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I am *that* name? naming neurotypical imaginaries of the sole autist in autistic/autism fiction

Je suis *ce* nom? nommer les imaginaires neurotypiques du seul autiste dans la fiction sur l'autisme/l'autisme

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Abstract
This paper explores neurodivergent readings of different fiction and non-fiction novels with explicitly “diagnosed” “autistic characters”, or what McGrath (2017) has referred to as ‘named’ representations of autism, and where “autism” is a central part of the plot. We discuss the impact of neurotypical naming and neurotypical texts; what explicit referencing to “autism” and “autistic characters” do in the case of fiction and non-fiction novels aimed at a predominantly neurotypical audience. We reflect upon what it means (and how it feels) to use an already established name (such as autism), and acknowledge its different routes and meanings associated with it. Our aim is not only to do a critical reading and discussion of neurotypical texts about autism and autistic characters, but also to find a collective reading practice where our experiences as readers are valued as research material, providing insights on how we occupy spaces, experience emotions, and inhabit the world. This is a way to challenge neurotypicality of the taken for granted “us” and “our” gaze in neurotypical texts.

Cet article explore les lectures neurodivergentes de différents romans de fiction et de non-fiction avec des "personnages autistes" explicitement "diagnostiqués", ou ce que McGrath (2017) a appelé des représentations "nommées" de l'autisme, et où "l'autisme" est un élément central de la parcelle. Nous discutons de l'impact de la dénomination neurotypique et des textes neurotypiques ; ce que font les références explicites à "l'autisme" et aux "personnages autistes" dans le cas des romans de fiction et de non-fiction destinés à un public majoritairement neurotypique. Nous réfléchissons à ce que cela signifie (et à ce que cela fait) d'utiliser un nom déjà établi (comme l'autisme), et reconnaissons ses différentes voies et significations qui lui sont associées. Notre objectif n'est pas seulement de faire une lecture critique et une discussion de textes neurotypiques sur l'autisme et les personnages autistes, mais aussi de trouver une pratique de lecture collective où nos expériences en tant que lecteurs sont valorisées comme matériel de recherche, fournissant des informations sur la façon dont nous occupons les espaces, ressentons les émotions , et habiter le monde. C'est une manière de remettre en question la neurotypicité du « nous » et de « notre » regard pris pour acquis dans les textes neurotypiques

Keywords
neurotypical naming, autistic coding, neurotypical gaze, neurodivergent gaze, novel, reading, readership

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Introduction

Autism history has been written by neurotypical psychiatrists and parents. Autism and "autistic coded" characters (Mullis, 2019), or characters who "move like [us]" (the phrase used by Julia Bascom to describe the experience of first seeing a character onscreen who she believed to be autistic (Mullis 2019)), have been differently depicted in neurotypical imaginaries. As Broderick and Ne'eman highlight, metaphors are rife in neurotypically-dominated autism discourse, and tend to portray autism as something negative or threatening (Broderick and Ne'eman, 2008). These include alien metaphors (autists being from "another planet"); territorial metaphors (autism as "withdrawal to or arrival from" a "foreign space"); military metaphors or metaphors of self-imprisonment (autistic person living in a "fortress" (Bettelheim 1967)); metaphors depicting loneliness and isolation (autistic person "locked inside a shell"); and computer or robot metaphors (what Murray terms the "autist as automaton" (Murray 2013)). Closely related to these are the common autism literary tropes portraying the autist as subject or cultural other; as a savant or super-crip (Murray, 2006; Maich et al, 2020), non-human other (Maich et al, 2020) or as psycho-emotionally disabled (Maich et al, 2020). Dominant metaphors, regardless of whether the focus is on autism as a concept or on autistic individuals themselves (c.f. Yergeau, 2018), have been "drawn upon in conceptualizing autism in the more than six decades since its naming

and constitution as a disability label" (Broderick and Ne'eman, 2008). Maich et al (2020) has argued that cultural understandings of autism that are "dominated by the medical model", "continue to stigmatize and pathologize while excluding positive social identities". In order to steer away from these "potential damaging aspects of literature portrayals of autism in fictional works" we need "to move the autism genre forward in a humanizing and inclusive manner" (Maich et al, 2020, see also Tharian et al, 2019; Lugo et al, 2017).

Naming his position, a "dynamic nominalist", Hacking (2006) explains that he has "long been interested in classifications of people, in how they affect the people classified, and how the effects on the people in turn change the classifications":

> They [categorized people] are moving targets because our investigations interact with them, and change them. And since they are changed, they are not quite the same kind of people as before. The target has moved. I call this the 'looping effect'. Sometimes, our sciences create kinds of people that in a certain sense did not exist before. I call this 'making up people'. (Hacking, 2006)

In line with Hacking's suggestion, Sonya Freeman Loftis (2015) has argued that speculative diagnoses "demonstrate how a fictional character can be labeled based on stereotypes and then used as an exemplar for actual autistic people. Suddenly, it is not autistic people who are the interpretative template for the literary character – the public perception of the literary character may reshape and inform how autism is defined as a social construct" (Freeman Loftis, 2015, 24-25, see also Freeman Loftis, 2014).

A common thread in the neurotypical picturing of the autist/autism, is what Sinclair (2010) refers to as "the sole autistic", which describes a lone autist in a social space dominated by neurotypicals. This is a common neurotypically-imbued narrative about autism, picturing autistic 'solipsism', asociality, apathy, 'mindblindness', and lack of enjoyment of fiction (see Baron-Cohen and Craig, 1999) as typically autistic. This neurotypical-centered worldview, and

the doings of autism and the autistic person within that worldview – what McDermott (2022) has referred to as "the neurotypical gaze"– can be seen as actively producing neurotypicality (McDermott, 2022). The neurotypical gaze is present in many representations of autism in popular media. Moore, in their reading of the television series *The Good Doctor* (2019), states that autism features as a narrative device, "not only [...] enrich[ing] the lives of his [the autistic character] non-autistic colleagues but also [...] reinforc[ing] compulsory neurotypicality" (Moore, 2019).

Hacking defines autism fiction as fiction "in which autism plays a key role" (Hacking, 2010) in the narrative's plot, shaping character identities and affecting the outcome of events. He also makes a distinction between narratives "told by the people themselves, or their families, or by novelists, or by writers of stories for children", and "expert reports by clinicians or reflections by theorists" (Hacking, 2009, 1467). In this paper, we want to make a distinction between stories told from a neurotypical perspective, and "insider accounts" of the condition (Van Goidsenhoven, 2017). We also find it important to challenge the distinction between "expert reports" versus autism fiction. Inspired by a critical race perspective (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), a distinction can be made by a (neurotypical) outsider approach to autism, as a neurocognitive "majoritarian" story of the neurocognitive minoritan. This can also be referred to "culturally dominant metaphor of autism" (Broderick and Ne'eman, 2008) or as neuroconventional (McDermott, 2022) ways of storying. This way of storying is generated from a legacy of neurocognitive privilege, and in the stories, neurocognitive privilege seems "natural." This is a story powerful enough that even the cognitive minorities themselves, among them neurodivergent people "buy into and even tell majoritarian stories", which can be referred to as a "minority majoritarian storytelling" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). With other words, the

neurotypical gaze may be a way of looking for both neurotypical and neurodivergent people alike. For example, Bertilsdotter Rosqvist and Jackson-Perry (2021) notes how certain spaces predominantly occupied by autistic people may still be dominated by “non-autistic storying” of autistic experiences, as found in a study of narratives of sexuality at an online forum for autistic people. They asked how we can “separate a person’s ‘lived experience’ from that same person’s ‘epistemic infection’ by a body of (collective) knowledge that defines their actions as being the product of deficit?” This ‘epistemic infection’ occurs when stories that naturalise neurocognitive privilege are internalized by neurocognitive minorities themselves, compounded by lack of access to non-pathologising concepts and language with which to shape their narratives (Fricker, 2007). The different expressions of majoritarian storytelling may be contrasted with other stories, or what Solórzano and Yosso (2002) among others (see also feminist theorist Lindemann Nelson, 1995) refers to as “counter storytelling”, or what Broderick and Ne’eman (2008) have referred to as “counter-narrative of autism within neurodiversity”. Different approaches or perhaps available “discursive resources and techniques” (Lawes, 1999) can, however, be used by autistic and non-autistic authors alike to construct the phenomenon of autism, in relation to different assumed readers and audiences. From this, we argue that there is not a clear distinction between different kinds of “autism fiction” – both can be storied from a neurotypical gaze or be doing minority majoritarian storytelling. Rather there is a difference between what we started to refer to as the “NT editing” versus what can be referred to as “ND editing”. NT editing refers to neurotypical texts; or *fiction storied from a “neurotypical gaze”* with a foremost neurotypical audience in mind (regardless of it is a neurocognitive majoritarian or neurocognitive minority majoritarian storytelling). ND editing refers to neurodivergent texts; or *fiction storied from a “neurodivergent*

gaze", with a foremost neurodivergent or a neuromixed audience in mind (as an expression of neurocognitive counter storytelling).

An increasing number of autistic- and neurodivergent-authored texts are being published, which challenge representations of autism from a neurotypical gaze. However, what is needed is a neurodivergent theoretical lens through which to interpret texts about autism. We agree with Hacking's argument that narrative constructions of autism fuel broader cultural attitudes about what autism "is" or "means," and that these attitudes are then fed back into autism stories, creating what he calls a "looping effect." Thus, narrative plays a crucial role in how autism is formulated as a concept, meaning that it is possible to initiate cultural change through the stories we tell. We "make up people" too. This provides them (and us as autistic readers and writers) with considerable agency and power; however, this agency and power is too often unevenly distributed. Commonly theorists are speaking from a neurotypical standpoint while addressing a neurotypical audience, reasserting a cultural majoritarianism one may seek to eschew.

Looking at autism and autistic people from an outsider perspective, from the neurotypical gaze, means *we* (as authors of this article we identify as autists) are depicted as *they*, while the *we* of the neurotypical stories of autism is the neurotypical viewer of autistic people. Through neurotypical gaze and the intended neurotypical audience, *we* are placed, as autistic readers, in a position where we are forced to see ourselves from the outside when reading about *us*. Our sense of being subjects in our own stories is disturbed by fiction and theory written about us from a neurotypical perspective. We are autistic authors with experiences of writing both theory and fiction, within a range of different genres and academic fields, including autism studies and literary criticism. When we write, we are often asked to adopt our texts to fit a neurotypical (a "broader") public. We have gotten used to the expectations of adapting our texts and to try to

read from a neurotypical rather than an autistic gaze. Through the writing of this paper, we have explored our sense of inconvenience, even our rage, when gradually realizing how this distancing reader and writer practice affects us. Us as autistic bodyminds , selves, readers and writers. We have read autism fiction and non-fiction through this rage. But we have not done this reading alone, as sole autists. Central in our readings are the collective, the autistic togetherness (c.f. Sinclair, 2010), the autistic "we."

Readings from a neurodivergent gaze of recognition

This paper is based on our readings of different fiction and non-fiction novels with explicitly "diagnosed" "autistic characters", or what McGrath (2017) has referred to as 'named' representations of autism, and where "autism" is a central part of the plot. Here we have chosen to refer to "autistic characters" regardless if the "people" in the texts are explicitly "made up" (as in the case of fiction) or can be said to be implicitly "made up" (as in the case of non-fiction where the "real people" are pictured in the role of autistic characters). During our reading and writing we have discussed different stances on naming, and what explicit referencing to "autism" and "autistic characters" do in the case of fiction and non-fiction novels written by neurotypical authors or novels written by autistic authors which we read as aimed at a predominantly neurotypical audience: *neurotypical texts*.

In this paper we will be discussing neurotypical texts and naming as autistic readers. This include a curious exploration into the named content as in "what´s in *a* name" (Shakespeare) and what´s in that name. This is followed by a discussion between us, as an autistic collective of readers "Am *I* that name" (Riley, 2003) where we reflect upon what it mean (and how it feels) to use an already established name (such as autism), and acknowledge its different routes and meanings associated with it; I am *that* name? Am I, a *name* with a history, produced in order to

make a division between cognitive normality and its other, from a cognitive normate, a neurotypical outsider perspective (Waltz, 2020). We acknowledge different ways of naming. On one hand, naming or diagnosing from the outside – the neurotypical gaze naming someone as "somewhat autistic", with the different power structures embedded in this: *neurotypical naming*. On the other hand, counter naming or diagnosing from the inside; the recognition of someone "moving like us" (Mullis, 2019); "autistic coding" (Mullis, 2019). Mullis (2019) has pointed out the strengths of a collective autistic fanbase reading or "coding" fictional characters as autistic, even though they are not explicitly named as autistic. The autistic fanbase comes close to a neurotribe. Autistic coding is a way of creating a historical and social connection. To "code" fictional, or historical figures as autistic from an autistic point of view is not the same as diagnosing or naming these or other characters with autism as a deficit (as a deficit version of neurotypicality), as in the common case of neurotypical naming.

The name, naming and counter naming are never uncomplicated. It is infused with emancipation and talking back, as well as internalized neurotypical gazes. During our reading and writing we have asked ourselves; how do these different and complicated perspectives merge and infect each other? While we do not mean to discredit voices of autistic authors, we want, however, to challenge the assumption of "the autistic (authentic) voice" in the case of novels written by autistic authors which we read as aimed at a predominantly neurotypical audience. We want to point at the neurotypical power structures infecting the society that classifies us as autistic, and which shapes how we speak, read, write and relate.

Our aim is not only to do a critical reading and discussion of neurotypical texts about autism and autistic characters, but also to find a collective reading practice where our reader experiences are being valued in their own rights. Not as part of research exploring whether

autistic people do enjoy fiction or not or whether there are any differences between autistic people´s reading habits and neurotypicals. (Chapple et al, 2021a) Neither as part of research exploring the potential effect of fiction reading as a way to make autistic people behave more like neurotypical people (Chapple et al, 2021a) or bridge between neurotypes (Chapple et al, 2021b).

This is a way to challenge neurotypicality of the taken for granted “us” and “our” gaze in neurotypical texts. Therefore, the article is as much (or more) its method as it is its results. We have tried to find a collective space for reflection that dares to criticize, that dares to challenge of the neurotypical views, that dares to be angry and emotional, and partly also to criticize “from within”, discussing how also named autistic authors may write from an internalized neurotypical perspective – and yes, we are aware that the internalized neuronormative gaze is probably also infecting us.

We have chosen to work with the following works:

1) *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003), fiction novel by non-autistic author Mark Haddon
2) *Animals in Translation* (2005), non-fiction partly autobiographic novel by autistic author Temple Grandin together with non-autistic co-author Catherine Johnson
3) *Neurotribes* (2015), non-fiction partly autobiographic novel by non-autistic author Steve Silberman. In Neurotribes, Silberman recalls his encounters with “neurotribes” and autistic people, whom he refers to as “his nerdy shipmates”
4) *See It Feelingly. Classic Novels, Autistic Readers, and the Schooling of a No-Good English Professor* (2018), a non-fiction autoethnographical study by non-

autistic Ralph Savarese. In the text, Savarese recalls his encounters with autistic readers of classical fiction, among them his autistic son, DJ Savarese.

The article will circle around our readings of these works, cited as reader diaries. Through our collective reading practice we aim to formulate a neurodivergent gaze. It is based on two things: looking back and recognition. Doing this together, we mean, is a way to challenge the taken for granted neurotypicality of the "us" and "our" gaze, and create a space where *we* as autists are collectively looking back at, neuroqueering the neurotypical readership. At the same time it is a space from where we look and together recognize characters as "moving like us".

We have chosen to refer to our own individual readings/autoethnograpic voices in the text with a collective "One of us". This is a way of stressing the text as written in an autistic collective space, the collective "I" as "one of us". "One of us" is also used as expression of a "joint action" which feminist researchers Francis and Hey (2009), have stressed as being "core to feminist action over the years" but in particular within academia" where "joint action counter-narrates the position as "individual experts"". The use of a collective I is a way to counter-narrate the image of the "sole autist", stressing the presence of an "autistic togetherness". More practically, it is a way to protect ourselves, as neurological minority (stigmatized) selves working within the neurotypical confines of academia.

Neurotypical encounters with "my nerdy shipmates"

> "Instead of dozing in chaise longues by the pool, *my nerdy shipmates* were eager to figure out how things work and help them work better. By midweek, they persuaded the captain to give them a tour of the engine room." (Silberman, 2015, p.2, our italics)

> "The tireless curiosity of these *middle-aged wizards* gave them an endearingly youthful quality, as if they ´d found ways of turning *teenage quests* for arcane knowledge into rewarding careers. On weekends, they coded recreationally, spinning off side projects that lay the foundations of new technologies and startups." (Silberman, 2015, p.3, our italics)

In *Neurotribes* by Steven Silberman (2015), the *neurotypical I* (in the shape and size of neurotypical journalist Steven Silberman, possible in the same age as the rest of the group of cruise participants) is looking at the *neurodivergent them*. This is in line with how autism and the ways of autistic people commonly is looked from an outsider perspective, what has been theorized by McDermont (2022) as an expression of the neurotypical gaze. Silberman's description of the neurodivergent people as "nerdy shipmates" and "middle-aged wizards" with "teenage quests" does not necessary reduce the neurodivergent wizards to something slightly naïve and childish, less valued, rather, there is a friendly curiosity in Silbermans gaze. However, the naming of the wizards creates a distance from the I that looks at them. Sometimes this neurotypical gazing explicitly constitutes an autistic otherness in relation to an imagined (neurotypical) "we": the "us", "our" and "you", by which the author positions the reader as a similar neurotype as the author. The descriptions of Silberman´s (2015) encounters with "his nerdy shipmates" in the citation above illustrates this. As another illustration of this, Ralph Savarese writes in his explorations of autistic reading:

> "Though you wouldn't know it from prevailing stereotypes, autistic do experience this emotion and quite intensely. In fact, it often overwhelms *them*. Stephen Shore, for example, speaks of "fusing" with another's suffering, whether real or imagined, of being so attuned to the pain that it becomes his own." (Savarese, s. 18, our italics)

Further, Savarese (2018) tell his imagined similar neurotype audience:

> "their sensory lives are much richer and more immediate than *our own* (Savarese, p. 9, our italics)

Following Hacking (2009), we think about the effects of texts written about autism. Hacking argues that autist-written texts are not merely "witnessing", but are actively constituting, shaping cultural perspectives on autism. The texts "are creating the language in which to describe the experience of autism, and hence helping to forge the concepts in which to think autism."

(Hacking, 2009). This is the case for the effects of non-autist-written and autist-written texts about autism alike. Autistic autobiographers commonly rely on neurotypical named definitions of autism - what Stenning (2020) has referred to as "standard depictions of autistic (…) deficits" (p. 120). For example, in the following citation from Hacking, the autistic autobiographers (or "Autistic narrative") both works as translators between non-autistic and autistic people ("comes to our aid") in the same time they are repeating non-autistic narratives of autism, hereby acknowledging the epistemic authority of the neurotypical gaze (c.f. Bertilsdotter Rosqvist & Jackson-Perry, 2021).

> "*ordinary people* cannot see what an autistic boy is doing when, to take a banal example, he is furiously flapping his hands. What on Earth is hand flapping? The parent or other outsider knows vaguely that there must be some kind of agitation, yet the child seems so tranquil when hand flapping. Autobiographies tell us how calming it is. So *we* are now able to infer a bit of what's going on. Autistic narrative thus comes to *our* aid. *It is striking that although we are told that it takes us into the mind of the autist, in fact autobiographers usually begin with their behaviour, reaching back to childhood."* (Hacking, 2009, 1471-72, our italics)

Similarly, Bates notes:

> "Other writers have opened *our eyes* to the autistic world view in its strangeness and richness." (Bates 2010, our italics)

In the citations above Hacking and Bates firmly positions themselves in relation to an imagined similar neurotype audience. Autism fiction or autistic narrative, Hacking argues, have "effects on the evolution of our understanding of autism and on our ability to talk about autistic experience" (Hacking, 2010, our italics).

> *We* now watch, hear and read a great deal about what itis like to be autistic—in autobiography, biography and fiction. (Hacking, 2009, 1467, our italics)

We (as autistic readers) want to highlight the *we*, the *us*, the *our* (or earlier *my*, in "my nerdy shipmates"), the you, since it is central for the understanding of Hacking's (as well as Bates's, Silverman's and Savarese's) argument that *they* (neurotypical readers) understand autism as

something that needs to be made understandable – in line with metaphors of autism as foreign space and something alien (Broderick and Ne'eman, 2008). From *their* perspective, autism is not *our standpoint* (c.f. Harding, 1991; Bertilsdotter Rosqvist et al, 2022), and text written from an autistic standpoint may make *us* understand. Importantly, McDermont (2022) has noted that the neurotypical gaze of neurotypical spectators/readers of autistic characters and texts may look like they are looking at autism, but in reality they rarely sees anything but themselves/neurotypicality; the neurotypical gaze is "far more interested in examining and preserving the boundaries of normalcy than in gaining insight into autistic subjectivity and interiority." (McDermott, 2022, p.4).

In the context of physical disability Garland Thomson (1997) has argued that a diverse range of ideas of nondisabled/able-bodied "cultural selves" and the disabled "cultural other", actively constitute the able-boded (the normate) as the "ordinary" and the disabled as the extraordinary. Similar to the category of the heterosexual being born at the same time as the homosexual is created as a category (Katz, 1995) the category of neurotypicality is being born at the same time as autism is created as category (c.f. Waltz, 2020). Broderick and Ne'eman (2008) have argued that:

> cultural purposes that autism metaphors have historically served are (1) to create a commonsensical narrative congruence between common understandings of autism and currently dominant notions about its aetiology(ies) or cause(s), and (2) to create a commonsensical narrative congruence between common understandings of autism and currently dominant notions about appropriate responses to or interventions for autism.. In order to achieve these twin purposes, dominant narratives about autism commonly draw upon metaphors that themselves rely upon and reproduce a binary divide between cultural notions of 'normalcy and 'abnormalcy'. (p.466)

Holmer Nadesan (2008) explains how attitudes towards autism are intertwined with, and dependent on, cultural movements. Because Asperger syndrome as a diagnosis appeared around the time of the mainstreaming of the internet, when many more people started to own computers,

it became 'the geek syndrome' (Silberman, 2001). Nadesan writes that '[a] range of media information directed toward popular audiences complements the scientific research. [...] More recently, the popular media have speculated on a causal relationship between autism and computer "geekiness"' (2008, p. 78). Hacking raises some caution against the imaginary of the autistic savant/autism savantism, writing: "too many [autism] stories foster images of 'the' autistic person as having special gifts that ordinary people lack." (Hacking 2009). The idea of "the geek syndrome" (Silberman, 2001), or "special gifts" of autism Hacking refers to above, is a frame for neurotypical gazing at the autistic people. It allows Silberman, in a somewhat endearingly way, in his recapitulating of his experiences of a cruise convention for leaders within the early tech world, to describe the people he encounters as "my nerdy shipmates", "wizards" with a "youthful quality", who are able to turn their "teenage quests" into "rewarding careers", "a tribe of digital natives", and a "convivial society of loners". Following this, we want to refer to Hackings warning as an illustration of the dangers of neurotypical gazing as producing *neurocognitive extraordinariness* in contrast to *neurocognitive ordinariness* (or neuroconventionality).

In the reflections below one of us thinks about the impact of NT audience intertextuality, as in the case of the same actor playing autistic characters and characters with marks of monstrosity.

> Shaun in *The Good Doctor* is played Freddie Highmore, who also plays Norman in *Bates Motel* (2013-2017) – a character who has multiple personalities, blackouts where he murders people, and overall is characterized as a sort of nerdy psychopath. I think it does a lot to the characterization of Shaun (who is played by Highmore in very much the same way, with a slightly monotone voice and a never fully relaxed face) and my experience of the characterization, that I as a viewer is used to see Highmore in the role of Norman – I see parts of Norman in Shaun. Shaun gets "contaminated" by Norman. Highmore seems to be type casted to play people who "are not really real humans", where the (NT) audience can never know if it is an innocent outsider position or a dangerous murderer

> that they see. Through the choice of actor the autistic savant is placed in the same category as the psychopath killer. (One of us)

A well-referred literary representation of the sentimental savant is Christopher Boone, the main autistic protagonist in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* by Mark Haddon (2003). Christopher is represented as a "mathematical genius". Curious Incident set the precedent for subsequent stories featuring so-called 'high functioning' autism. In the following one of us contrast their reading of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* with the novel *Room Called Earth* by neurodivergent author Madeleine Ryan (2020).

> So many people I know (including me, who read it at eight years old), first encountered Asperger syndrome through the book. Which is a problem for the majority of us who don't identify with Christopher at all. When they told me I might possibly be autistic, I thought back to this socially incompetent, male, mathematical genius and thought 'this can't be me.' I was socially adept, female, obsessed with reading. If that kind of autism existed, I thought, surely I would have encountered it in one of my other books? That's why *A Room Called Earth* by Madeleine Ryan (2020) is so important to me. When I read it, I finally saw myself in a narrative, after a lifetime of waiting. I'd come home, so to speak. (One of us)

Reading *Animals in Translation* by Temple Grandin co-written with Catherine Johnson (2005) we think about the closeness between Grandin and the animals, and what the closeness between Grandin and the animals DO, but also of the closeness between Grandin and Johnson, and what the closeness between Grandin and Johnson DO. Johnson is described in the author description in the end of the book as a mother of an autistic child and a psychiatrist. Reading *Animals in Translation* we can't know for sure who is the author, who is doing the editing on whose narrative. van Goidsenhoven (2017) has argued that the introduction or prefacing of autistic-authored memoirs by doctors, psychiatrists, and other medical professionals (for example, Bernard Rimland in Donna Williams's memoirs or Oliver Sacks in Tito Mukhopadhyay's) reinforce notions of fascination, spectatorship, and pathology associated with the neurotypical gaze. In line with this, we read Grandin as an "autistic character" in the book

who is through the neurotypical co-writing/writer, is being pictured by the neurotypical gaze (working of the gaze regardless of the author/s neurotype) as a sentimental savant.

> Is it like Grandin loses a little humanness – and what does that mean? I have analyzed horse books where the girl chooses the horse before humans, which I read as a way of choosing one's allies beyond the norm. Which I think is nice. But it is also like the horses in the introductory chapter [in *Animals in Translation*] is being humanized, it is described how they have ”serious psychological problems”, which I think is an extremely anthropomorphic diagnosis. Which is interesting in relation to the thought (fact?) that the text has been edited by the NT-co-author. My own experience of being close to animals is not about assigning emotions to them in that way. The being with animals is beyond that. And so I think that here I do read a NT-editing of the animals. I think about the expression ”animals saved me” – as a parallel to how the reader is supposed to understand that the human Grandin does also save horses and other animals. I think about the savant-position. How the savant is a construction that will explain something non-human, sort of (I have not really sorted my thoughts about this yet), to make what should be an enviable skill into something monstrous. I think of the psychological perspective as violent in and of itself. (One of us)

Returning to Madeleine Ryan's novel *A Room Called Earth* (2020), we experience it as an important antidote to neurotypical storytelling. Ryan is an example of a neurodivergent writer that, in our experience, does not try to adapt her writing to a neurotypical audience – she does not explain autism or name the main character´s ways of being as autistic. Experiences are only explained when there is need for the main character to explain something to herself (and therefore implies it to the reader). Through this way of storytelling, Ryan's work is not positioning the main character within neurotypical narratives of autism. Rather, Ryan brings forth a way of compulsory analyzing her surroundings, monotropically (c.f. Murray et al, 2005) telling the reader about her interests in plants, cats and spirituality, which we recognize in our own lives. Reading a text that works on our premises is an affirmative experience. We feel seen and understood – even though we are not exactly similar to Ryan's main character. We feel this as an allowance to write and to sense the world in our own ways. But we also read the reviewer quotes on the back of the novel:

> Not only totally refreshing and original but wonderfully humane.
> ... and the hunger for universal connection.
> Fiercely authentic.

We wonder about the neurotypical readings that apparently need to point out that the text is "humane". We notice how the word "authentic" is used, next to "fiercely". But is it fiercely written like this, or is it just out of tiredness, because Ryan does not cope with neurotypical, literary masking strategies, or because the novel *just can't* be written in any other way, since the style is part of its content? . We read Ryan's novel as an alternative, but the reception of it (arguing for its humaneness, pointing out its authenticity) as a disarming of the radically autistic language practice. We read with our emotions: happiness, sadness and anger. We read because the text *is us*.

Conclusion

When reading autism fiction and non-fiction which is not explicit from a deficit-perspective on autism, what can be referred to as autistic-friendly literature, sometimes written from an autistic perspective, we may still feel the presence of the neurotypical gaze in the text. We partly feel guilty, because we know we are supposed to feel grateful for all the kind pictures of autism – especially when it is written from within. But being together, we refuse to give in to the guilt, we stay in the sadness and the rage. We do not mean to accuse autistic writers writing for a neurotypical audience – this is necessary work. But we ask for alternatives. We ask for a more curious neurotypical audience, interested more in including us in their circles of empathy and interest, on *our* own premises, than to keep looking at us from a distance, with a gaze marked by fascination of the stranger.

James McGrath writes in *Naming Adult Autism. Culture, Science, Identity* (2017)

> In this book, 'naming' is the accumulative shorthand for the following processes surrounding adult autism:

> Calling. Characterizing. Chastising. Classifying. Confining. Constructing. Deconstructing. Debating. Defining. Dehumanizing. Demeaning. Demonizing. Demonstrating. Diagnosing. Disabling. Disclosing. Dismissing. Disturbing. Embodying. Empathizing. Enabling. Engineering. Essentializing. Evolving. Exemplifying. Exhibiting. Existentializing. Expanding. Experimenting. Exploiting. Feeling. Fictionalizing. Finding. Functionalizing. Gendering. Generalizing. Historicizing. Humanizing. Idealizing. Identifying. Infantilizing. Interpellating. Labelling. Liberating. Limiting. Locating. Magnifying. Mainstreaming. Marginalizing. Meta-labelling. Misrepresenting. Narrating. Narrowing. Neoliberalizing. Normalizing. Othering. Paratexting. Performing. Personifying. Philosophizing. Playing. Poeticizing. Portraying. Priding. Queering. Radicalizing. Reaching. Reading. Realizing. Redeeming. Redefining. Renaming. Repeating. Replaying. Replying. Screaming. Screening. Seeming. Sensing. Sexing. Silencing. Showing. Surveying. Voicing. Writing. (p. 1)

This paper similarly argues that naming is a totally complex thing. It involves speakers and listeners, it involves autists and neurotypicals, subjects and contexts, language and bodies, violence and care. All intricately woven into each other. As autists we try to navigate in this dangerous but interesting fabric. Doing it together – as our argument for collective action suggests – makes is a little less hurtful.

With this article, we argue that coding, from a neurodivergent gaze of recognition, a neurodivergent (embodied) standpoint, is an important part of a self-advocate movement, where self-definition/self-identification acts as a counter naming to majoritarian storying, neurotypical naming. At the same time – we want to complicate the process of coding/naming, since neither always connect to either positive nor negative recognition, and the line between self-definition and pathologizing diagnoses are not always strict and clear. However, we would like to highlight the function of a neurodivergent gaze – a gaze that recognizes autism and other neurodivergences as "moving like us" (Mullis, 2019). This is not an othering gaze, which after the naming, turns elsewhere, forgets and dismisses. A neurodivergent gaze recognizes autistic similarities and the differences in the similarities – we are both alike and different. It triggers the (neurodivergent) reader's monotropic, focused interest, *charged with feeling* (Murray et al, 2005) for characters, in

particular characters we read as neurodivergent. The neurodivergent reading of these characters result in a "fusing" with the character (Shore, 2003) and becomes part of a collective "us", a neurodivergent togetherness. So, the fictional character, through a neurodivergent reading, a reading that Savarese points out is always on the verge of crossing the line between fiction and reality, becomes part of the neurodivergent reader's bodymind, the gaze turns, at the same time, inwards and outwards. This way of gazing is essential for the well-being of a neurodivergent reader. It is key to a neurodiverse ethics that involves neurodivergent readers as well as traits of neurodivergence in a body of fictional/non-fictional work.

The neurodivergent gaze is a gaze that not only points out the problems of being neurodivergent or the way neurotypicality work. Like the queer eye sees queer leakages of the heteronormative way of life, so the neurodivergent eye (or rather, eyes, since there are millions of ways of being neurodivergent) sees the glitches and fractures of the neurotypical mind, body, and behavior. Our readings sets out an intention to read the neurodivergent perspective as a way of also dislocate the entire idea of what it means to be a (neurotypical) human, and how (neurotypical) humanity has been seen as supreme. But most of all the neurodivergent gaze is a tool to find pleasure in neurodivergent reading patterns. The collective neurodivergent reading forms an opportunity and a possibility to share these pleasures. Coding phenomena as autistic or neurodivergent, or as neurodivergent pleasures, makes visible these patterns of pleasure and desire. Doing it together creates a shared sense of the world, and an affirmative love for the leakages and oddities (as the neuroconventional language says it and sees it) and trigger a collective sense of passion for the world.

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