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**A New Materialisms Poetics of Touch: David Eastham's *Understand: 50 Memowriter Poems***

**Une nouvelle poétique matérialiste du toucher : *Understand: 50 poèmes Memowriter de David Eastham***

Shane Neilson BSc MD MFA MA Ph.D.  
Waterloo Regional Campus, McMaster University  
neils@mcmaster.ca

**Abstract**

Although often mentioned in summarial histories of “first” authors with autism, the work of the Canadian David Eastham has not been analyzed at the level of form to date. Using Melanie Yergeau’s scholarship challenging the ruling episteme of biomedicine when it comes to neurodivergence, this paper considers biographical elements of Eastham’s life to confirm biomedical primacy in the accounts made by others. Then Eastham’s own work undergoes formal analysis to show how Eastham’s own words resisted the episteme while, even today, those means of those same words, provided by the contested practise of Facilitated Communication, are challenged by biomedicine. The method of close reading is used to interpret Eastham’s work, as guided by the theory inherent to new materialisms. The result is exposing an uncomfortable match between medical models and the alternative embodiment concept when it comes to interpreting the poetry of disabled people.

**Résumé**

Souvent mentionné dans les résumés historiques des « premières » plumes autistes, le travail du Canadien David Eastham n’a pas encore été analysé du point de vue de la forme. En se basant sur les travaux de Melanie Yergeau remettant en question l’épistémé dominant de la biomédecine en matière de neurodivergence, cet article considère les éléments biographiques de la vie d’Eastham pour confirmer la primauté biomédicale dans les comptes-rendus rédigés par autrui. Ensuite, l’œuvre d’Eastham elle-même subit une analyse formelle pour montrer la manière dont les propres mots de l’auteur ont résisté à cette épistémé alors que, même aujourd’hui, ces moyens de produire ces mêmes mots, fournis par la pratique contestée de la communication facilitée, sont remis en cause par la biomédecine. La méthode de lecture attentive est utilisée pour interpréter le travail d’Eastham, tel que guidé par la théorie inhérente aux néomatérialismes. Le résultat expose une correspondance inconfortable entre les modèles médicaux et le concept alternatif d’incarnation lorsqu’il s’agit d’interpréter la poésie des personnes handicapées.

**Key words**

Autism, disability poetics, biomedicine, facilitated communication, new materialisms

## Introduction

In *Authoring Autism*, Melanie Yergeau (2018) sets up some of the basic problems faced by autistic people, including the grandparent of them all: the epistemology of biomedicine in which the “discursive framework” revolving around diagnosis becomes the “lens through which others” can story the life of the autistic (p. 1). Yergeau explains that “through diagnosis, autistics are storied into autism, our bodyminds made determinable and knowable through the criteria of neurodevelopmental disability” (p. 1). As a corollary, “nonautistic stakeholders become authorized as autism somethings – as autism parents, as autism researchers, as autism therapists and specialists and mentors and advocates” (Yergeau, 2018, p. 2). Indeed, such was the case faced by David Eastham, a deceased Canadian poet who has been repeatedly recognized as the first published autistic poet in the world, including by scholars like Yergeau (2018, p. 21), Sofie Boldsen (2018, p. 897), Lauren Young (2012, p. 291), and Lisa Cartwright (2008, p.164). To date, however, Eastham’s work has never been engaged with other than mentioning it as a “first.” His poetry exists as passive material upon which well-intentioned authors inscribe an ironically blank intentionality, but it is an unexplored fact only, a material infused with supposed expression yet unstudied in terms of the means of its expression.

For its part, CanLit has yet to study Eastham, and the main contribution of this essay is to bring Eastham’s poetry forward as deserving of further study. Eastham should not remain only “storied for” as a “first”, either. To “story with” Eastham, I will first explain how his life was “storied for” by well-meaning normates. Ultimately, this essay will develop a new materialisms reading of David Eastham’s poetry, modelling an intersubjectivity between autistics and non-autistics that is influenced by the thought of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Emmanuel Levinas, and Shannon Walters. After discussing the impositions of biomedicine upon the narratives of

autistics – a doctrine of “lack” – I introduce facets of Eastham’s work as all-too-susceptible to what I suggest has become a problematic way to read poetry by disabled persons. I then bring forward the theory of new materialisms and the controversy of Facilitated Communication in order to show how communication by autistics can be materialized by including the sensual modalities of touch, with biomedicine always haunting that materialization, yet only in the sense that our possibilities are haunted by our past.

### **Biomedicine Stories David Eastham into Autism**

Based on the evidence of accounts of his life and Eastham’s own writings, it is hard not to conclude that, to a considerable extent, Eastham *was* storied into autism through diagnosis. His *Understand: 50 Memowriter Poems*, offers a foreword by Anne Grice (1985) that introduces Eastham in the first paragraph as “a 21 year old non-verbal, autistic and apraxic student who attends the M.F. McHugh’s School of Communications Disorders class situated in Laurentian High School in Ottawa, Ontario. His teacher is Mrs. Sally Borthwick” (p. 3). In short order, the reader is provided an immediate description of the developmental capabilities and capacities of the poet: he is non-verbal and apraxic; he is diagnosed as autistic; and, in what appears dramatically out of step with twenty-first century disability justice politics, his teacher is presented too, as if the teacher were somehow responsible for the fact of the poetry itself. In addition to the aforementioned proofs, there are a great many more. Grice concludes her introduction as follows: “He is the student whose situation was presented at the 1983 National Conference on Autism in Toronto by his teacher then, Mrs. Wilhelmina Watters and myself under the title, ‘The Sharp EL 7001 Memowriter as an Augmentative Communication System for Non-Verbal Children’” (M. Eastham, 1985, p. 3). Additionally, the dust jacket copy of the lone

biography of Eastham, *Silent Words* by nonautistic parent Margaret Eastham (1992), begins with the following four simple words: “David Eastham had autism.” It continues: “He could not speak, write, or use sign language. He had no meaningful communication until age 16.” This simple phrasing contributes to Eastham’s autism-storying, but it also arguably raises a series of complicated questions: Who decides what is meaningful? What matters? Is what matters meaningful, or vice versa, or is the relationship more complex than bidirectional flow? Even this dust jacket’s penultimate paragraph suggests that Eastham’s story is more so a simple journey “through educational techniques which helped make [his] life rewarding.” *Silent Words* delivers on this promise, offering tens of pages describing the education of Eastham and the interventions of dozens of people who assisted him with communication.

Based on this overwhelming evidence, I do not think it cynical to suggest that the gift Eastham offered to the world other than himself—his poetry—was also the occasion for Yergeau’s well-characterized army of autism-somethings to claim professional status and distinction. I can hear Yergeau in my mind mocking the voice of hegemonic normativity when they nail the problem like this: “Autistics don’t tell us what we want to hear, nor do they tell it to us in the manner in which we wish to hear it” (2018, p. 22). Yet it’s not entirely fair or complete to leave things there, either. Only so much work can be done interrogating the autism-storying of Eastham using the well-worn social model of disability.

### **Lack Perspective: Biomedicine’s Narrative Effects**

Yergeau historicizes autism as storied by the epistemology of biomedicine, which has as its dogma a doctrine of “decided lack” of intentional discursive expression in autistics. Yergeau contends that medicine vends a “medicalized storytelling of lack” (2018, p. 7). Under

biomedicine, autistic people are stereotyped as possessing a limited ability to communicate and, on top of that, a limited ability to flex rhetorical agency in order to diagnostically qualify. The destructive consequence of this stereotype in society is obvious: “if one is arhetorical, then one is not fully human” (2018, p. 6). Yergeau refines the larger social consequences later in their introduction by writing of “the ways in which non-rhetoricity denies autistic people not only agency, but their very humanity” (2018, p. 11). More to the point, autism is a pathological condition within biomedicine, and the wills of autistic people are conceived of as “merely the wills of neurobiology” (2018, p. 17). If the point is not yet clear, Yergeau adds for good measure that “[a]utism’s rhetorical function – in genetics, neurology, psychology, philosophy, and more – is to contrast those who are otherwise presumed to be cognitively and thereby humanly whole” (2018, p. 23).

At the theoretical level (and proceeding practically from there), biomedicine makes lack of communicative ability the dominant presupposition of the autism discourse, reducing what communicative agency autistic people possess and inflicting this theorized lack on diagnosed bodies to intensify what communicative challenges are already present. The trap is one of diagnosis itself, the imposition of a dominant discourse from which there is no escape. Anything “autistic” must cohere around lack and faulty neurology, otherwise such narratives are not perceived or recognizable as autistic narratives to neurotypicals and the autism-somethings who decide. Yergeau contests biomedical epistemology strenuously, offering a crucial “takeaway” from their book: a glimpse of “purposively ignore[d] . . . autistic narrations of . . . rhetorical events, the interbodily potentials, desires, and moments that structure an autistic life” (2018, p. 4). As Yergeau pointedly asks, “To whom do we listen? The autistic or the non-autistic? Can there ever really be an in-between?” (2018, p. 2).

For my part, I seize upon Eastham's poetry to elaborate the conditions of possibility for this in-between. Granted, it is the project of biomedicine to eradicate such possibility, enforcing a binary of normate and autistic via the diagnostic process; this becomes the totalizing force through which people are known, denying them selfhood and agency. However, conversely, I read David Eastham's poetry as a manifestation of the intertwined, dynamic relationship of materiality and disability discourse. I feel encouraged to make this investigation because, after years of frustrated attempts to communicate, Eastham started to interact with – returning to Yergeau's cautionary line – an “us” on “our terms” by telling normates that he wished to participate more. In fact, Eastham's record is one oriented towards normate readers who wish to understand what life was like for him, assisted by the technologies he was instructed in by the intensive efforts of educators as well as by the accounts of those who knew him.<sup>1</sup> These accounts will, by my essay's close, become the ultimate metaphor for always-problematized human communication itself: that is, like Yergeau, I remain unconvinced that there is a way to avoid a privileging of familiar forms of communication when normates are involved, yet the attempt to try to bridge the gap seems always worth it. To an extent, this is why disability scholars have turned to and developed new materialisms theory in the first place, as part of “finding out whether or not disability can assist in locating an agency not entirely eclipsed by language and the workings of culture while, nonetheless, using words as our only route to the agentic materiality we seek” (Mitchell et. al. xii).

### **Escaping Diagnostic Traps via New Materialisms**

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<sup>1</sup> If this seems too large a claim, consult *Silent Words* – especially Chapter 12 – for a description of Eastham's anguish at not being able to speak to others.

Because sequence is important in poetics, I now turn to the first poem in Eastham's book, one titled "Understand." I transcribe the poem in its entirety to give readers not only a glimpse of the typical presentation of an Eastham poem, but also to provide some common formal elements (its theme will be returned to later):

**UNDERSTAND**

I WANT PEOPLE TO UNDERSTAND  
I KNOW ITS HARD TO DO  
I THINK THEY CAN, IF THEY TRY  
UNDERSTAND WON'T YOU?

UNDERSTANDING IS SO HARD  
I LONG TO SEE IT REAL  
I JUST HOPE, REALLY HOPE  
IT'S NOT A LOST IDEAL

Readers will immediately note the all-caps nature of the presentation, which was used because Eastham's assistive technology, the Memowriter, produced words in capital letters only. Here, a brief description of that technology is in order (but only so as to destabilize it later): The Sharp EL 7001 Memowriter has 40 keys, each of them programmable with a word or phrase. It is possible to program 120 characters of memory into the machine, which Eastham would memorize. The machine prints out a small tape of print as type is generated, and in short order Eastham was programming the machine himself. Representing an improvement upon the laborious wordboard, the Memowriter enabled Eastham to have much easier conversations with people.

The all-caps lines of Eastham's poetry tend to be self-contained single thoughts that eschew enjambment. There is often a simple (and often monosyllabic) rhyme scheme employed within stanzas. The metre is fairly regular and rigid. On more than one occasion, the book



contains poems that are four short lines long, each line featuring 2-3 words that revolve around a single idea. With all this said, I am reluctant to proceed too much further in this vein because it is a troubling default in contemporary criticism. Too often in the past, a disability poetics interpretation would cohere around form in particular as the privileged arbiter of a hegemonic alternative embodiment interpretation regime. Specifically, formal elements of the work would be emphasized in a didactic, concrete fashion so as to graft them onto the lived experience of the writer. For example, consider the analysis of Larry Eigner in the seminal disability poetics anthology *Beauty is a Verb*:

Eigner's is decisively a poetry of the page, a field of intense activity produced entirely with his right index finger, the one digit over which he had some control. The page – specifically the 8 ½ by 11 inch typewriter page – is the measure of the poem, determining its lineation, length and typographic organization. . . nor is the machine by which he produced those pages insignificant. Because Eigner needed to lean on the keys and peer closely at the sheet of paper, he could not use an electric typewriter and thus worked with a succession of Royal or Remington portables that permitted him a degree of flexibility in composition. . . Eigner's careful spacing of letters and words, his indentations and double columns, could be seen as typographic idiosyncrasy, a variation on Charles Olson's "field" poetics, but they are also cognitive maps of his internally distanced relation to space.

(Davidson, 2011, p. 30)

The paragraph above is of special relevance to the work of Eastham, who also used a very specific form of technology in order to communicate. The analysis that follows does not proceed down the same route, and I will soon explain why based on the enhanced interpretive potential

inherent to new materialisms theory. Although form is of paramount concern in any discussion of poets, poetry, and poetics, there is something strange that occurs under the alternative embodiment disability poetics interpretation model in which the shared problems of the social and medical models – diagnostic problems at heart – bring to bear a limiting map of capabilities and outputs.

For as the editors of *The Matter of Disability* explain, “matter itself exerts influence and agency that ultimately outstrips any human ability to deterministically channel its substantiality into false discursive singularities” (Mitchell et. al., 2019, p. 3). They argue for an “intra-actional” dynamism between matter and discourse to remediate and augment the useful and homologous simplicities inaugurated by the medical and social models of disability, both of which are “diagnostic approaches” that, though they have “profound differences when it comes to their findings (one diagnoses deviant embodiment, the other diagnoses exclusionary social and built environments), they both tend to empty disability materiality of its active participation in fashioning alternative biologies, alternative subjectivities” (Mitchell et al., 2019, p. 2). When it comes to Eastham (or Eigner), the urge to consider poetic form as mediated through a technology that is necessitated due to a “lack” walks straight into a diagnostic trap shared by both medical and social approaches. Thus, in contrast, I consider Eastham’s work by bringing forward new materialisms’ focus on “productive, proactive expressive capacities within matter itself” (Mitchell et al, 2019, p. 4). In the context of poetry, form (the shape of a poem on the page as well as whether a poem is a set form, such as a sonnet) and process (how a poet writes their poem, taking into account chronology, technologies used, as well as ambient conditions of composition) may, to a certain way of thinking, be closer to “matter” than any other way of looking at poetry (for example, theme). However, my essay approaches Eastham’s work

informed by feminist materialist Karen Barad's (2014) contention that "[m]eaning is not an ideality; meaning is material. And matter isn't what exists separately from meaning. Mattering is a matter of what comes to matter and what doesn't. Difference isn't given. It isn't fixed' (p. 35). This essay will try to make Eastham's work matter in Canlit by discussing poetics outside of the relatively fixed coordinates of form.

Each individual poem can be interpreted using this approach, as can the intercorporeal means to produce the work known as Facilitated Communication. However, I shall start with Eastham's book-length engagement with a homily-like form, meaning that in toto, Eastham's work formally enacts his attempt to connect with others, disseminating affects in clear ways so that he can live up to the title of his book: that he is a poet who wants to be understood, that he writes vehicles of understanding. In this light, Eastham's prosody becomes an elegant reflection and embodiment of his life's chief desire and struggle.

Like Canadian poets Souvankham Thammavongsa and Mark Truscott<sup>2</sup>, Eastham demonstrates that, paradoxically, utilizing restriction results in bountiful communication. Some of the poems are fascinating in this way. Consider "You":

**YOU**

PERSON TRIES  
PERSON GOOD  
USES ALL  
HAS UNDERSTOOD (1985, p. 9)

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<sup>2</sup> Thammavongsa's *Cluster* (McClelland and Stewart, 2019) is reviewed by Canisa Lubrin in the *Hamilton Review of Books* as consisting of poems that "are maps to Thammavongsa's mighty, mighty command of limiting the physicality of language to the work of very few words." Truscott's *Branches* (Book\*Hug, 2018) is reviewed by rob mclennan on his blog as "furthering his seemingly-ongoing explorations into brevity, meditation, compactness and the single, extended moment."

Unlike the classical biomedical wisdom that dictates a lack of empathic ability in autistic persons, Eastham suggests he is aware of what empathy is as concept and practise, pushing back against the biomedical epistemology that stories him oppressively as, ostensibly, someone who cannot possess empathy due to the very fact of his diagnosis. In other words, the poem is a rejection of his identity as levied by biomedicine. Even more than this resistance, though, what's especially interesting is *how* he accomplishes his demonstration of empathy in the poem. He theorizes a "you" that is the title of the poem but isn't its subject. Rather, the subject of the poem is using all of one's self in order to understand another human being, and in the context of this collection, with Eastham so overtly positioned as speaker, one can't help but think he is directly addressing readers. He sets up a kind of equation: in trying to understand, one uses everything one has, all of one's experience and attention. Formally, one notes that the pronoun of the title ("you") becomes the repeated noun of "person" in the first two lines, centring an archetypal actor who is attempting ("tries") in beneficence ("good") to understand the speaker. Yet the subject-verb link is dropped in the next two lines, where there is just verb and verb modifier, suggesting that the "you" is lost when attempting the infinitizing act of trying to reconcile self with other. Who even is the "you" in a dynamic, intercorporeal matrix when language is co-constructed between bodies? And where can empathy be located if the capacity is also co-constructed? (This poem takes on a whole new resonance when one extends the theory of new materialism to Facilitated Communication, which I will turn to shortly.)

Empathy is a capacity one will require when reading *Understand*, offering another effective way to re-story autism as a narrative in which the potential for empathy is precluded by biomedicine. Eastham repeatedly writes of his teachers and his parents with affection (e.g. "SALLY" (1985, p. 6) and "FOR DAD" (1985, p.12)); he expresses positive, optimistic outlooks

in poems (e.g. “POEM FOR LOTS OF PEOPLE” (1985, p. 15) AND “GOLDEN MOMENTS” (1985, p. 26)); and he writes a group of poems that focus on themes of freedom and personhood (e.g. “TRY TO HELP YOURSELF” (1985, p. 24) and “PEOPLE” (1985, p. 21)). Nevertheless, the book lives up to its title and the subject of its first poem, for the most common theme expressed in *Understand* is the difficulty of his plight as a disabled man because of an inability to use speech to communicate to normates, a difficulty that is conveyed in a low affective register.

I’ll suspend close-reading of individual poems for a moment here to present some lines from various poems that reflect Eastham’s desires and dreams being thwarted. In “GOOD PEOPLE,” Eastham writes, “HAVE SO MANY PEOPLE TO LOOK AFTER ME / HAVE EVERYTHING I NEED / EXCEPT SOMEONE TO LOVE” (1985, p. 10). This sentiment is repeated in “LONELY” when he writes, “MUST HAVE LOVE / TO NOT / NOT / BE LONELY” (1985, p. 14). In “TRUTH HURTS,” Eastham explains that he has “SO MUCH TO LEARN / AND SO LITTLE TIME” (1985, p. 11). Related to this group of poems are those expressing outright sadness at being David Eastham, poems that approach despair-like levels of affect, such as “YOUTH TOO LONELY” (1985, p. 40), “TALK” (1985, p. 49), and “HOPE” (1985, p. 56) that suggest suicide.

Though it is reductive to abstract a book of poetry into argument alone, Eastham clearly does seem to flip the biomedical assumption that autistics are not able to conceive of the perspectives of others around them. Rather than not identify others, his poems are dedicated to and are about those others (albeit from his perspective), creating intra-actions that actively seek connection between self and world, grieving that their author cannot participate in the world more. They collectively (and some poems, individually) express a willingness to present the

point of view of an autistic man who wished to situate his own non-neurotypical humanity adjacent to neurotypicals, suggesting that there is not a deficit of Eastham's understanding at work here, but rather a critical failure for normates to understand him.<sup>3</sup> This failure is epitomized in "KINDNESS IS LOVE":

LOVE, MY KIND INTELLIGENT FRIEND I LIKE  
JUST JUMP INTO MY HEART  
NOBODY UNDERSTANDS (1985, p. 18).

Consider the ambiguity operative in this seemingly simple form. Just three lines long, one doesn't know with certainty what or whom Eastham is addressing at any point in the poem. With the comma after the first word, there is ambiguity: is he writing a poem of romantic love, addressing said love? Or is he addressing the subject or ideal of love itself? Is the feeling of "LOVE" a kind and intelligent friend to Eastham, or is there an actual person that he finds smart, likeable, and loveable? The second line is an impatient imperative, or a welcoming exhortation – as if "just" was loaded with the difference between "hurry up" or "oh, it's no problem, all you have to do is." And in the third line, we get a ramp into complexity: is it Eastham's heart that nobody understands, or is this meant to be a separate sense-unit itself, an expression of frustration and loneliness? The many valences of meaning, of possible connections and their matterings, as Barad would maintain, are arguably related to the intersubjective means of production of Eastham's writing. In the spirit of moving away from simple binaristic thinking, I return to Yergeau.

### **Touching the Cracks: New Materialisms and Facilitated Communication**

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<sup>3</sup> The failure can even lie in the fact that people do not want to understand him, such as when, in "HELL IS," he states that "HELL IS WHEN YOU'RE IGNORED / THIS IS TRUE I SAY."

Before moving to the poetry by Eastham that suggests a dynamic, materialist poetics for communication between autistic and normative communicants, some more backstory is in order. In his early life, Eastham had received intensive efforts to facilitate speech. Finally, at the age of twelve, one of Eastham's teachers, Amanda Green, discovered that Eastham would be able to initiate basic motor functions to identify objects when her hand was resting on his hand:

Amanda had brought him a long way. Daily they would work on nouns with hand-over-hand writing practice. She would show him a picture of an object and ask, "What is this?" Then she placed her hand on his, forming it around a pencil, and slowly guided his hand to write the answer. . . . Amanda was surprised to feel his fingers move to correctly write the words. Secondly she reported, "I could look away and not know what the pictures were and he would still write the words correctly." (Eastham, 1992, p. 33)

This discovery – that Eastham is able to use what would become known as the contested technique of Facilitated Communication (FC) – proved key to the eventual development of expressive language for Eastham, for as refinements and explorations on this discovery were attempted over the years, involving storyboards and eventually the explosively generative and revolutionary Memowriter technology, Eastham still required a hand on his arm or shoulder in order to be able to initiate the movements that allowed him to push buttons that made words.

*Silent Words* documents the transformation those around Eastham experienced upon learning that, *after twelve years* of being presumed "mute", he could communicate using written speech. As they presided over the flowering of speech production that would eventually become a book of poetry, the teachers who had worked with him for much of his life expressed their deep

regret at not knowing how much he truly had understood of the world around him. The previously passive material — or, in Brian Massumi’s phrase, the “dumb material” (2002, p.1) — of the antiquated social model’s way of looking at Eastham transforms in this moment to become a dynamic corporeality that is as informed by previous unidirectional inscriptions of muteness as it is newly agential with the capacity of language. The collective moment recorded for posterity functions as an acknowledgement that Eastham was always already there to share with, and had been doing the sharing for years, despite their ignorance and presumption:

Watters: ALL THE TEACHERS  
ARE SORRY THAT WE  
DID NOT DO ANY  
READING WORK WITH  
YOU WHEN YOU WERE  
YOUNG

David: OK

Watters: WE DID NOT BELIEVE  
THAT YOU WERE SO  
SMART

David: DIFFICULT

Watters: YES IT WAS, BUT I  
HAVE LEARNED A LOT  
FROM TEACHING YOU (Eastham, 1992, p. 70-71)

Eastham was never only a passive vessel destined for inscription by others (as would be suggested by the social model), he was also a learning and growing human being who affected his environment and world.

One survival strategy of enduring the communicative lack imposed upon him by biomedical epistemology and an understandable deficit in communicative technologies is



possibly described by Eastham in the poem “IN MY MIND,” which features the speaker imagining being a teacher, going for his driver’s license, and getting married,

I TRY TO PRETEND I’M  
NORMAL AS HUMANLY POSSIBLE  
IN MY MIND

This poem’s strategy is Eastham’s own attempt at a prospective intersubjectivity that fits with new materialisms, for Eastham faced a world that, as Yergeau (2018) unpacks in general terms, continues to inflict non-rhetoricity on autistic people, “deny[ing] autistic people not only their agency, but also their humanity” (p. 11). Indeed, Eastham pleaded to be recognized as a self, and to be met as one, in “LOVE”:

THERE  
IS  
LOVE  
GO  
INSIDE

I’M  
HUMAN  
YOUNG  
HELP (1985, p. 39)

Eastham isn’t passive materiality, but rather possesses interiority (“GO INSIDE”) where there is “LOVE.” As Yergeau states, one way the humanity of autistic people can be recognized for its special valence might come from recognizing “that being autistic confers ways of being, thinking, and making meaning that are not in and of themselves lesser – and may at times be advantageous” (2018, p. 34). Here, Yergeau echoes the idea that the social model does not sufficiently acknowledge that the lived experience of impairment or alterity has something productive to contribute to an understanding of subjectivity. Eastham’s poetics and his

knowledge of the world is more meaningful than an approach limited to diagnosing his frustrations and feelings of loneliness as the product of an ableist world can permit. And when considering the life of David Eastham, the way of being and making meaning that diverges most from the norm is arguably Eastham's represented sense of touch.

The sensory modality described by his mother, Margaret, as most visibly unusual in Eastham's young life was his tactile sense (as is true for many autistics). At many points in the biography, Margaret reflects on her son's incessant tapping. For example, a photo of Eastham is included with a caption that reads, "David tapped everything, even his fingers" (Eastham, 1992, p. 18). Eastham experienced the world in a sensory fashion differently than neurotypicals, and I suspect it was a communication modality that led to meaning-making for him that aligns with Yergeau's concept of "advantageous" and, at the least, likely has its own logic and vocabulary unfathomable to those that lack it. With physical sensation being key to Eastham's capacity to move, communicate, and be curious about his world, it is perhaps not surprising that the sense of touch would also find its way into his poetry. What may come as a surprise, however, is how generally-conceived his concept of touch was, how he formulated his concept for everyone in poems like "TOUCH":

YOUTH REALLY NEEDS  
TO BE TOUCHED  
THE REASON I DO NOT KNOW  
I ONLY FEEL IT IS  
PERHAPS  
THE QUIETEST FORM  
OF GROWTH (1985, p. 32)

Eastham learned to communicate with a normate "us" on their "terms" (to reinvoké Yergeau) through qualities as old as human beings: nurturance and reciprocity. Communication with normates was unlocked for him through an extra-lingual means, that of physical touch, a

materialization of Shannon Walters' contention that "rhetorical touch" has the "potential for fostering partial identifications among people of diverse experiences of embodiment [and] can encourage opportunities for social cohesion, alliance building, and cultural connection among people of different levels of ability and disability" (2014, p. 3). That he deploys the insight cleverly – "I ONLY FEEL IT IS" can be read alternately as Eastham alone feels it this way, unlike neurotypicals, or as humble speculation about a truth – and with an elegant beauty ("THE QUIETEST FORM / OF GROWTH"), making this the most arresting poem in the collection. Rather than existing in a limiting discourse of neurodevelopment signalled by the word "GROWTH", Eastham's lines instead occupy a poetic register of yearning. For Eastham, the form of his life, as readers would come to know it, manifested through touch; the form that his mature life took was revolutionized by touch as pure communication with his caregivers, parents, and friends. I find it productive to approach Eastham's poetry as less determined by the technology of the Memowriter as an intervention, which would be a classical way to interpret his work, and rather as a product of a sensory modality that neurotypicals can't quite comprehend, but can only aspire to understand. When understanding is aspirational, the default storying-for that Yergeau critiques is disrupted. Thus, Eastham's poetry opens up in ways that not only permit, but also reveal, neurodivergence as testimony, as mattering.

### **Biomedicine Strikes Again**

This interpretation of Eastham's poetry via new materialisms could be somewhat disqualified on biomedicine's turf. Facilitated Communication (FC), the technique used to enable Eastham to produce his book and allow him to interact with others, is described in a review article published in 2018 as involving "a facilitator" who "typically supports the FC user's hand to make his or her index finger touch letters on a keyboard or point at objects"

(Hemsley et al., p. 91). Originating as a technique in the 1960s, many investigators and studies from the 1990s onward have undermined the credibility of FC, including important papers from Ganz, Katsiyannis, and Morin (2018) and Schlosser et al. (2019) in this current decade. In this literature, FC is often described as the product of wishful thinking on the part of loved ones and well-meaning educators who understandably wanted linguistic communication – reinvoking Yergeau yet again – on “our” terms with “us” to be achieved.

However, this matter is neither simple nor settled at all when considering voices from disability groups with lived experience, who claim that the studies are conducted in artificial environments that cannot recreate the non-laboratory or non-study conditions of communication that autistic people need. Even so, this doesn’t strike me as far enough a step away from the diagnostic trap earlier described. If the lens of new materialisms is used to inform the creation of intersubjectivity, the “problem” of FC is moot. The “unique mattering” – to use Olga Tarapata’s phrase (2019, p. 84) – of Eastham’s poetry supersedes the epistemological trap set by biomedicine which seeks to discredit what it views as a pseudoscience. Eastham’s work matters in and of itself as a product of Eastham, technology, and the sensory contributions of another human who, in his own poetry, he invites as a necessity for his own humanity to be honoured.

According to Lisa Cartwright (2008), the discreditation of FC, which from a “scientific” point of view proceeded according to biomedicine’s normal workings (hypothesis-experiment etc.), was, essentially a cultural contest “about the meaning and interpretation of expression in disorders involving communication impairment. But in effect, FC practice opened up the larger question about the relationship between affect and expressive representation” (p. 165). To a fascinating degree, FC asks us to question just how much the privilege of speech is, itself, mediated; moreover, it encourages us to reconsider speech not as the product of an autonomous

subject (the holy grail for most of the research done on the topic, according to Western, Cartesian, liberal preference), but rather as a subject “enacted in relationship to and in dependency upon others” (Cartwright, 2008, p. 160). Cartwright’s understandings of “relationship” and “dependency” are informed by a Levinasian interpretation of Merleau-Ponty, which results in a model of intercorporeal intersubjectivity that is the prototype for a new materialisms view of disability:

For Levinas and Merleau-Ponty, the model for this relationship is the intersubjective action that takes place within the individual body when one hand touches another. The copresence of two hands in the body of one subject is extended to the intersubjective unit of two bodies. In touching and in being touched by another, each body comes to life as subject in the field of the other. (2008, p. 162)

This is a dynamic mattering that, in itself, is not only meaning-making but world-making, as it is both for a reader who is touched by Eastham’s words. These creational processes also inform Eastham himself, as he is touched into speech and as speech is touched through him into others. Cartwright goes on to rebalance agency away from the facilitator, describing a “tendency . . . to think of the facilitator as the active one who touches”, supposedly bringing speech forth and enlivening the othered subject. For Cartwright, FC is a reciprocal, intersubjective relationship. Paraphrasing Levinas, she claims that in her “formulation, touch is not the mere symbol of love, but love itself (2008, p. 163).” When Cartwright adds that “The FC relationship makes literal this enactment of being born into the social through touch with an other” (2008, p. 162-3), one sees a glimpse of new materialisms to come – merely add the complicating layer of forward and reverse

flows of meaning and change and one is in the vicinity of a phenomenology close to new materialisms.

Biomedicine isn't a practical way to read the words of any poet, perhaps especially those of an autistic one whose entire corpus would be neatly relegated to the realm of the fraudulent according to biomedicine's predication on independence and validity. As this essay hopes to show, communication is porous and intra-actional. Eastham's work contributes to the finding that all speech is somehow mediated. This "unique mattering" creates an interpretive tool that exists outside of able/disabled, medical/social binaries that cannot see past lack. More work needs to be done on Eastham, perhaps taking up the question of Shannon Walters: "how might understanding touch as rhetorical and rhetoric as tactile change how we think of rhetoric, especially regarding what kinds of bodies and minds have access to rhetorical production and its elements, purposes, and possibilities?" (2014, p. 2)

By moving from an outline of the problems biomedicine visits upon the identity of autistics to a critique of the formalist analytical approach within disability poetics, this article draws an uncomfortable parallel between these two projects. By bringing forth the work of David Eastham and the theory of new materialisms, I suggest a novel means of interpreting poetry that avoids recapitulating the "storying for" tendency of biomedicine. Ironically, I conclude this article by mentioning once again the lack hypothesis by way of declaring my impetus for this study, which is to story myself in a kind of FC conducted between Eastham's work and my own life. My recent diagnosis of ASD at the age of 44 years old has created a need for understanding the empathic capacities of poetry and autism. So far, I have lived a life doomed to miscommunication and ableist prejudice within the discipline of medicine as both patient and practitioner, and of course within the larger social world. Even if my own testimony

is unspoken in much of the article – the verifiable, quantifiable detail *lacks* – it nevertheless exists within me as a core text that may one day find expression and possibly change previous ableist representations of myself conducted by others into more dynamic, reparative, intercorporeal ones, perhaps as Eastham’s work has done in this article.

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Dr. Jennifer Blair Ph.D