Literary and Linguistic Landscapes of Autism: communication, community and kinship in 21st century fiction and life writing

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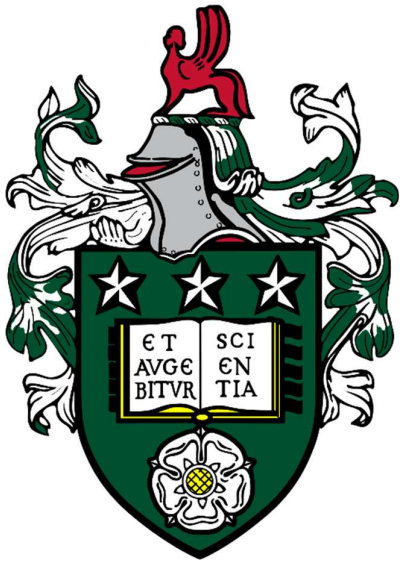

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I confirm that the work submitted is my own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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Abstract

Autism is a site of much contention and debate: models of disability struggle to account for its heterogeneity in a way that meaningfully contributes to autistic lives. I argue that autism can be more productively conceived of as a shifting node within a network of models, strategically drawing on queer, crip, feminist and environmental perspectives. By positioning autism dynamically at the intersection between multiple fields I use literature to demonstrate just a few ways autism is constantly working to broaden conceptions of communication, community and kinship – three themes around which this thesis is structured. I introduce my own original notions each of which corresponds to one of these themes respectively: Autistic Inflection, Voluntary Visibility, and Neuroqueer Kinships.

As this thesis is invested in placing control of autistic lives in autistic hands, amongst the many different forms that advocacy takes, I make the argument for literature being a particularly influential force in ethically storying autism. My corpus consciously mirrors the pace at which conversations about autism are constantly progressing. I deliberately selected texts published within the last five years: Amy Arnold's novel *Slip of a Fish* (2018), Katherine May's memoirs *The Electricity of Every Living Thing* (2018) and *Wintering: The Power of Rest and Retreat in Difficult Times* (2020), Dara McAnulty's memoir *Diary of a Young Naturalist* (2020) and Madeleine Ryan's *A Room Called Earth* (2020). I examine each of these narratives using close textual analysis employing doubt, queerness and fluidity as powerful empirical tools to advocate for *un*knowing neurodivergence. By moving beyond a cultural obsession with explaining autism in precise terms we may foster appreciation for autistic originality, creativity and diversity.

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Personal Statement

A thesis advocating for autistic-led research and the foregrounding of autistic voices being produced by a non-autistic researcher has the potential to be a site of tension. My position is one of allyship initiated by a feeling of injustice with how autism was addressed as a pathological disorder throughout my undergraduate degree in linguistics. At that time, I lacked the theoretical framework and terminology to adequately address my frustrations, and this project was borne from a determination to rectify this, so I might be able to include myself within efforts to seek equality and appreciation of autistic populations.

In a field saturated with non-autistic opinions on autistic lives, those external to autistic perspectives garner a perceived authority which constructs itself as though beyond the possibility of bias.[1] I realise that with autistic communities having a history of disenfranchisement there are innumerable instances of research which pay lip service to ethics, but which have contrary intentions. I open with this thesis with an acknowledgment of my position to demarcate myself and my work from these outlooks.

Throughout this project, I have sought to identify and rigorously challenge my biases, although these can never fully be removed due to the privilege I experience as neurotypical passing. I accept that my work is inherently partial due to my non-autistic perspective, but arguably any work that isn't produced collaboratively in its entirety would be. Rather than seeing my position as a shortcoming, I instead construct this thesis as an open-ended conversation to be enriched, challenged and built upon by voices from all neurotypes. My aim is not to adopt autistic narratives to claim them as my own, but to act as the voice of an

[1] Botha, M., 2021. Academic, activist, or advocate? Angry, entangled, and emerging: A critical reflection on autism knowledge production. *Frontiers in Psychology,* Volume 12, p. 4196; Rosqvist, H. B. et al., 2023. Cutting our own keys: New possibilities of neurodivergent storying in research. *Autism,* 27(5), pp. 1235-1244.

ally adding volume to the ongoing conversation and drawing attention to the wealth of autistic voices.

Integral to this has been the warm welcome I have received into autistic networks and communities. I have engaged in collaborative, emancipatory research efforts examining the expressive freedom granted by these networks and have been grateful to my autistic peers for their feedback on the germinal ideas of this thesis.[2] Whilst I will always be an outside observer (admirer) of autistic perspectives, the unconditional acceptance of my voice within these circles gestures towards the possibility of truly neurodiverse spaces.

[2] Betts, K. et al., 2023. Neurodiversity, Networks, and Narratives: Exploring Intimacy and Expressive Freedom in the Time of Covid-19. *Social Inclusion,* 11(1), pp. 60-71.

A note on terminology:

There is no neutral language when it comes to discussing autism[3] or disability,[4] therefore my position within these fields is key to understanding the intention behind terms I use in the interest of clarity and convenience.

My academic position at the intersection of Medical Humanities and Disability Studies sees disability as a site of social oppression as per the social model as well as a site of resistance as per Crip Studies. My personal experience within Autism and Neurodiversity Studies recognises that not every autistic person would identify as disabled and autistic lives exceed models of disability as we know them. Despite this, I use the term disability to acknowledge the ongoing barriers and social violence that autistic people face.

This project uses identity-first language as a move towards empowerment, remaining respectful that anyone's relationship with identifiers of this sort is incredibly personal. Where writing is my own words (as opposed to that cited or quoted from others[5]) I use identity-first language (i.e. "autistic people", "autistic communities" rather than "people with autism", "people diagnosed with autism" etc.) as the majority feeling within autistic communities is that their status as autistic is something which is an integral part of themselves and not something that they would want to be removed.[6]

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[3] Bottema-Beutal, K. et al., 2021. Avoiding Ableist Language: Suggestions for Autism Researchers. *Autism in Adulthood,* 3(1), pp. 18-29.

[4] As per Kafer, A., 2003. Compulsory bodies: Reflections on heterosexuality and able-bodiedness.. *Journal of Women's History,* 15(3), pp. 77-89: 'The very fact that so much energy is funneled into defining disability and impairment suggests the fundamental instability of the term' (p. 78).

[5] There are occasions where quoted terminology references 'disorder' or 'ASD'. If this is included, it is only because I felt it would be an omission to remove it and should not be mistaken as my complicity with the use of such terms.

[6] Kenny, L. et al., 2016. Which terms should be used to describe autism? Perspectives from the UK autism community. *Autism,* 20(4), pp. 442-462; Botha, M., Hanlon, J. & Williams, G., 2021. Does Language Matter? Identity-First Versus Person-First Language Use in Autism Research: A Response to Vivanti. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders,* pp. 1-9.

I also move away from terminology referring to spectrum (i.e. Autism Spectrum Conditions) which can create a false sense of linearity. I opt instead for a kaleidoscopic idea of autism where '[e]ach autistic person is affected strongly enough in one or more categories for it to be disabling in some way. But each person's dominant colour palette may look different.'[7] I avoid pathologising or over-medicalised terms such as deficit or disorder. Where autistic authors have used terminology I would avoid, I have left this as per their original writing, but where the author is non-autistic I have opted to replace this for simply 'autism' unless stated otherwise.

For the sake of clarity I am keen to highlight that whilst there are different usages of the term 'neurodiversity' that circulate, unless stated otherwise, my usage throughout this project refers to the first of the below definitions:

1. Neurodiversity as a subset of biodiversity i.e. the value-neutral fact that a range of neurotypes occur naturally and we all form part of this inherent cognitive variation. Walker highlights that in this sense of the word, neurodiversity is a quality that can only be applied to groups or populations, therefore it would be incorrect to call any one person neurodiverse when they are neurodivergent.[8] Jon Adams succinctly summarises as he tweets 'Neurodiverse people = Everyone in the human race. Neurodivergent people = a specific neurominority.'[9]
2. Neurodiversity as opposed to biomedical models of developmental disabilities, including but not limited to autism. This has an element of advocacy associated with

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[7] Lynch, C. L., 2019. *"Autism is a Spectrum" Doesn't Mean What You Think.* [Online] Available at: https://neuroclastic.com/its-a-spectrum-doesnt-mean-what-you-think/ [Accessed 12 December 2022].
[8] Walker, N., 2021. *Neuroqueer Heresies: Notes on the Neurodiversity Paradigm.* Fort Worth: Autonomous Press.
[9] Adams, J., 2021. *Neuroqueer Heresies: Notes on the Neurodiversity Paradigm.* Fort Worth: Autonomous Press.

it and exists to challenge terms such as ‘disorder’ or ‘high/low functioning’. This is typically referred to as the neurodiversity paradigm as it will be throughout this thesis. There is sometimes academic and colloquial usage of ‘neurodiversity movement’ which gives a misleading idea of a specific group leading such advocacy. It is my impression that this usage of term references a more general societal awareness and movement towards using the neurodiversity paradigm which was spearheaded by autistic advocates and communities.

3. Occasionally, neurodiversity/neurodivergence is used in the context of autism specifically to reference the variance between neurotypicality and neurodivergence.[10]

In relation to this, the term neurotypical is used as an indicator of a perceived type of cognition which is positioned as acceptable and desirable within a given culture. This is as opposed to usages which substitute it to refer to any non-autistic subject.

[10] Murray, D., Milton, D., Green, J. & Bervoets, J., 2022. The Human Spectrum: a phenomenological enquiry within Neurodiversity. *Psychopathology,* pp. 220-230.

Introduction

The benefit of (the) doubt: uncertainty as a generative tool

Autism is contested, contradictory, complex.

As autistic populations become more visible and valued than ever, it is an exciting time to be involved in the field of autism studies. Whenever I mention the work I do to non-autistic peers, I can almost guarantee one question I get is: 'But what actually is autism?'. Three years ago, I would find myself giving a general gesture towards autism's multiplicity which shifted according to the context in which the question arose. I was always left with the uneasy feeling that I had done autism and autistic people a disservice no matter how succinct or detailed my explanation. I was aware I stood on precarious ground but struggled to find a way to adequately express this. There are many different ways to describe autism, in fact too many for them to form any meaningful definition. Simultaneously, I remain cognisant that all of these ideas combined could never come close to doing autistic lives justice.

Despite this, the public has witnessed nearly a century of scientific research attempting to understand what autism really is, but seems, if anything, to be moving further away from any firm definitions. Whilst some might find this slipperiness 'decidedly odd',[11] I see this as a gesture towards the multiplicity of autism writ large.[12] Scholars have historically used

[11] Rutter, M., 2014. Addressing the issue of fractionation in autism spectrum disorder: a commentary on Brunsdon and Happe, Frazier et al., Hobson and Mandy et al.. *Autism,* 18(1), p. 55.

[12] As do: Orsini, M., 2022. Who needs to (un) know? On the generative possibilities of ignorance for autistic futures. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education,* pp. 1-18; Milton, D., 2014. Autistic expertise: A critical reflection on the production of knowledge in autism studies.. *Autism,* 18(7), pp. 794-802; Pyne, J., 2021. Autistic disruptions, trans temporalities: A narrative "trap door" in time. *South Atlantic Quarterly,* pp. 343-361.

autism's lack of rigid description to assert that autism is 'enigmatic'[13] or 'mysterious'[14] which is not only reductive but entirely false. Autism is not awaiting discovery or definition; its fluidity is fundamental to the power of autistic lives to disrupt normative standards. Due to its very nature, autism occupies an integral position within a reformatting of how disability and dependence are envisioned. Stenning asks 'what does it take for autistic people to participate in a shared world as equals with other people?'.[15] I argue that moving away from a cultural obsession with explaining autism in precise terms makes room for an appreciation of the scope that autism presents in its everydayness.

I find the most meaningful way to interact and engage with autism is to commit to *un*knowing as Munhall presents it: 'a condition of openness' which 'allows others to be.'[16] This is particularly relevant to autistic populations with the ongoing distrust caused by studies and research based on 'well-meaning attempts to know'.[17] Pursuits of this kind are often carried out by (non-autistic) external parties who assume an unspoken 'epistemic authority'.[18] As will be evidenced in this introduction, these attempts often result in stigmas and stereotypes of autism which are hard to remove from the public consciousness once they begin to propagate.

This thesis takes full advantage of uncertainty as a generative force, pushing for nuanced

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[13] Frith, U., 1997. The neurocognitive basis of autism. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences,* 1(2), p. 73.

[14] Frith states "I thought them hauntingly mysterious. How could they do jigsaw puzzles straight off, and yet never even respond to my simple requests to play with them? What was going on? How could they be tested?" (Frith, U., 2016. Why study autism?. In: *Scientists Making a Difference. One hundred eminent behavioral and brain scientists talk about their most important contributions.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 431).

[15] Stenning, A., 2024 (forthcoming). *Narrating the Many Autisms: Identity, Agency, Mattering.* London: Routledge. [uncorrected manuscript] p. 1.

[16] Munhall, P., 1993. 'Unknowing': toward another pattern of knowing in nursing. *Nursing Outlook,* 41(3), p. 125.

[17] Orsini (2022) p. 1.

[18] Rosqvist, H., Milton, D. & O'Dell, L., 2022. Support on whose terms?: Competing meanings of support aimed at autistic people. In: D. Milton & S. Ryan, eds. *The Routledge International Handbook of Critical Autism Studies.* London: Routledge, p. 192.

and complex understandings of autism.[19] I am not alone in using uncertainty as an (anti)epistemological tool: Orsini argues for the benefit of 'strategically position[ing] the act of unknowing as both politically desirable and necessary for disability futures.[20] Orsini's 'project of ignorance'[21] offers the potential to disrupt dominant ways of coming to know autism. This outlook does not render autism itself irretrievably obscure, rather it questions the use of prioritising precision and certainty in a field which is so culturally contingent. To unknow is an act of resistance against dehumanising and pathological narratives presented as 'transcendent of all social and cultural values by virtue of their quantitative and/or experimental nature.'[22] A dethroning of evidence-based approaches 'disrupt[s] conventional dynamics of power'[23] acting as a recalibration towards non-hierarchical, collaborative ways of appreciating autistic lives.

In line with Orsini's aims, Jack Halberstam considers the ways in which 'not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in this world'.[24] Halberstam frames the so-called failure of queer and otherwise divergent lifestyles as counter-hegemonic resistance. To problematise the binary of success and failure in turn destabilises narratives of autism as deficient or disordered, bringing creativity and ingenuity to the fore. This thesis is a project of unlearning, dismantling and destabilising to showcase the creativity of being and seeing otherwise that is inherent in neurodivergent perspectives.

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[19] The idea of unknowing also has a long history with feminist scholars such as Eva Sedgwick: Sedgwick (1988. Privilege of unknowing. *Genders,* Volume 1, pp. 102-124.)

[20] Orsini, 2022, p. 2.

[21] Orsini (2022) uses this term with a sensitive awareness to the fact that it risks being problematic in discussions of cognitive disability as raised by Stacy Simplican (2015. *The capacity contract: Intellectual disability and the question of citizenship.* Minnesota: Universiy of Minnesota Press.) and Shelley Tremain (2017. *Foucault and feminist philosophy of disability.* Michigan: University of Michigan Press.)

[22] Rosqvist, H. B. et al., 2023. Being, knowing and doing: importing theoretical toolboxes for autism studies. *Autism in Adulthood,* 5(1), p. 26.

[23] Price, M., 2009. "Her Pronouns Wax and Wane": psychosocial disability, autobiography, and counter-diagnosis. *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies,* 1(1), p. 31.

[24] Halberstam, J., 2011. *The queer art of failure.* Durham: Duke University Press, p. 2.

Contexts and Conflicts - Constructing Autism in the Twenty-First Century

I will firstly explore the complexity of autism's ongoing cultural construction before describing the specific contribution of this thesis. I recount the ways in which there has been undeniable improvement in the lives of autistic populations in the twenty-first Century, mindful that autism's existence in public, private and professional consciousness is far more complex than a linear trajectory from adversity to acceptance.[25] To demonstrate autism's layered (as opposed to linear) reality, this introduction consciously resists chronological structure so as not to inadvertently present a neatened, oversimplified version of autism's progress. Autistic-led advocacy acts as a significant driving force for sociological research, challenging scholars to more appropriately account for the impact their output has on autistic lives. This introduction uses autism advocacy and autism-led emancipatory efforts as a scaffold around which discussion of autistic subjectivity, creativity and potential takes place. I take the lead from the many challenges autism and autism advocacy faces in the twenty-first century and how these are influenced by outdated constructions that persist and appear in unexpected forms to this day.

Autism is both constructed and constructive. It appears at once everywhere and nowhere. Autism is not a tangible *thing* per se but a nebulous way of understanding 'the diverse ways that a heterogenous group of people do not "fit" within their social environments'.[26] Of course, this is not to suggest these ideas are mutually exclusive: understanding the ways in

[25] The conception of this cultural obsession has been outlined by Stuart Murray (2008. *Representing Autism: Culture, Narrative, Fascination.* London: Oxford University Press.), Dan Goodley (2016. Autism and the Human. In: *Re-thinking autism: Diagnosis, identity and equality.* London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, pp. 146-159.) and Alicia Broderick (2010. Autism as enemy: Metaphor and cultural politics. *Handbook of Cultural Education and Politics,* pp. 237-268.) amongst others.

[26] Nadesan, M. H., 2005. *Constructing Autism: Unravelling the 'truth' and understanding the social.* London : Routledge, p. 220.

which autism is socially constructed does not undermine autism as an inherent neurological difference. This said, autism is a term more frequently seen in the Global North and particularly in Anglophone societies[27] which challenges the medical model's assertion that autism is as an empirical, biological truth. The 'sensory subjectivity'[28] of autistic embodiment presents both very real challenges and visceral joys in its everydayness that contest the silently ubiquitous norms.

The dynamic and elastic nature of autism renders it a socially, geographically and temporally contingent category and at the same time not a category at all.[29] What it means to be autistic changes over time – be that over the course of decades as diagnostic consensus shifts or within the space of a single day as different challenges are encountered. Autism's geographical contingency is demonstrated by the increasing number of those identifying as autistic in twenty-first century Western, Anglocentric societies but relatively fewer (or even an absence statistically) in other demographics. It is a common misconception that there are just more autistic people than there used to be – the rising rate of autism is accounted for through multiple factors: greater public awareness; a widening of the criteria needed to be considered autistic; the influx of adults recognising their neurotype later in life (or any mixture of these reasons).[30]

With increasing numbers of people identifying as autistic, we might expect to see a greater understanding of the many forms autism can take. In reality, autistic populations have historically had very little control over the direction of autism research and the form autism

[27] Zeidan, J. et al., 2022. Global prevalence of autism: A systematic review update. *Autism Research,* 15(5), pp. 778-790; Crosbie, P., 2022. The Moulin Rouge and the Rouge Moulin: Language, Cartesianism, republicanism and the construct of autism in France. In: *The Routledge International Handbook of Critical Autism Studies.* London : Routledge. pp. 165-181.

[28] Stenning, 2024, p. 3.

[29] Botha, 2021.

[30] Nadesan, 2005.

takes in the wider world. It is most often those external to autistic experiences (i.e. non-autistic researchers or professionals) holding the cultural capital to influence how autism is perceived. This can lead to mainstream ideas of autism diverging entirely from lived experience. The noisy environments of autism research and mainstream media results in conflicting ideas vying for space and asserting their dominance, ultimately rendering autistic voices largely unheard by comparison. The divorce of cultural conceptions of autism from its reality begs the question 'if autism is constructed, who does the constructing?'.[31]

Beyond diagnosis:

Social anxieties about difference and disability settle disproportionately around autism. Faced with the condition's complexity and fundamental variability, mainstream media engages in a widespread 'blunting'[32] in order to achieve a marketable 'recognizable shorthand'.[33] These cultural fictions often operate independently of lived autistic experience becoming more readily accepted within the public consciousness than autistic voices themselves. Rather than enriching public knowledge, this commodification of autism 'ha[s] overlaid the condition not with understanding but with the complex desires of a society that wishes to be fascinated'.[34] Autism becomes a palimpsest where autistic voices interrupt outdated stigmas and prejudices but struggle to fully remove these ideas from the public consciousness, acting instead as a layer over them.

The widespread consumption of a media-curated version of autism results in entrenched stigmas being more prevalent than ideas of autistic value and diversity. Narrow and

[31] Straus, J., 2014. Autism as Culture. *The Disability Studies Reader,* Volume 4, p. 466.
[32] Murray, 2008: p. 211.
[33] Murray, 2008: p. 22.
[34] Murray, 2008: p. 4.

reductive ideas influenced by these outdated notions therefore emerge in unexpected ways in present day conversations. Pamela Moss describes how medical diagnoses in general carry with them a history of research and biomedical knowledge so thorough that 'physicians can talk with each other without conferring directly'.[35] Moss's statement sits within a wider conversation of how diagnosis can act as a kind of entry ticket for those with alternative embodiments or chronic conditions, particularly relevant to autistic communities' experiences. Autism as a term carries the historic weight of many 'physicians conferring',[36] usually with very little input from autistic populations. As a result, autism is frequently 'characterized by its external manifestations rather than experienced phenomenology'[37] where those external to autistic experience gatekeep autistic diagnosis and identity.

Using salient autistic traits as diagnostic criteria fortifies an existing idea of autism. Philosopher Ian Hacking notes a 'looping effect'[38] relating to the classification of mental conditions where '[t]o create new ways of classifying people is also to change how we can think of ourselves, to change our sense of self-worth, even how we remember our own past'.[39] As a result, 'people of the kind behave differently and so are different'.[40] Therefore, those diagnosed according to a list of how autism usually presents are subjected to the professional's *idea* of autism which may operate independently from an autism-led idea of neurodivergence.[41] Women and girls are far less likely to be recognised as autistic since

[35] Moss, P., 2016. Perching as a Strategy for Seeking Legitimacy for Broken Embodiments. In: C. Kelly & M. Orsini, eds. *Mobilizing Metaphor: Art, Culture, and Disability Activism in Canada.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, p. 221.

[36] Moss, 2016: p. 221.

[37] Murray et al., 2022: p. 220.

[38] Hacking, I., 1995. The Looping Effects of Human Kinds. In: D. Sperber, D. Premack & A. J. Premack, eds. *Causal cognition: An interdisciplinary approach.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 351-383.

[39] Hacking, 1995: p. 369.

[40] Hacking, 1995: p. 369.

[41] Research which actively seeks 'diagnosed autistic' participants risks creating self-perpetuating idea of a very

quietness and introversion in women is coded as being polite and reserved.[42] This is a result of many complex factors but also serves to demonstrate the direct impact of this looping effect on autistic populations.

Dawn Prince-Hughes similarly discusses her frustration that medical professionals' biases may act as a barrier to autistic individuals attaining appropriate support: 'Significant but rarely discussed is the additional deciding component in the diagnosis: the discretion of the diagnostician and his or her level of familiarity with autism'.[43] Prince-Hughes' testimony highlights how biases can result in unethical research led by ableist notions of what autism is or can be. This is continually demonstrated by the allocation of research funding to what Botha and Cage term 'basic science'.[44] They note how the funding priorities congregate around 'brain, behavior, genetics [and] causes'[45] when autistic populations continue to demand research on 'post-diagnostic support, mental and physical health, improving public understanding and improving access to services'.[46] Scholarship has readily moved beyond viewing biomedical and scientific knowledge as objective on any level, yet when autistic people seek medical intervention, a power dynamic is nonetheless established which appears to 'have been informed by the idea that biomedicine is *the* authority'.[47] The impact

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limited section of autistic populations for this reason. McDonald discusses how there is little benefit in stipulating participants must have received a medical diagnosis when self-identifying autistic population report similar impacts of stigma on their mental health and wellbeing as well as "similar needs related to identity, stigma, quality of life, and employment as adults who have an autism diagnosis." (2020. Autism identity and the "lost generation": Structural validation of the autism spectrum identity scale and comparison of diagnosed and self-diagnosed adults on the autism spectrum. *Autism in Adulthood,* 2(1), p. 22.)

[42] Hamdani, Y. et al., 2023. Roadblocks and detours on pathways to a clinical diagnosis of autism for girls and women: A qualitative secondary analysis. *Women's Health,* Volume 19, pp. 1-12.

[43] Prince-Hughes, D., 2004. *Songs of the gorilla nation: My journey through autism.* New York: Three Rivers Press, p. 30.

[44] Botha, M. & Cage, E., 2022. Autism research is in crisis": A mixed method study of researcher's constructions of autistic people and autism research. *Frontiers in Psychology,* Volume 13, p. 3.

[45] Botha & Cage, 2022: p. 3.

[46] Botha & Cage, 2022: p. 3.

[47] Moss, 2016: p. 224.

of outdated stereotypes is extensive, casting a shadow over everything from diagnostic criteria to job opportunities to even life expectancy. Despite these bleak outlooks, autistic communities' wellbeing continues to fall low on research priorities.[48]

Hostile prejudices and biases may operate under the guise of charity[49] or research projects that don't centralise autistic interest or confer with autistic shareholders. Particularly prescient was the Spectrum 10k study spearheaded in 2021 by Simon Baron-Cohen at the Autism Research Centre (ARC) in Cambridge. Spectrum 10k was to be the largest genomic investigation of its kind exploring the genetic and environmental factors that may contribute to autism. As a result of autistic advocacy and widespread boycotting, the study is currently under ethical investigation pending permission to continue. Although the team responsible for Spectrum 10k state explicitly on their website that they are opposed to any eugenic lines of enquiry, advocates noted a significant lack of transparency with regards to what is deemed eugenic in their eyes and how the data would be used in light of this. Reflecting on the persistence of biomedically situated research, Pellicano and den Houting lament that by 'prioritising research on causation we have failed to understand the nature of autistic people's life experiences. Imposing non-autistic, medically driven priorities has had the

[48] Pellicano et al. (2014. What should autism research focus upon? Community views and priorities from the United Kingdom. *Autism,* 18(7), pp. 756-770.) corroborates autistic populations' request for more applicable research. Den Houting & Pellicano (2019. A portfolio analysis of autism research funding in Australia, 2008- 2017. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders,* Volume 49, pp. 4400-4408.) demonstrates a stark disparity between these requests and the reality of research carried out (in Australia).

[49] An example of this is the US based charity 'Autism Speaks' founded in 2005 which until 2016 framed autism as a disease and put significant funds towards attempting to find a cure as per their original mission statement: 'We are dedicated to funding global biomedical research into the causes, prevention, treatments and a possible cure for autism. We strive to raise public awareness about autism and its effects on individuals, families and society: and we work to bring hope to all who deal with the hardships of this disorder.'(Autism Speaks Inc., 2023. About Autism Speaks. [Online] Available at: https://www.autismspeaks.org/about-autism-speaks [Accessed 13 October 2023].) This statement has been updated in recent years, but their board is majority neurotypical providing very little input from autistic voices. In 2009 they released their televised advert series 'I Am Autism' which framed autism as an insidious character out to 'rob you of your children and your dreams'. More about the controversy around Autism Speaks can be read about in: Rosenblatt, A., 2022. Autism, advocacy organizations, and past injustice. *Disability Studies Quarterly,* 38(4).

grave consequence of diverting resources away from existing autistic people and the areas that matter most in their lives'.[50] Autistic communities and their allies were rightfully concerned and distressed that such a large-scale project could have been proposed without any consultation with autistic populations[51] and with such little clarity about how the sensitive material was being dealt with.[52]

Baron-Cohen stated that the aims of the project prioritised the health and wellbeing of autistic populations, hopeful that 'future knowledge may lead to improved diagnosis through genetic testing'.[53] However, the wording of the original grant application from 2018 is available online and revealed a problematic aim 'to identify several genetic variants that contribute to the development of autism', which raised some concern about the possibility of antenatal testing.[54] Under increasing pressure from investigations, it was revealed that participants were required to consent to their genetic material being accessible for future (as yet undisclosed) projects with little explanation as to the research aims of these projects. To capture data from a range of autistic participants, caregivers were given authority to pass on the genetic material from those who may not be able to consent independently. In this way, Spectrum 10k's methodology takes advantage of non-standard communication styles

[50] Pellicano, E. & Houting, J. d., 2022. Annual Research Review: Shifting from 'normal science' to neurodiversity in autism science. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry,* 63(4), p. 385.

[51] Consultation with 'approximately 15-20 autistic people (and some parents/carers)' was only suggested on 28th October 2021 as a result of the backlash the study received. Autistic researcher Dr Leneh Buckle was appointed at around the same time which only served to demonstrate how little autistic input the original study had. Baron-Cohen stated 'Leneh's co-leadership role was particularly important as she brought an autistic perspective into the design and analysis of the consultation and helped to ensure that autistic voices were kept central throughout the consultation process' something which a study based on the interests of autistic populations would have had from its inception. (Spectrum 10k, 2022. *Frequently asked questions - Genetic data.* [Online] Available at: https://spectrum10k.org/faqs/genetic-data/ [Accessed 15 December 2022].)

[52] Natri, H. M., 2021. *Spectrum 10K and the questionable past, present, and future of genetic autism research. [Preprint].* [Online] Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/356218196_Spectrum_10K_and_The_Questionable_Past_Present_and_Future_of_Genetic_Autism_Research [Accessed 8 June 2023].

[53] Spectrum10k, 2022.

[54] Baron-Cohen, S., Hurles, M., Geschwind, D. & Rowitch, D., 2018. *Common Variant Genetics of Autism and Autistic Traits (GWAS) Consortium.* [Online] Available at: https://wellcome.org/grant- funding/people-and-projects/grants-awarded/common-variant-genetics-autism-and-autistic-traits [Accessed 6 June 2022].

to deny a large portion of autistic communities their agency and bodily autonomy.[55]

Examining the genetic code of autism places a medical outlook at the forefront of research aims, which autistic populations are rightfully concerned about due to autism's long history with reductively pathological lines of enquiry. The unfolding of Spectrum 10k not only demonstrates the conflicting schools of thought which influence autism research, but also the ongoing battle for autistic communities to have their needs and wellbeing prioritised in research carried out on and about them. Rather than consult autistic knowledge on autistic lives, the type of research carried out by Baron-Cohen and his colleagues designates a perceived authority to external parties over the lived experience of autistic people leading to 'autistic people [being] treated as unreliable narrators to their own experiences, and hav[ing] their subjectivity, agency and activity denied as meaningful'.[56] The medical model's reliance on an assumed standard of ableness depicts illness and disability as a deviation to be remedied. This logic may be beneficial when it comes to illness and disease, but in relation to disability it generates a problematic commitment to curing. This is complicated by the fact that there are many instances where deferring to a medical model is essential for a balanced outlook: i.e. managing conditions which frequently co-occur with autism (such as epilepsy or Ehlers-Danlos) can be beneficial to life quality and wellbeing. Taken with flexibility and nuance, there is undeniable merit to medical approaches, however the medical model itself is underpinned by some fundamental beliefs which preclude the possibility of alternative perspectives on disability. In other words, it is not the presence of medical or pathological outlooks that cause the problem, but the *dominance* of these ideas in cultural perceptions of who is, or can be, a functioning member of society. The perceived scientific objectivity that

[55] Of course I recognise the necessity of caregivers being able to consent to emergency procedures when a risk to life develops.

[56] Botha, M., 2022. Community psychology as reparations for violence in the construction of autism knowledge. In: *The Routledge International Handbook of Critical Autism Studies.* London: Routledge, p. 82.

the medical model rests on neglects not only the 'embeddedness of the person with autism within his or her environment'[57] but also autistic culture and the benefit of autistic outlooks. Idealising standardised bodies and minds results in ongoing stigma, oppression and exclusion for many disabled populations, but especially those identifying as autistic.

Many autistic people lament the double bind of being socially conditioned to mask but then being refused accommodations because they 'do not look autistic enough'.[58] Any number of autistic people may mask in order to pass as neurotypical, which can then complexify seeking subsequent support since 'autistic people who communicate in ways that are legible to non-autistics are dismissed as "not autistic enough"'.[59] Discussing her diagnosis in adult life, author Katherine May states: 'before I knew I was autistic I was always told I was really weird and now people tell me I'm *far too normal* so you just can never win'.[60] The fact that accommodations are only granted on the visibility of such difference is problematic on many levels and further entrenches stigma surrounding autistic identity.[61]

Shuttling between cultural and medical perceptions of autism leads to simultaneous ethical and ontological stalemates where diagnosis becomes a political matter.[62] Many neurodivergent people ultimately seek the aid of a medical professional for the accessibility and support that only becomes available upon disclosing a diagnosis. Autistic people might be in a state of burnout or as one participant in Leedham et al.'s study, 'Lucy', stated: 'I was exhausted trying to figure it out … why things were so different for me, and … by the time I

[57] Loveland, K., 2001. Toward an ecological theory of autism. In: J. A. Burack, T. Charman & N. Yirmiya, eds. *The Development of Autism: Perspectives from Theory and Research.* New Jersey: Erlbaum Press, p. 32.
[58] May, K., 2020. *The Good Life Unravelled: Embracing the Winters of our Lives with Katherine May* [Interview] (17 September 2020).
[59] Orsini, 2022: p. 10.
[60] May, 2020 [interview].
[61] Botha, M., Dibb, B. & Frost, D., 2022. "Autism is me": an investigation of how autistic individuals make sense of autism and stigma. *Disability and Society,* 37(3), pp. 427-453.
[62] Bervoets, J. & Hens, K., 2020. Going Beyond the Catch-22 of Autism Diagnosis and Research. The Moral Implications of (Not) Asking "What is Autism?". *Frontiers in Psychology,* Volume 11, p. 1.

had got to that diagnosis, I was already half dead, I was already in a functioning depressed state'.[63] 'Lucy' is not alone is feeling 'exhausted' and 'depressed' by the time they sought a diagnosis – a result of struggling to cope in a world set up for the majority neurotype.[64] Continually encountering autistic people in desperate mental health affects the diagnostic criteria to focus on what someone cannot do or how their behaviour may differ from expected behavioural milestones for a 'typically' developing person of their age. *The American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, Fifth Edition* (DSM-5)'s descriptor of autism features a lexicon of 'failure', 'deficit' and 'abnormal': 'Deficits in social-emotional reciprocity, ranging, for example, from abnormal social approach and failure of normal back-and-forth conversation; to reduced sharing of interests, emotions, or affect; to failure to initiate or respond to social interactions'.[65]This turns autism into 'a neurological disorder, a pathological deviance from expected functional stages of development'.[66] Describing autism as 'abnormal' or a 'failure' constructs the majority neurotype comparatively as though it is the widespread preference. Vivanti notes that '[f]ar from being mere semantics, this distinction has practical implications, as the words that we use to describe individuals with an autism diagnosis influence societal perceptions, public policy, clinical practice, and research directions'.[67] Self-identification therefore offers the possibility of coming to claim autistic identity in more diverse (and potentially positive) ways such as inclusion in an online community or developing shared interests with peers.

Just over ten years ago, scholar and advocate Michelle Dawson highlighted a need for

[63] Leedham, A., Thompson, A., Smith, R. & Freeth, M., 2020. 'I was exhausted trying to figure it out': The experiences of females receiving an autism diagnosis in middle to late adulthood.". *Autism,* 24(1), p. 139.
[64] Leedham et al., 2020: p. 139
[65] American Psychiatric Association, 2022. *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (5th ed., text rev.).* Washington DC: American Psychiatric Publishing, p. 50.
[66] Milton, D., 2012. On the ontological status of autism: the 'double empathy problem'. *Disability & Society,* 27(6), p. 883.
[67] Vivanti, G., 2020. Ask the editor: What is the most appropriate way to talk about individuals with a diagnosis of autism?. *Journal of autism and developmental disorders,* 50(2), pp. 691.

'advocacy which demands higher standards of science and ethics for autistics' lamenting how 'this hasn't happened yet'.[68] Present day advocacy is coming closer to reaching these high standards as the significant backlash over Spectrum 10k shows the power of advocacy and autistic voices to shape research that impacts autistic lives directly. Spectrum 10k is still pending its final report, due to be released at the end of 2023, at which point there is the possibility that the study may resume. Rigorous questioning around how particular projects affect perceptions of autism highlights the multiple (and often conflicting) approaches that shape the field.

Neurodiversity and the Social Model - Juggling difference, disability and diversity

When the term neurodiversity first entered the public consciousness in the late 1990s there was already a recalibration in process towards a more social conception of disability. The social model's dispersal of disability throughout society (as opposed to being an individual or private matter) was key to moving autism beyond notions of disorder towards discussions of majority/minority neurotypes. This said, autism's constant state of flux made it somewhat difficult to accommodate within a social model, even with the best of intentions. Discussions of social models often focus on accessibility from a physical perspective – the archetypal implementation of the social model being a ramp for wheelchair access. In line with this obstacle, the term 'neurodiversity' was first coined in 1997[69] to encompass the diversity

[68] Dawson, M., 2012. *Autistic in the UK.* [Online] Available at: https://autismcrisis.blogspot.com/2012/04/autistic-in-uk.html [Accessed 13 July 2022].

[69] Controversy around the origins of the term have emerged recently as reported by Martijn Dekker (2023. *A correction on the origin of the term 'neurodiversity'.* [Online] Available at: https://www.inlv.org/2023/07/13/neurodiversity-origin.html [Accessed 8 November 2023].

inherent in human cognition. Singer[70] described neurodiversity as 'postmodern fragmentation' – a paradigm through which 'our most taken advantage of assumptions […] are being dissolved'.[71] Reflecting on her intentions at the time, Singer notes how her use was rooted in activism and intersectionality:

> "Neuro" was a reference to the rise of neuroscience. "Diversity" is a political term; it originated with the black American civil rights movement. "Biodiversity" is really a political term, too. As a word, "neurodiversity" describes the whole of humanity.[72] But the neurodiversity movement is a political movement for people who want their human rights.[73]

In line with this, philosopher Erin Manning sees the ubiquity of neurotypicality as 'akin to structural racism'[74] demonstrating how the liberation of one minority group is complexly intertwined with all other oppressed peoples.

Under a social-model-led understanding, society is shaped by the majority neurotype meaning that a disproportionate number of challenges congregate around neurodivergent populations. Reflecting on a later life diagnosis, Barkved states:

> Instead of seeing myself as a failure for my inability to meet and keep up with the

[70] Singer has been criticised for supporting some transphobic attitudes, see Rao, K., 2023. *Who is Judy Singer? Autistic Pride Day controversy explained as transphobic tweets go viral.* [Online] Available at: https://www.sportskeeda.com/pop-culture/news-who-judy-singer-autistic-pride-day- controversy-explained-transphobic-tweets-go-viral [Accessed 5 August 2023].

[71] Singer, J., 1999. 'Why can't you be normal for once in your life?' From a 'problem with no name' to the emergence of a new category of difference. In: L. Barton, ed. *Disability Discourse.* Buckingham: Open University Press, p. 64.

[72] Singer frequently comments that as the concept of neurodiversity gains traction it is used in some circles as though being synonymous with autism exclusively rather than the infinite configurations of human cognition. She notes she feels this usage risks it moving away from its intended meaning of diversity in the widest sense to the point that neurodiversity may become interchangeable with autism in some discussions.

[73] Harris, J., 2023. *The mother of neurodiversity: how Judy Singer changed the world.* [Online] Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jul/05/the-mother-of-neurodiversity-how- judy-singer-changed-the-world

[74] Manning, E., 2020. *For a Pragmatics of the Useless.* Durham: Duke University Press, p. 2.

> world around me, I began to consider that perhaps the world around me was one that I could not fully participate in —and that was okay, because it was not a world built for people like me.[75]

With minimal accommodations, autistic people are continually disabled by society and oppressed for not fitting the template of a well-rounded, productive citizen.

Singer discusses how she welcomes the divorce of disability labels from the medical field, noting that identifying as autistic is a deeply personal matter.[76] Scholars have long debated whether autism is a difference or a disability, but the truth is both, neither, and somewhere in between all at once depending on the individual. The relationship someone will have with specific identities or labels is entirely dependent on the person, the day, the context and many other factors. None of these identities need to be mutually exclusive, even within one person: a certain way of identifying might be appropriate in a specific context and another might suit a different situation. The widespread requirement to disclose a medically endorsed diagnosis for access to real accommodations is a barrier to implementing the utopian promises of a social model in practice. The continued dominance of the medical model and pathologisation of autism in the twenty-fist century creates a false dichotomy of in/dependence when autistic outlooks highlight the ways in which we might benefit from leaning into being intricately dependent on each other.

Autistic activist Hiari critiques the neurodiversity movement, defining it as a 'public relations campaign that emphasizes the many positive qualities associated with *some* presentations of autism […] while erasing or minimizing the experiences of autistics who are severely

[75] Kaytlyn Barkved presents her artwork as an idiolect through which she has come to better understand her own autistic identity (Barkved, K., 2021. *Neuroqueer Imaging: An autistic autoethnography,* Vancouver: University of British Columbia, p 14.).
[76] Harris, 2023.

disabled.'.[77] He is not alone in raising criticism around the movement towards neurodiversity with comments from some advocates, especially parents, raising concerns about the way neurodiversity could be perceived to underplay the struggles of autistic experience, romanticising and politicising lives but forgetting the everyday. It is also important to note the ways in which the neurodiversity movement stands to exclude those who cannot communicate their experiences as readily as others. Proponents of the neurodiversity paradigm would refute these claims as a redressing of the balance where autism has been stigmatised and distilled down to a series of diagnostic criteria and deficits. This said, despite the social model and neurodiversity's welcome interruption in medical dominated conversations, autistic populations are united with many disabled communities by being disabled most significantly by outdated stereotypes and stigmas.[78] It is evident that when it comes to autism specifically, models remain incomplete at best.

Neurodiversity Studies and/or Critical Autism Studies?

Nearly thirty years on from the first use of the term, Neurodiversity Studies has now been formalised into a field in its own right, most notably established by the release of *Neurodiversity Studies: A New Critical Paradigm*;[79] Rosqvist, Stenning and Chown's collection is an empowering mix of autistic scholars and allies united in their stance against oppressive and exclusionary research practices. The essays centralise the social construction of neurodivergence through 'the epistemic and ideological rules that govern and produce

[77] Hiari, T., 2018. *Neurodiversity is Dead. Now What?.* [Online]
Available at: https://www.madinamerica.com/2018/04/neurodiversity-dead-now-what/
[Accessed 5 October 2022], para. 3, ln. 1.
[78] Davis, L. J., 1995. *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness and the Body.* London: Verso.
[79] Rosqvist, H., Chown, N. & Stenning, A., 2020. *Neurodiversity Studies: A New Critical Paradigm.* London: Routledge.

"normals" and "others" according to scientific, cultural, and social practices'.[80] The field sees neurodiversity as a mode of radical inclusion and looks to deconstruct the social mechanisms that work in the opposite direction towards exclusion and hierarchy. Neurodiversity studies redistributes focus from how autistic populations deviate, moving instead towards 'problematis[ing] neurotypical […] by questioning the boundaries between the predominant neurotypes and their "others"'.[81] The integrity of autism as a category is not brought into question, but promoted as just one of many examples of the complexity of human cognition in general and to demonstrate how the challenges inherent to any neurotype may become exacerbated upon inter-neurotype connection.

Neurodiversity Studies' past is inextricable from Critical Autism Studies: both share fundamental emancipatory ideologies but differ subtly in the position autism holds in relation to these discussions.[82] Neurodiversity Studies aligns implicitly with all of the aims of Critical Autism Studies and whilst they are distinct lines of enquiry, they operate as 'separate yet cooperative heterogeneous entities'.[83] We could perhaps think of them as overlapping in a Venn diagram configuration: each outlook is an independent, full circle in its own right, but they can be productively combined to enrich each other's ways of thinking.

Critical Autism Studies re-centres autism's complexity as a way to challenge the ongoing impact of its pathologisation. Seeking to expand autism beyond the dominant neurobiological framework which often propagates notions of autism as deficit, Critical

[80] Rosqvist, Chown & Stenning, 2022: p. 2.
[81] Rosqvist, Chown & Stenning, 2022: p. i.
[82] The timelines of each field developing are complexly intertwined: Neurodiversity as a concept has a long history of advocacy and emancipation but its presence in academe came somewhat later. Critical Autism Studies has its inception within academic conversations and draws on logic established by Critical Disability Studies but continues to be invigorated and updated to meet the needs of an ever-changing field.
[83] Woods, R., Milton, D., Arnold, L. & Graby, S., 2018. Redefining Critical Autism Studies: a more inclusive interpretation. *Disability & Society,* 33(6), p. 975.

Autism Studies positions autism as a rich culture and 'identity that is materially and discursively produced within specific sociocultural contexts'.[84] The origin of Critical Autism Studies can be traced to Davidson and Orsini who devised the term following a conference in 2010.[85] Scholars were initially inspired by the differences in how autism is perceived around the world, taking a global perspective on how these different refractions of autism 'gain currency, and form the basis for policy, practice and political movements'.[86] Tailoring Critical Disability Studies for autism specifically, the emerging field proposed three main tenets as outlined by Davidson and Orsini:

> 1. Careful attention to how power relations shape the field of autism
>
> 2. Concern to advance new, enabling narratives of autism that challenge the predominant (deficit-focused and degrading) constructions that influence public opinion, policy and popular culture; and
>
> 3. Commitment to develop new analytical frameworks using inclusive and non-reductive methodological and theoretical approaches to study the nature and culture of autism. The interdisciplinary (particularly social sciences and humanities) research required demands sensitivity to the kaleidoscopic complexity of this highly individualised, relational (dis)order.[87]

A defining characteristic of the field was its intention to 'open new lines of inquiry, not foreclose the potential for critical scholarship in the autism field, especially research that

[84] O'Dell, L. et al., 2016. Critical autism studies: exploring epistemic dialogues and intersections, challenging dominant understandings of autism. *Disability & Society,* p. 167.

[85] This collaborative effort would later become their co-edited collection: Davidson, J. & Orsini, M., 2013. *Worlds of Autism: Across the Spectrum of Neurological Difference.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

[86] Davidson & Orsini, 2013: p. 166.

[87] Following a reinvigoration of Critical Autism Studies, Waltz's (2014) working definition was adopted where the field defined its focus as being on "power dynamics that operate in Discourses around autism, questioning deficit-based definitions of autism, and being willing to consider the ways in which biology and culture intersect to produce 'disability'" (Waltz, M., 2014. Worlds of autism: across the spectrum of neurological difference (review), *Disability & Society,* p. 1337).

brings advocates and academics from social sciences and humanities into productive tension'.[88] I am particularly keen to focus on how this idea of 'productive tension'[89] can be mobilised in discussions of the 'kaleidoscopic complexity'[90] of autism. To accept that tension can be a generative force aligns with autism's shifting, contradictory and 'highly individualised'[91] nature as it necessarily straddles multiple different schools of thought simultaneously. Autism defies a static relationship with any mode of thinking; approaches which work at the intersections between fields to foster flexibility and fluidity are best suited to match autism's energy.

Neurodiversity Studies approaches very similar questions as Critical Autism Studies but from a macro perspective, zooming out from examining autism specifically towards neurodiversity in all its forms. Whilst both schools are attentive to the power relations that develop between neurodivergent and neurotypical populations, neurodiversity scholars reverse-engineer these dynamics to examine why difference might be praised in some instances but marginalised in others. Scholars within the field work hard to overlay frequent reference to disorder or deficit with the much richer idea of diversity.

Autism as Culture

According to Straus we may foster more balanced conversations about autism by 'consider[ing] it within the ambient culture and, more specifically, within the distinctive culture that autistic people have begun to construct'.[92] Nearly ten years on from this assertion, rising numbers of people feel empowered in identifying as autistic (via different

[88] O'Dell et al. 2016: p. 171.
[89] O'Dell et al. 2016: p. 171.
[90] Davidson & Orsini, 2013: p. 12.
[91] Davidson & Orsini, 2013: p. 12.
[92] Straus, 2014: p. 466.

avenues, be that medical of self-identification) enabling them to find kinship among shared experiences and encouraging autistic culture to grow. Considerations of the diverse cultural practices of others is a practical way of understanding someone on their terms. In some ways, autism advocacy follows a path carved out by the Deaf community by using a capitalised version of 'Autistic' to recognise a growing group who identify as culturally neurodivergent and that autism is in itself a culture. Considered a linguistic subgroup and a 'self-defining subnationality within a larger structure of the audist state', the Deaf community is a culture with its own language and customs.[93] This act of resistance through reclamation is in line with 'queer' or 'crip' where autistic communities take back ownership of what it means to be autistic.[94]

There are, of course, instances when a D/deaf person may encounter difficulty interpreting or being interpreted within a purely spoken conversation. As per social/cultural models of disability, these challenges are posited as a language barrier (such as one might encounter when they do not speak the language of the majority) rather than a fundamental shortcoming of either party. Cross-neurotype communication can similarly be theorised as a language barrier using Milton's 'Double Empathy Problem'.[95] Milton's notion highlights a bias towards assuming that when a breakdown in communication occurs the fault must necessarily lie with the autistic interlocuter rather than the inherent insufficiency of language.[96] Milton's work asserts that an understanding of different neurotypes' outlook is a prerequisite to successful interactions. Empathy begins with openness to being educated about the differences that autism presents and a recognition that it is not the autistic

[93] Davis, 1995: p. xiv.
[94] As is discussed in more detail under the subheading "From Queer to Crip to Neuroqueer".
[95] Milton, 2012.
[96] It also toys with the idea that autistic populations are proposed to lack empathising skills in some reductive research such as Song, Y. et al., 2019. Empathy impairment in individuals with autism spectrum conditions from a multidimensional perspective: A meta-analysis. *Frontiers in Psychology,* p. 1902.

person's responsibility to translate that difference into something understood by the majority.

Ten years on from the publication of the original 'Double Empathy Problem' a series of seminars was held to recognise the progress made and the work still to be done where members of autistic communities and researchers met to discuss the landscape of current autism research.

Milton and colleagues state that to actively move closer to research which meets the needs of autistic populations 'an alternative account of autistic development is needed that is not rooted in notions of a social communication disorder, but of a different embodied way of being that can lead to effects on social interactions and understanding.'[97] There was a united objective to encourage public and professional spheres to hold space for neurodiversity and the value of autistic subjectivity. They saw this as being instrumental in moving beyond diagnostic tick boxes towards greater fluidity in conceptions of autism. This thesis sees playful approaches to language and linguistic construction as an invaluable and underappreciated instance of autism's distinct culture.

Autism beyond models of disability

The majority of models struggle to account for all types of disability whilst remaining specific enough to add value to conversations. This puts pressure on our existing relationship with models to move towards an interdisciplinary field that advocates for difference and diversity. Autism advocacy has similarly put consistent pressure on disability models, highlighting their insufficiency and challenging them to become more widely applicable.

[97] Milton, D., Gurbuz, E. & López, B., 2022. The 'double empathy problem': Ten years on. *Autism,* 26(8), p. 1902.

There have been attempts at an autistic-specific model (for example Anderson-Chivarria's 'Predicament Model')[98] and more generally applicable models (consider Kafer's Political/Relational model[99] for example), all of which have their merits and scaffold important discussions in disability advocacy. Ultimately, it is clear the obstacle is not a lack of models but our relationship with these models.

Both Critical Autism Studies and Neurodiversity Studies critique historical and cultural legacies which create standards of 'normal' as a strawman against which disability and difference are marked as deviant. Whilst the social model effected a significant and timely shift in how disability is accounted for by society, it rests ultimately on a binary of dis/ability. This dichotomy between disablement/impairment has been criticised as overly materialist or essentialist[100] and also struggles to adequately account for cognitive/developmental disabilities or the sensory profiles of neurodivergent populations. Whilst many scholars find the social model to be a useful shorthand for describing the social injustice surrounding disability, the social model was never intended as a permanent fixture in disability theory

[98] Anderson-Chavarria, M., 2021. The autism predicament: models of autism and their impact on autistic identity. *Disability & Society,* pp. 1-21: The Predicament Model holds space for 'the extensive variability of autistic experiences – both the variability of how autism is experienced by an individual depending on the social context and their surroundings and the variability of experiences between autistic individuals in the same social context and surroundings.' (p. 15) The predicament model's most significant intervention is that it seeks to make redundant the spectrum metaphor which Anderson-Chivarria sees as oversimplifying functionality without taking into consideration context or individuality.

[99] Kafer, A., 2013. *Feminist, Queer, Crip.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press: Kafer's political/relational model encourages interaction and overlapping of schools of thought. The model 'sees disability as a site of questions rather than firm definitions: Can it encompass all kinds of impairments – cognitive, psychiatric, sensory and physical?' Leading with curiosity, Kafer laments the way in which '[disability']s position as a category to be contested and debated goes unacknowledged' as if it exists 'beyond the realm of debate or dissent.' (2013, p. 3). Kafer's approach does not discard any approach (be they medical or social) but assesses the ideological biases and heteronormativity they imply. This creates a structure whereby disability models are led their cultural and political contingency. Kafer's model is (perhaps ironically) less a model itself but a relationship with and between multiple models intricately informed thinking from other schools of thought such as feminist and queer studies.

[100] Vehmas, S. & Watson, N., 2014. Moral wrongs, disadvantages, and disability: a critique of critical disability studies. *Disability & Society,* 29(4), pp. 638-650.

but as an essential tool.[101]

Autism has the potential to invigorate how neurodivergence is discussed in Disability Studies by situating it as a shifting node within a network of disability models and theory. This project engages with multiple models in a transitory and dynamic fashion that aims to match the pace and tone of autism studies. Silverman argues that '[t]he most successful studies are those that refuse to situate their claims firmly with one model or the other, but instead pay attention to the strategic uses of different models by various interested groups',[102] a position this thesis upholds by engaging with each one as far as they may be useful whilst rejecting exclusivity through an interdisciplinary approach. This thesis presents the possibility of using each model for as long as is useful, but not restricting our notions of what autism is or can be, should the ideas contradict or fall beyond the scope of one model in particular. Autism is dynamic, fluid, elastic. Autism is a state of becoming, very much unfinished and in the present tense. Autism transforms but is itself transformative leading us to question why we uphold arbitrary standards when it is liberating and joyous to exist outside of these.

From Queer to Crip to Neuroqueer

The ongoing conversation around autism's relationship with disability is indicative of the way that neurodivergence invokes a splintering of the existing models. Within the last five years there has been a proliferation of the use of Neuroqueer as a productive way of

[101] The social model's original proponent Mike Oliver is keen to assert that the model arose out of cultural necessity and he did not see it being universal or timeless. He sees the model as an intermediary 'tool to improve people's lives' (2013: p. 1025) rather than a fact of disability and is happy to move beyond this way of thinking. (Oliver, M., 2013. The Social Model of Disability: Thirty Years on. *Disability & Society,* 28(7), p. 1025.)
[102] Silverman, C., 2008. Fieldwork on Another Planet: Social Science Perspectives on the Autism Spectrum. *BioSocieties ,* Issue 3, p. 336.

imagining this fluidity and working with 'productive tension'.[103] As autism is frequently theorised in terms of disability, Crip Theory might ostensibly appear to be the logical intersection of neurodivergence and queerness, especially given its focus on equality and emancipation beyond normalising agendas. To queer autism is an act of resistance but at the same time doesn't move autism away from disability informed perspectives entirely. Queering autism instead places the focus on a different aspect of autism's cultural multiplicity to redirect conversations to possibility and potential.

By understanding the many ways in which Crip and Queer ideologies coincide and the points at which they diverge Queer's particular applicability to autism becomes clear. 'Crip' stands in solidarity with 'Queer' in reclaiming the autonomy to construct and/or dismantle identity when this has otherwise been dictated by majority (able-bodyminded,[104] white, cis-gendered, neurotypical) populations. Both terms are a powerful reclamation of historically pejorative terminology, intentionally shocking in their usage the terms draw attention to their 'radical edge':[105] 'to say "Yeah, you're right. I'm queer, I'm a crip. So what?" undercuts the power of those who want us dead.'[106] Crip Theory, as outlined in the work of McRuer,[107] describes disability as a cultural group by challenging the intrinsic link between constructed heteronormativity and ableist expectations.[108] For Schalk, Crip refers to more than just an identity status to a 'culture arising from such communities'.[109] She sees a sense of solidarity in its readiness to include minority groups whilst not being exclusive to these smaller populations.

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[103] O'Dell et al. 2016: p. 171.
[104] I use bodymind as per Price's (2011) coining of the term.
[105] Sandahl, C., 2003. Queering the crip or cripping the queer?: Intersections of queer and crip identities in solo autobiographical performance. *Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies,* 9(1), p. 53.
[106] Clare, E., 1999. *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness and Liberation.* Boston: South End Press, p. 109.
[107] McRuer, R., 2006. *Crip theory: Cultural signs of queerness and disability.* Manhattan: New York University
[108] Goodley, D., 2014. *Dis/ability Studies: Theorising Disablism and Ableism.* London: Routledge.
[109] Schalk, S., 2013. Coming to claim crip: Disidentification with/in disability studies. *Disability Studies Quarterly,* 27(33), para. 16, ln. 2.

Crip uses an intersectional approach to validate and value the presence of disability. 'In recognizing identities and bodies as fluid, crip theorists take up feminist disability scholars' call to attend to intersectionality'.[110] Crip transforms into a verb as a mode of resistance against 'the arbitrary delineation between normal and defective and the negative social ramifications of attempts to homogenize humanity'.[111] In this way, Crip Theory toys with ideas of identity in a way that distinguishes it from more general disability studies and presents a strong link to activism. Crip uses uncertainty as a generative force which 'sees disability as a site of questions rather than firm definitions.'[112] The equivalent could be said of queer and as demonstrated by Clare's usage quoted above, the two often co-occur. Queer and Crip are intricately intertwined, leaking into each other in some ways but remaining distinct in others – far from synonymous, there is still a 'productive reciprocity'[113] between fields.

United on many fronts, to identify the points where Crip and Queer intersect, overlap and diverge can be challenging. Both fields have become highly interdisciplinary, carrying a meaning which extends further than their respective origins in LGBTQIA+ or Disability Studies. Crip and Queer communities share a history of being pathologised, oppressed and marginalised. Both have created their own vibrant cultures in resistance to the historic and ongoing violence they face. Sandhal sees the most salient intersection being their commitment to challenging the ubiquity of 'normality':[114] whilst Crip and Queer's forebearers promoted that all sexualities, genders and bodyminds were 'normal', Crip and Queer studies questioned the value of adhering to a standardised 'normal' at all. Crip and

[110] Egner, J. E., 2019. "The Disability Rights Community was never mine": Neuroqueer Disidentification. *Gender and Society,* 33(1), p. 130.
[111] Sandahl, 2003: p. 37.
[112] Sandahl, 2003: p. 11.
[113] Sandahl, 2003: p. 25.
[114] Sandahl, 2003.

Queer seek to thoroughly dismantle discriminatory social structures, critiquing hierarchical thinking in any form which is of particular merit in discussions of neurodiversity since diversity in the fullest sense of the word evades hierarchy completely.

This said, criticism of Crip Theory notes that it seems to be dominated by discussions of physical disability.[115] Kafer requests that discussions feature more 'references to bodies with references to minds and pair[ing] "compulsory able-bodiedness" with "compulsory able-mindedness"'.[116] The term Neuroqueer[117] satisfies a timely requirement for an expression which not only matched autism's fluidity, but also places neurodivergence firmly at the centre of conversations rather than on the peripheries as an afterthought or anomaly. Walker outlines neuroqueer as 'the practice of queering (subverting, defying, disrupting, liberating oneself from) neuronormativity and heteronormativity simultaneously.'[118] The term recognises how the impact of normative expectations on neurodivergence, gender, sexuality (and identity more widely) are all intricately interlocked.

To align autism with queerness demonstrates how autistic identity extends and exceeds conceptions of disability whilst also recognising the many ways that autistic people are still disabled and oppressed. This is not to deny autism's status as a disability, but for many, queerness celebrates the joy of unknowing and shifting identities beyond medicalisation.

[115] Exceptions to this, where cognitive disabilities and neurodivergence feature are (Falek, J., 2016. Review of Monje, Defiant. *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies,* 5(3), pp. 142-147; Kafer, A., 2016. At the same time, out of time: Ashley X. In: *The disability studies reader.* New York : Routledge, pp. 282-304; McWade, B., Milton, D. & Beresford, P., 2015. Mad Studies and Neurodiversity: A Dialogue. *Disability & Society,* 30(2), pp. 305-309; Richter, Z. A., 2017. Melting down the family unit: A neuroqueer critique of table-readiness. *Disabling Domesticity,* pp. 335-348.

[116] Kafer, 2013: p.16.

[117] There is conflicting information about who coined the term as Nick Walker, Michael Scott Monje Jr., Elizabeth J. (Ibby) Grace and Remi Yergeau were all toying with the concept around the same time and it is unclear whose use was first.

[118] Walker, 2021. She discusses how stating a complete definition of neuroqueer is 'inherently doomed and ridiculous, simply because the sort of people who identify as neuroqueer and engage in neuroqueering tend to be the sort of people who delight in subverting definitions, concepts, and authority.'

Stretching far beyond ideas of sexuality and gender, queerness recognises the way in which heteronormativity and cisnormativity perpetuate ideas of able-bodyminded norms. Autism's ineffability leans into Queer Theory by moving beyond logic that relies on history or tradition to invoke 'naturalness' (i.e. 'this is how it has always been done') towards 'fluidity, uber-inclusivity, indeterminacy, indefinability, unknowability'.[119] Queer theory honours autism (and difference in general) in its everydayness whilst simultaneously celebrating it for presenting the possibility of being and perceiving otherwise. It is precisely due to the fact that queer is 'transitive – multiply transitive'[120] that its application reaches so far beyond itself and makes it particularly applicable to autism and neurodiversity.

As a constantly shifting idea, precise definition of Neuroqueer's essence is elusive, but its emancipatory effects are widespread. According to Potess, the term neuroqueer 'is alive, meaning it is growing and spreading and being transformed by those who choose to nurture it.'[121] Rather than operating as yet another identity category, Neuroqueer demonstrates a rejection of identity categories altogether, with joy to be found in the liminality between identities. Egner uses virtual ethnography[122] to compile and investigate the contents of multiple blogs' discussions of the facets of Neuroqueerness in practice. Egner begins by stating how Neuroqueer 'opens up identity by recognizing the malleability and fluidity of the experiences associated with various social locations and the meanings of those experiences.'[123]

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[119] Giffney, N. & Hird, M., 2008. Introduction - Queering the Non/Human. In: *Queering the Non/Human.* Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Limited, p. 4.
[120] Sedgwick, E., 1993. *Tendencies.* Durham: Duke University Press, p. xii.
[121] Potess, D., 2019. *NeuroClastic - An Introduction to NeuroQueer Theory.* [Online] Available at: https://neuroclastic.com/an-introduction-to-neuroqueer-theory/ , para. 5, ln. 3 [Accessed 18 August 2021].
[122] Egner, 2019: their virtual ethnographic project involved data scraping from a series of active blogs which were focused on Neuroqueerness. This methodology draws on a lot of the conventional tools of an ethnographic project but recognises the particular way an online presence may be more accessible to disabled populations or those who have historically been silenced.
[123] Egner 2019: p. 135.

Nick Walker's *Neuroqueer Heresies*[124] sees fundamental inclusiveness as Neuroqueer Theory's central tenet:

> Neuroqueer transcends essentialist identity politics not only by treating identity as fluid and customizable, but also by being radically inclusive. Neuroqueering is something *anyone* can potentially do, and there are infinite possible ways to do it and infinite possible ways to be transformed by it. The term *neuroqueer* points to a horizon of creative possibility with which anyone can choose to engage.[125]

Drawing from Walker's discussion we can see that neuroqueer is 'first and foremost a verb'[126] but also a transformative tool, a shifting identity and a fluid process all at once. *Neuroqueer Heresies* effervesces with lexis of 'potential', 'possibility' and 'beautiful weirdness'.[127] Its magic comes from its mobility: it incites change but is actively changed in itself by doing so. Neuroqueerness was an integral framework for Remi Yergeau to consider the intense innovation that is presented by autistic communication.[128]

Literary aesthet(h)ics: Autism as rhetoric[129]

Autism is continually narrativised in multiple directions – be that medical, political or

[124] Walker, 2021.
[125] Walker, 2021: p. 169.
[126] Walker, 2021: p. 167.
[127] Walker, 2021: p. 184.
[128] I am keen to note that when referencing 'autistic communication' I am not suggesting one type of communication style but infinite possibilities which are united is using unreserved creativity as a starting point.
[129] I am aware that definitions of 'rhetoric' differ in the UK and US, the former being more closely related with oratory techniques used for persuasion. For clarity, the definition of 'rhetoric' that I will use from this point onwards is more typical of how it is taught in the US: 'rhetoric is the process of using language to organize experience and communicate it to others. It is also the study of how people use language to organize and communicate experience. The word denotes, as I use it, both a distinctive human activity and the "science" concerned with understanding that activity. All human beings are "rhetors" because they naturally conceive as well as share their knowledge of the world by means of discourse.' (Knoblauch, C. H., 1985. Modern rhetorical theory and its future directions. In: B. W. M. &. T. R. Donvan, ed. *Perspectives on research and scholarship in composition.* New York: Modern Language Association , p. 29.)

cultural. Without a biological marker for neurodivergence, those wishing to seek an autism diagnosis engage in a dialogue between (third-party) clinical expertise and (their own) lived experience. James McGrath draws attention to the fact that 'the most scientific tool available to scientists for diagnosing autism is not a piece of laboratory technology: it is a book – and a contentious one at that.'[130] He is referencing the DSM-5 which is used by mental health professionals as the standard classification of so-called 'disorders'.[131] The DSM tells a specific story about autism that (despite there being infinite ways to understand it) exerts a narratological authority of 'deficit' and 'disorder'. As this thesis is invested in placing control of autistic lives in autistic hands, amongst the many different forms that advocacy takes, I make the argument for literature being a particularly influential force in ethically storying autism.

Russell et al. note that the prevalence of autism is less to do with the incidence of autism itself but evidence that 'the more often a diagnosis is applied, the more people rally around its banner and advocate for more diagnosis'.[132] We see this in practice as the correlation between the mainstream success of media such as the 1998 film *Rainman* and an increase in people seeking autism diagnoses in the early 2000s.[133] Mark Haddon's 2003 novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*[134] 'achieved the status of [a] sociological document'[135] for its commitment to the intricacies of an autistic outlook.[136] With rising rates

[130] McGrath, J., 2017. *Naming Adult Autism: Culture, Science, Identity.* London: Rowman and Littlefield International Ltd, p. 2.

[131] Rodas approaches the DSM playfully highlighting that if the manual were to apply its own (reductive) diagnostic criteria to itself it would in fact end up diagnosing itself due to its lists, focused interests and repetitive vocabulary. (Rodas, J. M., 2018. *Autistic Disturbances: Theorizing Autism Poetics from the DSM to Robinson Crusoe.* Michigan: University of Michigan Press.)

[132] Russell, G. et al., 2022. Time trends in autism diagnosis over 20 years: a UK population-based cohort study. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry,* 63(6), p. 681.

[133] The effect is of course loosely correlative rather than directly causal and is the intersection of multiple different factors as outlined in (Goodwin, 2023).

[134] Haddon, M., 2003. *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time.* London: Jonathan Cape.

[135] Murray, 2008: p 12.

[136] The novel has been thoroughly discussed within literary and disability studies (see Hacking, I., 2009. Autistic

of autism diagnoses in the early 2000s, autism became a commodity to be 'produced, exchanged, traded and consumed'.[137] Iconographs of autism set to profit from a voyeuristic attitude to difference[138] with most literature being written by non-autistic authors for non-autistic audiences. In such writing, autism was manipulated into a caricature that bifurcated entirely from autistic lived experience for the purposes of entertainment.

Early critical writing on autism's literary presence notes how the condition operated as a symbol or a plot device taking on a multitude of meanings beyond itself – 'a generic synonym for emotional isolation and conceptual solipsism'.[139] Mitchell and Snyder view these deployments of autism as 'a social erasure [which] has been performed even as a representational repertoire has evolved.'[140] In other words, all the while disability operates as a symbol for a message located elsewhere in the text, the social, political and embodied dimensions of disability itself are overlooked. The result is a flattened portrait of disabled and autistic communities which percolates down from the literary aesthetic to being accepted without criticism.

Pang expresses her frustration at living in a world that favours convention over diversity: 'an Aspie in a world of neurotypical half-meanings, ambiguous gestures and untranslatable implications […] is a hazardous existence'.[141] Autistic language[142] in all its form defies and

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Autobiography. *Autism and Talent,* 364(1522), p. 195; Berger, J., 2010. Alterity and autism: Mark Haddon's Curious Incident in the neurological spectrum.. In: *Autism and representation.* London: Routledge, pp. 279- 296; Ghosal, T., 2019. Shapes of Cognition in Typographical Fictions. *Studies in the Novel,* 51(2), pp. 276-296.

[137] Mallett, R. & Runswick-Cole, K., 2016. The commodification of autism: What's at stake?. In: *Re-Thinking Autism: Diagnosis, Identity and Equality.* London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, p. 110.

[138] Shaughnessy, N., 2013. Imagining otherwise: Autism, neuroaesthetics and contemporary performance. *Interdisciplinary science reviews,* 38(4), p. 323.

[139] Silverman, C., 2012. *Understnding Autism: Parents, Doctors, and the history of a disorder.* Oxfordshire: Princeton University press, p. 12).

[140] Mitchell, D. & Snyder, S., 2000. *Narrative prosthesis: Disabilities and the Dependency of Discourse.* Michigan: University of Michigan Press, p. 6.

[141] Pang, C., 2020. *Explaining Humans: What Science Can Teach Us about Life, Love and Relationships.* London : Viking - Penguin Random House UK, p. 206.

[142] I am keen to clarify that I refer to 'autistic language' in the singular (syntactically) not to suggest that there is

destabilises binary thinking to push us to consider how language is an intrinsically 'partial'[143] and flawed system of which autistic users take creative advantage. Rodas references the ways that language in general is inherently insufficient, as a series of signs and symbols it can only ever gesture towards what we truly want to express: 'language is difficult, contingent, and experimental; of course, there is only ever the illusion of clear unidimensional meaning. Language is always approximate, always loaded, always a little unpredictable'.[144] Ultimately, the expressions we use are not the most practical or informative, rather they are the ones socially accepted by the majority. Prendergast observes that this rhetoric failure does not lie with the autistic speaker but with society's inability to appropriately appreciate alternative modes of communicating.[145] From this perspective it would make as much sense to frame the breakdown in communication as a language barrier where no one party is specifically at fault.

Baggs notes how autistic language has been reductively categorised as 'mysterious and puzzling' in popular culture, when in fact Baggs' own work – a Youtube video, 'In My Language', showcasing a range of communication techniques and autistic pleasures which are then translated – demonstrates a plasticity in how meaning is constructed.[146] It is notable that much literary and figurative language, particularly metaphor, pivots around 'a conceptual movement from the known to the unknown'.[147] These literary devices purposefully obscure the most obvious meanings, yet if an autistic locutor speaks without

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one particular form that autistic communication takes. Instead, I use this to highlight autistic language's inherent openness, variability and endless possibility. To speak of 'autistic languages' in the plural seemed to suggest a finiteness as though discrete variations of autistic language could be counted, using 'autistic language' is a gesture towards its infiniteness.

[143] Yergeau, M., 2018. *Authoring Autism.* Durham: Duke University Press, p. 3.

[144] Rodas, 2018: p. xii.

[145] Prendergast, C., 2001. On the Rhetorics of Mental Disability. In: *Embodied Rhetorics: Disability in Language and Culture.* Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, pp. 45-60.

[146] Baggs, A., 2007. *In My Language.* [Online] Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JnylM1hI2jc [Accessed 20 December 2020].

[147] Dinishak, J., 2013. Mindblindness: A Troubling Metaphor. In: Herrera & Perry, eds. *Ethics and Neurodiversity.* Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, p. 68.

advancing a purposeful conversation it is seen as disordered. A double standard emerges where partial language is accepted if it otherwise meets social convention, but language that toys with the loophole created by indeterminacy and flexibility in another direction (eg. the metonymic association of echolalia) is wrong. Whilst many communicators will not question the socially accepted sign/signifier relationship, autistic users may investigate this arbitrariness in how meaning is constructed as a source of creativity. For example, Prahlad explores how 'D-o-g spells dog. But "dog" isn't a real dog. "Dog" is a word someone made up. So why can't "d-o-g" spell cat, if you want it to?'.[148] In this sense, autistic communication highlights how any language could be construed as disordered to an extent but 'to construct certain language and communication behaviours as merely signs of [autism] may obfuscate personal, contextual, experiential or social meanings for the phenomena in question, in favour of upholding a persisting medical analogy that appears logically contestable.'[149]

I see autistic literature as uniquely positioned to put pressure on this double standard of communication which on one hand praises some literature's obscurity as ergodic or experimental, but on the other hand dismisses autistic language as partial or incomprehensible. Key to this perspective is the way Yergeau inverts discussions of autism as apparently 'enigmatic'[150] to instead question how well we understand the boundaries of rhetoric and typical language use. They use queer thinking to play with autism as a productive and interactional site of rhetoric. Yergeau states 'rhetoricity itself should not remain contingent on a rhetor's intent, or, more pointedly, on the perceptions of a rhetor's

[148] Prahlad, A., 2017. *The Secret Life of a Black Aspie: A Memoir.* Alaska: University of Alaska Press, p. 63.
[149] Muskett, T., 2016. Examining Language and Communication in Autism Spectrum Disorder. In: S. Timimi, ed. *Re-Thinking Autism : Diagnosis, Identity and Equality.* Philadelphia : Jessica Kingsley Publishers, pp. 318.
[150] Frith, 1997: p. 73.

intent'.[151] In other words, the fact that language is open to misinterpretations and plurality of meanings, is a reflection on the incomplete nature of language rather than of the speaker or 'rhetor'. Within autistic communication, non-autistic interlocuters may wrongly overlay their perceived interpretation, obscuring either the intended meaning or the meaninglessness of the utterance.

Yergeau begins, per Dolmage's *Disability Rhetoric*,[152] examining the shifting power of communication and language to enable or disable at any given moment, to 'reconfigure bodies and language by obliterating their boundaries'.[153] This use of queerness is especially pertinent (in advocacy and in this thesis) as it rigorously questions why we see standardisation as preferable given the option of such rich diversity. The reclamation of disabled identity as enacted through crip and queer studies is woven through Yergeau's realigning of autism as rhetoric: 'if autism is an inventional stim point – then autistic embodied communication (whether sign or stim or tic) has the potential to reinvent what we think we know about rhetoricity'.[154] Yergeau enacts the resistive power of literature *by* neurominority groups *for* neurominority groups to move autism towards more complex, multidimensional portrayals.[155]

Autistic-produced literature places autistic voices in the public domain to reclaim control of how neurodivergence is refracted through society. The proliferation of autistic voices in literary domains has the potential to actively contribute to public appreciation of autistic

[151] Yergeau, 2018: p. 32.
[152] Dolmage, J., 2014. *Disability Rhetoric.* Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.
[153] Yergeau, 2018: p 84.
[154] Yergeau, 2018, p. 181.
[155] There are examples of texts by non-autistic authors which have been readily accepted as *for* autistic audiences though these are far less frequent – for example Sayaka Murata's 'Convenience Store Woman' as discussed by autistic author Naoise Dolan (Kelleher, P., 2021. *'Embracing queerness delayed my coming to terms with autism. We need more visibility,' says acclaimed author Naoise Dolan.* [Online] Available at: https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2021/03/04/naoise-dolan-exciting-times-paperback-edition-queer-autistic-brexit-ireland/ [Accessed 5 November 2021].

value. From this perspective, literature has the potential to be a diverse democratic network[156] where its serves as a 'participative platform for widening perspectives'.[157] Far from being a passive 'echo of societal and political changes'[158] neurodiversity in literature provides a template for radically inclusive futures. Research supports the multiple didactic or educational impacts of literature on public knowledge of autism (i.e. a tool for learning or a social simulation) but to consider this as autistic literature's main function overlooks the creativity of autistic authorship. Autistic populations remain disproportionately responsible for teaching the wider world about their cognition, which we see in the many works that take a neurotypical audience as the default to whom neurodivergence needs to be explained. To read autistic authors for the pleasure of enjoying their imaginative output is an act of resistance against the expectation to be educated. In line with this, this thesis takes autistic creativity as a fulcrum around which conversations of community, communication and kinship pivot.

Autistic Inflection

Autistic language toys[159] with and subverts semantic convention. This said, autistic language is not always laden with meaning: it can be incidental, irrelevant, involuntary. Led by the plurality and the heterogeneity inherent in autistic perspectives and using Yergeau's

[156] Limitations and pressures that influence this (such as from the publishing industry) will be discussed in chapter 2 and 3 as it relates to fiction and life-writing respectively.
[157] Layton-Matthews, S., 2023. The Politics of Fiction: The Signiicance of Fiction as a Medium to Advance Dialogue and Advocacy Around the Human Condition in Politically Challenging Times (EPUB version). In: *Integrated Approaches to Peace and Sustainability.* Singapore 189721: Springer Nature Singapore Pte Ltd, p. 266.
[158] Layton-Matthews, 2023: p. 261.
[159] My lexical choice of 'toying' is designed to demonstrate a playful, ludic attitude to language that may be lost by the majority of language users as they accept the standard communication systems. I use this term with a sensitive awareness of the infantilisation of autistic populations which I am not seeking to further entrench. I instead use this term to critically engage with the plasticity and openness to language we may possess as new language users.

discussion of autism as rhetoric as a springboard, I examine how autistic communication may queer preconceived ideas of acceptable language use. Combining Yergeau's use of 'neuroqueer' and Rodas' idea of autism as 'an aesthetic, a way of seeing and interpreting, a vantage, a mode, a set of expressive practices'[160] I use the term 'autistic inflection' throughout this project. My intention is to signify the plurality and the heterogeneity of autistic perspectives – something that Murray's concept of 'autistic presence'[161] gestures towards but that I hope to further stretch as it does not encompass my specific angle on how these outlooks may be communicated. My term 'autistic inflection' is used in acknowledgment of the idiosyncratic nature of any communication but draws particular attention to and respect for how autistic users may toy with the boundaries of more widely accepted linguistic patterns. Autistic language use is not entirely cleaved from the more widely accepted use, rather it demonstrates a different perspective and interpretation of linguistic conventions.

My choice of the term 'inflection' is intended to capture both definitions of the word, i.e., the literal grammatical sense when the form of a word is inflected in order for it to bear meaning (gender, plural, tense) whilst also signifying a bending or changing of shape in a more general sense. Autistic inflection is a playful attitude to language, a stretching of boundaries, and in many cases actually infusing language with creatively new interpretations. Rather than concealing the forged relationship between signifier and signified (i.e. /ˈflaʊ.ə/ as a signifier of the mental image of a flower) autistic inflection productively takes advantage of this arbitrary relation.[162]

[160] Rodas, 2018: p. 29.
[161] Murray, 2008.
[162] In the preface to Rodas' (2018) text, Yergeau states "Is it ever truly possible to say entirely what we mean or to mean entirely what we say? Does language, used by anyone in any form, exist as a fully intentional medium, transparently communicative, a direct expressive conduit of some true inner self.' (p. xi).

In Chapter 1, *Unknowing neurodivergent narratives – ambiguity and 'autistic inflection' in contemporary fiction*, I use my notion of 'autistic inflection' to engage with Amy Arnold's 2018 novel *Slip of a Fish.*[163] By reading *Slip of a Fish* alongside concepts of neurodiversity and autistic inflections we may view Ash's narrative style as creative and uniquely connected to her world. I combine this with ecofeminist approaches to highlight the ways in which the natural environment is animated beyond being simply a backdrop for the narrative to act as a narrative anchor or agent. *Slip of a Fish'*s unique success is not derived from its 'accurate' representation of an autistic perspective but comes from the multimodality of interpretations which contributes to representing autism's liminal position between disability and creativity.

Voluntary Visibility

Mason's wishful thinking that '[i]n an ideal world, we wouldn't even need a name for [autism]; neurodiversity would simply be accepted and celebrated.'[164] is not without its difficulties to enact in reality. In Chapter 2, *Environ(mental) health – Using autistic life writing to reconfigure community, communication and care,* I analyse how Katherine May's 2020 memoir *Wintering*[165] toys with the possibility of how we may understand and appreciate autism when it is not outrightly labelled as such. *Wintering* is uniquely informed by May's lived autistic experience – it is a memoir depicting her struggles with her mental health and sense of disconnection from her community. Despite this, the narrative keeps discussion of autism virtually absent. In other words, the *absence* of autism in *Wintering*

[163] Arnold, A., 2018. *Slip of a Fish.* Sheffield: And Other Stories.
[164] Mason, V., 2014. Chapter one. In: E. Hurley, ed. *Ultraviolet Voices: Stories of Women on the Autism Spectrum.* Birmingham: Autism West Midlands, p. 21.
[165] May, K., 2020. *Wintering: The power of rest and retreat in difficult times.* London: Rider.

guides readers to see autism through a lens that provides access to an enhanced reading of the text. This *sense* of autism becomes a powerful form of presence *through* absence, knowing through *unknowing,* demonstrating the possibility of unconditional acceptance beyond needed to explicitly label difference and disability.

I frame this as 'voluntary visibility' (my term inspired by Foucault's notion of 'compulsory visibility' where dismantling consent around notions of visibility and privacy becomes a means of exerting power and discipline)[166] to highlight how refusing to be immediately available or performatively transparent is a form of resistance. My term honours how many autistic communities feel caught in a trap of being socially conditioned to mask but then being refused accommodations because they 'do not look autistic enough'. Voluntary visibility becomes a source of empowerment as it places control back within autistic communities when it has for too long been a pressure exerted from non-autistic outsiders.

Chapter two combines feminist scholars' outlooks on care[167] with environmental outlooks on community.[168] The intersection of these schools of thought acts as a springboard this chapter uses to explore how neurodiversity can enrich a reading of May's text that otherwise obscures autism as the mainstream may know it.

Neuroqueer Kinships

Chapter 3, *Autism against anthropocentrism: Environmental entanglement as Neuroqueer*

[166] Foucault, M., 1979. *Discipline and Punish.* Paris: Gallimard

[167] Kittay, E., 1998. Welfare, Dependency and A Public Ethic of Care. *Social Justice,* 1(71), pp. 123-145; Fisher, B. & Tronto, J., 1990. Toward a feminist theory of caring. In: E. K. Abel & M. K. Nelson, eds. *Circles of Care: Work and Identity in women's lives.* New York: State University of Nw York Press , pp. 35-62.

[168] Cella, M., 2013. The ecosomatic paradigm in literature: Merging disability studies and ecocriticism. *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment,* 20(3), pp. 574-596; Bellacasa, M. P. D. L., 2017. *Matters of care: Speculative ethics in more than human worlds.* Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.

Kinship in autistic life writing and fiction, takes the lead from Queer Inhumanism to explore the vastness of connection beyond solely human relationships. I examine Madeline Ryan's 2020 novel *A Room Called Earth*[169] and Dara McAnulty's 2020 life writing *Diary of a Young Naturalist*[170] to examine how autistic connection puts pressure on boundaries that otherwise seem ubiquitous: human/non-human, animate/inanimate, verbal/non-verbal.[171] Demonstrating the richness of seeing beyond binary thinking, I use Queer Inhumanism to build on ecological theories in previous chapters to structure a discussion of how Ryan and McAnulty present ideas of agency and kinship within the more-than-human-environment with which they are inextricably entangled: McAnulty is closely in tune with his more-than-human[172] natural surroundings and seeks companionship in animal and environment alike; meanwhile Ryan indiscriminately connects with everything from houseplants to celestial bodies.

Chapter three culminates in an exploration of how both authors manage to balance human relationships with these intense and vast inhuman connections. By looking beyond hierarchy and human exceptionalism they create a space for diversity in its widest sense to flourish.

[169] Ryan, M., 2021. *A Room Called Earth.* London: Scribe Publications.

[170] McAnulty, D., 2020. *Diary of a Young Naturalist.* London: Ebury Press.

[171] Terms which are far from neutral and the problematic nature of each is explored in more depth.

[172] I credit usage of this terminology to ecologist and philosopher David Abram (1996) in his environmental text *The Spell of the Sensuous – Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World*: New York. Vintage.

CHAPTER 1

Unknowing neurodivergent narratives – ambiguity and 'autistic inflection' in contemporary fiction

Amy Arnold's 2018 novel, *Slip of a Fish,* gained attention at a literature festival in 2019 where the author appeared on a panel discussing autistic voices and the power of neurodiversity in literature.[173] Identifying as neurodivergent herself, Arnold discussed how her writing is a mixture of personal experience embedded within fictional characters. As is the case with many authors, Arnold spoke about finding power in giving her own differences and divergences a fictional environment in which to play out. As she was aware of the presence of 'autism literature' as a genre unto itself,[174] Arnold mentioned she had purposefully avoided labelling any divergent outlooks as autism specifically, preventing readers from approaching it with pre/misconceptions.

The text presents a non-chronological, fragmented narration of a woman, Ash, and her attempts to cope in a society that is hostile to her unique outlook. It quickly becomes clear that the narration takes place in the fallout of some unnamed incident, assumed to be an instance of child abuse committed by Ash, causing her relationship with her daughter, Charlie, to become strained. Arnold writes in a creative idiolect that forces readers to accept they cannot indisputably interpret the character's trajectory – a potentially uncomfortable position to occupy. Arnold's commitment to ambiguity centralises the narration's idiosyncrasy: the text, although influenced by an autistic outlook,

[173] The festival took place at the University of Bradford in 2019 and the panel also featured poet and comedian, Kate Fox, and autism advocate James Sinclair.

[174] For clarity, I define autism literature as the presence of autistic characters irrespective of authorship or commitment to the ethics surrounding their portrayals whereas *autistic* literature would most frequently be autistic authors writing for autistic audiences. As per footnotes 150 and 171, this is far from a simple delineation.

is not attempting to portray an autistic experience as such. In a market saturated with autistic characters who are sentimentalised and commodified literary devices, Arnold intricately depicts a woman's internal life and her neurodivergent outlook.

The text seems to be indicative of an exciting milestone for autism in fiction*: Slip of a Fish* embodies and leans into autism's slipperiness, toying with the shape of uncertainty and unknowing in narrative form. Arnold creates space to reconsider how arbitrarily meaning is constructed and guides readers to appreciate the potential of fostering flexible perspectives towards language. The protagonist, Ash, disrupts expectations along multiple threads of identity, including sexuality and gender, even going so far as to create a sense of porosity between human and other beings. This gives her interactions with those who surround her the sense of being a critical commentary on dominant social narratives which dictate normative familial roles. By deflecting any attempt to pin down the boundaries of how exactly autism may be defined, autism's vast potential is brought to the fore.

It is essential to understand the recent history and current position of autism in fiction to fully appreciate the significance of *Slip of a Fish*. I will firstly explore early critical writing on autism in fiction (such as Osteen[175] and Murray)[176] and invigorate these conversations with more recent scholars such as Rodas[177] and Bérubé[178] (among others) to highlight the exciting intervention that Arnold's writing presents. I argue that *Slip of a Fish* picks up the 'loose threads of autism poetics hanging everywhere'[179] and embeds them within a richly neurodivergent network made up of environmental, feminist and queer themes (the surrounding context of which will be more thoroughly discussed in subsequent paragraphs).

[175] Osteen, 2008.
[176] Murray, 2008.
[177] Rodas, 2018.
[178] Bérubé, M., 2016. *The Secret Life of Stories.* Manhattan: New York University Press.
[179] Rodas, 2018: p. 192.

My own close textual analysis takes the lead from themes set up by Arnold and evaluates the generative impact of considering 'autistic inflection' through an environmental lens. The culmination of this chapter is a series of close readings that put pressure not only on ideas of creativity and disorder but accepted binaries much more widely.

More than a 'recongizable shorthand'? – autism's role beyond the symbolic

Autistic characters in fiction[180] are not a recent phenomenon,[181] but it was Mark Haddon's 2003 novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* that received particular acclaim for its engagement with the autistic narrator's thinking. While the novel sparked a near exponential surge of autistic characters in fiction – to the extent that it is widely considered a genre of its own – the portrayals had varying degrees of commitment to exploring the depth and complexity of autistic perspectives.[182] The 'autism literature' genre is marked by a slippage whereby on one hand autism takes on multiple meanings beyond itself, but on the other is distilled down to a composite of autism stereotypes.

Autism and autistic characters often function as narrative devices within fiction, a 'narrative prosthesis' standing as a shorthand for meanings outside of itself.[183] For example, in Keith Stuart's *A Boy Made of Blocks,*[184] autism is the fulcrum around which turn questions of the nuclear family, the role of the father and ultimately divorce. The novel's premise is a father coming to understand his son through the game Minecraft, yet autism is actually side-lined

[180] I am choosing to address just those who have been explicitly stated as being autistic (i.e. not those who may be autistic or have been posthumously hypothesized to be so).
[181] Philip K Dick's 1964 novel *Martian Time Slip* features one of the earliest intentionally autistic characters.
[182] This was and is, of course, not limited to literary fiction, but spans radio, television, and film extensively, equally significant to the trajectory of public consciousness of autism.
[183] Mitchell & Snyder, 2000.
[184] Stuart, K., 2016. *A Boy Made of Blocks.* St. Ives: Sphere.

in favour of discussion of these familial struggles. Just as Davidson maintains that the metaphoric treatments of disability in literature forces it into a marginalised position, in Stuart's novel it is as though autism 'asked to step offstage once the metaphoric exchange is made.'[185] Autism in this example acts to advance the plot and the moral trajectory of other characters but the development of the autistic character themselves is neglected.

In Murata's, *Convenience Store Woman*, the neurodivergence[186] of the protagonist, Keiko, is centralised, yet nonetheless acts as a prosthesis[187] for examining the social anxieties of achieving collectively recognised/acceptable success in life. The text inverts ideas of 'normal' by focusing on the narrator's perspective despite her happiness to exist on the peripheries of society. The subjectivity of 'normal' is brought to the fore since Keiko's marginalised position permits her to disrupt social expectations with her own unconventional happiness, despite the ideas of enforced normalcy that surround her.

The above examples take advantage of autism's shifting nature to construct a universal symbol for aspects of non-autistic life that seem strange or uncomfortable. Both Osteen and Murray comment on the frequency with which autism becomes marketable and commodified, turning heterogenous experiences into 'one dimensional portraits of the autist'.[188] Autism taking the form of 'fluid signifier'[189] within literature undermines its plurality; autistic characters are forced to shuttle between outsider positions and more

[185] Davidson, M., 2008. *Concerto for the Left Hand.* Michigan: University of Michigan Press, p. 1.
[186] This is never explicitly stated in the novel to be autism specifically but is a widely accepted interpretation. There is a body of autistic readership who have come to claim the narrative as autistic (see Eloise, M., 2020. *This anti-capitalist novel explores what it means to be 'normal' in an abnormal world.* [Online] Available at: https://i-d.vice.com/en_uk/article/dyzn3y/earthlings-sayaka-murata-review-convenience-store-woman [Accessed 29 October 2021]; Blank, A., 2021. *'Convenience Store Woman' Review: A Neurodivergent Normal.* [Online] Available at: http://roarnews.co.uk/2021/convenience-store-woman-review-the-neurodiverse-normal/ [Accessed 29 October 2021]).
[187] Mitchell & Snyder, 2000.
[188] Osteen, 2008: p. 31.
[189] Loftis, S. F., 2015. *Imagining Autism: Fiction and Stereotypes on the spectrum.* Indiana: Indiana University Press, p. 16.

central roles in order to mobilise conversations on themes unrelated to autism and disability. The paucity of fully developed autistic characters outside of autistic writing means that if we were to repurpose the Bechdel test[190] for autistic characters in fiction, the majority of texts would fail.

Murray assesses how the 'recognizable shorthand'[191] often seen in fiction bifurcates dramatically from the intricate and diverse lived experience of autism, thereby 'blunting'[192] autistic difference in order to fit it into a commercial mould.[193] Commercial, profit driven pressure results in problematic and frequent incidence of '[r]emediation perform[ing] the climactic stabilizing function in many autistic narratives that maturity performs in the classic bildungsroman.'[194] In other words, a recovery or cure narrative is deployed rather than constructing a complex autistic character who is subject to a developmental trajectory. Not only does this do a disservice to the nature of autism but demonstrates the priority that public entertainment takes over autistic populations and their quality of life.

The result of this 'autistic bandwagonism'[195] is a body of texts that appears to explain autism to a non-autistic audience; autistic idiosyncrasies may be altered or removed to make the interaction readily recognisable for a commercial, mass market. Crucially, this elides the possibility of autistic readership as the texts appear to cater to the majority neurotype. Naoise Dolan, an autistic author, discusses in an interview on her critically

[190] To pass the Bechdel Test a film must: 1. Have at least two women in it; 2. The women must talk to each other; 3. Their discussion must be about something other than a man. I imagine we could replace 'women' with 'neurodivergent character' and 'man' with 'neurotypical character'. (Bechdel, A., 1986. *Dykes to Watch out For.* Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books.)
[191] Murray, 2008: p. 22.
[192] Murray, 2008: p. 22
[193] The fact that Garland Thomson's (1997) comment on how the lack of narratives that mitigate stereotypes of disability means 'the literary traffic in metaphors often misrepresents or flattens the experience real people have.' (p. 10) remains true indicates how urgent it is that we continue to critically assess narratives of disability, and autism specifically.
[194] Valente, J., 2018. All Better? Recovery Anxiety in the Writing of Autism. *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies,* 12(4), p. 478.
[195] Murray, 2008: p. 33.

acclaimed novel, *Exciting Times*,[196] how growing numbers of autistic authors feel 'enormous pressure on own-voices autistic portrayals to undo the damage caused by decades of harmful ones from non-autistics,' to the extent that she would be unwilling to write an explicitly autistic character.[197] Holly Smale, autistic author of *Geek Girl,*[198] disclosed a similar anxiety in a podcast with Sara Gibbs, author of *Drama Queen.*[199] The protagonist of the *Geek Girl* series was not originally intended as an autistic character but as a semi-autobiographical account. Having identified as autistic years after publication, Smale now recognises autistic tendencies in her character but would be reluctant to state this explicitly for the reasons mentioned above.

Literature's difficulty accounting for autism arises in part from the tension of existing under several competing sets of expectations (i.e. clinical diagnostic, neurodiversity advocacy, literary cultural). The intersection of these narratives can result in texts 'short-circuiting' as they attempt to depict the condition; texts may attempt to balance an ethical approach (i.e. being representative of an autistic experience) with one that is more aesthetically appropriate for readers (i.e. having accessible, readable narrative). Ato Quayson accounts for autism's complex relationship with representation through the notion of 'Aesthetic Nervousness'.[200] He states, 'the autist's silence generates a multiplicity of significations that cannot be encompassed solely within a reading of content or theme'.[201] Less robust accounts will default to stereotypical and reductive representations whilst more complex accounts are able to recognise that autistic silence may have many meanings or actually none at all.[202]

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[196] Dolan, N., 2020. *Exciting Times: A Novel.* London : Harper Collins.
[197] Kelleher, 2021.
[198] Smale, H., 2013. *Geek Girl.* London: HarperCollins UK.
[199] Gibbs, S., 2021. *Drama queen: One autistic woman and a life of unhelpful labels.* London: Hachette UK.
[200] Quayson, A., 2007. *Aesthetic nervousness: Disability and the crisis of representation.* s.l.:Columbia University Press.
[201] Quayson, 2007: p. 177.
[202] Heilker, P. & Yergeau, R., 2011. Autism and Rhetoric. *College English,* 73(5), pp. 485-497.

Unfortunately, innovative texts that are able to use ambiguity to hold these meanings in suspension are unlikely to reach a mainstream audience because of the challenge that ensues in reading them.

'Is it too much to ask for simple accuracy?' – the pressure of representation

As though anticipating the challenges autistic literature now faces, Osteen questioned in 2008 how much of autism in fiction is 'truly representative',[203] wondering if it is 'too much to ask for simple accuracy'".[204] Whilst the intention of Osteen's request was to push for more nuanced autistic characters, 'simple accuracy'[205] is a comment more on narrative's relationship with an idea of authenticity than representations of autism. Autistic literature may also struggle to satisfy the commercial pressure for narratives to be completely transparent and accessible for a mainstream audience, while honouring autistic individuality. A requirement which appears particularly contradictory considering the success of ergodic novels such as Mark Danielewski's *House of Leaves*[206] or Ali Smith's *There But For The.*[207] I would argue that this request for 'simple accuracy'[208] would not be made for literature in general and highlights how autistic literature is often considered separate to the main literary domain.

Bérubé proposes that a text need not feature an overtly disabled character to address and

[203] Osteen, 2008: p. 8.
[204] Osteen, 2008: p. 31.
[205] Osteen, 2008: p. 8.
[206] Danielewski, M., 2000. *House of Leaves.* New York: Pantheon.
[207] Smith, A., 2012. *There But For The.* London: Penguin Books .
[208] Osteen, 2008: p. 31.

explore disability.[209] Disability is widely accepted as extending beyond a purely personal, self-contained phenomenon to an intersection of physical/cognitive and social factors.[210] In the microcosm of literature, exploring disability 'can involve ideas about disability, and ideas about the stigma associated with disability, regardless of whether any specific character can be pegged with a specific diagnosis.'[211] To more ambiguously address disability, specifically autism, means that there is no risk that a reading of the text becomes an occasion to identify diagnostic criteria within a character. Rather, it permits readers to 'aim to work with the consequences of understanding autism on its own terms, including the possibility that this can, and does, lead to conclusions that are on subjects other than itself.'[212] It is important to clarify that this is distinct from the use of disability described by Mitchell and Snyder as a symbol to explore other social tensions:[213] Bérubé does not claim that disability stands in for such conversations in a metaphorical sense but asserts instead that novels may hold space for disability beyond a precise, representational portrait. Disability that is refracted through texts with greater complexity will necessarily exceed mimetic representation which puts further pressure on Osteen's request.

Osteen states that it is the 'tension between narrative order and narrative disruption' that creates the resistance where autism narratives are concerned.[214] To firmly refute this, I invoke Arnold's novel as a powerful opposition to this statement: autism is not resistant to narrative but is limited by mimetic representation in narrative. That is to say, how autism appears in fiction has perhaps less to say about autism itself and more about our expectations of narrative and fiction. *Slip of a Fish*'s unique success is not derived from its

[209] Bérubé, 2016.
[210] As per Oliver, M., 1986. Social policy and disability: Some theoretical issues. *Disability, Handicap & Society,* 1(1), pp. 5-17; Shakespeare, T., 2006. *Disability Rights and Wrongs.* London: Routledge; and McRuer, 2006; 2017.
[211] Bérubé, 2016: p.19.
[212] Murray, 2008: p. 12.
[213] Mitchell & Snyder, 2000.
[214] Osteen, 2008: p. 17.

accurate representation of an autistic perspective but comes from the multimodality of interpretations that contributes to representing autism's liminal position between disability and creativity. Autism is not represented per se but is refracted throughout the text in the way that the narrator (in reality, Arnold of course) toys with language to create autistic inflection. As Murray notes, 'autism is not endlessly self referential'[215] and it is this multiplicity that demonstrates how autism and our conversations around it are incredibly open ended, shaped endlessly by the texts that aim to discuss it.[216]

In 2008, Osteen wrote that he hopes 'someday an autistic person will write a novel that dramatizes autistic consciousness and self-formation from the other side of the mirror.'[217] Neurodivergent herself, Arnold's writing resists mimetic representation of an autistic experience in favour of a labyrinthine text that could be read as a refraction of autistic consciousness and perception. It is reminiscent of how Alex Sobel, writer for *Electric Lit*,[218] describes postmodern literature as the best representation of her autistic experience. Sobel finds she often feels 'made to time travel by force, to never focus on a single event without being buried by the ones that have happened.'[219] This statement could be lifted word for word and transposed as a reader response to *Slip of a Fish's* knotty chronology. Loftis argues that 'postmodernism has clear analogues with the public perceptions of autism [by] interrogating the boundaries of the human with cyborgs, moving art from fragmentation to pastiche, focusing on the beauty of recycling and repetition'.[220] Whilst I will not reductively categorise *Slip of a Fish* as a postmodern text, the fact that Arnold has so creatively

[215] Murray, 2008: p. 12.
[216] As per Hacking's (1995) 'Looping Effect'.
[217] Osteen, 2008: p. 37.
[218] An online journal featuring essays, criticism and literary news.
[219] Sobel, A., 2018. *Postmodern Literature Is the Best Expression of What It's Like to Be Autistic.* [Online] Available at: https://electricliterature.com/postmodern-literature-is-the-best-expression-of- what-its-like-to-be-autistic/ [Accessed 14 October 2021].
[220] Loftis, 205: p. 12.

crystalized autistic lived experience seems to answer Osteen's hopeful request, whilst simultaneously disproving his idea that autism 'is particularly resistant to narrative'.[221]

Autistic authors are held to a different set of standards which reflects attitudes towards autistic communication more widely than just in literature. Yergeau argues that this imbalance in expectations filters down from ideas of intentionality (or ableist notions of a lack thereof in autistic authorship).[222] Rodas is similarly keen to investigate the tension between that which may be classed as disordered and that which is lauded in literary circles for its creativity.[223] She builds on Yergeau's work to embed discussions of autistic expression into analyses of classic literary canons.[224] Her efforts highlight an 'obscured tradition of literary autism at the center of Anglo-American text culture.'[225] Rodas describes how non-autistic listeners are privileged in being the majority neurotype and so reflect any language failures back onto the autistic speaker. Communication challenges are in fact inherent of any social interaction, but this is exacerbated between different communication/cognitive styles.[226]

Based upon the foundation laid by Yergeau[227] along with a body of scholarship discussing disability and rhetoric,[228] this chapter leads critical dialogue towards considering autistic communication as a literary aesthetic of neurodivergence. I put pressure on the boundaries between what may be commercially considered creative and what is dismissed as

[221] Osteen, 2008, p.17
[222] Yergeau, 2018.
[223] Rodas, 2018.
[224] Yergeau's *Authoring Autism* arguably laid the groundwork for Rodas' (2018) *Autistic Disturbances* - it is no coincidence that Rodas sought Yergeau out to write the foreword for her text.
[225] Rodas, 2018: back cover.
[226] McGuire, A., 2016. *War on autism: on the cultural logic of normative violence.* Michigan : University of Michigan Press.
[227] Yergeau, 2018.
[228] See Prendergast, 2001; Price, M., 2011. *Mad at School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life.* Michigan : The University of Michigan Press; Kafer, 2013; Rodas, 2018.

disordered or 'inherently partial'.[229] By taking into account the plurality of language and communication it is possible to destabilise binary thinking on many fronts: ideas of neurotypicality/neurodivergence, verbal/nonverbal, human/nonhuman for example. I highlight the intersection between innovative expression and that which is (commercially and diagnostically) viewed as 'disordered', to demonstrate how autistic inflection enriches and expands ideas of creativity.

'Inherent leakiness' – Ecocriticism meets neuroqueer

Whereas Murray notes how texts such as Haddon's *Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* captured the zeitgeist of public fascination with autism,[230] *Slip of a Fish* challenges expectations both of neurodivergence and of narrative texts. The novel purposely omits details and encourages speculation rather than proposing to narrativise or capture an autistic experience. Throughout the course of the novel, the reader is witness to the intricacies of Ash's behaviour from an interior perspective, never quite sure where to draw the line between coping mechanisms and idiosyncratic behaviour. As will be explored, Ash collects words as though material objects, toying with their meaning to highlight language's polysemous, elastic potential – a powerful instance of autistic inflection.

Slip of a Fish's ingenuity hinges on language's role in constructing social reality and power hierarchies.[231] Arnold draws on this to emphasise how the reverse may also be possible: *de*constructing social structure to build it back up using neurodivergent led ideas of diversity and inclusion as a scaffold. Within discussion of disability, particularly of autism, socially acceptable language use is the basis upon which someone may be granted or denied

[229] Yergeau, 2018: p. 33.
[230] Murray, 2008.
[231] Fairclough, N., 1989. Critical Discourse analysis in Practice. *Language and Power,* pp. 91-116.

personhood. As DJ Saverese mentions: 'If personhood conceives of a person as a bound individual who has an interior invisible self which is the site of beliefs and intentions and emotional states, then it will also require a standardized language and mode of communication in order to confirm the existence of a self.'[232] Language quickly becomes a means of marginalising anything that falls outside of the boundaries of so called 'normal'.

Shildrick states the 'inherent leakiness of meaning in the logos is paralleled by a necessary uncertainty about bodies.'[233] In other words, notions of interdependence and connectedness are just as relevant to linguistic meaning making as to ideas of the body, and they are of course how we communicate these relationships.

Arnold's narrator, Ash, sets out a template for language's potential through her complex interior dialogue that frames her unique sensory experience of the world. Through Ash's narration, multiple components of autistic inflection are explored, extending beyond creativity to ideas of embodied communication and environmental entanglement. Readers witness this most clearly in Ash's relationships with the natural environment around her and the sense of comfort and companionship she finds in open water. My close textual discussions take as a starting point how the natural environment goes beyond being simply a backdrop for the narrative to act as a narrative anchor and site of interaction of special importance.

This unique connection can be more thoroughly understood in terms of Stacey Alaimo's notion of 'transcorporeality': being enmeshed in the natural surroundings to the extent that

[232] Savarese, D. J., 2023. Unearthing the concepts that bury us. In: *Disability in Dialogue.* Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company , p. 152.
[233] Shildrick, M., 2002. *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the vulnerable self.* London: Sage Publications, p. 84.

a blurring of the boundaries between human and more-than-human is enacted.[234] Any parallel drawn between autistic language users and the more-than-human must be sensitively employed with an acute awareness of the history autistic populations have with being dehumanised.[235] To blur the boundaries between human and more-than-human in this context is not to say autistic inflection is closer to the non-human, but to highlight how porous the terms human and embodiment are and that basing ideas of personhood on language usage are necessarily problematic.

This embeddedness represents a counter to posthuman images of autism existing beyond the human where there are comparisons with computers or robots (Haraway's cyborg is particularly salient in this respect).[236] Murray admits that such posthuman imagery is limited in its account of embodiment: 'For all that may be gained by a focus on lived experience as understood through the lens of systems or informational processes, how much might we lose if we take the body out of our thinking about autism?'[237] I therefore propose this relation to the environment not as a counter, per se, but to further enrich ideas of autism extending the boundaries of what we conceive to be 'human'.

Connectedness and interdependence can be seen widely in the world, however ableist standards appear to uphold notions of each person being a discrete, independently functioning entity. Recognising our interconnectedness and 'transcorporeality'[238] highlights the impossible standards of independence despite connection appearing as default elsewhere in our surrounding environment. Showcasing the environmental scope of *Slip of a*

[234] Alaimo, S., 2010. *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
[235] Botha, 2021.
[236] Haraway, D., 1985. A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1908s. *Feminism/Postmodernism,* pp. 190-233.
[237] Murray, S., 2013. Autism and the Posthuman. In: J. Davidson & M. Orsini, eds. *Worlds of Autism: Across the Spectrum of Neurological Difference.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, p. 66.
[238] Alaimo, 2010.

Fish's autistic inflection, we may be able to deconstruct the hierarchy that privileges conventions of language use at the expense of diversity and creativity. When language is proven to be inherently impoverished in encompassing such visceral environmental entanglement, Ash's idiosyncrasies can no longer be thought of as confusing or 'disordered' but an appreciation of joy that exceeds verbal expression. Autistic perceptions allude to the alternative ways of being in the world; disregarding discrete categorisation such as ab/normal or non/human becomes a gesture at the possibilities of diversity outside of human focused, anthropocentric notion. Relating to the world in an idiosyncratic way such as Arnold's protagonist, Ash, works to 'unsettle the ideology of human exceptionalism, by describing their narrators' cognitive embodiment as autistic individuals.'[239] Examining autistic perspectives in this way enriches considerations of how we interact with and inhabit the environments, allowing us to question why we uphold social constructs that actively enable boundaries rather than encourage fluidity.

Autistic inflection in *Slip of a Fish*

Arnold's narrative style takes advantage of the fact that language is inherently incomplete and polysemous, something that autistic users toy with creatively. In *Slip of a Fish* the idiosyncratic approach to language and complex interconnectedness of the novel give the narrative a sense of strangeness and can be difficult to follow at times. We might account for this feeling via Alaimo as she states: 'transcorporeality entails a rather disconcerting sense of being immersed within the incalculable, interconnected material agencies that

[239] Stenning, A., 2019. Autism and cognitive embodiment: steps towards a non-ableist walking literature. In: D. Borthwck, P. Marland & A. Stenning, eds. *Walking, Landscape and Environment.* London: Routledge, p. 1.

erode even our most sophisticated modes of understanding.'[240] To 'erode' ideas of language as a complete, perfectible system for conveying meaning can be at times uncomfortable and challenging to read but gestures towards a greater potential of creativity and appreciation of autistic inflection.

Arnold creates dissonance and confusion through a contradiction between the perceived linearity of events and the tenses used to depict these. Ash's perception of the world as complex and intertwined: events from her childhood resurge in her relationship with her own daughter; conversations from earlier in the day or week make appearances as she sees fit; and conversations flow through games of semantic relation. Whilst initially confusing and difficult to follow, the more the reader attunes to Ash's specific way of viewing the world, these events become linked in a very unusual but ultimately logical manner. The erratic use of tense throughout the novel, be that through frequent flashbacks or subtle changing from past to present mid paragraph, give a sense of dissociation and lack of grip on reality. The act of reading effects a state of confusion on the reader, parallel to the one that Ash experiences in her attempts to navigate a society that sees things differently to her.

The meandering timeline is mirrored by Arnold's commitment to highlight the inherently multiple nature of language. Readers would struggle to settle on a static interpretation of events, just as Ash is a complex character whose motivations are never fully disclosed. The below passage takes place immediately after Ash has perceived a dog to be maltreated by its owner and so takes it upon herself to untie his lead: a morally ambiguous action. The moral grey area that this action sits in alludes to the uncertainty surrounding the supposed instance of child abuse committed by Ash against her own daughter. The reader can only

[240] Alaimo, 2010, p. 17.

ever work to understand a fraction of the narrator's logic.

> And he lets the handbrake off.
>
> 'Let's go,' he says. 'Tilstoke bound.'
>
> And it's nice to think of homonyms again, to think of leaping strides
>
> …
>
> He looks at his watch and holds it up to the windscreen so Charlie can see it, but Charlie doesn't understand. She doesn't care about time. She's talking to the dog, saying something to him , and Abbott says he hasn't got all day. But it doesn't matter what he hasn't got because Charlie's coming now, walking back to the car with the dog beside her. She's walking with the dog beside her and when she gets back in the car the dog follows. He hops inside and she shuts the door.
>
> 'Ash,' Abbott says.
>
> And what am I supposed to do?
>
> 'Ash,' he says. And the dog is there on the backseat with Charlie
>
> …
>
> And Abbott says OK. He says 'OK,' and he straightens his driving glasses and puts his car into gear. The dog gave himself to Charlie, just like that. He lay across the back seat with his head on her knee and he was sold on her, made up. Nelson, that's his name.[241]

Within the above excerpt, there are multiple instances of characters using idiolectic language systems, within which the meanings are implicit or otherwise not understood by

[241] Arnold, 2018: pp. 71-72.

their intended recipient. For example, Abbott is gesturing through the window to Charlie, but she is unable to understand what he means. Charlie is then talking to the dog, Nelson, but his interpretation is obviously not on a semantic level. Finally, Ash interprets 'Tilstoke bound'[242] as the verb form (i.e. 'bound' as a synonym for 'leaping strides'), but fails to grasp the cryptic meaning inferred by Abbott's use of 'Ash' where his specific meaning is entirely implied. It is as much of an effort to infer the elided meaning behind Abbott's use of 'Ash' (i.e. 'Aren't you going to say anything, Ash' or words to that effect) as to understand the metonymic and associative relations behind Ash's language use, yet Abbott's elision is far more common in conversational language use. The misfiring of conversational strands in the above passage demonstrates the intricate and symbiotic relationship of communication of any sort that means it would be difficult to blame a particular party for a failure of interpretation.

The entirety of the passage depicting the incident with the dog (from which the above section appears) is in the present tense, which does not initially seem strange or remarkable since it is at the beginning of a new chapter. However, halfway through the chapter, Ash states: 'This morning, I went into her room and asked her if she wanted a game of Bird Bingo'[243] which creates disjuncture since the deictic marker 'this morning' signifies that time has moved on (it cannot be the morning prior to the dog theft since Nelson is also depicted in the scene) but this is in conflict with it being in the past tense. The reader may at this point question if the entire preceding passage had actually been a resurgent memory rather than true events. Since this was not apparent at the time of reading, it acts as an extended garden path: the reader is forced to either go back and reread the passage equipped with this new knowledge to make sense of it or else just accept the sense of strangeness.

[242] Arnold, 2018: p. 71.
[243] Arnold, 2018: p. 73.

Caracciolo credits such paralinguistic features with being able to 'challenge reader's assumptions about the temporal continuity of consciousness'[244] and indeed in the case of Ash we see that her present state is a complex mixture of events that have come before and current experiences.

To approach the narrative with the notion of autistic inflection in mind, we understand that Ash is constructing meaning creatively rather than for the sake of efficient communication. What may originally seem like unconnected sentences of an asyndetic mind can be appreciated as an alternative way of perceiving the world. For example, as a leaf falls on to a skylight in their home, Ash is stung with flashbacks to a recent infidelity she has not yet told her husband, Abbott, about. She juggles multiple, anachronistic mental images which she quickly becomes overwhelmed by and attempts to call Abbot. Upon reaching only his voicemail these mental images compound upon one another causing her to spiral.

> 'This is Abbott's phone. Please leave a message.'
>
> Please leave.
>
> Leave, leaves, leaf.
>
> Grieve, grieves, grief.
>
> Leaving, grieving, left, grieved, greft. Grieved hangs on far too long, don't you agree?
>
> Aggrieved. They won't stop coming once they've started, words, leaves, all of a sudden, all of a.
>
> Please grieve.

[244] Caracciolo, M., 2014. Punctuating Minds: Non-Verbal Cues for Consciousness Representation in Literary Narrative. *Journal of Literary Semantics,* 43(1), p. 54.

> Please leave a message.
>
> I won't. Won't leave words anywhere these days. I spat them out over the bridge and into the beck that ran through Nott's wood. So many times. I spat them when Papa spat. He thumped his palm between my shoulder blades so I could hoik them out. Far too many, coming, spewing, felt better once they were out, got used to it, losing things. Papa said, we'll get used to it, but. Spit and words are like birds.
>
> They keep coming up, coming back.[245]

What begins as a grounded, real-life event spirals into introspection and childhood memories. Ash's internal monologue develops almost like free writing as she links the words linguistically, not through any inherent semantic similarity but just toying with how the words sound.[246]

Ash's communication gives an insight into her inner mental state: any number of words rhyme with leaves (believe, relieve, achieve are all much more optimistic), yet Ash appears to be in a state akin to mourning feeling abandoned by Abbott. The linguistic association appears to trigger a deep childhood trauma which she appears unable to verbalise. Struggling for her words seems to be like choking or vomiting for Ash, highlighting the intense physical effect they have on her. The words take on a material permanency, they are something that Ash is able to physically spit into the water. The form the words take on

[245] Arnold, 2018: p. 211.

[246] This passage is reminiscent of how Dawn Eddings-Prince describes the word 'fact': "Fact is a terrible word: The first letter starts out angry, the same letter than starts words like freak and forget. The harsh a sound that comes next is the sound of terror, of someone falling off a cliff and knowing the end will come and can't be stopped. The c and the t that finish it might as well just spell cut and be done. The whole word conjured in my mind a gorilla, a person, stabbed in the heart and pushed off a precipice, quickly forgotten." (Prince, D. E., 2013. "All the Things I Have Ever Been" Autoethnographic Reflections on Academic Writing and Autism. In: J. Davidson & M. Orsini, eds. *Worlds of Autism: Across the Spectrum of Neurological Difference.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. 322.)

the page mirror and are inextricable from Ash's internal state: not only does the fractured nature of the sentences produce a frantic, staccato rhythm emblematic of panic and anxiety, but the sentences are broken and unfinished. The form and short sentences quicken the pace of reading as Ash loses control and the sentences run away from the reader, just as Ash's sense of panic takes hold and she feels uncontained without Abbott. Towards the end of the passage, the first-person pronoun is dropped entirely, which gives the passage a rushed, note like form but also shows that Ash may feel that her sense of self in the present moment has been eroded by this point, she appears to be leaking across timeframes and between people.

The uncertainty created by the distortion of time places particular significance on the natural environment to anchor the narrative. As the fragmented narrative resists formal linearity, the environment performs the consistent, stabilising function that chronology typically would. Ash uses idiolectic descriptions of her experience in the natural environment to convey how she feels typical semantics are insufficient to describe the precise moment she is experiencing. The narrator's unique affinity with the environment is represented as exceeding verbal expression and would only be limited by conventional language usage.

The lake to which Ash frequently returns acts neither as a site of recovery nor 'healing' but as a complex medium through which the narrator's life plays out. It is a site of interaction for Ash as both the place where the unspeakable traumatic event occurred and also her means of escape. Towards the beginning of the novel the reader witnesses Ash grappling with words that fall short in expressing the richness of the lake that she often goes to. She gradually develops a more individual means of autistic inflection to express this sentiment as the novel develops.

”Come on, come on in,” Charlie says.

And I will. First though, I’ll open my arms. To the lake, to the sky, to the beginning-of-summer sun. I’ll gather them in.

“Are you swimming? Ash, are you swimming?”

Swimming of course, and look at the water with the sun on it. Brown or green or yellow, all three colours, some other colour, dappled, maybe, but I’ve never known what to do with adjectives. I told Kate too, I said it straight out. But still. She wanted me to choose. Happy, sad, angry, confused? She said it would help her understand.

And what is the word? There probably isn’t a word for the colour of the lake under the sun.

There doesn’t have to be a word although it feels like there should be… Some things, a lot of things I suppose, are untranslatable. Anyway. It’s May. It’s a sun-through-the-leaves-on-the water kind of day, and warm enough to swim at last.[247]

More than just making use of the environment for swimming or other leisure activities as the majority of people in the text do, Ash embraces her surroundings in an almost spiritual way. Before diving into the water she opens her arms to the lake, the sky and the sun as if to ‘gather them in’. To come from an angle of transcorporeality, Ash’s engagement is better described as a radical rethinking of connection where the boundary between herself and her surroundings begins to dissolve. Where most people in the scene are using the lake for their own pleasure Ash perceives her surroundings as intricately entwined, noticing the effect of the sun on the colour and temperature of the water and the precise shadow cast by each individual leaf. As per Alaimo, Ash is cognisant of the ‘bizarre enormity of the

[247] Arnold, 2018: pp. 12-13.

effects of the most minute everyday actions' as is mirrored in her layered language use as she attempts to encompass her vast feelings.[248]

Ash observes the lake and its surroundings paying particular attention to the novel combinations that occur (I.e. each time the light changes, or the colour of the leaves changes etc). Much as elsewhere in the novel where Ash likes to collect words, here she gathers them together in a long hyphenation since there does not seem to be a sufficient description in her opinion. It is not that Ash is unaware that the word 'dappled' is a close approximation for 'sun-through-the-leaves-on-the-water'[249] since she uses this word earlier in the passage, but she clearly does not think it adequately encompasses the situation. As Rodas discusses the joy of list making in autistic language, she notes how such lists are always gesturing beyond the boundary of the form that they exist in.[250] It is exactly this paradox that Arnold is here toying with: the string of words itself gestures beyond the realms of that which may be accessed verbally. The fact that Arnold describes the water as '[b]rown, green or yellow, all three colours, some other colour'[251] (i.e. the colour of the reflection of the leaves rather than the body of water itself) epitomises how she perceives the world as constantly shifting and temporary as well as a slipperiness in attempting to fit it within the constraints of language.[252]

The novel expresses Ash's identity as intertwined with the ever-changing environment generating a porosity of the boundary between human and non-human. Prince-Edding

[248] Alaimo, 2018: p. 436.
[249] Arnold, 2018: p. 13.
[250] Rodas, 2018.
[251] Arnold, 2018: p. 13.
[252] This scene recalls James McGrath's (2017) account of how habitual visits to a café are a unique experience each time: "[E]very single visit to that café is distinct for me. The daylight is different. The moods are unique. Some morning, some combinations of light and shade might remind me of a previous visit, and there is a pleasing feeling not of repetition, but continuity. But no two of my morning visits are ever entirely the same. Some routines can make the everyday feel new, every day." (p. 17) This feeling of continuity is especially significant in light of Arnold's use of the environment to anchor the narrative.

comments on a similar sense of precarity in her identity as she was growing up, she observes that 'I was born unassembled. Having none of the filters or templates that most human beings are born with, I instead came out disembodied, all I sensed around me becoming me – no remembered barriers between myself and the world.'[253] Identity appears to effect itself through osmosis, an idea that Ash overlays on other characters within the novel. One particular image which persists from the Ash's childhood is one of "the woman with her hair tied back".[254] When Ash thinks she may have seen the same woman years later she is defined as 'the woman on the train and the woman on the bus'. In all descriptions, the woman is defined by temporary situations or identity markers which could change at any point, and likely do even throughout the course of one day. Placing such weight on that which surrounds her means Ash is defined by her position to others: as a mother in her relationship to Charlie; as a heterosexual woman with duties as a wife to fulfil in her relationship to husband Abbott; or as a marginalised neurodivergent person experiencing the community from the peripheries. The natural environment permits her be entangled in a transcorporeal and osmotic sense: Ash resists the permanency of being defined comparatively by her relationship with/to others and leans towards an ambiguity that existing in the environment and open water permits her. 'If only I could hold on, lost like this'[255] she says as she imagines herself swimming. Rather than engage with the problematic social hierarchy, Ash embeds herself within biodiversity more widely, ultimately stimulating her idiosyncratic communication and outlook.

Amid this flexibility and shifting approach to identity Ash's husband, Abbott, frequently acts as an authority figure or gatekeeper in her interactions: he attempts to forbid her from

[253] Prince-Eddings, 2013: p. 323.
[254] Arnold, 2018: p. 94.
[255] Arnold, 2018: p. 18.

going to the open lake and instead encourages her to take Charlie to the indoor pool. Where Ash wants to be enmeshed with the natural world, Abbott would rather abide by convention. Ash appears stifled by the indoor pool as is demonstrated in the below passage:

> 'At least it's clean. At least you know where you are with the baths,' he says.
>
> And he's right. We're not far from the bottom of our hill. The red sign, the revolving door, the changing cubicles with yellow curtains. We know where we are.
>
> We know where we are with the lake too, but sometimes you get lucky. I mean, sometimes it's possible to swim far enough out so the light catches, or doesn't catch. Sometimes it's possible. Really. Sometimes you're swimming and you look across the water, the water you've looked across so many times before. You look for the grassy bank running up into the scrub, for the rock, for the spot you went in, where you almost always go in, and you think the light must have caught, or maybe it didn't catch, and it must be the light, because it can't be anything else, because you're looking across the water for the bank, you're looking for the alder trees, the spot where you went in, where you always go in and you don't know…. and you say to yourself, you say out loud 'If only I could hold on, lost like this, at least until the light comes back.'
>
> But wait it's easy to get carried away. Abbott says I get carried away.
>
> 'All the time,' he says, and shakes his head.'[256]

The juxtaposition of the two instances of swimming heightens the richness of Ash's experience in the lake compared to the confines of the pool. Ash's dialogue makes frequent and jarring use of the conjunction 'and' giving the passage an almost childlike feel of

[256] Arnold, 2018: p. 18.

excitement. The reserved nature of the asyndetic description of the indoor pool seems to be limited to the unimpressive infrastructure 'The red sign, the revolving door, the changing cubicles with yellow curtains.'[257] In comparison, the description of the lake seems to present a much more visceral yet imprecise experience where the natural light playing across the surface of the water gives the impression of a different place each time Ash visits. Ash considers it 'lucky' to be lost in such an indescribable way ('We know where we are with the lake too, but sometimes you get lucky.')[258] demonstrating how she resists the rigidity that Abbott attempts to impose on her in favour of a state of unknowing. It is significant that her intense memory is book-ended by Abbott's speech, it is as though his authority has infiltrated her psyche to the extent that he controls her thoughts and daydreams. He contains and puts limits on her escapism here figuratively but elsewhere, literally.

It is clear from the above passage that Ash sees the open water of the lake as free from imposed structure, be that architectural or expected social roles of a woman, wife and mother. This is reflected in the above passage where Ash's excitement at being in the open water gave a childlike impression, which she perhaps feels is stifled by social expectations of an adult woman. She returns frequently to considerations of gender and the fluidity that water (quite literally) permits her to access. As she reads about Kevojarvi, a country she longs to visit on account of its '[s]eventy-one days of endless daylight'[259] that keep the water warm enough to swim in. She comments on a picture within a book she is reading: 'The pair who were wading were close to the camera, but I couldn't tell whether they were men or women. It was one of the things I wanted to ask Abbott. Look at those two wading

[257] Arnold, 2018: p. 18.
[258] Arnold, 2018: p. 18.
[259] Arnold, 2018: p. 10.

I'd planned to say. Do you think they're men or women? Boys perhaps?'.[260] It seems of particular importance that Ash ascertains whether they are men or women, but she nonetheless appreciates the ambiguity that the water provides. This thought pattern resumes in relation to Ash's relationship with Kate, a yoga instructor she is dating without Abbott's knowledge. Ash states "Boy, girl. Girl, boy, I couldn't see the point in being one or the other, and if I'd had a photo of Kevojarvi that summer I would've asked her about the wading pair. Do you think they're men or women? Boys perhaps? I would've asked and she would've looked and said. It doesn't matter." (pg. 186) The phrasing is near identical to the interaction with Charlie, despite appearing at the beginning and the end of the novel respectively, another instance of the ritualistic repetition as discussed in reference to trauma narratives.

Kate's presumed response to Ash's questions of gender 'It doesn't matter'[261] is a resurgence of Charlie's words from earlier in the novel when Ash comments on a sign at the lake 'One says *No Swimming Unsupervised,* the other has a figure swimming in a red circle with a line through it, and you can't tell whether the swimmer's a boy or a girl, but Charlie says it doesn't matter.'[262] Ash again seems preoccupied with ideas of gender in a way that Charlie is not, potentially presenting Ash as wanting to return to this childlike uninhibitedness. As Ash constructs meaning through metonymy (i.e., through association rather than semantics) we can see that the image of Kevojarvi is representative of questions of gender that Ash is not able to express or converse with anyone about. As she looked at the photograph in the first instance, Ash stated 'It was one of the things I wanted to ask Abbott.'[263] alluding to the fact that there were many things she would like to discuss but feels hindered. In a similar

[260] Arnold, 2018: p. 11.
[261] Arnold, 2018: p. 186.
[262] Arnold, 2018: p. 12.
[263] Arnold, 2018: p. 11.

way, this photograph could stand in for the lake where Ash feels most free and at home. The multiplicity of interpretations demonstrates the depth of Ash's narrative intent that goes far beyond the literal words that she employs. Ash's language is created through complex relationships, from things that resurge from her past or hold particular significance to her. Though initially this might seem fragmented and difficult to follow, once the reader is able to apprehend these intricate relations between words and meaning, it is clear that Ash utilises a language specific only to herself – an intricate idiolect.

Constructing language through metonymic relations is one means of presenting Ash as enmeshed in her environment: no section of narrative is a discrete entity; everything is linguistically presented as being part of a whole and entangled in a web of complex relations thereby destabilising boundaries between human and non-human. The passage below exemplifies a how a linguistic blurring reflects a concurrent blurring of the bodymind. The narrator is attending a summer solstice celebration with some acquaintances from a yoga class. Upon finding out that Kate – the woman she will later engage in a romantic relationship with – is not there, Ash's inner turmoil bleeds into a physical experience in the natural environment:

> And I was running down, running down, and I was thinking about my feet. I was thinking about my feet and the sounds they made, over grass and over stones, and I wasn't thinking about anything else. I wasn't thinking about the hours that had gone. I wasn't thinking about how soon the days would get shorter, the swifts would leave, the house martins would leave, and wouldn't come back for months.
>
> I was in the here and now, I was centered. I remember thinking yes, my feet and the way my breathing sounds when it hits the air. I remember thinking, yes. I'm in the here and now, and I was running fast and I was thinking about my feet. I was listening to

them.

I was listening for them.

…

And I ran. I was running down. I was flying down and I had no feet. I couldn't hear my feet, although the ground was beneath them. And I wasn't thinking about time. I was making time. I wasn't thinking about it and I wasn't thinking about Kate. I wasn't thinking about her and I flew on past. I had no feet and I flew on past.[264]

Ash appears to be struggling with an inner conflict shown by the repetitive, frantic form the passage descends into. Amid the disjuncture and general confusion of her plans being changed last minute, Ash finds comfort in focusing on her body's relation to the environment around it. Bondi et al. remark how 'emotional experiences highlight the permeability and fluidity of bodily boundaries. They also illuminate how emotions help to construct, maintain, and sometimes disrupt the very distinction between bodily interiors and exteriors'.[265] We see this in the way the passage moves from Ash enjoying the rhythmic pounding of her feet on the grass, to no longer being aware of her limbs' presence: 'I couldn't hear my feet, although the ground was beneath them.'[266] Her immersion in the environment actually takes over her own sense of proprioception[267] – a important sense in autistic embodiment. It is through the grass and her movement down the hill that Ash has any sense of her body's place as she can no longer rely on the sensation of her own body

[264] Arnold, 2018: p. 64.
[265] Bondi et al, 2016: p. 7.
[266] Arnold, 2018: p. 64.
[267] Proprioception is defined as the body's sense of movement and location. Whilst this can be associated with medial model ideology, recent scholarship seeks to reclaim neurodivergent proprioception as an aesthetic (Montero, Barbara. 2006, "Proprioception as an aesthetic sense." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 64.2: pp. 231-242.) or an alternate mode of perception.

since she 'had no feet'.[268] This represents a merging of body/environment and essentially human/more-than-human where the environment has taken on the function of not only proprioception but also grounding and focusing Ash.

Ash's connectedness to the environment, is deeply transcorporeal to the point of being the fabric of her identity '"the environment" is not located somewhere out there, but is always the very substance of ourselves.'[269] Ash plays with language, subordinating its usual use, returning it to a form of art rather than a reduction to pure meaning. This offers the potential to more completely capture a relationship with the environment, where attempting to fit the experience into the restricted boxes of verbal language may fall short. This ludic approach demonstrates how language need not be restricted to communicative purposes – the accessibility of a clear message is not a priority.

> I sat down next to her, pulled my knees up to my chin and listened to her oceanic breath. I listened to the rain on the window, to cars taking the crest of our hill. I listened to the swifts, to the crows, to openings and shuttings, to a ball kicked against a wall, a garage door perhaps. I listened to voices, children's, women's, to words surfacing here and there, finding their way up through the oceanic breath. I listened. I listened to her, I held my knees to my chin and listened. In and out, in and out, rain too, voices, birds, cars. I was listening, I was asking myself, what does this sound like? All of this together.
>
> "It sounds like waves," I said.
>
> She smiled a little, not too much. Not enough to stop the ocean's swell.[270]

[268] Arnold, 2018: p. 64.
[269] Alaimo, 2018: p.4.
[270] Arnold, 2018: p. 205.

The scene initiates an inversion of agency between animate and inanimate objects: the car is anthropomorphised in being given an active verb 'taking' whilst there is no agent mentioned with regards to the ball being kicked or the 'openings and shuttings'.[271] Moreover, words become active participants in the above passage as they 'find their way up through the oceanic breath'.[272] The materiality and physical nature of words is something that the novel returns to often, as though toying with how these utterances hang suspended in time for Ash. Ash appears to be in communication with all elements of her environment, the infiniteness of which could be inferred from her use of asyndetic phrasing which portrays the list as non-exhaustive and the environment around her as endless. This said, it is interesting that the snapshot only features the sounds of children and women as though Ash is commenting on the archetypal family roles which default to women as caregivers and parents. The almost formulaic nature of the list that Ash creates gives the impression of when a word is repeated too often and loses its essential meaning to become an element of sound. By prioritising the importance of sound over meaning in communication, Arnold immerses the reader in a soundscape equivalent to the one Ash is enjoying.

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Arnold's text engages readers in an experience that they are not supposed to completely understand. There are moments that expressly set up garden paths: for example, when the tense shifts mid chapter, forcing reconsideration of the supposed timeline of events. The reader can either indulge in the inconsistency or else tie themselves in knots trying to make sense of it. Arnold omits as much detail as she includes, and that which she chooses to

[271] Arnold, 2018: p. 205.
[272] Arnold, 2018: p. 205.

include is either nonchronological or else draws its meaning by association from elsewhere in the narrator's lifetime. The labyrinthine structure of the novel is a literary argument for the fact that texts – and language – do not draw value from being transparent in their ability to be understood. The narrative ultimately champions neurodiversity, despite Ash struggling to find adequate words at the beginning of the novel, through her toying with the musicality of language as a response to her environment. Through autistic inflection, Ash accesses the imaginative, sonorous side of language where conventional communication overlooks this in favour of linguistic meaning. This attention to detail at the expense of engaging with social norms is usually framed as a 'deficit' within autistic cognition (pure pattern vs social pattern dichotomy i.e. regarding objects as complex but overlooking their social relevance).[273] However, it is actually a source of creativity that highlights the potential of alternative and varied perceptions. Arnold draws attention to how Ash plays with language, subordinating its usual use, returning it to a form of art rather than a reduction to its suggested meaning. This offers the potential to more completely capture a relationship with the environment, where attempting to fit the experience into the restricted boxes of conventional language may fall short. Such creativity could hardly be considered deficient or 'disordered' but rather explorative of the inflected plasticity and potential that language possesses when we consider it outside of its ostensible, functional purpose.

[273] For more information surrounding this dichotomy see for example: Skripkauskait, S., 2018. *Domain general attention processes and stimuli properties,* Roehampton: University of Roehampton.

CHAPTER 2

Environ(mental) health – Using autistic life writing to reconfigure conventions of community and care

When Katherine May's most recent memoir *Wintering: The Power of Rest and Retreat in Difficult Times* (*Wintering* from this point forth) was published in February 2020, it was inadvertently fitting for the lockdown the world was about to enter. May writes about her personal 'winter', a low period in her life where she felt overwhelmed and out of rhythm with herself. She depicts various means that communities around the world use to embrace this 'winter' as a shared hibernation from which we can return well rested and in tune with ourselves. The book has been hailed as a success in many fields – longlisted for the Wainwright prize for nature writing; awarded Radio 4's book of the week for its frank discussion of mental health. Yet it is rarely acknowledged as an autism narrative; in fact, autism is mentioned only once in passing in the entire text. It is for precisely this reason that it is an important text to incorporate in a discussion of autism narratives specifically. I explore how, in discussing the themes that orbit autism rather than autism directly, May demands that readers reconsider how they perceive disability by destabilising ideas of rugged independence towards a community of interdependence. I take my lead from autistic, feminist and environmental views on entanglement to foster an interconnected perspective of care which foregrounds diversity in its widest sense.

Any relationship established between autism and the environment needs to be done with sensitive awareness of the long history autistic communities have of being denied

personhood or treated as less-than which earlier discussion demonstrated to unfortunately be ongoing.[274] A quick online search of the links between autism and environment returns results that declare a supposed link between the rise in autism diagnoses and environmental toxins.[275] I raise these points to make it clear that when I propose to theorise autism in relation to the environment, it is distinct and completely separate from thinking like this. Hopefully, in a similar reclaiming of terms such as Queer and Crip, autistic communities' visceral and pleasurable relationship with the environment may come to overlay and replace discussion of toxins and vaccinations.

This chapter will discuss the legacy of autistic life writing and its significance in altering public perception of neurodivergence. Using autistic texts and voices, it will explore how nuanced ideas of autism exert pressure on conventional understandings of dependency guiding us to consider the vast benefit of interdependency. I examine how Katherine May foregrounds her unique relationship with the natural environment to confront and challenge oppressive stigmatisation in her texts *The Electricity of Every Living Thing* (*Electricity* from this point forth) and *Wintering.* I will explore how May's unique affinity to the more-than-human environment permits her to use it as a communicative conduit for her experiences that exceed verbalisation. By focusing attention on the socially constructed nature of the hierarchies of personhood, May's texts point towards interconnectedness as a

[274] Mcguire, 2016.

[275] Despite the widespread, definitive refuting of Andrew Wakefield et al.'s (retracted) 1998 paper outlining a causal link between heavy metals and autism (Wakefield, A. J. et al., 1998. [RETRACTED] Ileal-lymphoid-nodular hyperplasia, non-specific colitis, and pervasive developmental disorder in children. *The Lancet,* 351(9103), pp. 637-641.), research is still being published in peer reviewed journals using similar logic. For example, McCanlies, E. C. et al., 2023. Parental occupational exposure to solvents and autism spectrum disorder: An exploratory look at gene-environment interactions. *Environmental Research,* Volume 228, pp. 1-12; Awadh, S. M., Yaseen, Z. M. & Al-Suwaiyan, M. S., 2023. The role of environmental trace element toxicants on autism: A medical biogeochemistry perspective. *Ecotoxicology and Environmental Safety,* Volume 251, pp. 1-9 along with many others.

means of opposing anthropocentrism.

The Legacy of Autistic Life Writing

A burgeoning interest in life writing during the late twentieth century, termed the 'memoir boom', mirrored a public interest in private lives.[276] Not limited to those with celebrity status, this interest extended to a cultural fascination in accounts of physical disability and cognitive difference.[277] It is no coincidence that an increase in publications and mainstream attention emerged in parallel to disability advocacy movements asserting that '[d]isabled people have been spoken about, and spoken for, but rarely listened to.'[278] Seeking to examine how disability life writing intervenes in the dominant master narratives that endorse a fallacy of 'normal', scholars observed the genre as 'a form of social critique'.[279] Those working in disability studies (as well as those in other similarly diverse, interdisciplinary fields) are united in their conviction that life writing and disability narratives act as 'counter discourse' through which misinformed perceptions and stereotypes may be challenged.[280]

Mitchell and Snyder explore how life writing framed disability as an alternate mode of experience and embodiment rather than something for which a cure should be sought.[281] First person narratives destabilise the perceived exclusivity of the medical discourse of

[276] Smith, S. & Watson, J., 2017. A Personal Introduction. In: *Life writing in the long run: A Smith & Watson autobiography studies reader.* Michigan: Maize publishers, p. xxx.
[277] Couser, T., 2005. Disability, life narrative, and representation. *PMLA,* 120(2), pp. 602-606.
[278] Sherry, M., 2005. Reading me/me reading Disability. *Prose Studies,* 27(1-2), p. 165.
[279] Ferri, B., 2011. Disability Life Writing and the Politics of Knowing. *Teachers College Record,* 113(10), p. 2268
[280] Couser, T., 1997. *Recovering Bodies: Illness, Disability, and Life Writing.* Madison : University of Wisconsin Press.
[281] Mitchell, D. & Snyder, S., 1997. *The Body and Physical Difference: Discourses of Disability.* Michigan: University of Michigan Press.

disability and the 'contradictory treatment of disability in the sciences and humanities' that previously meant 'the disabled experience [was] never imagined to offer its own unique and valuable perspective.[282] Despite the upsurge of disability life writing at the end of the twentieth century, the eschewing of first-person disability perspectives persisted in other fields as Mitchell and Snyder draw attention to: they cite a set of essays released in 1995 produced by nearly forty scholars in disability studies, of which only one author identified as disabled.[283] Disability life writing means those at the centre of their own lived experience are able to reclaim a narrative which has frequently been dominated by those external to it, a power structure seen not only in the above example but also in medical settings and popular culture.

Couser contends that shedding outdated stigma and seeking to understand lived experiences through disability life writing highlights 'the ways in which disability may create culture.'[284] This said, as the social model of disability began to gain traction, some scholars raised concerns about the individuality of autobiography as a mode of enquiry.[285] This individualism, they assert, runs the risk of popularising the trope of overcoming adversity through personal effort, a narrative trajectory that is designed for an ableist (or at least non-disabled) audience. Consequently, although it would be possible to refute the individualism of life writing based on the connection that is created through shared experiences of marginalisation, publishing pressures nonetheless impact the shape and content of texts from marginalised writers. Even while attempting to narrate alternative modes of being,

[282] Mitchell & Snyder, 1997: p. 2.
[283] Ingstad, B. & Whyte, S. R., 1995. *Disability and Culture.* California: University of California Press.
[284] Couser, T., 2000. The Empire of 'Normal': A Forum on Disability and Self-Representation: Introduction. *American Quarterly,* 52(2), p. 308.
[285] Mitchell & Snyder, 2000; Davis, 1995.

'when it comes to narrating one's life, norms constitute intelligibility'[286] and those narratives that stray from the consumable, marketable version disability risk losing out on a mainstream audience. Rather than dismantling prejudices and stigma that surround disability, the publishing industry encourages disability to be repackaged into a form that is readily recognisable, thereby further marginalising those who do not fit in these restrictive categories. This is particularly significant for those who utilise more diverse communicative methods and are forced to either translate their experience for comprehension by the majority, or else forgo the mainstream publishing market.

Bérubé examines the particular significance that narrating a life has for those who may otherwise be (erroneously) presumed unable to do so (i.e. persons with a cognitive or developmental disability), an insight informed by living with his son born with Down Syndrome.[287] He views life writing as a 'performative utterance'[288] that has 'substantially altered the life chances of an entire population, such that a group of persons once thought to be incapable of speech, let alone life writing, is now – or should now be – understood as potentially capable of reflecting critically and articulately on the very policies of inclusion that have shaped their lives.'[289] Whilst Bérubé is speaking specifically in relation to Down Syndrome, there is a clear parallel that could be drawn with the inaccurate assumptions that are made about autistic people. Mistaking alternate modes of communication for a lack of verbality, autistic populations have historically had their narratives overlaid and obscured by external parties. Life writing exerts a force over the existing narratives of what it means to be disabled, it is not just a 'performative utterance' but a form of resistance against

[286] Ferri, 2011: p. 2269.
[287] Bérubé, M., 2000. Autobiography as Performative Utterance. *American Quarterly,* 52(2), pp. 339-343.
[288] Bérubé , 2000: p. 339.
[289] Bérubé , 2000: p. 342.

reductive assumptions of capacity or ability. It is a narrative form that puts pressure on the idea that spoken and written word are an accurate measure of cognitive (or otherwise) ability.

Tougaw sees autistic life writing as contributing to a 'long tradition of autobiographical writing that chronicles mind-body relationships and their implications for selfhood' that he terms 'Brain Memoirs'.[290] Such memoirs invite readers to witness the intricacies of cognitive difference from a first-person perspective, often employing lived experience to highlight the inherent subjectivity of fields that would otherwise assert themselves as fact (i.e. medicine/neurology). The corrective force that life writing exerts over mainstream misconceptions of any disability is particularly significant for autistic communities due to unsubstantiated claims made of their internal narratives.[291] Prior to the prevalence of autistic accounts, autistic lives were long assumed to be 'unautobiographical'[292] and inhibitive to an internal narrative.[293] Such assumptions inflict a 'pattern of cyclical influence'[294] upon society, 'both reflect[ing] and influenc[ing] the general public's understandings'.[295] False information thereby risks being accepted into the public consciousness as fact if not challenged.

Instances of autism in popular media weave together the most salient identifiers of autism

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[290] Tougaw, J., 2018. *The Elusive Brain.* New Haven: Yale University Press, p. 74.
[291] Barnes and Baron-Cohen claim that "ToM [Theory of Mind] turns out not only to be important for mindreading and predicting what others will do or what they might think, but also for any communicative activity, be it narrative or culture itself. (Barnes, J. & Baron-Cohen, S., 2011. Language in Autism: Pragmatics and Theory. In: *The Handbook of Psycholinguistic and Cognitive Processes: Perspectives in Communication Disorders.* London: Psychology Press, p. 742.)
[292] Smith, S., 1996. Taking it to a limit one more time: Autobiography and autism. In: Smith & Watson, ed. *Getting a Life: Everyday Uses of Autobiography* . Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. 233.
[293] Sacks, O., 1995. *An Anthropologist on Mars.* London: Picador; Couser, 2005.
[294] Sarrett, J., 2011. Trapped children: Popular images of children with autism in the 1960s and 2000s. *Journal of Medical Humanities,* 32(2), p. 143.
[295] Sarrett, 2011: p.143.

to become (at best) an inaccurate composite but frequently a caricature. Outdated stereotypes layer on top of each other to make for a crowded, and often 'rowdy, conversation' as Tougaw[296] states in his introduction to the works of Higashida, Mukhopadhyay and Robison – canonical for their respective roles in revising reductive perceptions of autism. Autism life writing presents the possibility of reformatting how neurodivergence is perceived:

'autobiography offers an alternative to patronizing and marginalizing (mis)representations by others; it thus provides a medium for counter discourse that challenges stereotypes and misconceptions.'[297] Life writing is integral in dismantling tenacious and outdated layers of representations by showcasing how richly creative autistic life can be.

The 'rowdy conversation'[298] of autism in the public consciousness often values voices external to the autistic community as a perceived authority (medical professionals, educators, parents, carers etc.). McGrath considers the impact of autistic lived experience having been persistently reified through a non-autistic narration. Autistic identity becomes subject to 'the contestable liminality of how it is named and by whom'[299] which limits the agency of autistic people to define their own identity and way of being in the world. Prior to the reclamation of identity through first-person accounts, family narratives dominated publications on autism the most eminent being Clara Claiborne's *The Siege: The Battle for Communication with an Autistic Child* published in 1967.[300] The title alone embodies the ambient cultural perception of autism as resistant to communication

[296] Tougaw, 2018: p. 97.
[297] Couser, 2000: p. 306.
[298] Tougaw, 2018: p. 97.
[299] McGrath, 2017: p. 187.
[300] Claiborne Park, C., 1967. *The Siege: A Family's Journey Into the World of an Autistic Child.* San Diego: Harcourt, Brace & World.

and as only occurring in childhood. The text, whilst not entirely unproblematic, was foundational in the rebuttal of blaming cold and detached parenting styles first asserted by Bruno Bettelheim in the same year. Many parents related to the way in which Claiborne depicted her autistic child: she demonstrated a sensitive desire to understand and highlighted that even with the utmost empathy her daughter's difference means society will impose limits: 'She dwelt in a solitary citadel, compelling and self-made, complete and valid. Yet we could not leave her there. We must intrude, attack, invade, not because she was unhappy inside it, for she was not, but because the equilibrium she had found, perfect as it was, denied the possibility of growth.'[301] Throughout the narrative, autism is positioned as something to be battled against through the author's use of militarist semantics. Despite this subtext, the text played an important role in the way it took autism from a purely medical setting to a familial one. There is the potential in such publications for autism to exist on the peripheries of narratives that actually examine the politics of nuclear families, contemporary social anxieties or other issues (as discussed previously in texts such as *A Boy Made of Blocks.*[302] Although familial narratives such as Claiborne's advances the conversation around autism, they remain inherently limited for being narrativised by someone without lived experience of autism.

Temple Grandin's *Emergence: Labelled Autistic* (1986) (*Emergence* from this point forth) was the first publicly acknowledged autobiographical account of autism, notable for refocusing the gaze on autistic lives from an internal perspective.[303] The impact was significant enough to generate a legacy of 'autiebiographies' – a term that distinguishes and highlights texts

[301] Claiborne, 1967: p. 8.
[302] Stuart, 2016.
[303] Grandin, T. & Scariano, M., 1986. *Emergence: Labelled Autistic.* Novato: Arena Press.

written from an autistic perspective from those by family or other external parties.[304] Sacks wrote in the foreword to Grandin's 2005 revision of the text how it seemed to him at the time: 'unprecedented and, in a way, unthinkable […] because there had never before been an "inside narrative" of autism; unthinkable because it had been medical dogma for forty years or more that there was no "inside", no inner life, in the autistic, or that if there was it would be forever denied access or expression', a commentary that epitomises the public reaction to Grandin's writing at the time.[305] The text spans from Grandin's childhood, through her education to her later life as she discovered her expertise in animal behaviour, which led ultimately to her career. Grandin feels her unique cognitive and sensory profile put her in a privileged position to understand both animal behaviour and mechanics. Although *Emergence* was co-authored by her teacher and mentor Margaret Scariano, Grandin's subsequent publications were written under her sole name – *Thinking in Pictures*,[306] *Animals in Translation*,[307] *The Autistic Brain: Thinking Across the Spectrum*[308] are but a few examples. Grandin herself recognises how the limited availability of autism narratives as she was growing up led her to believe that all autistic people thought and visualised in the same way that she did. Whilst individually informative it would be impossible for one autistic narrative to be representative of the myriad outlooks that exist in autistic communities. During Grandin's childhood (and arguably until only recently) the

[304] Williams, D., 2009. *Representation of autism/autistic presence in contemporary cultural forms.* [Online] Available at: http://blog.donnawilliams.net/2009/05/12/representation-of-autism%E2%80%9Dautistic-presence%E2%80%9D-in-contemporary-cultural-forms/#more-807
[Accessed 29 April 2022].

[305] Sacks, O., 2005. Foreword. In: *Emergence: Labeled Autistic - A True Story.* 2nd ed. New York: Grand Central Publishing, p. 11.

[306] Grandin, T., 2006. *Thinking in Pictures, expanded edition: My Life with Autism.* London: Bloomsbury.

[307] Grandin, T., 2006. *Animals in translation: Using the mysteries of autism to decode animal behavior.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

[308] Grandin, T., 2013. *The Autistic Brain: Thinking across the spectrum.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

paucity of autistic life writing did not do justice to the diversity of autistic experiences. Grandin herself has commented on the power of community and kinship to insulate autistic people against misconceptions and internalised prejudices.[309]

Autistic life writing and narratives, whilst each interesting and invaluable in their own right, gain their particular disruptive force when they are considered in conversation with each other. In subsequent years, many notable first-person accounts of autism emerged to challenge reductive and outdated stereotypes: they demonstrated that mainstream culture had yet to fully grasp autism's heterogeneity and potential. At one point in history, it might have been possible to chronologically document all of these texts – in *Representing Autism* Murray remarks that there were fifty-five texts published in English by autistic writers between 1985 and 2004[310] – but publications have since proliferated such that this would now be a near impossible feat. I cover a few major touchstones in the cultural trajectory of autism by way of summary.

Polly Samuel (aka from this point forth as Donna Williams) was an autistic author, artist and singer-songwriter best known for her autobiographies published from 1992 onwards. In *Nobody Nowhere*[311] Williams details how she suffered years of abuse and neglect, being labelled as 'mad' or 'stupid'[312] on account of her misunderstood idiosyncratic behaviour. It was only at the age of twenty-six that she was finally diagnosed as autistic and began to surround herself with a like-minded community. Williams used *Nobody Nowhere* as an outlet to reflect on her life through a lens of autistic hindsight and the sequel, *Somebody*

[309] Grandin, 2013.
[310] Murray, 2008.
[311] Williams, D., 1992. *Nobody Nowhere.* New York: Bantam Books.
[312] Williams, 1992: p. 178.

Somewhere,[313] to evaluate how the publication of her earlier book changed her life.

Dawn Prince-Hughes, anthropologist and primatologist, discusses how she came to better understand herself when she relinquished the idea of human exceptionalism. She details in her memoir *Songs of the Gorilla Nation*[314] how she observed gorilla behaviour as a potential model for sociality. These ideas became foundational in how she understood her position in society and managed autistic difference. Prince-Hughes' more recent publication *Circus of Souls: How I Discovered We Are All Freaks Passing as Normal*[315] returns to the theme of compulsory normativity as a way of undermining the structure that marginalises difference, particularly cognitive difference.

Daniel Tammet's *Born on a Blue Day*[316] discusses how his autistic identity (then classed as Asperger's)[317] gives him a unique and intensely sensory outlook: he writes about the role synaesthesia plays in his capacity for numbers and languages. A review at the time of its release stated 'Tammet would be deemed remarkable by any standard; but what makes him truly exceptional is that he alone has overcome his crippling disabilities to live independently, form lasting relationships, and describe his world in an astonishingly articulate manner'[318] demonstrating how restricted conceptions of autism remained at this point in time. There is a sense that Tammet's abilities compensated for (and made socially acceptable) his disability

[313] Williams, D., 2015. *Somebody Somewhere.* New York: Crown.
[314] Prince-Hughes, 2004.
[315] Prince-Hughes, D., 2013. *Circus of Souls: How I Discovered We are All Freaks Passing as Normal.* South Carolina: CreateSpace.
[316] Tammett, D., 2007. *Born on a blue day: Inside the extraordinary mind of an autistic savant.* New York: Simon and Schuster.
[317] The fifth edition of the DSM removed Asperger's Syndrome as a separate category combining into a singular category for autism. More information on this and the impact this had for autistic identity can be found in Huynh et al., 2020.
[318] Barnes and Nobel (2007) quotes on Tammet, D., 2023. *Book Reviews.* [Online] Available at: http://www.danieltammet.net/media.php[Accessed 6 May 2022].

as long as he was happy to performatively satisfy the public gaze. Being forced to compensate in this way obstructs unconditional inclusion and acceptance highlighting the ongoing marginalisation of autistic lives. In recent years, Tammet has written creative fiction and non-fiction; his collection of essays *Every Word Is a Bird We Teach to Sing*[319] builds on his experience of numbers' communicative value to examine the plurality of language systems elsewhere in culture. This is a theme which undeniably informs his earlier published novel *Mishenka*[320] following a world champion chess player, Tammet explores Chess as an embodied language of logic and creativity. Having been originally

> celebrated for his feats of memory, Tammet's more recent works use his autistic perspective to 'intervene in the world more widely'.[321]

John Elder Robison's memoir, *Look me in the Eye*,[322] details his life growing up undiagnosed but painfully aware of his difference. Having worked extensively as a sound engineer in the music industry he has been credited with the unique guitar effects used by the band KISS, something he attributes to the way he thought differently to his peers. He was forty years old when he was eventually diagnosed with autism by a therapist friend and wrote his first book at age forty-nine. His life had already been extensively narrated in his (non-autistic) brother's memoir *Running with Scissors*[323] to which it is feasible Robison's later texts act in response to, as though to reclaim his own narrative. Throughout his texts Robison articulates how an autistic identity can be a site of tension between the individual and the

[319] Tammet, D., 2017. *Every Word is a Bird We Teach to Sing: Encounters with the mysteries and meanings of language.* London: Hachette UK.
[320] Tammet, D., 2016. *Mishenka.* Paris: Les Arènes.
[321] Stenning, A., 2020. Understanding Empathy Through a Study of Autistic Life Writing: On the Importance of Neurodiverse Morality. In: Rosqvist, Chown & Stenning, eds. *Neurodiversity Studies.* London: Routledge, p. 114.
[322] Robison, J. E., 2008. *Look me in the eye: My life with Asperger's.* London: Random House.
[323] Burroughs, A., 2002. *Running with Scissors: A Memoir.* New York: St Martin's Press.

external pressures they encounter. In 2011, for the documentary series *Ingenious Minds*, Robison underwent Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation, a non-invasive medical procedure that conducts electricity to specific regions of the brain, in the hopes of developing his social cognition. Robison's attempts to bring his cognition more in line with the majority demonstrates the difficulty social models face in dealing with the disabling and traumatic impact of ongoing stigmatisation.

A common thread in autistic life writing is appreciating retrospectively the value that difference represents. Consider for example how Anand Prahlad's aligns his ludic approach to language and culture in his childhood to his position in academia as an esteemed literary professor in *The Secret Life of a Black Aspie*.[324] Similarly, Chris Packham's celebrity in adulthood was a result of his affinity to more-than-human life as fostered in his childhood in *Fingers in the Sparkle Jar*.[325] These narratives are undeniably uplifting and motivating, particularly for the way they stand to correct outdated stereotypes that distort autistic creativity and capacity to fit into boxes. This said, Valente explores the pressures from the publishing industry[326] that exert themselves over autistic writers (be that of fiction or life writing) to conform to what Frank termed a 'restitution narrative'.[327] Under this structure, the narrative moves from the original diagnosis, through treatment to the narrator or protagonist typically being restored to good health as a result of modern medicine. Valente asserts that the 'guarantee of a recovery negates and undermines the nature of autism to make it readable.'[328] Couser likewise contemplates how '[d]isabled people may only be

[324] Prahlad, 2017.
[325] Packham, C., 2016. *Fingers in the Sparkle Jar.* London: Random House.
[326] Valente, 2018.
[327] Frank, A., 1995. *The Wounded Storyteller: Body Illness and Ethics.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
[328] Valente, 2018: p. 481.

granted access to the literary marketplace on the condition that their stories conform to preferred paradigms. (Their 'prose licenses' carry restrictions.) Because disability is considered "downbeat" or "depressing" its representation may only be allowed on the condition that the narrative take the form of a story of "triumph."'[329] Such a pressure seems restricted to the writing of disabled and other marginalised populations as there are many genres where a darker or 'downbeat'[330] storyline is precisely its selling point – consider true crime. I would argue this pressure speaks to the wider social perception of disability and dependence as a self-contained, personal phenomenon.

Autistic writers appear to be caught in a double bind of trying to portray a lived experience all the while aware that their text carries the burden of correcting misinformed stereotypes. Too much focus on the challenges encountered and the text is unlikely to be picked up by mainstream publishers, however too much focus on positive aspects or talents risks replacing one stereotype with another. Moreover, a consistent focus on what autistic perspectives can add to society threatens to make contribution a requirement to acceptance in the community. In other words, admittance would become conditional on what someone may add or provide rather than a universal and collective acceptance. Autistic authors and advocates alike are hopeful for a future where autistic creativity can be liberated from its existence solely in opposition to the entrenched stigmas with which such texts contend.

As ableist assumptions about autism were challenged through the proliferation of life writing, criticism arose due to a worry that it spotlighted a limited sector of autistic communities able to convey their thoughts through writing. Despite the innumerable

[329] Couser, 2000: p. 308.
[330] Couser, 2000: p. 308.

autistic authors who act as evidence to the contrary, the sentiment arguably still casts a shadow to this day. Davidson states: 'many of those with ASDs[331] lack the skills or resources, whether cognitive, social, or financial, to present their accounts in a publishable form. This focus on book-based autobiography therefore screens out the vast majority of - and probably more typical - ASD experiences. Only the most coherent accounts are likely to be published and such accounts will usually be written by those at the less `severe' end of the spectrum.'[332] I refute the generalisation of Davidson's above comment, no narrative can be representative of a heterogenous population, for example although feminist accounts present common challenges they do not attempt to universalise the experience of being a woman. Likewise, members of any group may lack 'the skills or resources, whether cognitive, social, or financial'[333] to publish a text or memoir, this is not something that is unique to autistic populations. Speaking about this requirement for communication to take a particular form, Yergeau states '[f]ollowing this logic, a claim to autism is read as incomplete and in need of non-autistic correction, clarification, or rehabilitation.'[334] Of course, due attention should be paid to the way in which the publishing industry appears to elide the different forms that autistic communication takes, but multiple barriers to publication may exist for anyone.

Davidson's comment finds company in critics of the neurodiversity movement who claim that to celebrate neurodiversity and diverse communication methods risks underplaying real life challenges. As if to retort, recently more life-writing and other creative endeavours

[331] Though I would generally avoid including disordered terminology within this thesis, it here serves to demonstrate the myopic and generalised tone of the quotation.

[332] Davidson, J. & Smith, M., 2009. Autistic autobiographies and more-than-human emotional geographies. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space,* 27(5), p. 902.

[333] Davidson, 2009: p. 902.

[334] Yergeau, 2018: p. 33.

have been released by non-speaking autistic writers who aim to collapse the (false) equivalence of spoken language with competence: the frequency of speech is not a precise indicator of someone's specific care needs or cognitive ability. Using diverse communication methods forces readers to reassess not only how they perceive disability and difference but also the potential that exists when communicative barriers are removed. By way of a few examples: Tito Mukhopadhyay's *The Mind Tree: A Miraculous Child Breaks the Silence of Autism*[335] combines philosophy and poetry to correct misconceptions not only of autistic voice, but also of creativity; Naoki Higashida's *The Reason I Jump*[336] is a thoughtful display of many of the questions non-autistic people may have about autism; Ido Kedar's *Ido in AutismLand: Climbing out of Autism's Silent Prison*[337] is a collection of thought provoking essays about how Ido attempts to overcome the reductive stereotypes that circulate about autism; DJ Savarese's poetry collection *A Doorknob for an Eye*[338] uses autistic artists as springboards for lyrical consideration of autistic perspectives in the arts.

Whilst autism narratives are distinct and individual, they come together in collective resistance. 'Through counter-narratives, people with disabilities can destabilize widely-accepted norms and create space for alternative stances. However, collective action only takes place when people with disabilities feel that they are members of a community'.[339] Before publishing widely successful texts, the above artists had their creativity and unique

[335] Mukhopadhyay, T., 2003. *The mind tree: A miraculous child breaks the silence of autism.* New York: Arcade Publishing.
[336] Higashida, N., 2005. *The Reason I Jump: Inner Voice of a Thirteen-Year-Old Boy with Autism.* London: Hachette UK.
[337] Kedar, I., 2016. *Ido in Autismland. Climbing Out of Autism's Silent Prison.* s.l.:Ido Kedar.
[338] Savarese, D., 2017. *Doorknob for an eye.* Minnesota: Unrestricted Interest.
[339] Parsloe, S., 2015. Discourses of Disability, Narratives of Community: Reclaiming an Autistic Identity Online. *Journal of Applied Communication Research,* 43(3), p. 340.

voice overlooked in everyday life as it existed outside the majority preference for verbal expression. However, we can see that each of their accounts is strengthened by the network of autistic voices it exists within an be appreciated as both individual and corroborative.

Life writing in the age of neurodiversity

Stenning's formulation of generations of autistic life writing is a useful framework with which to consider retrospectively how the genre has developed:

> a Approximately 1987–1993: those that define or translate what autism is for a non- autistic audience, which were published after the publication of the DSM-III […]
>
> b 1994–2013: those that define a life retrospectively in the context of a later diagnosis of autism for the sake of what earlier experiences contributed to the possibilities of living an ethical life […] Writing from the position of their adult life, authors question fundamental assumptions about the nature of autism and need to refer to other autistic people as a source of authority […]
>
> c After 2013: those that seek to intervene in the social world more widely than in cultural understandings of autism.[340]

For example, we can see that Grandin's early work would align with the first generation, Robison's memoir corresponds to the second and a work such as Dara McAnulty's *Diary of a Young Naturalist*[341] exemplifies the third. This overview works well as a rough sketch to

[340] Stenning, 2020: p. 114.
[341] McAnulty, D., 2020. *Diary of a Young Naturalist.* London: Ebury Press.

demonstrate the changing mainstream perception of autism over the decades (from something obscure that requires an explanation to being appreciated for the valuable interventions and outlooks it presents). However, I contend that there are a number of exceptions which suggest the chronology is not quite as neat as it would appear from the above. I would argue that rather than being led chronologically by the years that have elapsed, autistic life writing is shaped by the extent to which outdated stereotypes and stigmas persist. The degree to which this impacts a writer (or indeed autistic communities in general) varies along socio-economic, cultural and geographical strata more so than according to chronology.

Camille Pang's *Explaining Humans: What Science Can Teach Us about Life, Love and Relationships*[342] is an example of a contemporary text that falls through the gaps between Stenning's classification. Working as a postdoctoral scientist in Bioinformatics, Pang relates the scientific theories she uses in her career to the behaviours of humans as a type of retrospective handbook for her younger self. Pang explores the very nature of humanity from what she believes to be a privileged position of existing just outside the threshold of 'normal'. Having won the 2020 Royal Society award for science writing, the book gained much traction, dispersing Pang's vignette of her autistic experience through those who did not necessarily have a primary interest in autism but in science more generally. Pang states 'I have become my own living science experiment: testing the words, behaviours and ways of thinking that will allow me to become, if not completely human, then at least a functioning member of my own species.'[343] It is notable that Pang sees herself as being

[342] Pang, 2020.
[343] Pang, 2020: p. xiii.

excluded from being 'completely human' on the basis of her difference. Whilst this remark is in made in the offhand, relatable tone of the text as a means of self-deprecating humour, Pang's reference to being granted/denied personhood alludes to what McGrath calls 'interpellation': the way in which something is named or brought into being by labelling it as such (typically from those external to autistic experience).[344] He states: 'I have been internalizing and therefore reinforcing ableist assumptions that normalcy is meaningful, attainable or desirable.'[345] Pang discusses how she is constantly experimenting with variants of masking as a coping mechanism to insulate herself against the way society frames a majority neurotype as 'normal'. This pressure shows the prevalence and tenacity of deficit discussion despite the progress made by neurodiversity movements. Pang's text arguably occupies a grey area between all three of Stenning's generations. The title uses inclusive pronouns to invite the collective readership to witness how Pang's autistic perspective intervenes in 'Love, Life and Relationships' as though occupying a position in the third generation. Yet upon reading, Pang's reflections appear to explain autistic outlooks and autism to a wider population, reminiscent of the first generation. This is not to undermine the value of either Stenning's framework or Peng's text, but to demonstrate that the mechanisms that created social stigma around autism and neurodivergence towards the end of the twentieth century still operate to this day. These complexities are key as I engage with Katherine May's texts and explore how she subverts expectations of connection and community in autism narratives.

[344] McGrath, 2017.
[345] McGrath, 2017: p. 109.

Environ(mental) health – Autism and the Ecosomatic Paradigm

In a recent interview with writer and editor Elise Loehnen, May commented on how 'part of our [autistic people's] exquisite sensitivity in the world [is] we can feel the edges of people and they extend much further than our bodies.'[346] This statement comes as May reflects on a session with a meditation tutor where she set to unpick the multiple strands of her newly recognised autistic identity – many of which she realises are external notions unconsciously subsumed. She employs meditation as a guise of unravelling these parts of herself that have become enmeshed with the opinions of others as both autistic and a woman. The meditation tutor describes May's vast aura as 'queenly',[347] and whilst she rebuts the 'too imprecise, too contingent on belief' nature of 'energies, flows, secret mantras and all the other accoutrements of the spiritual industries'[348] there is nonetheless an appreciation for understanding this sensitivity as a unique and powerful way of being in the world rather than 'prickly or awkward or difficult'.[349]

Understanding May's experience as a comment on the porosity of the mind-body (such as Haraway's acknowledgment that bodies do not 'end at the skin')[350] forces a reformatting of communication and connection as it is currently understood. Blurring the boundaries between species means communication is no longer an activity limited to humans. This mode of thinking redistributes connection among the more-than-human and places the 'rhetorical action'[351] in our connections to one another rather than with one party in

[346] May, K., 2022. *Passing as "Normal"* [Interview] (17 March 2022).
[347] May, K., 2018. *The Electricity of Every Living Thing.* London: Melville House, p. 201.
[348] May, 2018: p. 201.
[349] May, 2018: p. 202.
[350] Haraway, 1985: p. 200.
[351] Smilges, J., 2019. White squares to black boxes: Grindr, queerness, rhetorical silence. *Rhetoric Review,*

particular.[352] Environmental theories of embodiment which diversify conceptions of communication structure my discussion of how May uses the environment as a communicative conduit for her experiences. What begins as an electricity that May frames as a sensory interaction that exceeds direct, conventional verbalisation develops into a more embodied and bidirectional communication between human and more-than-human. I use environmental theories to first flatten existing ontological hierarchies before using this foundation to build ideas of how autistic and alternative communication gesture towards the possibility of a more entangled, enriching form of social interdependence.

Singer states 'Perhaps as the views of the 'neurologically different are heard more loudly, a more ecological view of society will emerge: one that is more relaxed about different styles of being, that will be content to let individuals find her/his own niche, based on the kinds of mutual recognition that can only arise through an ever developing sociological, psychological, and now neurological, self-awareness'.[353] For example, Stenning asserts 'It is only once we move beyond dominant conceptions of human subjectivity and agency that we can comprehend the extent of human interdependence and vulnerability in line with ecological thinking.'[354] Whilst Stenning focuses more closely on interspecies (human/animal) relationships, I will expand this to take into account the more-than-human environment

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38(1), p. 80.

[352] Although implicating the environment as an agent in caring relationships appears innovative within western thinking having only been brought to the fore at the turn of the twentieth century by feminist new materialist scholars, it is an integral part of culture and thinking for many indigenous and other populations. My discussion is not aiming to rename or culturally appropriate such thinking, rather I have drawn inspiration from the non-anthropocentric outlook to care and attempted to integrate it sensitively within my theoretical framework. As Boulton and Brannely state: 'This sense of interdependence, the adherence to the strength of the collective, an ancient relationship with a defined territory, and the understanding that humans are inextricably linked to the natural world are beliefs held in common by many indigenous peoples' Boulton, A. & Brannely, T., 2015. Care ethics and indigenous values: political, tribal, personal. In: *Ethics of Care.* Bristol: Policy Press, p. 72.

[353] Singer, 1999: p. 67.

[354] Stenning, 2020: p. 149.

generally.

Davidson notes that 'a form of agreeable sociality, a kind of being-with-others imbued with many varied phenomenal and emotional resonances'[355] between autistic communities and the more-than-human environment is frequently reported in autobiographical accounts. Stenning concurs and explores how the proliferation of autistic life writing raises awareness of the limitations of a human centred approach to the more-than-human environment:

> It just so happens that there is a growth in autism memoirs that simultaneously present a marginalised subjective identity, contribute to a burgeoning autism culture, and describe different forms of human embodiment. These texts make explicit their privilege, dependency on the environment and non-human others, and vulnerability to different types of pain and to mortality and loss. It is argued that the outsider status of writers who identify as autistic provides opportunities to challenge the ideologies of human uniqueness and ableism.[356]

My work picks up on two particular threads of Stenning's above statement and focuses on their application to environmental and ecocritical theories: I explore how 'different forms of human embodiment' (in this work, autistic perception and communication) forge a new perspective of 'dependency on the environment and the non-human other'.[357] To do this, I implement Cella's idea of the 'Ecosomatic Paradigm'[358] to expand Stenning's idea of interdependence towards a 'dialectic of embodiment and emplacement'.[359] The paradigm outlines a proximity between bodyminds and their environments (be that social or natural)

[355] Davidson, 2009: p. 899.
[356] Stenning, 2019: p. 150.
[357] Stenning, 2019: p. 150.
[358] Cella, 2013.
[359] Cella, 2013: p. 574.

which is so close that the boundary between the two becomes porous. Cella sees the main undertaking of the Ecosomatic Paradigm being 'deconstruct[ing] norms of embodiment whilst simultaneously promoting ethical treatment of the natural world.'[360] Cella frames the acknowledgment of deep entanglement between human and more-than-human environments as fundamental for stewardship of the planet, therefore galvanising a productive collaboration between disability studies and environmental humanities. It is the blurred boundary between bodyminds and the environment that permits the relationship to become bidirectional: greater appreciation of our dependence on and interdependence with the environment stimulates a stewardship that goes beyond potentially anthropocentric preservation of the earth as a resource for human usage and consumption. I use Cella's paradigm to more fully explore May's electrical, embodied connection and assess how it interlocks with neurodivergent outlooks.

To critically consider May's texts within such a paradigm conceives of an empowering, informed language that does not rely solely on an immediately recognisable 'representation' of autism as such. Environmentally informed readings are positioned to celebrate autistic perception's multiple, varying forms – even those that remain more latent. Applying the Ecosomatic Paradigm to May's texts supports a reformatting of the existing hierarchies of personhood on the basis of human exceptionalism, the dismantling of which is the foundation of this chapter. The ecocritical angle guides readers towards a comprehensive ethics of care that where interdependence is universal across and between the human and more-than-human world alike.

[360] Cella, 2013: p. 575.

Towards an (Eco)feminist ethics of care?

Wintering and *Electricity* portray dependency as ubiquitous in everyday life across multiple themes: motherhood and the nuclear family unit; disability and illness; community networks of care; interdependence with the natural environment; self-care and mental health for example. By highlighting the benefit of interconnectedness, May's texts query why mainstream discussions of care and dependency congregate disproportionality around populations perceived as vulnerable (children, elderly, disabled etc.) when in fact:

> Dependency is found not only in the case of the young child who is dependent on a mothering person. A boss is dependent on his or her secretary. Urban populations are dependent on agricultural communities. Persons on farms are dependent on electrical workers. Professors are dependent on janitors, and janitors are dependent on engineers. And so on. We are all interdependent.[361]

Western philosophy depicts moral agents as autonomous and independent, with care being seen as a private and personal matter. [362] In the late 1990s, along with second wave feminists, scholars such as Eva Kittay, Berenice Fisher and Joan Tronto sought to reformulate dependency as fundamental and universal to human experience. In Fisher and Tronto's reconfiguration of care under a feminist ethics we can see the kernel of a focus on environmental entanglements:

> On the most general level, we suggest that caring be viewed as a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that

[361] Kittay, 1999: p. xii.
[362] Keller, J. & Kittay, E. F., 2017. Feminist ethics of care. In: *The Routledge Companion to Feminist Philosophy.* London: Routledge, pp. 540-555.

> we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web.[363]

I engage in an ethics of care that appreciates the natural environment – 'our "world"' – simply for its presence rather than tending towards the anthropocentrism of it being merely the backdrop to our human activities. Puig de la Bellacasa similarly picks up on the potential of incorporating the environmental within discussions of care in her work *Matters of care: Speculative ethics in more than human worlds*.[364] Bellacasa extends conversations beyond being species specific towards being embedded, socially constructed and highly context dependent. By engaging in a form of care which is a 'force distributed across a multiplicity of agencies and materials'[365] we may move towards 'nonexploitative forms of togetherness'.[366] Bellacasa is committed to bringing marginalised or forgotten entities to the fore where care is distributed non-hierarchically.

By positioning May's identity as an autistic woman and writer within these ecofeminist and environmental networks of care she puts particular pressure on hegemonic, ableist notions of personhood. My argument explores how autistic outlook and communication can develop an understanding of mutual dependence where care becomes an 'assemblage', or a network. [367] That is to say, this discussion evokes an interconnected network of care which lauds diversity and interdependence. To enrich Cella's Ecosomatic Paradigm with feminist theories is to consider how unconventional modes of caring look beyond the typical

[363] Fisher & Tronto 1990, p. 40.
[364] Bellacasa, M. P. D. L., 2017. *Matters of care: Speculative ethics in more than human worlds.* Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.
[365] Bellacasa, 2017: p. 20.
[366] Bellacasa, 2017: p. 24.
[367] Bellacasa, 2017: p. 56.

dichotomous care/cared for when we interpret them as a form of mutual and universal interdependence. Such a melding of environmental and feminist theories is not novel, in fact much ecofeminist thought uses the environment to extend notions of care beyond the maternal,[368] the expectations of care in motherhood being a theme that May addresses with refreshing ambivalence. To partner feminist theories with Cella's Ecosomatic Paradigm is to create a discussion of feminist networks of care and the environment in a way that is grounded in a 'dialectic of embodiment and emplacement'.[369] That is to say, the Ecosomatic Paradigm moves my critical reading beyond imprecise notions of interdependence whilst my critical reading signposts the potential of a feminist ethics of care represents for Cella's theory. The result is a reading of May's texts as one of many possible responses to a question Kafer poses: 'What happens when theory is no longer based primarily on individuals' encounters with nature but on experiences of interdependence and community?'[370] The answer is a deconstruction of bodymind norms that encourages diverse modes of being in our surroundings through a renewed perspective of dependency and care.

Wintering as (Environ)mental health

May's unique outlook in *Wintering* fosters a connection with the more-than-human environment that emerges towards the end of her first text, *Electricity*. Bringing this connection to the fore acts as an answer to a question posed by Cella's Ecosomatic

[368] MacGregor, S., 2011. *Beyond Mothering Earth: Ecological Citizenship and the Politcs of Care.* Vancouver: UBC Press.
[369] Cella, 2013: p. 574.
[370] Kafer, 2013: p. 144.

Paradigm: 'What is to be gained by defining the variety of mind-body configurations not by their individual characteristics alone but also in their relationships with and dependencies upon other bodies, human and nonhuman?'[371] Continuing from her immersion in the natural environment and association with other species that began in *Electricity,* May's texts extend the significance of the more-than-human environment beyond a place of escape or mindfulness exercise. She presents the potential of an interdependence that takes human and non-human life equally into consideration. By bringing the environment into the foreground May considers the role it can play within conversations of care and dependency.

In *Electricity* May feels an electrical energy (as may be assumed from the title) conduct from the environment into herself which enables a unique, visceral connection that evades precise articulation. Towards the beginning of the text, May feels this energy in moments of anxiety: prior to identifying as autistic she didn't have the framework of neurodiversity to see her unique connection otherwise. She appears to be grappling with the possibility of how sensory communication exceeds verbality but is initially overwhelmed by this to the point of being in physical pain. May's own later diagnosis, identifying as autistic when she was nearly forty, provides a framework to explore the conflict she encounters between shifting ideas not only of her own identity and attempting to keep a critical relationship with her neurodivergence but also of autism as a category. It is as May begins to engage with the natural environment around her – walking, open water swimming, interacting with birds – that she begins to question the neutrality of her knowledge of autism and medicine's inherent bias. She uses walking and hiking to immerse herself not only in the environment

[371] Cella, 2013: p. 584.

but in her newly embraced identity. In this way, the reader sees May discover a unique mode of engagement (which could be generatively discussed as autistic inflection) towards the end of *Electricity,* which she further develops in *Wintering*. I argue that by finding an idiosyncratic means of expressing her intimate relationship with the environment, we may use *Wintering* to advance conversations on autism beyond existing models both of disability and of autistic life writing.

In *Wintering*, May advocates for occasionally stepping back from the demands of a fast-paced society:

> Wintering is a season in the cold. It is a fallow period in life when you're cut off from the world, feeling rejected, side-lined, blocked from progress, or cast into the role of an outsider. Perhaps it results from an illness or a life event such as a bereavement or the birth of a child; perhaps it comes from a humiliation or failure. Perhaps you're in a period of transition and have temporarily fallen between two worlds.[372]

Ostensibly a dismal image, May encourages us to lean into this uncomfortable feeling in order to better process and recover from it, to draw friends and families close to create a communal experience. To do this, she draws on her own encounters with a state of retreat being almost forced upon her by circumstance: *Wintering*, perhaps unexpectedly, opens in balmy September a week before May's fortieth birthday. Her partner, referenced throughout the text as "H", is rushed to hospital for a burst appendix. This becomes a critical juncture where May is forced to take some time away from ordinary life to care for her husband. Keeping pace with the natural rhythms of seasons, May's narrative spans

[372] May, 2020: p.9.

from September to March, a period in which she explores how different cultures (and species) embrace 'wintering' as a productive, community driven responsibility. The text culminates in May returning from her period of hibernation with a renewed perspective on caring and dependency. She explores how this means engaging in a more honest connection amid the pressures that risk commodifying our own mental health under the guise of productivity or self-sacrifice.

Beyond compulsory visibility (Towards Voluntary Visibility)

Wintering forces us to renegotiate not only how we understand the function of communication and the many forms of connection, but also how to appreciate difference when it is not explicitly labelled as such. As a memoir written by an autistic writer depicting her struggles with mental health, *Wintering* is uniquely informed by May's autistic lived experience. Despite this, the text keeps discussion of autism virtually absent - it is feasible to read the text as discussion of mental health without the lens of autism, as many readers whose interest lie with health and wellness may do. In other words, *Wintering* is marked by an absence of autism, yet I would argue that this is not an actual omission, but an absence only at the surface level. By occupying a structural rather than an aesthetic function, autism is made less visible with the focus being cast on the impact of an autistic perspective instead. Rather than imagining it as invisible or absent it is perhaps best understood as a lens that permits us to access an enhanced reading of the text. This *sense* of autism is more complexly knotted into the narrative, fortifying itself against reductive stereotypes and tired metaphors. Wintering creates a powerful form of presence through absence, demonstrating

that although autism may not be readily available to be witnessed throughout the text, the impact of a neurodivergent outlook is not dependent on other people labelling it as such.

Whilst I have used terms such as absence and presence until now, I would like to move beyond these binary terms, conscious of their potentially problematic nature within such a project. Murray notes how in popular media the autistic characters 'alternate between the twin poles of visual absence and presence' to which his productive notion of 'autistic presence' is particularly crucial.[373] This idea of specific autistic presence that emerged encourages us to attend to the legitimacy of autistic logic as it presents itself within everyday encounters. My ideas acknowledge the work done by 'autistic presence' but aims to both extend it in line with the pace set by the advocacy movement and also look towards a hopeful future which is inclusive of all difference irrespective of diagnostic status. A conversation about the so-called presence or absence of autism risks a reading of a text becoming a tick box or diagnostic exercise. May is not placing autism in a more covert position so that it becomes a cypher to piece together and arrive at an autistic reading. Nor is she leaving negative space through which the readers own autistic interpretations and experience may enter as if to coproduce a text. May chooses to obscure autism in this way to redirect the focus on her didactic message. It is this element of choice that I would like to emphasise as this distinguishes the instances when invisibility can be oppressive from times when it has the potential to be empowering.

I frame this as 'voluntary visibility' to demonstrate the resistive power of refusing to be immediately available or to perform your difference. Many autistic communities lament the

[373] Murray, 2008: p. 128.

double bind of being socially conditioned to mask but then being refused accommodations because they do not match the public perception of autism stereotypes.[374] Despite the potential benefit of recognising a shared experience of marginalisation through a shared identity, the personal merit of a diagnosis or specific label can only be determined by the individual themselves. In line with this, I argue that *Wintering* encourages readers to attend more closely to the diverse possibilities of communication and the many sites of rhetoric which are often overlooked.

To speak of voluntary visibility – disclosing information about yourself for the pleasure and pride of doing so – by default acknowledges the inverse which is *in*voluntary *in*visibility. I purposefully draw attention to the many ways that invisibility and appearing absent has harmed autistic communities and been an oppressive force which advocacy has long fought against. This includes (but is not limited to) masking, being spoken for by someone else, or the erroneous stereotypes that obscure real autistic experience. I mark voluntary visibility as distinct from this, as my notion represents appreciation of difference existing unconditionally and irrespective of labels. The term voluntary visibility alludes to the shadow existence of involuntary invisibility which is important in drawing our attention to the power structure that determines when in/visibility is a resistive force. Crucially, we must examine who is demanding in/visibility and to what end, even more so if this pressure is coming from a force external to the person themselves. In/visibility becomes a source of empowerment when it places this control back within autistic communities (i.e. voluntary visibility) since it has for too long been a pressure exerted from non-autistic outsiders.

[374] The fact that accommodations are only granted on the visibility of such difference is problematic on many levels as discussed by Botha, Dibb and Frost (2022).

This does raise some limitations in how we may discuss something that I have asserted is not conventionally visible. In a Saussurean sense, meaning is gained through comparison and relation, so perhaps the instance of autism in *Wintering* is best understood through how it differs from autism in *Electricity*. Both texts could be read as a form of invisibility since ableist stereotypes of autism initially occlude May's understanding of her unique relationship to her neurotype in *Electricity* where she wrestles with her 'personal and social dimensions [being] medicalized into invisibility.'[375] May's text highlights how true acceptance of diversity means accepting versions that are not immediately available to be seen as different.

In *Electricity*, May disclosed the turmoil that led her to identifying as autistic in adulthood. She undertook to walk the 630-mile English Southwest Coast Path in its entirety as she contemplated her identity and place within the world around her. With a more overt discussion of autism than is seen in her subsequent memoir, *Electricity* raises themes which are later picked up in *Wintering* as though the two texts are in a retrospective conversation. *Wintering* is structured as a series of light-hearted vignettes punctuated with contemplative reflections on the world at large and May's position within this. It is made intensely readable as the autobiographical aspects are grounded in reflection, and at the same time the autobiographical episodes are imbued with a sense of hope for the future with May highlighting all that stands to be learned from 'a season in the cold'.[376] This differs from *Electricity* which is purely a retrospective account, of course the text intervenes in contemporary prejudices and comments on the state of the world, but not with the same intent of looking to the future as in *Wintering*. In other words, if *Electricity* takes the form of

[375] Tougaw, 2018: p. 9.
[376] May, 2020: p. 9.

a more traditional memoir with a quest narrative structure, *Wintering* is an optimistic vision for the future. Considering both texts in dialogue with each other gives the impressions of a Janus face that balances looking back over a life as an undiagnosed autistic and a hopeful future with more nuanced appreciation for neurodiversity in all its guises.

In a second edition of *Electricity,* May contemplates the limitations of how 'a memoir is always a snapshot in time – unstable, imperfect, capturing meaning in flight.'[377] and as such states 'I hope this book becomes very dated, very quickly.'[378] *Electricity* would easily find its place within Stenning's generations of life writing, but interestingly would be more suited to those dated between 1994 and 2013 where 'Writing from the position of their adult life, authors question fundamental assumptions about the nature of autism and need to refer to other autistic people as a source of authority.'[379] This anachronism is not a criticism of May's writing but demonstrates the tenacity of outdated stigmas in the present days and as such continue to shape contemporary narratives. This means that whilst the discussion focuses on Wintering, Electricity plays an important role in charting the distance that has already been travelled between these two texts as a hopeful marker of the progress still to come.

When May first begins to toy with the idea that she may be autistic (in *Electricity*), she reaches out to her husband and recoils stating '"Oh God'[…] "are you my carer?"'[380] Whilst the statement is intended as a light-hearted comment to break the tension of what was anotherwise an emotionally fraught discussion, it is nonetheless very telling that her

[377] May, 2018: p. ii.
[378] May, 2018: p.i.
[379] Stenning, 2020: p. 114.
[380] May, 2018: p. 71.

husband is quick to deny that he may be her carer in any capacity. This alludes to the narrow perception of caring in society which limits care and dependency to those who are vulnerable rather than something we all engage in to live a fulfilled and interdependent life.[381] *Wintering* sensitively picks up the threads of dismissive attitudes to care and uses them to weave a more nuanced approach to how dependency, care and interdependency are present in all aspects of our lives and are enriched for this very fact.

May acknowledges that the act of wintering is a recognition of those moments when we need to relinquish independence and rely on those around us. Within *Wintering* this acknowledgment is instigated by her husband falling ill which disrupts the equilibrium of everyday life. Contemplating illness as a means of falling through the cracks of typical life, May considers how the hospital setting 'shepherd[s] us into another state of being where we are compliant, passive helpless – and willingly so. We fall easily into a hierarchy that we would otherwise resist in any other situation.'[382] Questioning why it is that we continue to resist this "state of being", through examining other cultures (both human and more-than-human) May explores how myriad instances of interdependence already exist and establishes an ecosomatic frame that highlights the merit of such cooperation. To configure it in this way allows us to question the extent to which the fallacy of independence is a result of a capitalist society driven by ideas of productivity. Although possible to read the text as a statement on neurodiversity, such a reading is potentially reductive of the scope of the disruption May is trying to achieve. This said, to appreciate the influence her autistic outlook has had on the production of the text provides a valuable reading: May is able to see that her voluntary position on the peripheries of society, as an autistic woman, is

[381] As per Kittay, 1999.
[382] May, 2020: p. 82.

actually a vantage point from which she is able to critique the practices we engage in and move us rewards more rewarding interactions.

Wintering not only addresses themes of care across many strands but also presents a critical relationship towards mainstream notions of dependency; over the course of the narrative May moves beyond self-care practices to practices that have a basis in community, shifting from the individualistic to the collective (with varying degrees of success and humorous outcomes). While May is signed off work due to stress, her doctor encourages her to go on the holiday to Iceland that had already been booked for the potentially restorative effects of a change of scenery. It is whilst in an Icelandic spa that May observes the sense of community between women as they engage in collective care, united through the kinship of gender. She reflects:

> In the changing room later, I experience a different kind of warmth: the nakedness of a dozen women all unashamed […] chattering companionably in a language I don't understand. They are a glimpse of a life yet to come: a message of survival, passed on through the generations. It's a message I rarely find in my buttoned-up home country, and I think about the times I've suffered silent furies at the treachery of my own body, imagining them to be unique. We don't know ourselves in context. But there is evidence of wintering here, freely shared like an exchange of precious gifts.[383]

In an attempt to recreate a sense of care that she has learned in Iceland, May decides she will indulge in some time in the steam room at her local gym. This unfortunately leaves her

[383] May, 2020: p. 40.

feeling faint and she resorts to requesting some assistance from the woman in the changing cubicle next to her:

> 'Excuse me,' I whisper, and then say it louder: 'Excuse me?' I tap on the partition between us.
>
> 'Yes?' comes a startled voice.
>
> 'I'm sorry to trouble you, but I'm feeling a little faint. I wonder if you could possibly get me a glass of water?
>
> A pause.
>
> 'Er is it absolutely necessary? Only I'm in the middle of getting dressed.'
>
> 'Yes,' I croak. 'I can't seem to get up off the floor.'
>
> The woman falls silent, and it looks for all the world as though she's thought better of conversing with me, and has just decided to get on with her day.[384]

In fact, the woman has gone to seek the help of the first aid team who come rushing in, exposing May in a state of undress. Related with a comic tone, the reader is nonetheless mortified by proxy. The two scenes are contrasting in their attitude to both community and care, the most obvious being the architecture of the changing rooms. May shows an awareness of this separation and distancing between people as she comments on her 'buttoned-up home country' whilst she is in Iceland. The architectural structure of the individual changing cubicles is allegorical of the perception (arguably one that is more prevalent in Western societies) that care practices should only occur in the private

[384] May, 2020: p. 54.

domain.[385] It would be a leap to suggest that private changing cubicles alone are symbolic of care practices more widely in society, however combined with the woman's solipsistic response to May's cry for help the scene alludes to entrenched ideas of idealised independence. It is interesting to note that in the scene in Iceland, May does not understand the dialogue that is going on around her as she does not speak the language yet she feels comforted by it all the same. Compared with scene at her local leisure centre, the conversation only acts to alienate the two women. This demonstrates how some exchanges are limited by being considered purely within verbal parameters and communication actually far exceeds this, a theme that is consistent throughout the text whether this be different language systems or different ways of communicating entirely.

This subversion of verbality as the sole way on conveying meaning continues as May partakes in a festival of light at a Swedish church. Despite a limited linguistic comprehension, the communal appreciation of something outside of ourselves (she engages in both faith and religion in a traditional sense and a more diverse notion of the environment and earth) allows May to immerse herself in a visceral sense of community. This develops into a contemplation on the limitations of considering the traditional nuclear family as a complete, encapsulated unit when other cultures readily accept that it takes an entire community to raise a child or care for elderly relatives:

> The loose communities that we find in spiritual or religious gatherings were once entirely ordinary to us, but now it seems that it is more radical to join them, a brazen challenge to the strictures of the nuclear family, the tendency to stick within tight

[385] Chatzidakis, A., Hakin, J., litter, J. & Rottenberg, C., 2020. *The Care Manifesto: The Politics of Interdependence.* London: Verso Books.

> friendship groups, the shrinking away from the awe inspiring. Congregations are elastic, stretching to take in all kinds of people, and bringing up unexpected perspectives and insights. We need them now more than ever […] If we resist the instinct to endure those darkest moments alone, we might even make the opportunity to share the burden, and to let a little light in. [386]

Whilst an autistic lens presents the possibility of interpreting 'stretching to take in all kinds of people, and bringing up unexpected perspectives'[387] as a statement on the inherent value of appreciating neurodiversity, May aims towards a more general appreciation of diversity (within which neurodiversity would necessarily be a component). Making use of the inclusive pronouns seen frequently throughout *Wintering*, she invokes a sense of community amongst her readers as though demonstrating the elasticity of a culture formed through common interests. This said, readers that have come to Wintering equipped with an awareness of May's previous work will recall that throughout *Electricity* she presents an ambivalent attitude to parenthood. She laments the loss of her independence, freedom and peace which causes her to actively seeks moments alone in the natural environment as respite from the responsibilities of parenthood. In *Wintering*, however, May contemplates how much of her fatigue around parenting has come from the artificiality of the nuclear family. She observes other cultures where entire communities raise their offspring communally sharing dependence and responsibility of care. This outlook marks a significant shift from *Electricity* where May considered how much of her trouble with traditional parenting was a result of living as an undiagnosed autistic since the situation ostensibly improves as she comes to understand herself better. It would, of course, be impossible to

[386] May, 2020: pp. 134-135.
[387] May, 2020: p. 135.

state whether restrictive ideas of the nuclear family or her neurotype had a more significant impact on May's reaction to motherhood – it is most likely a messy combination of the two. What is notable, however, is the shift in focus from what May feels to be an individual failure on her part in *Electricity* to what she critiques as a failure of society in *Wintering*.

Readers witness May's narrative develop from seeking solace in the environment as an escape from her parenting responsibilities to actually invoking the environment within an ecosomatic interdependence within which she fosters a more rewarding understanding of her son and their relationship. This is a subtle distinction that is worth clarifying: to escape into the environment for the sake of mindfulness has the potential to be a revival of the pastoral ideal.[388] Whilst this ideal has anthropocentric underpinnings, May's engagement with the environment is distinct and actively challenges anthropocentric hierarchies. Just as the ecosomatic paradigm presents a 'unity that dissolves the split between nature and culture and that understand the inexorable link between the two',[389] so too does May's outlook present the possibility of a restructuring to grant the non-human greater equality and appreciation. Whilst *Electricity* may have a tendency to present an individualistic escape from everyday life into the environment, *Wintering* presents a deeper connection with the non-human as a means for communicating with those around her (both human and more-than-human) to foster a more interconnected community life.

Having felt the communal impact of faith, May wishes to engage with the sense of community it cultivates but remains wary of the religious aspects. In order to do so, she reframes her meditative practice as a form of praying:

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[388] Cella, M., 2017. Retrofitting rurality: Embodiment and emplacement in disability narratives. *Journal of Rural Studies,* Volume 51, pp. 284-294.
[389] Cella, 2013: p. 592.

> Praying is something I can do, and so I do it. It seems to represent an atavistic impulse on my part, a desire to find life in the world around me, the trees and stones and bodies of water, the birds and the animals that enter my line of sight. Mine is a personal animism, hushed by my conscious brain, nurtured by my unconscious.[390]

The focus on a deity, as may be expected within praying, is instead scattered throughout all aspects of the environment from the landscape to the fauna and to May herself. Reinserting herself 'as part of a broader ecological matrix'[391] is one of the first instances in the text where May engages in a deeply visceral relationship with the environment as per the ecosomatic paradigm, albeit initially within meditative practice.

In *Wintering,* May discusses how her engagement in meditation builds on environmental author Jay Griffith's notion of everyday rituals as 'metonymic prayer'.[392] In an article in *Aeon*, Griffiths responds with the following when asked if she prays: 'Yes, I pray – earthwise rather than to any off-ground god – and, though I cannot tell you the words I use, I will tell you their core is beauty. These prayers are the strongest elixir of my language.'[393] Though previously wanting to distance herself from organised religion, it is no coincidence that the significance of May's practice has a religious quality. She feels that to immerse herself in private reflection is both grounding and makes her feel part of something larger than

[390] May, 2020: p. 133.
[391] Cella, 2013: p. 589.
[392] Griffiths speaks of how daily rituals may hold just as must intention and power as religious tradition or prayer but may not be appreciated in the same way due to their ubiquity: "Yet ritual is also alive in the slightest of phrases: a 'thank you' that enhances gratitude; a ghost of a god in 'goodbye' (god be with you); the grace spoken before eating. It is there in the little personal talismans touched a certain way for luck, because sometimes that one lucky strike of chance – before a journey, competition or meeting – is what ritual seeks to shelter, cradling the match to an Olympian flame. Given half a chance, habits seem to want to augment themselves into ritual: embellish a habit with attention, stylise it slightly, and it will elbow its way into the domain of rites, until even a cup of tea can be ceremonious. Tiny, everyday rituals are a hand-crafted prayer to domestic order, beckoning the divine to step inside a moment." (Griffiths, J., 2019. *Daily grace: Everyday rituals are ephemeral prayers, a hint to the gods for protection, encircling life like a fragrant garland.* [Online] Available at: https://aeon.co/essays/how-rituals-can-protect- life-with-a-petal-and-a-prayer [Accessed 17 July 2022].)
[393] Griffiths, J., 2019.

herself. She states:

> It is a profoundly non-verbal experience, a sharp breath of pure being amid a forest of words. It is an untangling, a moment to feel the true ache of desire, the gentle wash of self-compassion, the heart swell of thanks, the tick tick tick of existence. It is a moment when, alone, I feel at my most connected to others. I can feel entirely separate in a crowd of people, but closing my eyes, I can feel as though I have walked into a river of all consciousness, bathed in common humanity.[394]

There is of course a sense of irony in presenting a visceral experience which the writer acknowledges exceeds linguistic representation in written form and is therefore limited by its presence on the page. Griffiths, in her original article about praying Earthwise, describes how such ritual uses the 'elemental grammar of nature',[395] a sentiment that is mirrored by May and the deeply somatic way she engages in the environment. May sees her moments of reflection as 'profoundly non-verbal',[396] she almost toys with the fundamental components of spoken language (breath combined with words) before placing emphasis back within the environment ('forest of words', 'river of all consciousness')[397] as she feels this is the true locus of her communication. We can here see the contiguity between body-mind and place that Cella's ecosomatic paradigm draws attention to. It would be easy to overlook the fact that, despite feeling a very specific sense of place and emplacement within the natural environment in the above excerpt, May is depicting and internal sense of peace and reflection. She is not escaping into the environment as per the pastoral archetype or using an idealistic image of the environment for mindfulness purposes, rather she is using a sense of environment as a means of communicating a visceral experience. In some ways,

[394] May, 2020: p. 132.
[395] Griffiths, 2019.
[396] May, 2020: p. 132.
[397] May, 2020: p. 132.

this mode of engagement disrupts how we may perceive communication, connection and community – it is a private moment which exceeds verbal expression and so is necessarily limited by its presence on the page - but in doing so it highlights the incomparable depth of a communication system that bypasses the (artificial) divide between the human and more than human environment putting pressure on these perceived boundaries.

May addresses dependency through the many facets and forms this can take in contemporary life, including not only motherhood but also interspecies relationships. She extends conventional notions of binary carer/care recipient relationships to explore how dependency is something we all engage in throughout our lives and would benefit from embracing more thoroughly. May's exploration of how we may flourish through greater interconnectedness mirrors Kittay's statement on how redefining dependency may equalise and destigmatise care needs: 'Connection-based equality eschews this exchange reciprocity for another sort, one based on different kinds of expectations.'[398] This statement is significant in how May interacts with the more-than-human environment around her, particularly open spaces and waters. To see such an interaction as a form of dependency requires that we conceive of care beyond immediate reciprocation. In other words, although the environment cannot immediately return our efforts to care for it (it does not have the agency to do so), creating an entangled network of interdependency enriches community life in ways that may not be immediately visible (eg. rejecting anthropocentric hierarchies may consequently aid slowing global warming even if this were not the sole aim). Reconfiguring dependency within the environment like this can be quite a large leap for many readers and is of course led by my environmental framing. May addresses these themes of interspecies dependency using a relationship that many readers will be able to

[398] Kittay, 2013: p. 72.

relate to:

> Usefulness, in itself, is a useless concept when it comes to humans. I don't think we were ever meant to think about others in terms of their use to us. We keep pets just for the pleasure of looking after them; we voluntarily feed these extra mouths and scoop up excrement in little plastic bags, and declare it relaxing. We channel our adoration towards the most helpless citizens of all – babies and children – for reasons that have nothing to do with their future utility. We flourish on caring, on doling out love. The most helpless members of our families and communities are what stick us together. It's how we thrive. Our winters are social glue.[399]

May recognises the interplay between mainstream conception of care (eg. babies and children) and less conventional modes that may not initially have been viewed as a form of dependency. Read through a disability studies and critical autism studies lens, the above statement appears particularly poignant in relation to how personhood is sketched out. To accept someone into a community 'for reasons that have nothing to do with their future utility' presents the possibility of a society more appreciative of diversity and difference in all its forms.

Throughout the text, May has been building on the idea of community and connection as a network – be that a social one incorporating ideas of dependency and care or greater contiguity between the human and more-than-human. By exploring diverse modes of communication May is attempting to escape human exceptionalism to place herself back into a more natural, seasonal rhythm. Fitting into the boxes of social expectations obscures what is truly valuable: the potential of diversity. May echoes Cella as they '[promote] the

[399] May, 2020: pp. 236-237.

ideal of, indeed the life-sustaining need for, diversity – of bodies, minds, and landscapes.'[400] Paying more attention to autistic perspectives enriches considerations of how we all interact with and inhabit our environments, allowing a critique of social constructs that actively construct boundaries when we stand to flourish by engaging in interdependence. But of course, appreciation for autistic perspectives extends beyond what could be added to community life, towards admiration at the innumerable ways to interact with the world around us.

[400] Cella, 2013: p. 593.

CHAPTER 3
Autism against anthropocentrism: Environmental entanglement as Neuroqueer Kinship in autistic life writing and fiction

'To experience the texture of the world "without discrimination" is not indifference. Texture is patterned, full of contrast and movement, gradients and transitions. It is complex and differentiated. To attend to everything "the same way" is not an inattention to life. It is to pay equal attention to the full range of life's texturing complexity, with an entranced and unhierarchized commitment to the way in which the organic and the inorganic color, sound, smell, and rhythm, perception and emotion, intensely interweave into the "aroundness" of a textured world, alive with difference. It is to experience the fullness of a dance of attention. For all the challenges of autism, this is not without joy.'[401]

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Scholars have long asserted the limitations of considering social life at a purely interpersonal level when connection is dispersed so widely throughout the world.[402] Where neurotypical convention prioritises human relationships, autistic embodiment invites us to consider the infinite ways in which connection emerges from every element of life.[403] The anthropocentric

[401] Manning, E. & Massumi, B., 2014. *Thought in the Act: Passaged in the Ecology of Exerience.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. 4.

[402] For example: Plumwood, V., 2002. *Feminism and the Mastery of the Nature.* New York: Routledge; Davidson & Smith, 2009; Panelli, R., 2010. More-than-human social geographies: Posthuman and other possibilities. *Progress in Human Geography,* 34(1), pp. 79-87; Wolfe, C., 2013. Learning from Temple Grandin, or, animal studies, disability studies, and who comes after the subject. In: A. K. Siewers, ed. *Re-Imagining Nature, Environmental Humanities and Ecosemiotics.* Maryland: Bucknell University Press, pp. 91-107; Latimer, J., 2013. Being alongside: Rethinking relations amongst different kinds. *Theory, Culture & Society,* 30(7-8), pp. 77-104.

[403] For example: Judge, S., 2018. Languages of sensing: Bringing neurodiversity into more-than-human geography. *Environment and Planning; Society and Space,* 36(6), pp. 1101-1119; Mitchell, A., 2022. Resonant relations: eco-lalia, political ec(h)ology and autistic ways of worlding. *Nature and Space,* 1(1), pp. 1-23. Manning & Massumi, 2014; Stenning, 2019.

assumptions that underpin the supposed sanctity of human relationships are challenged by autistic experiences of diversly interconnected life: Take for example, Temple Grandin's *Animals in Translation*,[404] Dawn Prince-Hughes *Songs of the Gorilla Nation*,[405] Tito Rajarshi Mukhopadhyay's *The Mind Tree*,[406] Chris Packham's *Fingers in the Sparkle Jar*[407] or Dara McAnulty's *Diary of a Young Naturalist*.[408] Being unfamiliar with behaviour such as immersion in 'color, sound, smell, and rhythm' means [409]it is often misinterpreted as antisocial 'indifference'[410] when in fact it showcases 'unhierarchized commitment'[411] to the world around us. These 'enchanting extrasensory experiences'[412] advocate for the benefit of communal, co-produced social lives beyond human exceptionalism.

This said, I concur with Stenning in remaining critical of any assertions that a connection between autistic populations and the natural environment arises from an 'intuitive love for nature'.[413] This statement turns a complex and individual way of relating to the world into a reductive and quasi-pathological statement. Not every autistic person engages in these entanglements, just as not every neurotypical person is oblivious to them. I find myself wrestling with the tension of wanting to discuss the ways in which autistic connections put pressure on the discreteness of 'the human' whilst autistic populations themselves continue to face dehumanising practices. Autistic populations have a long history of being continually objectified and denied their personhood[414] which exposes how the term 'human' is far from

[404] Grandin, 2005.
[405] Prince-Hughes, 2004.
[406] Mukhopadhyay, 2003.
[407] Packham, 2016.
[408] McAnuty, 2020.
[409] Manning and Massumi, 2014: p. 4.
[410] Manning and Massumi, 2014: p. 4.
[411] Manning and Massumi, 2014: p. 4.
[412] Mukhopadhyay, 2011: p. 213.
[413] Stenning, A., 2022. Misfits and ecological saints: strategies for non-normative living in autistic life writing.. *Disabiltiy Studies Quarterly,* 42(1), para, 38.
[414] Samet, D. & Luterman, S., 2019. See-Hear-Feel-Speak: a protocol for improving outcomes in emergency department interactions with patients with autism spectrum disorder. *Pediatric Emergency Care,* 35(2), pp. 157-

neutral. In order to navigate this, I place the discussion outside of any hierarchy whereby personhood stands to be granted or denied, as though something to be earned, opting instead for the framework of 'queer inhuman'.

Queer Inhuman thinking applies a bifocal lens to the discussion of autistic interconnection. On one side is the so-called 'inhuman': an expansive, inclusive and elastic term designed to include life of all forms, putting pressure on the binary of in/animate.[415] Inhuman is a purposefully provocative term which is used with an acute awareness of its historical controversy in relation to disability and autism studies. 'Inhuman' is therefore invoked in recognition of and in resistance against the abuse and marginalisation that has historically occurred in the name of protecting the sanctity of the 'human',[416] resistive properties which are highly relevant to autistic populations and the disenfranchisement they face on a regular basis. On the other side is its queer element: this leans into queer inspired fluidity to highlight the constraints that binaries such as verbal/nonverbal, human/nonhuman or animate/inanimate put on discussion of autistic potential. With both sides combined, queer inhuman enforces resistive power (akin to crip) to reject an entrenched hierarchy where humans are exceptional or superior.

Queer inhumanity was advanced as a formal line of enquiry in a 2015 *GLQ* special issue which compiled environmental, feminist and indigenous outlooks. The field is defined by a 'commitment to forgoing ownership of the word "queer"' and branching out into multiple fields to facilitate an 'undo[ing] of normative entanglements and fashion alternative

159; Rose, K., 2020. *Regarding the use of dehumanising rhetoric.* [Online] Available at: https://theautisticadvocate.com/regarding-the-use-of-dehumanising-rhetoric/[Accessed 8 July 2022]; Michael, C., 2021. Is being othered a co-occurring condition of autism?. *Autism in Adulthood,* 3(2), p. 118; Botha, 2021.

[415] Luciano, D. & Chen, M. Y., 2015. Introduction: Has the queer ever been human?. *A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies,* 21(2), pp. 183-207.

[416] Wolfe, C., 2010. *What is Posthumanism.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

imaginaries.'[417] The focus is placed on the value of interdependency and the potential of diversity which make is especially applicable to autistic modes of engaging in the world.

Contributors to the special issue, Luciano and Chen, question 'Has the queer ever been human?' to examine the dehumanising impact of a social preference for sameness where minority populations become polarised between the status of 'at once a secret and a spectacle'.[418] Their discussion focuses on a series of images by photographer Laura Aguilar, *Grounded* (2006-2007), where a body that is regularly othered by dominant cultures be that 'fat, brown, queer'[419] is photographed within outdoor environments to interrogate their invisibility within public consciousnesses. Aguilar intentionally creates a symmetry between the human in the foreground and the landscape, placing the focus more on the relationship between the two subjects rather than either one of them individually.[420] Within disability studies the environment is largely discussed as a barrier or an obstacle, the point at which an impairment becomes a disability as per the social model. More generally speaking, the 'natural' environment can also act as an escape or a retreat from a busylifestyle.[421] In Western societies, the more-than-human shuttles between disabling or enabling human experience, but either way serving and existing for the use of humans. Framing landscape and more-than-human environments as resources upholds a binary of in/animacy which queer inhumanism looks to critically examine the legitimacy of. Aguilar's photography encourages viewers to elevate the scenery as more than a backdrop to being equally

[417] Giffney and Herd, 2008: p. 4.
[418] Luciano & Chen, 2015: p. 184.
[419] Luciano & Chen, 2015: p. 184.
[420] The photo operates similarly to a portrait of Eli Clare produced in the late 90s by disabled artist Riva Lehrer. In the image we see a tree branch emerging from Clare's chest as though the two beings have become fused or entwined. It captures the sentiment of interdependency and symbiosis that Clare advocated for. Lehrer engaged with a series of disabled advocates and academics in a project called 'Circle Stories'. The project is so called as Lehrer takes the archetypal symbol of disability – the wheelchair – and reformats it as s symbol of 'circular and collaborative process' of coming to understand the interlocking of disability and identity.
[421] Cella, 2017.

important as the photo's (human) subject. The equality as depicted in the photography dethrones the human by animating the non-human.

Luciano and Chen take dehumanising practices as an opportunity to interrogate what it means to be human to begin with. Drawing on indigenous populations' material and spiritual inextricability from native grounds they see human identity as 'flexible, multiple, and fluid, composed not only of different identities but different entities, different materialities'.[422] Eunjung Kim sees the power of the inhuman residing in the possibility of moving beyond ableist notions of capacity towards an 'appraisal of differences'.[423] Kim zooms in so closely on the singular point at which a 'sacrosanct but fragile distinction between humans and objects' occurs so as to render it absurd and arbitrary.[424] The proximity between so called 'object beings' and 'human beings' becomes a site of negotiation rather than an opportunity to exclude.

José Esteban Muñoz views inhumanity as a decolonising practice which invokes radical connectedness in the fact of inequality.[425] Muñoz's description of queer inhumanity is particularly applicable to autistic communication and connections: 'inhumanity is the active self-attunement to life as *varied and unsorted correspondences*, collisions, intermeshings, and accords between people and nonhuman objects, things, formations, and clusterings.'[426] For Muñoz and my own work, the inhuman becomes a form of radical inclusiveness that extends Walker's conception of Neuroqueerness to the non-human. Queer inhumanity sees animacy as constructed through relationships between various beings, it is not something

[422] Luciano & Chen, 2015: p. 186.
[423] Kim, E., 2015. Unbecoming human: An ethics of objects. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies,* 21(2-3), p. 295.
[424] Kim, 2015: p. 295.
[425] Muñoz, J. E., 2015. Theorizing queer inhumanisms: The sense of brownness. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies ,* 21(2), pp. 209-210.
[426] Muñoz, 2015: p. 210, my emphasis.

that may be denied or granted, but something that interconnectedness allows us to appreciate fully. Susan Stryker equips the inhuman terminology as an armour against the stereotyping and pathologisation of transness: 'The only option other than reactively saying "no we're not" to every negative assertion about us was to change the conversation, to inaugurate a new language game.'[427] In this sense, inhuman takes on the resistive and combative properties as seen with Queer and Crip, but rather than defining a group of people it is categorised by a set of interactions and entanglements between and amongst these groups.

I build on queer inhuman thinking to incorporate autistic outlooks through the concept of Neuroqueer kinship.[428] Neuroqueer kinship recognises adjacent kinships across various schools of thought but highlights the unique position of autistic cognition in fostering vast relationships. I use it as a rebuttal against research (historical and present) which casts autistic lives as antisocial or insular, arguing instead that autistic interconnection defies convention so it not as readily recognisable but is just as worthy of attention.

[427] Stryker, S., 2015. Transing the queer (in)human. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies ,* 21(2), p. 227.

[428] Kinship as a notion has origins within indigenous lines of thought but my use is led by Crip and Neuroqueer allegiances, specifically disability advocate Shayda Kafai. Kafai accesses a unique sense of peace, fulfilment and belonging from her encounters with the more-than-human which she discusses in her book *Crip kinship: The disability justice and art activism of Sins Invalid*: "I've always had a relationship with all the living world, including minerals and rocks. Growing up near the ocean, across the street from Golden Gate Park, meant waking up to the smell of salt in the air, the sounds of sea lions barking, and touching plants and pine trees every day. Now at fifty-four (that's at least seventy in crip years) I find myself deeply connected again to the non-human universe, inspired by the beauty of all that is not human" (Kafai, S., 2021. *Crip kinship: The disability justice and art activism of Sins Invalid.* Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, p. 10). Kafai's move back towards interspecies connection has been crucial to understanding her ageing embodiment. She sees the points at which we intersect and interact with others as a significant site of resilience. She balances the universality of oppression with the heterogeneity of individual experience where each group is empowered by their intersections with other groups. For Kafai, embracing intersections includes acknowledgment of our connections that exceed the human. Recognising the points at which oppressed groups may overlap and intersect can fortify their resistance against dehumanising practices whilst honouring the challenges they face that are unique to each group.

Inhuman animacies in neuroqueer narratives

In line with queer inhuman's scepticism of boundaries, I have purposely chosen two texts that, despite being united in their commitment to decentre human interaction, differ significantly on multiple fronts: Madeleine Ryan's novel *A Room Called Earth*[429] (*Room* from this point forth) and Dara McAnulty's memoir *Diary of a Young Naturalist*[430] (*Diary* from this point forth). These two texts complement each other thematically: *Diary* sits comfortably within the environmental genre that brings the less salient ecological and inhuman themes of *Room* to fore; *Room* leans more into a queer lifestyle which fosters an appreciation of McAnulty's actions as quietly radical. Taking the texts in combination with a queer inhuman reading amplifies both authors' expanding ideas of community, communication and kinship.

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Australian author Madeleine Ryan is openly autistic[431] and takes great pride in having written an autistic character. It is perhaps surprising then that the words 'autism', 'autistic' or 'neurodivergent' are purposefully never used throughout the novel. Instead, the narrative is saturated with 'different way[s] of seeing the world and experiencing sensations and processing thoughts'[432] that become enriched for being read as autistic. *Room* captures the vivid interior life and unconventional household of an unnamed and ambiguously neurodivergent narrator as she gets ready for a party. Ryan uses her narrator to demonstrate an ambivalence towards identity labels: *Room* gestures towards a hopeful

[429] Ryan, M., 2020. *A Room Called Earth.* London: Scribe Publications.
[430] McAnulty, 2020.
[431] In fact it was the writing process itself that first made Ryan feel she might be autistic. She wrote a character to whom she related to intensely and when she read her prose back she thought the character could definitely be read an neurodivergent.
[432] Ryan, M., 2020. *Giving Autism Some Love In 'A Room Called Earth'* [Interview] (15 August 2020). Available at https://www.npr.org/2020/08/15/902617618/giving-autism-some-love-in-a-room-called-earth [Accessed 20 September 2022].

future where acceptance does not require a diagnosis or disclosure. Commenting on the writing process that surrounded her narrator, Ryan states:

> As I was writing, I became conscious she was autistic, and I knew that. By putting it on her, I was conscious of the cultural and social ramifications that might have. But I was also aware that, to be able to create the change and open up, she needed to live with that label. If the word [autism] is going to expand, and represent what I see as something that's sacred and just wonderful and an amazing additional to humanity, then she needed to be there.[433]

Ultimately, Ryan decided to let the first-person narrative guide readers beyond the cultural preconceptions of autistic identity by witnessing the connections and interactions from the narrator's perspective.

Irish writer and naturalist Dara McAnulty released his first long-form publication *Diary* in 2020. The Wainwright Award winning text uses the shifting seasons as a scaffold for McAnulty's evolving relationships with his peers, family and ultimately more-than-human kin. He recounts how he struggled to 'feel connected to a world which was overwhelming and confusing' on account of his autistic identity.[434] His (self-appointed) position as outsider combined with his esoteric interests carved out a distinct relationship with the more-than-human. As a result, he started his 2016 blog that recounted his family's relocation from Belfast to County Fermanagh as a result of his father's conservationist work. Just twelve years old at the time, McAnulty used the written form to reflect on the support and comfort he sought in the natural world during this time of upheaval: 'nature was and is as

[433] Ryan, 2020: [Interview].
[434] McAnulty, D., 2021. *About Dara.* [Online] Available at: https://daramcanulty.com/about/ [Accessed 20 September 2022].

big a part of me as my own heartbeat – it governs the beat of the best part of me.'[435] Seeing himself as entangled within the environment, he detailed the activism he undertook to protect these precious spaces. McAnulty acknowledges how environmental stewardship can often be fundamentally human centred and seeks to appreciate the beauty of diversity in its own right rather than as a resource for human benefit. Through his writing, McAnulty demonstrates how boundaries between himself and the natural environment become blurred from which he takes an intense and visceral joy.

Room has a stream of consciousness, colloquial form and events take place largely in the present tense with the occasional flashback. This style proves every interaction and conversation to be laden with meaning: conversations with her peers might trigger musings on a tangential topic or a present experience could trigger numerous flashbacks. This works to build a rich picture of both the narrator and how her previous experiences feed into her present-day perspective in a way that defies conventional chronology. It is through these non-linear flashbacks that the reader gradually pieces together a portrait of the narrator and her past experiences. Through the narrator's introspective musings it is revealed that having lost her parents in a plane crash at seventeen, she now lives with the sole company of a cat. In the absence of a traditional nuclear family, she seeks connection in the more-than-human including everything from plants to celestial bodies without discrimination.

Diary (quite appropriately) takes the form of spontaneous, daily diary entries over the course of one year. It is comparably lyrical, making frequent use of figurative imagery as McAnulty processes his experiences. Writing at an emotionally turbulent point in his adolescence, the text details a geographical transition as he moves house as well as a social transition as he advances from middle to secondary school. Speaking post publication,

[435] McAnulty, 2021.

McAnulty discussed the pressure he felt (both self-imposed and from publishers) to go back and retrospectively edit his earlier entries. He avoided doing this as he felt the shift in writing quality from beginning to end was a significant element of his personal development.

Room works within a much smaller time frame but is not confined by this: The novel technically takes place over the course of a single day but manages to encompass years' worth of events in doing so as a result of its non-linear structure. The absence of a formal plot trajectory or timeline creates a sense of panning in and out between contemplating the minutiae of everyday life and considering ideas on a global scale such as climate crisis, racism and gender inequality. Ryan uses this scope to demonstrate the extent to which all of these topics, from the minute to the massive, are inextricably linked. The narrator's idiosyncratic engagement with objects of all scale and size indiscriminately blurs boundaries and redistributes agency in a way which corresponds with a queer inhuman line of enquiry.

Where *Room* obscures a specific autistic identity, *Diary* leans into autism as a way to examine McAnulty's position within society. Where Ryan's focus is on diversity in the widest sense of the word, McAnulty concentrates on overcoming anthropocentrism by reorienting the human back within discussions of biodiversity. In both *Room* and *Diary* the scope of the narrators' interactions range from the smallest of insects to celestial bodies. Queer inhuman balances the intricacy of the narrators' respective more-than-human interactions with an awareness of the significance these play in complexifying notions such as family, friendship and romance. The interactions are initially a substitute for more conventional relationships of family, guardianship and leadership but ultimately exceed these definitions to become even more rich in their own right.

Structuring the discussion within a queer inhuman framework reveals how the texts engage readers intuitively in a recalibration of agency and animacy in three main ways:

Companionship: The texts initially use readily recognisable ideas of companionship to demonstrate that more-than-human interactions can sometimes be so ubiquitous that they might pass without comment. For Ryan this is the narrator's intense relationship with her cat, Porkchop, which exceeds ideas of ownership or hierarchy. For McAnulty, excursions with the family dog permit him to access a precise sense of peace as the dog takes on a leadership role of sorts. Although these are likely to be familiar engagements with the more-than-human they put pressure on taken for granted categories such as human and animal.

Communication: Both texts juxtapose the richness of communication in one aspect of the narrator's life with an instance of impoverished communication in another. Ryan compares the scope of her exchanges with 'inanimate' objects (everything from plants to celestial bodies) to the vacuous small talk that takes place at the party she attends. McAnulty contrasts how dismissed he feels by his peers as opposed to how in tune he feels with the language of the natural environment around him to demonstrate that verbal interactions are not a prerequisite for connection. Moving beyond verbal language to more visceral communication encourages readers to re-assess where the boundary between in/animate may lie, if it exists at all.

Community: The final third demonstrates how both the above are building towards an expansion of community and kinship. By the end of the texts, both narrators appear to have found a balanced means of weaving the more-than-human kinships into their human

connections. For example, when McAnulty flourishes with friendships at school and meeting other likeminded people, he still prioritises inclusion of more-than-human entanglements. His attitude eschews anthropocentric stewardship of the planet viewing the relationship between people and place as not only bidirectional and animated but a necessary and invaluable part of our existence. Similarly, *Room*'s narrator does engage ultimately in a (human) romantic connection which she experiences on a deeper level for her celestial and environmental entanglements.

These three elements considered in conjunction are key to understanding the significance of Neuroqueer Kinships. Neuroqueer Kinships advocate for a significant restructuring of community where connection is distributed much more widely than just human relationships. It rejects the idea that inclusion needs to be based on common ground, similarities or mutuality. Diversity is appreciated solely for its existence rather than for what it stands to add or bring. Neuroqueer Kinships propose that diversity can be more adequately celebrated when unconditional appreciation and inclusion are the absolute base level of community.

Luciano and Chen ask 'how to forge connections between these divergent histories, how to think on more than one scale, how to remain responsive to the continuing historical urgency of particular or located crises at the same time as we face new universal or diffuse ones'.[436] By way of response, I posit that Neuroqueer Kinships sit within a network of adjacent kinships (along with for example Crip kinships) each of which engage with the more-than-human world in very specific ways. To discuss Neuroqueer Kinships highlights the idiosyncrasy of autistic embodiment whilst honouring the oppression faced marginalised populations as a shared experience. I envisage this 'kinship network' as being fortified by its

[436] Lucian & Chen, 2015: p. 192.

interactions and intersections with other identities whilst advocating for each identity's unique position within that network.

Companionship

Room offers a witty and incisive first-person commentary of a young woman's[437] (brief) attendance at a party and her commentary on the social cliques of which she skirts around the peripheries. As the narrator gets ready for the party she imagines if someone were to break into the house, she would be unaware due to the volume of her music. The richness of her interior life mean that these musings can take on a reality of their own and she credits a cat, Porkchop, for keeping her in the present moment: 'My inner process can be visceral to the point of being completely illusory, and absurd. Thankfully, I live with a cat called Porkchop who is a very grounding influence upon me.'[438] In the absence of any nuclear family in the traditional sense, Porkchop exceeds the role of emotional support/service animal to occupy a space between family member, guardian or friend. The narrator introduces her companion by saying she 'live[s] with a cat called Porkchop'[439] as though they are a roommate. This is a subtle shift from the typical lexis of possession or ownership – conventionally used when discussing pets – which is further emphasised when she describes Porkchop's role of protector as 'a self-appointed position'.[440] A queer inhuman outlook highlights the significance of the cat taking it upon themselves to act as protector as an instance of an animal being appreciated as a fully animate, moral being.

[437] Given the dynamic of the party and her peers' lifestyles she is assumed to be a young adult or in her early twenties, although this is purposefully ambiguous.
[438] Ryan, 2020: p. 3.
[439] Ryan, 2020: p. 3.
[440] Ryan, 2020: p. 3.

The 'mutual entanglement'[441] of cat and narrator has two main effects in line with a queer inhuman framework: portraying the cat as having moral agency places them in a grey area between animal and human with neither category being fully appropriate. The central, protective role that Porkchop takes queers ideas of family by demonstrating alternative forms of guardianship.

With the idea of family as a homogenous unit having been destabilised, Ryan toys with this further to explore how elastic definitions of family may be: 'Porkchop and I access a sense of wholeness that I rarely experience anywhere, or with anyone else. Our non-verbal union recreates the stillness of the respective wombs we left long ago.'[442] Along with a sense of exclusivity ('I rarely experience […] with anyone else'), themes of "wholeness", unity and peace (or 'stillness') permeate this discussion to demonstrate the depth of this bond and fulfilment that is gained through it. Ryan highlights how equality does not require sameness through the acknowledgment of the characters individual origins ('respective wombs we left long ago')[443] gesturing towards the rich potential of diversity in relationships of all kinds. Their communication ('non-verbal union')[444] is seen as a level playing field (i.e. the animal communication is not an impoverished version of something more human) indicating that verbality is not a prerequisite for connection. The subtle flattening of the species hierarchy is significant as it allows the focus to remain on their relationship as equals as opposed to the difference in their species – without prior knowledge of who Porkchop is this sentence reads as a tender moment of closeness between friends or kin.

In *Diary,* McAnulty's transition from middle school to secondary school is a significant pivot point and a focus of much anxiety. With bullying issues in his previous school having left him

[441] Munoz, 2015: p. 199.
[442] Ryan, 2020: p. 4.
[443] Ryan, 2020: p. 4.
[444] Ryan, 2020: p. 4.

with very few friends and peers, McAnulty refers to his family dog, Rosie, as his 'constant companion'.[445] He remarks frequently on the profound calming effect she has on him especially when the summer becomes occupied with uncertainty and nerves at the school year to come. As the narrative develops, Rosie aids McAnulty to deeply immerse himself in the more-than-human environment and to draw inspiration from her visceral and present interest in the world around her. The fact that Rosie exceeds simple companionship is initiated by her taking on a leadership role within the family: 'A strong, silent guardian. She's pretty docile now, and obedient […] We call her the "autistic dog" because she always wants to walk the same routes.'[446] Rosie is endearingly anthropomorphised in her depiction as an 'autistic dog' which situates her within the family unit. Significantly, McAnulty previously commented that his mother and siblings also identify as autistic with his father being the only family member identifying as non-autistic. Therefore, the inclusion of Rosie within this group distinguished by personality or neurotype rather than solely genetics gestures towards the numerous ways a family unit can be constructed. Not only does it break down the boundary between human and animal but demonstrates how the feeling of kinship is situated in daily occurrences and in inconspicuous ways.

The degree of closeness that McAnulty feels towards Rosie extends their relationship beyond the simple pet-owner dyad to her being a source of inspiration for him. The family make light of Rosie wanting to walk the same routes each day, however McAnulty's connection with her allows him to perceive that this might be due to her visceral engagement with the environment: her acute attention to detail makes the routes seem brand new with each day, reminiscent of *Slip of a Fish's* narrator's pleasure at the novelty created by shifting colours. He states 'When you visit a familiar place, it's never stagnant.

[445] McAnulty, 2020: p. 112.
[446] McAnulty, 2020: p. 112.

There's always change, and every new day brings a tilt, another view, something that previously escaped you.'[447] which highlights the richness of their respective interactions in the natural environment.

McAnulty writes with frequent zoomorphic descriptions of family members: 'We're as close as otters, and huddled together';[448] 'Mum is top dog. She-wolf'[449] which makes it clear that McAnulty is not attempting to relate to Rosie by approximating her to human standards, but he instead sees human and animal as overlapping. Rosie's role as leader and guardian has a positive influence on McAnulty demonstrating a close connection that exceeds and defies the boundaries of language and convention. A queer inhuman lens allows us to see that by subverting the conventional direction of care from owner to pet McAnulty extends familial caring connection beyond the human. Rosie's position as a guardian, role model and source of inspiration to the narrator goes beyond the loving relationship of a family pet to present the possibility of guardianship that bridges species.

The closeness to an animal companion, although not specific to autistic communities, is often cited as a source of unique calm and peace for neurodivergent people who may otherwise feel unheard and misunderstood. Dawn Prince-Hughes describes a real-life interaction with a group of gorillas kept in captivity, she describes:

> [T]hese captive people spoke softly, their bodies poetic, their faces and dance poetic, spinning conversations out of the moisture and the perfume, out of the ground and out of the past. They were like me […] And so we spent that first day, looking without looking, understanding without speaking. Writing poetry in our living, and

[447] McAnulty, 2020: p. 50.
[448] McAnulty, 2020: p. 19.
[449] McAnulty, 2020: p. 112.

reading it like weaving.[450]

Here the gorillas are arguably anthropomorphised more than Ryan's depiction of Porkchop, however in this instance it works to blur the lines between human and non-human rather than impose human standards on animal interactions. The 'conversations' between the gorillas defy comprehension in conventional human language ('understanding without speaking')[451] because Prince-Hughes sees them as far richer than any translation would permit. She engages with the gorillas on their terms and acknowledges the boundaries between them (despite the obvious physical barrier of their captivity) to be more of a semantic technicality than tangible separation. Prince-Hughes and Ryan's use of 'non-verbal union[s]'[452] corroborates the possibility of queer networks which are 'guided by silence that honors *queer* for what it is, as it is, even when it doesn't appear to be anything at all.' - a connection based on honouring diversity rather than imposing boundaries.[453] The Queer Inhuman not only animates the more -than-human beings but also draws them into the most intimate networks as peers, kin and family.

Communication

Prince-Hughes' focus on communication as a kind of 'poetry in our living'[454] runs parallel to the creatively neuroqueer engagement with language in both McAnulty and Ryan's texts which is key to foregrounding the narrators' commitment to unconventional kinships. As per the notion of autistic inflection set up in previous chapters, *Room* and *Diary* use the

[450] Prince-Hughes, 2004: p. 93.
[451] Prince-Hughes, 2004: p. 93.
[452] Ryan, 2020: p. 4.
[453] Smilges, J. L., 2022. *Queer Silence: On Disability and Rhetorical Absence.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. 230.
[454] Prince-Hughes, 2004: p. 93.

narrators' widening of the boundaries of conversation beyond the verbal to advocate for diversity in connection and community. For McAnulty, he draws attention to the fact that verbal language has frequently been used as insults and bullying for him where other (usually non-verbal) forms of communication offer a mutual understanding and respect. *Room's* narrator constructs a similar comparison between the dissatisfaction and disorientation she feels in a social setting as opposed to at home interacting with her plant kin.

In *Diary,* early in the text McAnulty outlines how the bullying and the 'foul-mouthed insults directed at the intense joy [he] feel[s]'[455] that he was subject to caused him to isolate himself and withdraw from peer groups. He recognises that 'when I am open to people the ridicule comes'[456] and immerses himself in the natural more-than-human environment around him with which he feels in tune and welcomed. Reflecting on how the flourishing beauty of summer heralds the end of a difficult school year, McAnulty discusses how '[f]riendship has always eluded me – what is it anyway? A collection of actions and words between two people or more, people who grow and change anyway. It's a good thing, apparently.'[457] McAnulty's writing elsewhere is lyrical and makes frequent use of imagery, but the lexis here is more functional and cynical in comparison.[458] The lack of literary flourish gestures towards the way McAnulty feels stifled by the prioritisation of human connection over any other sort of interaction (i.e. animals, plants and other more-than-human beings). There is an intentional irony to the reductive, almost disparaging, way McAnulty refers to relationships with his peers. *Diary* is dedicated to advocating for nuance

[455] McAnulty, 2020: p. 47.
[456] McAnulty, 2020: p. 47.
[457] McAnulty, 2020: p. 62.
[458] This choice could well have been inspired by having been subject to such restrictive definitions of autism and autistic capacity himself as outlined earlier in the text.

and diversity in our connections and the narrator sees a life without more-than-human entanglements to be impoverished. The flippancy with which he presents his views on friendship plays up to the hypocrisy of seeing the richness of one type of connection whilst remaining wilfully ignorant to others. Whilst social convention tends to argue that a life without deep human connections is incomplete, McAnulty insists that more-than-human entanglements should be taken just as seriously.

By way of example, for McAnulty the return of a flock of blackbirds is a source of unique and unrivalled joy:

> The richness of the notes, I can pick them out, even from the most crowded air space. They are the start of it all, the awakening of so much. The song carries me further back: I'm three, and living either inside my head or amongst the creeping, crawling, fluttering, wild things. They all make sense to me, people just don't.[459]

Where the previous extract appeared teleological and pared back, when McAnulty is describing his joy in the more-than-human environment his language is comparably energetic and lively. The paragraph is filled with kinetic word choice ('awakening', 'living', 'creeping, crawling, fluttering'). If the previous extract is symbolic of McAnulty feeling stifled, this example is him liberated and embracing his 'eccentric and chaotic'[460] personality. Compared with the bleakness of McAnulty's relationship with conventional friendships, statements rich in intensifiers such as 'They are the start of it all, the awakening of so much.'[461] signify potential and possibility. It is clear the birdsong has a deeply emotional connection for the narrator, reminiscent of his childhood. Notably, the narrator

[459] McAnulty, 2020: p. 25.
[460] McAnulty, 2020: p. 19.
[461] McAnulty, 2020: p. 25.

inserts himself 'amongst […] the wild things'[462] as opposed to an observer, saviour or steward of the natural world. McAnulty's experience falls in line with Queer Inhuman thinking that frames the environment 'as naming not the idea of the "natural world" as something set apart from humans but a complex system of interdependency'.[463] Even at the age of three his outlook destabilised species hierarchy and anthropocentric, human focused goals.

In the final sentence of the extract '[t]hey all make sense to me, people just don't',[464] McAnulty draws attention to the idea that the comfort and understanding he finds in the more-than-human environment might be something other people are able to access through human relationships. His use of the more-than-human to stand in for relationships with his peers demonstrates an intimacy that extends his love of the natural world beyond advocacy towards a queering.

In a similar respect, *Room's* narrator finds a distinct sense of contentment in the company of plants and other inanimate objects. While she contemplates her attendance at the upcoming social gathering, she compares the dissatisfaction she feels towards social niceties to the contentment she finds in relationships that exceed human boundaries.

When she is subsequently at the party, the narrator feels alienated by her peers which she describes as:

> I feel out of place here. Everyone has multiples of themselves and it's making me nervous. My presence messes with the established hierarchy. Before I came along, their mirror neurons were firing away happily, and now people are awkwardly looking

[462] McAnulty, 2020: p. 25.
[463] Munoz, 2015: p. 188.
[464] McAnulty, 2020: p. 25.

and not looking at me, and other people are starting to notice.[465]

Ryan uses the party as a microcosm of socially entrenched preferences towards homogeneity over diversity. The narrator acknowledges that her 'presence messes with the established hierarchy'[466] giving the scene a sense of tribalistic inclusion/exclusion based on how well attendees can maintain a perfectly curated version of themselves ('Everyone has multiples of themselves').[467] The encounter takes on a medicalised tone through the descriptions of 'their mirror neurons' which toys with and inverts the neurotypical gaze as default in much literature (be that scholarly, medical or literary). If we read the party as a comment on socially entrenched structure which Munoz conjectures 'remains with us partly as a means of disciplinary dehumanization and regulation, exclusion, and/or marginalization'[468] the scene demonstrates the narrator's sense of being excluded based on her openness to living and perceiving otherwise (i.e. the (neuro)queering of her lifestyle).

As she considers the multiple masks people seem to wear depending on the event she states: 'I feel safer with nature. It's just there, for everyone to see, touch, taste, smell and hear. There's a simplicity to it that puts me at ease.'[469] In referring to all five senses, the narrator outlines her visceral engagement with her surrounding environment with a sense of completeness – all her needs appear fulfilled. She appreciates the transparency with which nature presents itself and makes it clear that whilst she is particularly attuned to the rhythms of the more-than-human, this is not a secret or exclusive relationship but one that is readily available to whoever pays attention. This appears to be in direct opposition with how the narrator feels about interpersonal relationships throughout the novel. She laments

[465] Ryan, 2020: p. 95.
[466] Ryan, 2020: p. 95.
[467] Ryan, 2020: p. 95.
[468] Munoz, 2015: p. 191.
[469] Ryan, 2020: p. 12.

the multiple versions people have of themselves which she feels occlude any real connection.

> Lying on the grass for too long can sometimes be disorientating: it starts to seep in that I have no beginning and no end, and that everything is moving and vibrating and I might fall into the sky. Then I remember that the earth and the sky are my real mother and father and lover, and I feel calm again.[470]

The narrator feels she has 'no beginning and no end'[471] signalling how entangled she is in the more-than-human that the boundaries become porous. The narrator's intention to toy with and queer conventional familial relationship is emphasised by the fact that celestial bodies take on the role of 'mother *and* father *and* lover'.[472]

As the narrator considers leaving the party she can't help but return to the richness of the interaction between the narrator and the plants she cultivates to how impoverished those interaction at the party are:

> I talk to most of the plants every day, and I don't discriminate between the natives and the exotics. All of the interactions that I have are stimulating. I always learn something, and there's always something to be learned […] When differences are appreciated, and cared for, any conversation can be had.[473]

Room's narrator's affinity with the more-than-human beyond just an environmental interest to them taking on an intimate role akin to family or friends. The conversation at the party

[470] Ryan, 2020: p. 13.
[471] Ryan, 2020: p. 13.
[472] Ryan, 2020: p. 13. (My emphasis not in original text).
[473] Ryan, 2020: p. 38.

becomes close to an inanimate firing of 'mirror neurons'[474] compared with the narrator's exchanges with her plants which takes the form of a reciprocal conversations between peers: 'All of the interactions that I have are stimulating. I always learn something'.[475] From the narrator's point of view, the people in attendance of the party blur into a monolith with shared dismissive attitudes whilst she maintains a rewarding and reciprocal relationship with her plant kin on an individual level.

Within the first excerpt, the difference the narrator represents is perceived as a threat to 'the established hierarchy'[476] whereas in the final passage 'differences are appreciated'[477] as a valuable instance of diversity and an opportunity for learning and growth. This demonstrates that the narrator's queer outlook extends beyond just her unconventional household and familial relations to flexibility and diversity in the widest sense. The final sentence of the above extract intentionally widens the scope of the conversation as if to lament the fact that such fulfilment and richness could be found in relationships with human peers, but they are held back by arbitrary notions of inclusion/exclusion based on perceived similarities. By relating to more-than-human beings on such a close level and being open to the fact that 'there is always something to be learned',[478] Ryan's narrator embraces the queer inhuman in a way that widens the scope of friendship and connection. Within the frame of queer inhuman, both narrators' unique outlooks 'deflate the overblown human ego and open new possibilities for thought and action'.[479] Ryan is united with McAnulty in putting pressure on social standards that prioritise human connection when we might be challenged and enriched by any number of connections around us.

[474] Ryan, 2020: p. 95.
[475] Ryan, 2020: p. 38.
[476] Ryan, 2020: p. 95.
[477] Ryan, 2020: p. 38.
[478] Ryan, 2020: p. 38.
[479] Munoz, 2015: p. 192.

Community

Both texts challenge the widespread prioritisation of human connection to the exclusion of more diverse interactions. Initially, the narrators do this by juxtaposing the richness of their more-than-human connections with the shortcomings of human relationships. Whilst the integration of the more-than-human into intimate relations aligns with a queer outlook to a degree, as the texts come close to their respective endings we see both narrators' deep engagement with queer inhuman become clear: the commitment to a queer outlook on a deeper level is illustrated by the way in which the narrators find an equilibrium between human and more diverse interactions.

For McAnulty, who had turned to animal and environmental kin as a result of chronic bullying, when he eventually finds a group of people with shared interests, he maintains both sorts of connections and sees both the human or the more-than-human relationships enriched for their interaction with each other. McAnulty is initially surprised at the liberation this presents for him to showcase his passions and knowledge but soon finds a sense of joy and connection he had assumed impossible outside of his family or the more- than-human. When interacting with a group of conservationists he muses:

> I feel at ease. This is so rare. They aren't teasing or confusing me. I ask questions which are given detailed, intelligent answers, and it feels as if I've been dipped in a golden light. This is what I want to do. This is what I want to be, surrounded by kindred spirits, doing useful things with care, knowledge and clarity. Surely this is enough to quench my overactive brain. Surely this would mean I'd be happy. My endless need for facts and hunger for information don't necessarily fill me with ease. This is

> different, though. For here and now I am working and seeing and feeling, and it is more than enough.[480]

The passage opens with short, simple sentence structure as if to present that McAnulty is partly in a state of shock but also that this type of interaction 'is enough to quench [his] overactive brain' for which writing had been the outlet in the first place. McAnulty returns to a lexis that highlights how safe and 'at ease' he feels in this environment: 'care', 'clarity' and 'kindred spirits'. He appears to feel fulfilled by this interaction of 'working and seeing and feeling' with the string of conditionals 'this would mean I'd be happy' presenting how hopeful he is for his future where he had previously been in a state of survival, unable to see beyond the approach of the next season.

Despite engaging in these flourishing professional relationships, McAnulty nonetheless continues to seek inspiration from arboreal networks:

> I wish we could translate the language of trees – hear their voices, know their stories […] And I believe trees are like us, or they inspire the better parts of human nature. If only we could be connected in the way this oak tree is connected with its ecosystem.[481]

McAnulty laments the fact that trees' communicative capacity is often overlooked as it exceeds human comprehension. With this taken into consideration he contemplates how we may be able to understand them on a much more intimate level: their ability to communicate appears to reanimate them with 'voices' and 'stories'. McAnulty initially draws a comparison between tree and humans 'I believe trees are like us' but quickly

[480] McAnulty, 2020. p. 86.
[481] McAnulty, 2020. p. 69.

corrects this as he sees the scope of the network as something to aspire to and be led by and a straight comparison would only be reductive. This outlook challenges anthropocentric notions of trees on multiple fronts (be that as a resource for human consumption or a passive backdrop) and reaffirms the fact that agency is not measured or inhibited by silence. By mobilising a queer inhuman inspired flexibility in his approach, McAnulty is able to see the environment as a blueprint for how we might encourage more nuanced notions of community and brings this to his newly established human connections. Inhuman connections are not only valuable in the absence of other relationships (i.e. friendships with peers) but important in their own right.

In addition to the professional relationships he has fostered, McAnulty has become much more successful at establishing friendships at his new school than was seen earlier in the text and has put the bullying episodes in the past. Despite now being readily included in multiple social groupings, McAnulty displays an ambivalence to the binary of inclusion/exclusion that he feels categorisation often invokes as he states 'I want to belong, yet I hate the notion of belonging.'[482] McAnulty aims to place his existing and developing relationships within the scaffold of a more environmentally inhuman inspired network – a Neuroqueer Kinship. This means that rather than shuttling between human and more-than-human connections, McAnulty's purposefully places his relationships alongside so that they might overlap and develop common ground. Reflecting on his experience with the conservationists, he realises that this glimpse into his future has made his connection to the more-than-human even more intense:

[482] McAnulty, 2020. p. 74.

> I start to fill with something visceral. This is who I am. This is who we all could be. I am not like these birds but neither am I separate from them. Perhaps it's a feeling of love, or a longing. I don't know for certain.[483]

Through his engagement with the more-than-human, McAnulty accesses a distinct sense of self which is neither separate from the natural environment nor is completely subsumed by it. This blending and bleeding of categories shows a sustained queer inhuman outlook whereby McAnulty himself is included as inhuman. Within this line of thinking, McAnulty revels in the fact that he doesn't 'know for certain' and leans into doubt as a mode of accessing flexibility and diversity. His passion for the environment has exceeded advocacy of stewardship by this point and he actively recognises it as 'a feeling of love, or a longing' demonstrating the intensity and importance of these relationships for McAnulty on a deeply personal level. Where environmental connections might at one point have acted as a substitute for McAnulty's human relationships, by the end of the text it becomes clear that they hold a much more complex and inexpressible value of kinship, the intricacy of which would be distorted and diminished in any attempt to fit them in the space left empty by absent friendships.

Ryan's narrator follows a comparable trajectory as she is about to leave the party and return to the solace of her own company but strikes up a conversation with another attendee which develops into an unconventionally romantic connection. To allow this person into the sacred space of her home is initially jarring for the narrator but the widespread connections she has established in plants and celestial bodies allow her to enjoy the romance from a different perspective and on a deeper level. Contemplating how this relationship might

[483] McAnulty, 2020. p. 82.

develop, she reflects on how the pressure to conform shapes how she perceives and experiences her body, often seeing herself as an inanimate agent carried along by the decisions of others.

'I just want to take my body off, hang it on a hook, and grab some air, because every stroke, whisper, request, poke, brush, smile, squeeze, lick, kiss, and breath can feel like a fight for territory […] because honouring the multidimensional and miraculous nature of who we are is a bit uneconomical, and a bit inefficient. It's tricky to sum that shit up in a forty-five-minute lunch break. It's faster, and cheaper, and easier, to just hate each other, the planet, and ourselves.'[484]

Far from the connected, 'multidimensional' and ecologically entangled way the narrator is described elsewhere in the text, when reflecting on her past self she appears reduced to an object to fight over, a 'territory'. Her body is similarly objectified as an item to wear or hang up and something from which she is wholly disconnected. The objectification of the narrator in this way serves to demonstrate how socially confined that distribution of agency is. The narrator asserts how any attempt to connect to her without understanding her multiplicity and infinite entanglements essentially revokes her sense of agency and turns her into an object. She observes that in a society where sameness is praised and diversity is disruptive it is often easier 'to just hate each other, the planet, and ourselves'. '[T]he planet' occupies a significant position at the centre of this clause which not only demonstrates how tightly knotted the planet is within discussions of agency and injustice but it also structurally separates her from the hate of others as though alluding to the protective capacity of the environment. Ultimately, without her interconnectedness the narrator relinquished her

[484] Ryan, 2020: p. 125.

agency to the extent that she became inanimate akin to a passive landscape ('territory').

This flashback draws attention to how easily the narrator feels agency may be removed, but she uses this as motivation to explore how easy it would be to redistribute agency amongst other more-than-human agents. As the novel approaches its close, she uses this energy to reach an equilibrium comparable to McAnulty's revelation upon finding likeminded peers where she engages in diverse and interconnected relationships of which the human is just one node. The narrator introduces her date firstly to Porkchop, then her plants and just before the novel ends, she immerses him in her butterfly house, which he finds intensely spiritual. The connection that she shares with her new companion is depicted as a gravitational pull as though operating on a similar plane to her vast celestial and ecological connections. As they make a sandwich together, she observes:

> I experienced such a powerful charge in our electromagnetic field as I gave him the bread knife […] It emerged just like electricity […] The energy field that we create together is so full, and intimate. People must obsess over the physical act of sex when whatever *this* is is lacking. It's like sex becomes the outlet when we don't feel connected to each other emotionally and energetically.[485]

The connection she feels to her date defies description and exceeds the boundaries of any relationships she can describe so is simply 'whatever *this* is' (author's emphasis). She expresses her need to feel connected 'emotionally and energetically', which she constantly receives from the more-than-human but has struggled with in human relationships. The ineffable '*this*' of the connection operates on a similar level to her planetary connections

[485] Ryan, 2020: p. 233.

('electromagnetic field', 'energy field') giving her a sense of familiarity but also exhilaration that she has found the level of intimacy she has with the inhuman. Whilst the narrator's interior voice muses on topics of a sexual nature, nothing like this develops between them. Instead, the intimacy takes the form of making each other food, introducing him to her plant and animal kin and finally falling asleep. The narrator views caring for each other in a way that incorporates her environmental engagements as an intense form of intimacy. Despite their cosmic connection, the narrator is happy to keep the experience as a one-off and wishes her companion goodbye in the morning without any conventional romance: 'So let a goodbye be a goodbye, and my life on earth can be whatever it is too.'[486]

The fact that the novel eschews the conventional, heteronormative romantic ending demonstrates its commitment to decentring human relationships. The narrator doesn't reject romance entirely, she expresses a desire to be met and appreciated exactly as she is as well as an openness to the shifting nature of her 'life on earth'. She sees romantic relationships as just one component in her richly entangled network of Neuroqueer Kinship.

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The neurodivergent narrators instrumentalise their position on the peripheries of social groups to remain critical of the socially constructed nature of notions such as inclusion/exclusion, animate/inanimate and even human/inhuman. Seen from this angle, both narrators initially viewed human relationships as impoverished and, in the face of

[486] Ryan, 2020. p. 289.

exclusion and mistreatment from their peers, instead opted for the diverse 'multidimensional' relationships of the queer inhuman. Initially shunning the human and seeking out the inhuman, the narrators then saw an opportunity to raise their human networks to the richness they experienced in other elements of their lives by taking the lead from environmental and animal kin. A queer lens demonstrates that whilst these networks operate on a level so intimate and integral to the narrators, comparison to heterocentric ideas of family and relationships would only stifle and distort these ideas. In turn, an inhuman lens demonstrated that the agency which both narrators distributed to the more-than-human environments allowed them to expand ideas of community and to foster an unconditional (and often wordless) acceptance into networks of Neuroqueer Kinship. Autistic ways of living and perceiving demonstrate the benefit of maintaining a critical perspective and 'open new possibilities for thought and action':[487] infinite potential forms of community can flourish when diversity is prioritised and difference is celebrated.

[487] Munoz, 2015: p. 192.

In/conclusion

This thesis contends that as far as the future of autism is concerned: "Uncertainty is a gateway to the possible."[488] Now, when asked by non-autistic peers 'What is autism?' I take great pleasure in the surprise elicited when answering 'I don't know.' In a field saturated with non-autistics explaining autism to non-autistics, leaving questions about the fundamental nature of autism unanswered becomes a form of resistance. It is therefore a strange position in which I find myself, attempting to write a conclusion about a set of circumstances which are very much unknown, incomplete and constantly developing. The format of a conclusion suggests a degree of certainty or completeness but after working within the field for three years I move continually (and intentionally) further from any such assuredness. I maintain that autism is productively conceived of as being in constant motion, 'a series of temporary configurations made unstable and more theoretically diverse by the variety of disciplines involved'.[489] Rather than falsely represent a sense of finality, in lieu of a conclusion per se I offer 'Momentum', a section dedicated to discussing exciting avenues that autism research and creativity is currently pursuing, which brings us closer to hopeful neuroqueer futures.

I will firstly outline the contribution of this thesis to the developing fields of Autism and Neurodiversity studies before moving on to a discussion of exciting new neuroqueer ventures. My outlook stands to challenge current research priorities within the field that use the 'enshrinement of the idea of the scientific method' to foster a fallacy of objectivity where autism is extractable from culture and society.[490] Led by autistic voices I present

[488] Beghetto, R., 2020. Uncertainty. In: V. P. GLaveanu, ed. *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of the Possible.* London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 1-7.
[489] Silverman, 2012: p. 22.
[490] Botha, 2021: p. 2.

autism as entangled and enmeshed within culture to not only problematise the definition we arrive at, but to widen the scope of what may be considered 'culture' or 'creativity'. As Spectrum 10k awaits the ethical green light to resume their study, the past year acts as a reminder of the of quite how much work is still left to do for autistic communities and voices to achieve equality in society. I stand united with an increasing body of colleagues who offer toolboxes,[491] templates[492] and techniques by which we might better understand autistic epistemologies.[493] In line with this, my own project has set out to render the cultural constructions of autism more visible and acknowledges the ways in which literature makes (long overdue) space for autistic voices who are best positioned to speak about their lives.

I have been committed to challenging my predecessors in the Critical Autism field and look forward to a (not too distant) future where my own work will be subject to such rigorous criticism as the field continues to progress. This thesis positions autism as a way of living and perceiving that invigorates tired standards of sameness; just a few shifts in perspective can reframe dependence, disability and divergence as powerful indicators of diversity rather than 'disorder' in our everyday encounters. In Katherine May's new creative non-fiction published this year, *Enchantment,* she embraces a welcomeness to being enchanted rather than a desire to demystify and explain.[494] She states: 'It's not just that the world needs to change – I need to change, too. I need to soften, to let go of my tight empirical boundaries, to find a greater fluidity in my being […] that intuitive mode of thought that allows us to reside in 'uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and

[491] Rosqvist et al., 2023.
[492] Lin, L., 2023. *Lin, Liya. Autism and Songwriting: A Case Study Exploring the Intersectionality and Personhood of an Autistic Singer-Songwriter.,* Florida: Doctoral Dissertation - The Florida State University.
[493] Guberman, J., 2023. # ActuallyAutistic Twitter as a Site for Epistemic Resistance and Crip Futurity. *ACM Transactions on Computer-Human Interaction,* 30(3), pp. 1-34.
[494] May, K., 2023. *Enchantment: reawakening wonder in an exhausted age.* London: Faber & Faber.

reason'.[495] Whilst living alongside doubt has the potential to be a vulnerable position, *Enchantment* muses on the liberating possibility of living in wonder and wonder*ing* without the possibility of answers. Moving beyond a requirement to 'know' in any certain terms presents new ways to appropriately appreciate and accommodate autism's present, to protect and ensure neurodiverse futures.

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In the meantime, this thesis specifically offers creativity as a rebuttal against dominant medical models and pathologising perspectives. The flexibility and fluidity of queer theory was essential to underpinning my understanding of the transient and shifting relationship, where autism sits as an intersecting node in a network of theories and models. I have been led by autistic modes of living to assert a three-pronged approach to how we may reconfigure communities, communication and connection, critiquing the structure we uphold and the boundaries that seem so ubiquitous as to often pass unquestioned.

I firstly invoked Amy Arnold's distinct narrative style as a valuable instance of 'Autistic Inflection' through which we can expose how expectations of language interlock with personhood, (in)humanity and agency on a much wider level.

Then, through Katherine May's creative life writing I explored the resistive power of autistic (in)visibility and 'Voluntary Visibility'. Considering her two memoirs in conversation with one another framed them as a kind of Janus face looking both backwards and forwards over her relationship with autistic identity. Her text *Wintering* laid out a template for networks which centralise interdependency and move dependency beyond disabled populations towards a universal mode of engaging with the world around us.

[495] May, 2023: p. 8.

Finally, I placed Dara McAnulty and Madeleine Ryan in a cross-genre conversation to shed light on quite how far the tendrils of social expectations around autistic capacity extend. Using the notion of the 'queer inhuman', inter-species 'Neuroqueer Kinships' were uncovered as the cumulative effect of 'Autistic Inflection' and 'Voluntary Visibility'. These diverse connections dethroned human relationships in a move towards considering interactive community-based networks.

I maintain that the tension surrounding conversations about autism has the potential to be a productive force; it can be seen as the outcome of multiple fields co-existing, contradicting and conversing without exerting the dominance of a single school of thought. If we conceive of neurodivergence as elastic, tension is proof that our conversations are stretching the category we currently understand as autism. Walker sees autism as 'a culturally constructed category that won't necessarily last forever or be culturally relevant forever.'[496] Following in the footsteps of queer thinking's vast applicability beyond itself, there may come a point where the elastic is so stretched that it snaps and '[n]eurodiversity becomes a source of inspiration rather than a matter of categorical separation.'[497] To follow this line of thinking, I will review some examples of scholars and creatives who push these boundaries, optimistic that a neurocosmopolitan existence lies beyond the 'snapped elastic'.

[496] Walker, N. & Raymaker, D., 2021. Toward a neuroqueer future: An interview with Nick Walker. *Autism in Adulthood,* 3(1), p. 9.

[497] Bervoets, J., 2022. Neurogradualism: Neurodiversity Without Categorical Difference, A Case Study of Autism. *InterCultural Philosophy,* Volume 1, p. 65.

Momentum

Ten years have passed since Savarese first borrowed postcolonial terminology to coin the idea of Neurocosmopolitanism as a remedy to both appreciating and accommodating difference. If, he notes, a cosmopolitan in the traditional sense is a place where citizens from any part of the world feel welcomed and appreciated, by extension, a Neurocosmopolitan is 'the feeling of being at home with all manner of neurologies' through a dethroning of privileged neurotypicality.[498] The promotion of this 'neuro-equality' moves away from social hierarchies that operate using ideas of normal functioning, or autistic communities being accepted into society only upon realisation that they may contribute something. 'Happiness is our potential, the product of a mind that's allowed to think as it needs to, that has enough of what it requires, that is free of the terrible weight of bullying and humiliation.'[499] Recognising that models of disability are transient in their usage, and that our conversations will extend beyond these, fosters an openness to being educated about the differences that autism presents. This segues to a recognition that it is not the autistic person's responsibility to translate their perspective into something understood by the majority: Savarese's Neurocosmopolitan reframes neurodiversity as something to be appreciated purely for its existence within human variation rather than any potential benefits it may offer. Walker mentions with excitement that we cannot know what our neurocosmopolitan future looks like, all we can do is continue to take steps to ensure the emancipatory future.[500] Below, I discuss some examples which demonstrate exciting steps already being taken towards such neurodiverse futures.

Autistic Inflection in 'The Autists'

[498] Savarese, R., 2013. From Neurodiversity To Neurocosmopolitanism: Beyond Mere Acceptance and Inclusion. In: H. Perry, ed. *Ethics and Neurodiversity.* Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, p. 193.
[499] May, 2020, p. 138.
[500] Walker, 2021.

Swedish writer Clara Törnvall's life writing, *The Autists,* was published in May 2023 following her own autism diagnosis at the age of 42.[501] Törnvall uses the evaluation process as a framework to discuss just how far her identity extends beyond this reductive perspective. Living in Sweden, Törnvall notes that attitudes towards autistic populations is still largely coloured by a dominant medical framework where, until 2021, autistic people were prevented from working for the police or the military and where they must still submit a doctor's note about their diagnosis when they apply to learn to drive.[502]

Törnvall reads neurotypical, mainstream communication patterns as a sign that 'people are always expected to be in a hurry and it's thought of as normal to choose the fastest lane, the most efficient way of getting ahead'.[503] Törnvall corroborates the opinions of Baggs[504] and Yergeau[505] as she contemplates how, in neurotypical conversations, multiple words may be elided for the sake of brevity. Idioms are expected to convey a shared sense of meaning and conversation operates as though governed by an unspoken agreement yet autistic communication is still cast as 'disordered'. The tension that arises whereby she is 'often interpreted as speaking with a subtext, even when there is none'[506] is just another way in which autistic intentionality is dismissed in favour of neurotypical assumptions.

Törnvall highlights her experience of how diagnosis feels like a neurotypical's game, but taking advantage of language's inherent insufficiency is an autistic's game. She notes how autistic users foster a curiosity and creativity around metaphors as a cultural product where everyone has an unspoken agreement about their meaning. Amid this feeling of clumsily

[501] Törnvall, C., 2023. *The Autists: Women on the Spectrum.* London: Scribe UK.
[502] Törnvall, 2023: p. 180.
[503] Törnvall, 2023: p. 90.
[504] Baggs, 2007.
[505] Yergeau, 2018.
[506] Törnvall, 2023: p. 90.

speaking a foreign language, Törnvall wonders that if metaphor and allusion is just a case of majority consensus, 'what might an autistic metaphor look like?'.[507] She muses that 'just because autists process sensory input differently, this doesn't mean they can't create metaphors of their own. On the contrary, a person with autism often inhabits a thought-world rich in metaphors and symbolism. But these are personal metaphors, not the metaphors of the majority. Autists often think metaphorically and associatively and experience objects like physical representations of – or symbols for – something else.'[508] Sayings that merit praise in majority language such as 'they're juggling a lot' or 'they have a lot of balls in the air' might instead become an indicator that someone is struggling to cope with their workload or is close to burnout.

Törnvall's narrative is bookended by her experiences with a psychologist: as she leaves their office, she cries mourning the childhood she could have enjoyed if she had known she were autistic earlier. She commits to a project of unmasking and acceptance of her multiply autistic self, the complexities of which Amy Pearson and Kieran Rose discuss in their recently published *Autistic Masking: Understanding Identity Management and the Role of Stigma*.[509]

Törnvall, Pearson and Rose all respond to the social violence inflicted on autistic lives, framing masking as a trauma response. Törnvall's text laments how ongoing stigma and outdated diagnostic criteria render autistic women invisible – the three women featured in this 'Momentum' section are just a few of many who are actively working to rectify the underrepresentation of women within autism statistics.

[507] Törnvall, 2023: p. 94.
[508] Törnvall, 2023: p. 95.
[509] Pearson, A. & Rose, K., 2023. *Autistic Masking: Understanding Identity Management and the Role of Stigma.* Oxford : Pavilion Publishing.

Voluntary Visibility in 'All the Little Bird-Hearts'

Autistic author Viktoria Lloyd-Barlow's novel, *All the Little Bird-Hearts,* was longlisted for the 2023 Booker Prize.[510] Set in the late 80s, the text features an autistic protagonist, Sunday's, distinct perspective on motherhood where her everyday routine is made anew by her attention to the minutiae. In a world which feels like 'a revolving series of rooms [she has] walked into by mistake'.[511] Sunday follows rules from an old etiquette handbook and finds comfort in Sicilian folklore.

Lloyd-Barlow's writing responds to the tokenistic inclusion of autistic characters in contemporary fiction as 'a language and set of beliefs which serve the industry of autism, rather than the autistic community themselves'[512] and therefore purposely chose not to set her narrative in the present day. Rather than contribute to this burgeoning genre of autistic texts for non-autistic audiences, '[s]etting the book in in a period when the depiction of autism was less fixed and pervasive allows Sunday an autonomy of expression which is vital to her eventual self-acceptance.'[513] As such, the narrator rejects fixed or rigid ideas of identity seeing herself as a complex process where '[e]verything touches many, many other things, and these points of intersection are the only way in which the world can be properly understood.'[514] The narrative both thrives off and toys with this indeterminacy: autism is not explicitly mentioned but is nonetheless unconditionally welcomed[515] as a kind of implementation of Voluntary Visibility. Sunday communicates fluently with her Deaf

[510] Lloyd-Barlow, V., 2023. *All the Little Bird-Hearts.* London: Tinder Press.
[511] Lloyd-Barlow, V., 2023: p. 17.
[512] Lloyd-Barlow, V., 2023. *Viktoria Lloyd-Barlow interview: 'I'd be happy for more autistic writers to be celebrated'* [Interview] (21 August 2023). (available at https://thebookerprizes.com/the-booker-library/features/viktoria-lloyd-barlow-interview-id-be-happy-for-more-autistic-writers).
[513] Lloyd Barlow, 2023. [Interview].
[514] Lloyd Barlow, 2023: p. 32.
[515] In certain settings – flashbacks throughout the narrative show how the narrator's family struggled to accommodate or understand her behaviour when she was younger.

colleague having learned sign language so they can both indulge in moments of silence together, a practice that extends to daily communication with her daughter, Dolly, although they are both hearing.

The novel shuttles between silence and volume, just as between visibility and invisibility, across multiple themes that exceed solely neurodivergence. Lloyd-Barlow toys with the double bind that many autistic individuals find themselves in where they must appear performatively neurodivergent in order to access accommodation, but not so different as to be excluded or thought of as strange. Recalling a conversation with her late mother, Sunday remembers: 'Occasionally, and only in front of Dolly, I would showily eat something that did not adhere to my assigned list of foods. *You can eat something normally then; you can do what the rest of us do without a fuss.* My mother said this, often.'[516] Whilst Sunday consciously crafts her every encounter, her rich and extravagant neighbours, Rollo and Vita, are unapologetically eccentric and eschew social convention. The narrative takes a sinister turn as Rollo and Vita continue to overstay their welcome and cross boundaries to the extent of fracturing Sunday's family unit, rendering her involuntarily invisible.

All the Little Bird-Hearts draws attention to the price that autistic populations constantly pay to accommodate the convention of the neurotypical majority. The narrative trajectory culminates with the family unit in disarray and with Sunday desperately attempting to make amends with her estranged daughter. The novel is about autism as much as it is about privilege, extravagance, class and gender. Lloyd-Barlow's success alludes to a future 'canon of authentic autistic writing' rendering marginalised communities yet more visible.[517]

[516] Lloyd Barlow, 2023: p. 7.
[517] Mazumdar, A., 2023. *Interview: Victoria Lloyd-Barlow, author, All The Little Bird-Hearts.* [Online] Available at: https://www.hindustantimes.com/books/interview-victoria-lloyd-barlow-author-all-the-little- birdhearts-101696004633139.html [Accessed 1 November 2023].

‘Asynchronous friendships’ as Neuroqueer kinships:

Autistic artist, Sarah Shotts, discusses how certain conventions of ‘typical friendship’[518] might inadvertently place constraints and limits on the depth of our connections, promoting instead ‘The Benefits of Asynchronous Friendship’.[519] Shotts’ autoethnographic article details how for her, as with many neurodivergent people, maintaining friendships often involves an intense mental load of masking and deciphering neurotypical language. Shotts turned to the internet[520] as a means of finding likeminded kin: ‘While I often struggle with verbal conversations I thrive when given the time and space to compose my own thoughts and share them from the safety of my chosen environment.’[521]

A collaborative photography project and deep kinship connection developed through one such online acquaintance: their ‘collaboration soon became a container for friendship to grow’.[522] Both artists would send each other photos of intimate yet inconsequential motherhood moments and so the project, ‘The Magic Mundane’, was born as a grounding portrait of autism’s everydayness. The artists were separated not only geographically but also by time zones: an image sent in the afternoon for one person might not receive a reply until the next morning. There was no expectation of a verbal/typed response, with both artists sending whatever felt pertinent to them on that.

In essence, ‘[a]synchronous friendship means the freedom to respond when you have the energetic capacity. It means the flexibility to choose when and how you communicate. And

[518] Meaning, in this discussion, friendships that are reliant on geographical proximity and regularity of communication.
[519] Shotts, S., 2023. The Benefits of Asynchronous Friendship’. *Ought: The Journal of Autistic Culture,* 4(2), pp. 30-39.
[520] A resource frequently discussed in relation to neurodivergent connection, for example: Gonzalez, J., 2022. *Neurodiversity and Extended Reality: Community Growth Through Virtual Worlds,* Idaho: Dissertation - University of Idaho.
[521] Shotts, 2023: p. 31.
[522] Shotts, 2023: p. 32.

the ability to kindle friendship even if you aren't able to be in the same physical space.'[523] Communication can take any form including text, image, emoji, audio, or video. This flexibility is established by managing expectations and setting boundaries from the outset. As a result of this clarity each party is able to relax into the joy of sharing an experience without second guessing what someone's expectations of that conversation might be. The freedom to communicate according to each person's capacity or mental load demonstrates multiple ways of repurposing mainstream resources into neurodivergent spaces.

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Returning to thoughts of a Neurocosmopolitan, I see our hopeful and richly neurodiverse futures being filled with autistic authors garnering many literary awards. I am also hopeful that the terms I have coined will be subject to rigorous debate and discussion as this thesis is just the start of an ongoing conversation which extends much further than literature: 'autistic inflection' exerting pressure on language convention more widely might see us all make frequent and inclusive use of multimodal language systems; voluntary visibility can push for accommodation needs being unconditionally and universally met; Neuroqueer Kinships could push for a cultural shift in how we assign agency and inhabit the world.

This thesis has advocated for the value of unknowing, unlearning and uncertainty; it is by engaging in a communal sense of doubt that the hierarchy which positions 'knowing' as a preferred position can be destabilised. Ultimately, somewhere between autism's history and autism's future are the infinite autistic stories as yet untold – ones that are written, read and repeated by autistic populations but celebrated even more widely.

[523] Shotts, 2023: p. 38.

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