.

However, it is not always possible for her to perfectly mimic neurotypical codes, and each time the autistic person fails, she tries to search for "where the autism was bleeding

out, [thinking of] ways to stuff it back in" (Ellis 27). This image of violence clearly conveys the idea of autism as a wound, an unmanageable excess that needs to be gotten rid of or cured, echoing the medical model that pathologizes disability. The author-narrator eventually admits that she is disgusted that she tried to assimilate the neurotypical idea of normalcy by committing violence on her body, mind, and soul. Ellis' text ends with the resolution to embrace this excess: "I *will* dance [...] I *will* howl and shriek" (28). However, rather than inhabiting an already-unmasked autistic self that proclaims to have shed the mask and is living on her own terms, the author-narrator only tentatively projects the possibility of an unmasked self onto a future that is riddled with uncertainty, indicated by the future tense of 'will.' In the very next line, she breaks the promise to herself, considering the practical necessities of everyday survival as a black woman in a racist and ableist world. She confesses: "This is a lie, and I know it. I still need to eat and keep a roof over my head" (Ellis 28). She must keep talking in the same old subservient, "quiet, colonized, civilized tone" (Ellis 28). This realization is driven by the awareness that she is "colo[u]r[ed] [and] small [and] poor" (Ellis 28). The tone of the narrative is one marked by a curious mix of rage, hope, and helplessness, and evokes the sense of apprehension, anxiety, and paranoia that pervades the consciousness of the black autistic woman.

The doubly jeopardized situation caused by the overlap of race and autism is also portrayed deftly by Inkabuss, a neurodivergent, genderqueer person of colour based in Chicago, in the short introduction to the prose piece titled "The Wonderful World of Pharaoh." Inkabuss's text conceives the two worlds of neurotypical and the neurodivergent as being constituted by two separate languages. Whereas "humans rely on

[the language of] feelings, abstract thoughts and social concepts," as an autistic person, he relies on "[his] five senses" (164). The neurotypically-biased social world is "dominated by concepts, idioms, and emphasis on peer interaction & social norms [and] governed by constructs, cues [and] complex emotions" (165). In contrast, the daily-lives and routines of autists, he maintains, are run by "logic, patterns, and animalistic thinking" (165). Such a binaristic manner of perceiving neurotypical and neurodivergent languages as two starkly different modes of expression, however, reinforces the divide between two kinds of neurology, which leads to further alienization and pathologization of autistic individuals.

The conception of autism as a divergent kind of language, and an alternative mode of processing and communication is upheld by many other autistic writers as well. For instance, the Canadian author Jen-Meunier in her brief piece titled "We autistics, we villages, we humanoids" (also anthologized in *All the Weight*) writes how, as an autistic person, her "language [is] sound, shape and movement" (425). She further explains how her world is "magically woven in colo[u]r and sound and light, a Socratic melody of natural light where reality and abstraction moved together in waves" (425). These lines reflect the synesthetic richness of the author's experiences, in which different sensory modes merge together. Describing the meaning of words that form an integral part of her autistic vocabulary, she defines stim as "body expressiveness in a language broader and deeper than the linear word can convey" (430), and echolalia as "a language all its own, meaning understood in echoed mirrors" (430) that lean towards each other and reflect the interdependence of living and non-living beings. The image of echoed mirrors (or mirrors facing each other and reflecting each other) paints a picture of infinite repetition resulting

from the mirrors endlessly reflecting each other's reflections, perhaps suggesting the endlessly generative capacity of echolalia as a linguistic tool.

Coloured Autistic Poetry

A sustained example (and a meta-poetic celebration) of what I call coloured autistic rhetoric may be found in the poem "Love Letter To My Autism" by Kaijii Gomez Wick. The poem is a celebration of both neurological as well as racial difference; it glorifies the capacity of the poet's bodymind to access a myriad range of diverse sensory inputs. Autism, to the speaker, is "first colo[u]r in the void" (124), a touch of colour in a dark, monochromatic world. This phrase itself reimagines colour not as a mark of stigmatized identity, but as a signifier of power, vibrance, originality, and of a difference that is essential: it literally fills the void. The speaker goes on to state that autism is "the beginning of creation," and the "divine ecstasy that rescues from agony" (124). The religious connotation of these phrases is quite conspicuous: they can be read as an allusion to the Biblical myth of genesis, or the creation of the universe. The poet seems to suggest that autism is the magic generative force that existed in the void before anything else and sparked the process of creation. In fact, the poet describes autism using a catalogue of epithets: it is "love-unto-infinity," "joy of moving hands," "the-smallest-thing-is-worthy-of-my-rapture," "sharpen-my-mind-onto-the-head-of-a-pin," "manic-fire-of-want," "crave-with-all-your-skin" (124). These phrases mark a reconceptualization of autism not as a destructive, disruptive force, but as the source of a creative power that fuels innovation,

ingenuity, and invention. Filled with hyphenated words strung together to create new epithets for defining autism, the poem attempts to push the existing limits of language to make room for describing a unique phenomenon previously unwritten about. By listing down new definitions of autism which defamiliarize the clinical view, the poem redefines and reimagines autism as a creative linguistic and artistic force.

From a clinical perspective, one significant reason for discounting autistic experience and disqualifying autistics from the human race altogether is that autistics are seen as primarily characterized as possessing *defective* or *impoverished* linguistic capacity. In contrast to the clinical view, the literary scholar Julia Miele Rodas in her pathbreaking work *Autistic Disturbances* (2018) identifies a distinctly autistic aesthetic and explores the creative power of autistic language by focusing on atypical rhetoric and semiotics. Autistic writing, according to Rodas, is characterized by “a din of ricochets, apostrophes, ejaculations, catalogs, and neologisms [which contribute to a new language and] distinctive forms of verbal expression” (73). Indeed, Wick’s poem emphasizes the poet’s ability to perceive phenomena in the world in a language that is essentially auditory and tactile. The speaker mournfully commiserates with non-autistic people who have been denied the language of autism—because “their eyes have never exploded with the colo[u]rs of elation/ at the taste of a single fruit, their fingertips never become/ their entire world at the touch of silk” (l. 27-29). Colour, again, is associated with an excess/explosion of something as positive and welcome as elation. These lines also carry strong overtones of synesthesia which poignantly portray the intermingling of gustatory, tactile, and visual senses. The speaker seems to be keenly aware of the ableist notion of autism as a “stealer

of children, kidnapper of potential" (l. 25), as organizations like Autism Speaks promote.

He dismisses such allegations against autism with disdain: "they know/ nothing" (l. 25-26).

The Biblical allusions are brought back in the fifth stanza when the speaker notes how "they" (the non-autistics) insist that an autistic person's "life is chaos [and that autism's] pleasures are temptations, apples that, once eaten, / will make [them] into cyborg or angel" (l. 37-41). Autism, the speaker suggests, is commonly perceived as the devil itself, plotting and tempting. In defiance, the speaker goes on to praise the state of chaos as a mode of resistance to a mechanically ordered, neat world where all experiences are "quantifiable [...] laboratory-/ clean, / factory-standard, counted, not a single strand out of place" (l. 52-54). In contrast to such a world governed by decorum and order, autism is a celebration of the "undignified messes, [the] impure delights" (l. 59) of life. He writes:

If you are an apple I will
grab
you right off the tree, devour, gorge, lick clean the juices
and roll on the grass. I relish my spine of gleaming metal,
my mithril hair blowing in the wind, my fingernails of eye-
burning
light, my six wings. If you have made me an angel
or a monster, it is because I am that which I choose to be,
and you make me what I am.
My life is chaos? How else should a life be but chaos? (l. 41-49)

Richly sensory and highly evocative, these lines perform an unmistakable celebration of the qualities of *looseness*, *plasticity*, and *pleasure* that Rodas identifies as being

associated with autistic rhetoric. Such a rhetoric, as the poem insists, challenges the neurotypical standards and rules of regulated, efficient, and measured form of expression which are mechanical and quantifiable. In contrast, Wick's poem embodies an unruly and disruptive excess, a *spillage*, exhibiting a defiant disregard for the rules of grammar and syntax, as is evident in the punctuation, and the lack of 'complete' sentences. Therefore, it effectively engages in the task of *de-forming* neurotypical language with its rules, norms, and codes.

Instead of seeing such a textual utterance as illogical or non-dialogic, it is important to celebrate what Rodas calls the "unsettling quality [and the] deceptively contained instabilities" (3) which distinguish autistic aesthetic from neurotypical forms of expression. Wick's poem, heavily characterized by figures of speech such as metaphors, similes, synesthesia and hyperbole, also involves defamiliarization, non-linearity, circularity, and rhetorical excess. While the use of similar techniques may be witnessed in other experimental forms of writing, such as in literary works by modernist poets, imagists, and surrealists, Wick's poem itself functions like a meta-poetic commentary on the craft of autistic creation itself: the poet seeks to push the limits of existing vocabulary and syntax to adopt a new language for describing his experiences. They conceive the language of autism as being constituted by "electric words/ like stim and echolalia, / words that hum and buzz/ and loll around on the tongue" (126). Used to describe an alternative language that is kinetic and embodied, these words themselves evoke a sense of humming and buzzing and lolling (a neologism that perhaps refers to the act of gently swinging) around. The rhetoric employed in this poem is vibrant, electric, colourful, dynamic, and resistive in

its restlessness. Employing hyperbole, synesthesia, repetitions, and neologisms, this poem may be read not only as an exemplification but also a celebration of autistic rhetoric—one that upholds the beauty and resistive capacity of chaos, creative unrest, sensorial excess, verbal exaggeration, restlessness, defiance, repetition, lack of precision, dynamism, and mobility.

Autistic expression as a different kind of language has been studied by humanities scholars besides Rodas as well. For instance, Melanie Remi Yergeau’s work *Authoring Autism: On Rhetoric and Neurological Queerness* (2018) also debunks dehumanizing assumptions about autistics as being inarticulate, passive, and rhetorically challenged. Autistic language, they write, upsets the norms of allistic forms of language and knowledge. In fact, Yergeau goes on to challenge the clinical criteria that deny autistic people agency and the status of rhetorical beings. Terming such a dehumanizing standard as “demi-rhetoricity” (32), Yergeau challenges the very criteria of what is recognized as rhetorical. The autistic rhetoric employed in what Yergeau calls “autistexts” (20) marks a shift away from the demands of fluent speech, coherent thought, and concise articulation. In fact, Yergeau reclaims autism as a “narrative condition” (1) that carries a uniquely neuroqueer poetics of cognitive difference. In Yergeau’s words, autistic rhetoric is “a rhetoric that tics, a rhetoric that stims, a rhetoric that faux pas, a rhetoric that averts eye contact...” (31). Indeed, Wick’s poem can be similarly read as embodying a different kind of rhetoric that is electric, dynamic, and vibrant. The poem experiments with generic limits, formulates neologisms, plays with signifiers, and creates new epithets in an attempt to capture the scintillating experience of synaesthesia. In it we trace the emergence of a new

vocabulary and a new set of idioms for articulating vignettes of the black autistic self as being multi-faceted, contextual and situational.

On the surface, Yergeau's claim seems to conflate coherence with conformity, pairing rhetorical coherence by default with neurotypicality and creating a rigid binary between two distinct modes of writing. However, Yergeau's aim is not to reinforce the divide but instead to redefine the conventions and parameters of rhetoric so that autistic narratives can be appreciated on their own terms, rather than observed as curious instances of departure from the norm. Although it might be tempting to read any departure from literary and linguistic convention as an instance of autistic rhetoric, as Rodas frequently does in her work, it is important to remember the porous nature of the boundary between neurotypical and neurodivergent. Such a diagnostic model of reading, with its tendency to generalize and classify any form of stylistic or rhetorical otherness as symptomatic of neurodivergence, downplays the influence of socio-political changes, literary movements and experiments, economic demands of the market, and individual authorial choices on textual productions. Further, the essentialist stratification of human neurology into two broad, neat neurotypes does not overthrow but simply reverses the oppressive hierarchy that already exists in such a binary. Neurological conditions lie on a broad continuum without rigid boundaries separating them. Numerous autistic advocates and scholars have also severely critiqued the ableism embedded in the neurotypical/neurodivergent binary. In their article "Circle Wars: Reshaping the Typical Autism Essay," Yergeau writes, "when we describe autism in terms of binaries, discourse communities, or circles, we construct a very unreal very neurotypical, very us/them reality"

(7). They maintain that the easy separation of neurotypicality and autism as well as that of low-functioning and high-functioning autistics signals a "clear-cut, easily-defined" (7) border between the two. Vehemently opposing the categorization of human neurological configuration, Yergeau seeks to redirect attention to the role played by discourses in oppressing bodies and minds that perform divergence.

Conclusion

Foucault writes in his essay "Preface to Transgression in Aesthetics" that "a limit could not exist if it were absolutely uncrossable and, reciprocally, transgression would be pointless if it merely crossed a limit composed of illusions and shadows" (73). Texts by black autistic authors perform a linguistic excess which threatens to cross limits and destabilize the ableist, Eurocentric roots of linguistic correctness as we know it. By employing a black autistic rhetoric to expose the hollowness of grammaticality and linguistic convention, these texts expose ideas of the norm itself to be restrictive, insufficient, arbitrary and idealized standards that constrict the divergent modes of experiencing and expressing. Further, revealing the performative nature of neurotypicality and linguistic normalcy itself, these texts call out masking as imitation, mirroring and mimicry, challenging the hierarchical divide between neurotypical and neurodivergent that seeks to privilege the former while delegitimizing the latter.

To conclude, therefore, texts by autistic people of colour often articulate a stronger political critique than their white counterparts by seeking to create a new rhetoric for

expressing divergence, and generally engaging on a deeper level with political systems, racial injustice, embodied experiences, and social structures and relationalities. By enacting a break with linguistic, generic, and aesthetic norms, they question the arbitrary foundation of the norm itself. The autistic self that emerges in such writing is not one that is solipsistic and exotic or insulated from the real world but is a contextual self that is continually evolving; it is not a fantasy or an ideal but an embodied and precarious self that must be protected against social/physical threats. These texts therefore successfully *deform* linguistic and generic codes that are essentially ableist and create space for a new aesthetic and a new language to capture the experiential reality of inhabiting the intersection of racial and neurological divergence.

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