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Reflection: Autistic-coded characters and fans in fandom

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Moving like us

In June of 2012, Julia Bascom, Deputy Executive Director of the Autistic Self Advocacy Network, published an article on her blog entitled "Someone Who Moves Like You".

In it she writes,

"This is a story of what it means to start a new story and see on your screen, for the first time, *someone who moves like you*.

Do you understand what that means?

It's probably not something you've ever really had to think about. But how someone moves is the first thing telling you whether or not they might be able to be you, and you them. And for the first time in Julia's life, she looked at a character on television and saw a *yes*."ⁱ

The piece was specifically about the character Abed Nadir from the NBC comedy *Community* and it has resonated since its publication with many autistic people. It doesn't always resonate specifically in relation to Abed - although for many that is the case - but in the general experience of seeing "someone who moves like you". In other words, it speaks to the experience of seeing what you believe to be another autistic person on your screen.

The way someone moves may seem a strange marker to anyone outside of the autistic community. How can the way a character moves be any reliable indicator of whether or not they have a neurodevelopmental disability? Autism is in the brain, after all, and it really carries no physical distinctions. You can't always tell when someone is autistic from their appearance. So if a character was going to be clearly recognized as autistic, surely it would be in a diagnostic pronouncement, or a failed social interaction, or a perseverative interest (all of which Abed incidentally has to show for himself), wouldn't it? Yet, seeing autism in someone onscreen is for

much of the autistic community unquestionably recognizable in something as transient as "the way they move". It is in the awkwardness of their gait, in the tension of their shoulders, the quickness of their steps, the off-ness of their gaze, the precarious positioning of their limbs - in all these little ways that add up to make one complete picture reflecting back at you. Autistic people recognize the way these characters silently carry themselves, through a world not built for the way their body experiences it, because they also silently carry themselves through it every day.

Autistic-coded characters and their creators

Of course, Abed Nadir is an interesting case. Unlike many characters that autistic people recognize as moving like them, Abed is all but confirmed as autistic in the show. It is the numerous characters in other shows who are never confirmed, or thought, or made to be explicitly autistic, but which autistic fans claim as such ("headcanon" - an idea about the text that only exists inside the head of the fan creating it -), whom I want to focus on. Abed, however, is a good example to understand how headcanons come to be. Abed was not explicitly written as autistic initially. Creator Dan Harmon did not write him to be autistic, he simply wrote him to be a quirky, off-center, intelligent, obsessive, awkward character.ⁱⁱ As the series progressed, many autistic fans did what they do, and saw Abed "moving like them" and shared it with the world.

The common reaction for creators to having their character speculated as autistic seems to be a great sense of fear. An "oh no, I didn't mean to step into *that*" sort of feeling. The diagnostic label "autism" feels like a heavy weight around their neck, taking their story out of the fictional playground they delight in and into the very much "too real" world of disabilities that are listed in the "Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders" and the subject of frightful awareness campaignsⁱⁱⁱ. Disabilities, disorders, and diagnoses don't belong in stories, unless those stories are explicitly about disabilities, because disability can only exist for its own purpose, and not as a facet of the rest of the world - fictional or otherwise.

The Big Bang Theory producer Bill Prady, for example, does not want his show to be held responsible for^{iv} portraying Asperger's in the character of Sheldon Cooper, although he is fine with being held responsible for consistently portraying a character who is uncomfortable with eye contact, unable to detect sarcasm, sticks to stringent routines to maintain a sense of

order in his life, and is wickedly intelligent in areas of his interest but delayed a great deal in any other life activities.

Bryan Fuller, creator of NBC's *Hannibal*, will go as far as to speculate within his own show's pilot episode that one of his characters is autistic, but then adamantly deny his own charge,

"For Will Graham, there's a line in the pilot about him being on the spectrum of autism or Asperger's, and he's neither of those things. He actually has an empathy disorder where he feels way too much and that's relatable in some way. There's something about people who connect more to animals than they do to other people because it's too intense for whatever reason."^v

The fact that he has very accurately described the experiences of many autistic people doesn't seem to sway the matter. Autism is too big, too scary, too real, too hard, and more importantly, autistic personhood, is far too removed from the (presumably) non-autistic audience's own world to possibly be a part of a fictional one.

Dan Harmon, however, reacted to this in a way quite different from these creators. He did go a similar route as Bryan Fuller, in that in the pilot episode of *Community*, the main character Jeff cavalierly drops the declaration "Yeah, well you have Asperger's" on Abed before leaving the scene, and his newly formed ensemble cast, in an angry huff. Amongst the confusion and awkward laughter of other people in the group, another character whispers with gravity, "It's a serious disorder".^{vi}

Of course, it was not the intention of Dan Harmon for Abed to be autistic, any more than it was the intention of Bryan Fuller for Will Graham to be. "Autism" in media narratives becomes a shorthand for calling out the oddness of an oddball archetype character without the actual responsibility of the very real disability. The term becomes almost fully disconnected from itself - a way of saying "you're weird" likened to other disability-alluding phrases that have snuck into our everyday vernacular ("stop acting special needs", "don't be retarded", "I'm so OCD"). You're "like those autistic people", but you aren't actually.

Yet, when autistic fans started writing about how much they related to Abed, how much

they saw "someone who moves like you", and how good it made them feel, Dan Harmon diverged from the mainstream. He reports himself as thinking, "I don't want to let these people down, ever. They don't get a lot of role models on TV and I know how important that is. ... I didn't want to do wrong by these people, so I researched this thing just to make sure I never did something [wrong]."vii

That sense of responsibility which so many other creators fear, and that he freely took upon himself, led to him discovering just how familiar everything about autism sounded to his own life. Harmon soon discovered that he himself was likely autistic.^{viii} Autism was no longer too far removed from his world - as it turned out, Abed moved like him too.

Autistic headcanons and the fans who love/hate them

For autistic fans, an "autistic-coded" character is not merely a character they would like to be autistic, or that they see a few sprinklings of autistic traits in, but one who is so *obviously* autistic, they must actually be autistic. At the very least, these characters were based on the idea of autism as marked by certain "unusual" ways of thinking and being. It's therefore not a far reach for autistic fans to read as "autistic-coded" characters who are declared "autistic" in the pilots of their series, retracted by their creators or not. It certainly isn't for a character like Abed Nadir who came out of the mind of an undiagnosed autistic person.

Or, it shouldn't be. Yet, for every Will Graham, Sheldon Cooper, and Sherlock Holmes being embraced by autistic fans as "moving like them", there are possibly more vocal voices of fans denying that these characters are "autistic-coded", or that autistic fans are allowed to read them as such.

In online autistic communities, fans finding and declaring characters from shows and movies and any other form of entertainment as one of their own, has become quite popular. There are entire blogs dedicated to cataloging the many different characters, or dedicated to one in particular, and tags you can peruse to find more of these autistic "headcanons". There is also a growing autistic fandom community for whom this practice of "headcanoning" characters as autistic is an important part of their fandom experience. However, in response to this growing subculture of autistic fans there are many objections from other, unusually non-autistic, fans in

the same fandoms.

Not every autistic “headcanon” comes from an “autistic-coded” character. Sometimes these are applied to characters whom the fan will acknowledge exhibit no truly compelling traits of autism, but that they wish to reinterpret as autistic for their own enjoyment. Reading characters as different than they are written in canon is an acceptable and widespread practice in fandom. However, for the fans who object to any autistic reading of a character, there is little difference between a purely wishfully applied headcanon, and one applied to a character who is seen as autistic-coded in the show. To them, any autistic headcanon must be denied because it clearly has no basis in canon.

To these fans, an “autistic-coded” autistic headcanon must be even more strongly denied, because it is claiming that a beloved character is probably autistic, or based on autism, or on an autistic person. To claim this about a beloved character is often seen as an offense to their personal understanding of autism, often based in uncharitable stereotypes or ableism.

To these naysayers, the example of Abed, viewed as one of the most accurate and most current autistic-coded characters turning out to be from an autistic creator, makes no difference. They may think, “Not every content creator can be autistic, obviously!” The likelihood that creators might know any autistic people on which to base these characters is equally dismissed.

These objections are so common, a whole blog on Tumblr (dubbed “neurotypical-headcanons”) cropped up to document them. The autistic creator of the blog does nothing more than find comments objecting to autistic headcanons and reposts them as quotes. The blog’s heading reads, “Ridiculous Reasons Why That Character Can’t Be Autistic”.^{ix} It can usually elicit a good laugh from fellow autistic fans. When the comments are removed from their actual context, they’re less enraging for their often extremely ableist and ignorant content. It’s simply amusing that someone could be upset enough by the idea of a fictional character being autistic to write such things.

For these objecting fans, similarly to most creators, autism continues to be too big, too scary, too real, too hard, and mostly importantly, too far removed from their world to be included in their fandoms.

Autistic-coded in society

It's not hard to figure out why a good number of autistic-coded characters might exist. Current CDC estimates of autism prevalence in the United States put it at 1 in 68^x. That's not a small number, and consensus among the autistic community is that it is likely more, given how undiagnosed certain populations remain (women, trans individuals, poor people, people of color, etc.). It is more than likely that creators have met many autistic people in their lives without knowing it. It is likely everyone has met many autistic people in their lives without knowing it and that some of our common archetypal characters, *and the traits we associate to make these characters stand out even more*, come from very real autistic people we run across each day. The whole course of human experience is replete with autistic people.

As it turns out, autistic characters recognizably existed in popular culture before the diagnostic label of autism or Asperger's even existed. At least according to the doctor who brought about in one instance the diagnostic label himself, Hans Asperger, the Austrian doctor who helped in the initial 'discovery' of autism among his patients in Vienna. In Steve Silberman's *Neurotribes: The Legacy of Autism and Future of Neurodiversity*, Asperger is noted as having said the characteristics of autism "were already familiar in stock characters from pop culture like the "absent-minded professor" and Count Bobby, a fictitious aristocrat who was the butt of many Austrian jokes".^{xi}

Autism is diagnosed only by observable behavior, not by genetic tests or brain scans or blood samples, but by the notable characteristics that makeup that label, by "the way someone moves". These characteristics exist within the autistic person, regardless of whether the diagnosis and label is applied to them. The existence of an autistic person is therefore not reliant on being given a formal diagnosis.

If a creator needs a character to "move" in a certain way, to relay a certain message to the audience, they might, therefore, associate traits from real world people that have been codified in our popular culture (at least further back than Hans Asperger's own discovery) as autistic. We have long associated traits like lack of eye contact, and difficulty with sarcasm and picking up subtle cues, and love of routine, and restless fidgeting or awkward gait, with *that type* of character. Whether that character is someone who is a genius, an annoyance, a weirdo, a social

pariah, or all of the above, they must conform to a certain checklist of traits, that the medical establishment now calls autism, for audiences to recognize them.

Autistic fans in fandom

This process of unknown autistic people in real life informing the creation of autistic character archetypes in our popular culture becomes more apparent as more and more autistic fans notice and document different types of autistic-coded characters in our current media landscape. They're not all white, male, asexual, emotionally blunt, bumbling scientists and geniuses - some of them are Abed, a Palestinian-Polish young man in college who can't read analog clocks and loves TV shows and movies more than life itself. Some of them are women (Temperance Brennan in *Bones*), some of them are minimum wage workers (April Ludgate in *Parks and Recreation*), some of them are gay men (Raymond Holt in *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*), some of them are social media beauty stars (Eliza Dooley in ABC's *Selfie*), some of them lead the show's main romance storyline (Leopold Fitz in *Marvel's Agents of SHIELD*), some of them are from fantasy genres (Newt Scamander in *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*), or post-apocalyptic horrors (Sarah in *The Walking Dead* video game series), or *Disney* animated movies (Lilo Pelekai from *Lilo and Stich*), or supernatural comedies (Jillian Holtzmann in *Ghostbusters (2016)*)^{xii}. But they were all united by their creators' vision in needing them to be a little awkward, a little strange, and to move a little differently.

Although it can be subconscious when creators come up with autistic-coded characters, the psychology savvy writer may see an opportunity to quickly flag a character as "different". When these creators come up with these archetypes of characters that are older than the DSM label, they may come right out and say the word "autism" or "Asperger's" on screen, as a shorthand signaling to the audience who this character is supposed to be. Then, once they have made the association with autistic traits in the minds of their viewers, they turn around and deny that the character was ever actually meant to be an autistic *person* - just autistic-like.

It seems that 'autistic' can be associated with various interesting traits that make up the character, but it cannot go any further and be associated with the character's whole personhood as autistic. This removal of autism from personhood is not an unfamiliar reaction for those in the autistic community, who contend on a regular basis with parents, doctors, charities, and others

who insist that autism is separate from the person "afflicted" with it. It is often insisted that autism is a disorder that the person *has*, not something that the person *is*. Likewise, in popular culture, at the most autism can be a shorthand for traits that a character possesses, but never a real quality that defines who that character is.

While it's easy to explain how autistic-coded characters could come into existence, the public perception of autism as "less than" still stops many other fans, and often the creators themselves, short of the realization that one of their characters is likely autistic. Autism is too far removed from who ordinary characters can be in fiction. It is something definitively Other from their own lives as well. Autism is a rare, isolating, tragic disorder. Autistic people are Over There, and they're not going to be freely cropping up in our fiction Over Here. Autism is a dysfunction and not the calling card of fully fleshed-out, interesting, relatable human characters in diverse genres of stories.

This perspective creeps into every objection thrown at autistic fans' headcanons. They range from narrow or flat out wrong understandings of what being autistic means, to horror that someone would impose a "mental illness" on a character, or deem disability something even worthy of being in a "regular" story. Perhaps one of the most common objections is, "They're not autistic, that's just their personality". They may even follow it with a, "Jeez, can't people just have personalities anymore? Why does everything have to be a disorder?"

In the minds of these objectors it's as though autistic people don't have personalities, or that our personalities are not informed by our neurology, or that they themselves have never run across an actual "person" in their day to day life who could also be autistic. Autism is not in the realm of *personhood*, it is the realm of pathology, and it only follows that people aren't just *walking around*, in the real world or fictional ones, *being* autistic.

Conclusion

The lack of general knowledge about autism, its diversity, and its pervasive presence, among people in the real world, bleeds seamlessly into the worlds of fandom, where the very same objections that many autistic adults face in real life ("you *can't* be autistic, you seem like a real person") get lobbed at fictional characters, and the autistic fans who claim them.

Perhaps the most convincing sign that to these decrying fans autism is not close enough to be among their world, is that many will unknowingly accuse the autistic people making the autistic headcanons of "not understanding autism" and "insulting real autistic people". All the while without realizing, or being able to fathom, that autistic people are also part of their fandoms.

As long as autistic people exist in the real world, autistic-coded characters are going to keep cropping up in fiction. In the same way, as long as autistic fans keep engaging with media, they will continue to point out these characters and create autistic headcanons. The only chance that this may change one day is if "autistic" becomes a label no longer so far removed from personhood that creators would be just as comfortable claiming the actual label as they are its scheme of characteristics, while still writing a well-rounded full-fledged character. Characters will no longer be "autistic-coded", they will simply *be* autistic. However, simply getting to *be* autistic is a luxury many autistic people in the real world can't yet claim, so it may be a while yet for our fiction to catch up. Unless fiction starts to help lead the way.

ⁱ Bascom, Julia. "THINKING PERSON'S GUIDE TO AUTISM." *Someone Who Moves Like You*. Web. 15 Apr. 2016.

ⁱⁱ [Http://www.youtube.com/channel/UCKAE6VvXAo6TPO9SLMx7pQQ](http://www.youtube.com/channel/UCKAE6VvXAo6TPO9SLMx7pQQ). "Dan Harmon Talks about Asperger's Syndrome - Why Abed Is a Shaman [SubEng] [SubIta]." *YouTube*. YouTube, 2014. Web. 15 Apr. 2016.

ⁱⁱⁱ For example, Autism Speaks.

^{iv} Star-Ledger, Alan Sepinwall/The. "Reader mail: Does Sheldon from 'Big Bang Theory' have Asperger's?" *NJ.com*. N.p., 13 Aug. 2009. Web. 22 Jan. 2017.

^v Faye, Denis. "Hannibal's Bryan Fuller." *Hannibal's Bryan Fuller*. Web. 15 Apr. 2016.

^{vi} Harmon, Da. "Pilot." *Community*, National Broadcasting Company, 17 Sept. 2009.

^{vii} [Http://www.youtube.com/channel/UCKAE6VvXAo6TPO9SLMx7pQQ](http://www.youtube.com/channel/UCKAE6VvXAo6TPO9SLMx7pQQ). "Dan Harmon Talks about Asperger's Syndrome - Why Abed Is a Shaman [SubEng] [SubIta]." *YouTube*. YouTube, 2014. Web. 15 Apr. 2016.

^{viii} [Http://www.youtube.com/channel/UCKAE6VvXAo6TPO9SLMx7pQQ](http://www.youtube.com/channel/UCKAE6VvXAo6TPO9SLMx7pQQ). "Dan Harmon Talks about Asperger's Syndrome - Why Abed Is a Shaman [SubEng] [SubIta]." *YouTube*. YouTube, 2014. Web. 15 Apr. 2016.

^{ix} "Ridiculous Reasons Why That Character Can't Be Autistic." *Ridiculous Reasons Why That Character Can't Be Autistic*. Web. 15 Apr. 2016. <http://neurotypical-headcanons.tumblr.com/>

^x "Data & Statistics." *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016. Web. 15 Apr. 2016.

^{xi} Silberman, Steve. *NeuroTribes: The Legacy of Autism and Future of Neurodiversity*. Penguin Publishing Group, 2015.