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NARRATING THE MANY AUTISMS

IDENTITY, AGENCY, MATTERING

Anna Stenning

Centering autistic voices and expressive forms, *Narrating the Many Autisms* affirms autistic agency and creativity, with words and beyond. In this remarkable book, Anna Stenning dismantles deficit assumptions and cultural stereotypes on autistic lifeworlds to offer an original and profound reflection on the many forms of social relatedness.

Professor Laura Sterponi, *Berkeley School of Education,*
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Dr. Anna Stenning advances the long road towards the realization of autistic ontological agency with her new book, *Narrating the Many Autisms: Identity, Agency, Mattering*. She defers to autistic autobiographies, narratives, and community knowledge to make space for autistic selfhood, which she argues should be a shared practice and commitment by the neuro-majority. At the same time, Stenning considers how Western medical and educational research misrepresents and misrecognizes autism by reducing a way of being in the world to a neurological impairment.

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Narrating the Many Autisms

Autism is a profoundly contested idea. The focus of this book is not what autism is or what autistic people are, but rather, it grapples with the central question: what does it take for autistic people to participate in a shared world as equals with other people?

Drawing from her close reading of a range of texts and narratives, by autistic authors, filmmakers, bloggers, and academics, Anna Stenning highlights the creativity and imagination in these accounts and also considers the possibilities that emerge when the unexpected and novel aspects of experience are attended to and afforded their due space. Approaching these narrative accounts in the context of both the Anthropocene and neoliberalism, Stenning unpacks and reframes understandings about autism and identity, agency and mattering, across sections exploring autistic intelligibility, autistic sensibility, and community-oriented collaboration and care.

By moving away from the non-autistic stories about autism that have, over time, dominated public conception of the autistic experience and relationships, as well as the cognitive and psychoanalytic paradigms that have reduced autism and autistic people to a homogeneous group, the book instead reveals the multiplicity of autistic subjectivities and their subsequent understandings of well-being and vulnerability. It calls on readers to listen to what autistic people have to say about the possibilities of resistance and solidarity against intersecting currents and eddies of power, which endanger all who challenge the neoliberal conception of Life.

A stirring and meaningful departure from atomized accounts of neurological difference, *Narrating the Many Autisms* ponders big questions about its topic and finds clarity and meaning in the sense-making practices of autistic individuals and groups. It will appeal to scholarly readers across the fields of disability studies, the medical humanities, cultural studies, critical psychology, sociology, anthropology, and literature.

Anna Stenning, PhD, is a research associate at Durham University. She is the editor of a collection of essays on walking, literature, and the visual arts entitled *Walking, Landscape, Environment* (Routledge, 2020), and the editor of and a contributor to *Neurodiversity: A New Critical Paradigm* (Routledge, 2020).

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Narrating the Many Autisms

Identity, Agency, Mattering

Anna Stenning

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
NEW YORK AND LONDON

First published 2024
by Routledge
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

and by Routledge
4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

ISBN: 9780367478384 (hbk)
ISBN: 9781032707525 (pbk)
ISBN: 9781003036807 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003036807

Typeset in Sabon
by Deanta Global Publishing Services, Chennai, India

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Preface

This book argues against two of the most commonly conceived understandings of autism: that it is either a social disorder at the level of individual neurology, or – if it is not, and if psychology or neuroscience cannot prove that it is such – that it is meaningless and merely 'a label' that does a disservice to those who are thus diagnosed. I will argue that neither understanding accounts for the ethical or political utility of the term, and that both rely instead on stereotyping and a denial of the fundamental urge of all humans to make sense of our experiences and to consider what we think of as normal, desirable, and right for us. This book does not offer an ontological argument about autism, although it is sympathetic to efforts to do so which take into account lived experiences of autism: in line with feminist philosophers of science, it seeks to argue that what autism is cannot be separated from ethical and epistemological considerations and that this, in turn, should not be separated from the cosmopolitical in Isabelle Stengers' sense. This is because even more 'affirmative', but supposedly dispassionate, discourses about autism have consequences for which worlds are brought into being. It centers on the writings of autistic people who show that 'autism' names phenomena that are essential in developing a narrative understanding of their lives, even if it is not the only term that they use to articulate what they see as important differences between themselves and those around them. I will argue that the term 'autism' can enable us to articulate ways in which we matter to others and others matter to us. In the light of the vast corpus of stories by autistic narrators, which has hitherto received very little critical attention, and in the context of a world in which non-autistic-authored, metaphorical, and ultimately stereotyping representations of autism 'fascinate' us (Murray 2008), attending to the moral texture of autistic lives is a necessary and neglected component of liberatory world-making.

This book therefore rests on the assumption that political life, in general, depends on a prior ethical form of mutual recognition, and it further contends that this is only possible when we conceive of others as capable of acting in unprecedented ways rather than as objects determined entirely by biology or social locations. Autism poses a particular challenge to the possibility of mutual recognition because it is stereotypically parsed as an inability to conceive of a mind other than one's own. Even in more affirmative understandings, autism is regarded as presenting a 'two-way' challenge to mutual understanding in the light of autistic/non-autistic embodied differences that produce a 'double empathy' problem (Milton 2012). However, the corpus of autistic life-writing demonstrates that autistic narrators do engage in reflexive self-understanding in the light of conversations with both autistic and non-autistic others. Furthermore, they suggest that through the course of a life, autistic people develop a relatively enhanced understanding of the norms that govern social life in their immediate surroundings in comparison to neurotypical peers, due to the need to survive in a predominantly non-autistic world (Milton 2012).

If interpretations of our own and others' behavior and actions are always guided by our sense of who we are and our existing orientations toward the future, it is important that I disclose that I am autistic. I come to the corpus of autistic life-writing with the desire for more accessible forms of relation, of a future that is genuinely open to difference rather than constrained by the desires of a few. It is clear that my interpretations are partial and based on my limited understandings, even if they have been constructed alongside other autistic people who are working on similar questions. However, in acknowledging my own limits, I do not wish for others to use this as an excuse to discredit my cognitive authority to bring new understandings to light. Autistic narrators often approach social rules critically, with a perspective on how they marginalize not only autistics but also other minorities who are subject to stereotyping and misrecognition. This leads to complex and intersectional identity narratives that serve as the basis of action in the world. While the narrators considered in this study may be regarded as distinctively expressive (Milton 2014a), they demonstrate how narrative sense-making can be a constructive feature of both individual and collective autistic life. In this way, they offer insight into the subordinating norms that have led to the misrecognition of autistic experience and to tools that could expand two-way understanding between different forms of embodiment. Their narratives contribute to a shared cultural repository for imagining 'new forms of subjectivity, modes of self-understanding, sources of recognition, patterns of attachment and identification, and ways of living together' (Allen 2010). Finally, while it may be assumed that the dominance of non-autistic interactional norms combined with a monotropic range of interests would lead to autistics having a 'fragmented' perception of themselves in relation to others (Milton 2014b), this relies on an assumption that we are fundamentally determined by our neurology and social location. Yet as both social and material selves, we have recourse to more than introspection and misrecognition to formulate a conception of ourselves as agents.

Following feminist critical theorists and recognizing the Foucauldian claim that the subject is determined by power, I argue that it is necessary to recognize the autistic subject's capacity for critical resistance and reconstruction (Allen 2010). That is to say, the possibility of mutually recognitive political discourse requires accounting for the prior existence of individual political actors who don't recapitulate oppressive norms or the opinions of more powerful others. This means accounting for the confidence that individuals – autistic or otherwise – feel in bringing their claims to a public audience; it also requires that we analyze the conditions that prevent this disclosure from happening, when individuals are forced to accord with an image of themselves that is fundamentally alienating. It means understanding why so few autistic people are regarded as having the authority to speak on their own behalf, as opposed to non-autistic psychologists, parents, and neuroscientists having the authority to speak for them. To speak in a shared social world as an autistic individual, must we always conform to stereotypical understandings of the condition as a condition of hypermasculinity, of social failure, of whiteness?

Within feminist theory, the recognition that women's experiences are heterogeneous has led to a shift toward thinking about how we achieve self-trust, empowerment, and self-recognition, including in the face of overwhelming oppression. As Nicholas Allen has explained, social movements:

> [C]an serve as a site for the deconstruction, negotiation, and reconstruction of the subjectivity of participants, and they can provide conceptual and normative resources for participants and non-participants who are struggling to reconstitute themselves in less subordinated ways.
>
> (2010)

Such understandings of subjective resistance and autonomy move us away from thinking that agency is a matter of innate cognitive or emotional endowment. For Allen, this means exploring the ways in which social movements and culture provide new norms and conceptual tools that then become embedded in everyday life. For people who are devalued according to their assumed social status, actions may be constrained by environments designed for 'normal' people, but our understanding may not be. Non-speaking autistics, in particular, teach us about the constraints on action that stem from assumptions about the nature of communication itself.

To support mutually recognitive conversations, any answer to the question 'What is autism?' must recognize both the relational agency of those labeled autistic and those non-autistic people who have sought to either explain or understand autism from an external perspective. And it must also acknowledge that non-autistic stories about autism have typically dominated the public conception of which answers might be available. We may also wish to ask, what are these non-autistic explanations of autism doing to our collective world of shared sense-making, and where have they got us? Considering both non-autistic and autistic-authored narratives in their plurality and diversity, we can look for an understanding of autism that explains why it can in some cases lead to difficulties in mutual recognition.

Reading life narratives by those who identify as autistic, we can understand that it is also a condition of lives that are relational and rewarding in distinctive ways. These narratives also show us that autistic embodiment can be understood as a relational misfit between the individual, their environment, and those around them (Chapman 2021). But, as Jo Bervoets and Kristien Hens have argued (2020), making sense of autistic experience requires our willingness to consider that it is possible to identify as autistic and consider oneself to be in good mental health and capable of relating to others. This is at odds with cognitivist and psychoanalytic paradigms that regard autism as defined by a fundamental deficit in subjectivity, models that have increasingly come under scrutiny for their failure to explain a wide range of individual differences between autistics. Bervoets and Hens explain how regarding autism as essentially a social disorder precludes the possibility of understanding and ethical engagement with autistic lives (2020). To do justice to individual autistic agency, they argue, we must disentangle individual behavior from its cognitive underpinnings, so that we recognize the distinctive causality of the mental, as opposed to the biological realm. However, this also requires sensitivity to the ways the mind extends beyond the brain to enact possibilities produced alongside affordances for action available in a particular environment (Gibson 1979), which in turn influence the development of a perceived self. As I explore further in the Introduction, our interpretations of other people's behavior are the product of cultural pathways to personhood. We recognize others through existing stories that provide 'courses of action toward desired subject positions and ways of being in the world that stand in contrast to other possible but undesirable futures' (Solomon 2013: 120). But there is always a choice about the story we tell, and this has implications for what comes into being. As Olga Solomon has explored in relation to parental accounts of autism, stories make room for uncertainty as to whether their child's actions are because of, or despite autism: what matters is the creation of an environment and stories in which such actions can be pursued.

Non-autistic perspectives on the condition are currently dominated by the question of how autism can be both socially constructed according to those individuals who are currently regarded as autistic and at the same time be a biological reality (Bervoets and Hens: 1). The answer, as Bervoets and Hens suggest, is that these are two explanatory modes that seek to understand autism at fundamentally different levels of reality: of social appearance through behavior and via biophysical makeup (this is akin to the complementary 'particle' and 'wave' forms of matter). But from the first-person perspective, there may be many ways of explaining behavior. Throughout this book, I will argue that this is the space in which ethical interaction occurs.

At this level of complexity, we can see that autism is neither a fixed social location, nor a form of subjectivity determined by neurology. As Anand Prahlad explains in his memoir, *The Secret Life of a Black Aspie* (2017), 'if I was among a group of white people and didn't understand what was being said, was it because of Asperger's or because of race? Usually it was both' (9). Prahlad explains that the causes of misunderstanding in any interaction are unclear: is it because he has not had access to the norms of white US culture, or because he experiences language in different ways to most people? His family had taught him how to interpret the behavior of those who were different from him: he had been taught 'to read all things [...] To know what people wanted before they started talking' (33). His family also had to teach him, as someone who experiences synesthesia and sensory hyper-sensitivity, tactics to survive by such as 'how to deflect sound' which would enable his neurological difference to go unnoticed (9). Neither strategy could allow him to share his experiences with others, since there was no context for explaining the constraints imposed by the intersection of neuro-normativity and white supremacism. *The Secret Life of a Black Aspie* can therefore be read as an effort to create such a shared context.

While Bervoets and Hens emphasize the importance of both social and biological understandings of autism, they underestimate the significance of the narrative imagination and the relational capacity of all individuals to resist pathologizing social designations. Part of this resistance can be explained in terms of what Ulric Neisser calls the 'conceptual self', which is the sense we develop of ourselves according to the stories we encounter that incorporate experiences that are different from our own (Neisser 1988). This is why it is important to consider how autism may combine with being mentally well, and also how what may go wrong is consequent upon the stories we tell and the simplifications they embody (including those that make it harder for us to access diagnosis or appropriate support). These stories inhibit recognition for intersecting forms of identification: of being a woman and not communicating in ways that ease social tensions; of being black and 'uncool' or soft; of being a man who is dependent on others for support in order to maintain a job; of being intelligent but not learning or producing in ways that are valued by our culture; of being 'non-speaking' but having much to say. Thinking deeply about the apparent 'incompatibility' of autism with well-being – or the absence of mental health difficulties or distress – requires us to question our assumptions about the inherent vulnerability of autistic embodiment and listen to what people actually communicate. As researchers, we need to be aware of the ways in which we are subject to, and agents of, power through the stories we tell. At the same time, through awareness of the eddies and currents of power to which we are subject and perpetuate, we can produce research that is both more ethical and nuanced.

At any moment in time, we are capable of recognizing the different locations into which society would typically place us, and it is through occupying this liminal position 'that the virtues and defects of each community are easier to spot' (Meyers 2000: 155). Insofar as we are identified as belonging to a distinctive social group (and regardless of whether that is perceived to be a natural or social construct), we are 'inducted into its distinguishing paradigms and norms' (157). Social belonging, especially to a stigmatized group, poses constraints and possibilities for action that are not direct consequences of our embodiment. These include not only relations of domination and subordination themselves but also constraints on disclosure, because dominant discourses of subjectivity valorize 'unity, coherence and constancy' rather than the 'heterogeneity' that is a feature of intersectional lives (158). Taking account of an intersectional identity challenges the dominant discourses of sovereign selves – especially when one communicates experiences in non-normative ways. Very often this means that others will find such stories strange and complicated. But accounting for our lives in this way allows us to recognize that there is always something 'in excess' of authorized or received identities, something that comes when we recognize that other people's actions are always tied up with their sense of what is right and normal for them.

This is how it is possible for Prahlad to say that, despite being autistic and black in a culture where each of those identities are devalued, he has a 'secret life' that he sustains through maintaining habits that reward him emotionally and aesthetically. These habits are based on a scale and pattern of attention that he initially shared only with his family and are revealed through the way he reads the many different identity discourses and stories he has encountered during his lifetime. He discloses these experiences because he thinks it may 'help someone else to hear the stories, someone with autism or someone with a loved one on the spectrum' (2017: 11) and not because he believes he has overcome his autism. That he can do so is a product of his having learned – and subsequently able to break in meaningful ways – the generic conventions of autobiography, which define the expectations of his anticipated readership for a linear progression of events toward a static outcome. Instead, like many of the life writers cited in this book, he deploys a more cyclical narrative structure which should be read not as deficits in narrative cognition but as an altogether different perspective on causality, the limits of human agency and ways to live otherwise to the dominant ‘worlds of sense’ (Lugones 1992).

Prahlad’s secret life is one defined by both sensory sensitivity and cross-modal sensory associations. That is to say, he does not suggest that there is a singular ‘first order’ cognitive dysfunction that is responsible for his ‘autistic’ behaviors, nor does he look for a cause for the difficulties in his upbringing. Neither does he say that autism is just a label, imposed on him by others. The question of who decides what autism is matters to whether we can make sense of Prahlad’s story, because without any mutual effort toward reaching a shared understanding, there is always the possibility of misrecognition. And the greatest obstacle to this is not autistic embodiment but the dominance of understandings about autism and race that are based on stereotypes.

Inspired by these narratives that deploy an excess of meaning between authorized subject formations, I ask what possibilities arise for intersubjective meaning-making and a shared world of experience? What forms of sociality are enabled when we attend to the unexpected and novel aspects of experience, when we do not prioritize how we expect others to behave according to our preconceived expectations? What meanings of autism emerge? How might narratives unsettle our received understandings of communication by foregrounding its basis in ‘patterns of action, attention, or emotional response, in bodily dispositions and habits, in moral commitments, or in one’s personal relationships’ (Mackenzie 2008: 1)? If we focus, that is, on the process, through which we achieve ‘narrative agency’ (Lucas 2016)?

I therefore encourage you to listen to what autistic people say about their lives – we are not to be reduced to a homogeneous group, as though other aspects of our identity are unimportant. If biological research can make room for social-scientific explorations of what it means to be an autistic person in a non-autistic world, the social sciences should also make room for humanistic work on autistic cultures, languages, and competencies which have not traditionally been thought consonant with the condition and which demonstrate real differences in experience. Otherwise, much-needed work against autistic disempowerment through intersecting forms of oppression risks reifying the meanings of the condition and demoting us to the level of abject existence. We must avoid fixing autism at the level of discourse and recognize instead the potential of weaving narratives to articulate the meaning of a life lived well – in spite of oppression.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank James McGrath, Hanna Bertilsdotter-Rosqvist, Rosemarie Cawkwell, Robert Chapman, Jenny Bergenmar, Nick Chown, Susy Ridout, Matthew Wolf-Meyer, Richard Kerridge, Alice Hagopian, Timothy Baker, Gareth Farmer, Samantha Walton, Amy Pearson, Marie Manalili, Greg Hollin, and Jorn Bettin, who have read and responded to drafts of this book and the ideas behind its inception in insightful ways.

Anand Prahlad, Joanne Limburg, Leni Van Goidsenhoven, Natalie Joelle, Nick Walker, Gideon Henner, Julia Ankenbrand, Alyssa Hillary Zisk, Ralph Savarese, Dawn-Joy Leong, Dyi Huijg, Rachel Clive, Fergus Murray, Sonny Hallet, Steven Kapp, Damian Milton, Monique Botha, Rebecca Lewis, Alex Chand, Andrew Coltrin, Kelsie Acton, David Hartley, Des Fitzgerald, Georgia Pavlopoulou, Stuart Read, Jill Anderson, Paola Debellis, and Isabelle Finn-Kelcey and colleagues in the Narratives of Neurodiversity Network have been excellent conversation partners during this project. My especial thanks to Sarinah O'Donohue, Louise Creechan, Hanna Bertilsdotter-Rosqvist, and Sarah Lucas for their wisdom, humor, and solidarity. My thanks to Stuart Murray for his support for this project and for his guidance during the writing process. He has helped me to understand that research can be critical *and* creative.

I'm grateful to Thomas Bray, at the Wellcome Trust for his excellent support and guidance during the early stages of this project. A thousand thanks to David Perkins and Meg Price for helpful discussions and proofreading support. Lennard Davis, Tyler Bay, and Paige Loughlin at Taylor and Francis have been consistently helpful throughout the time I've been working on this project. With thanks to Amanda Forest Vivian, Daina Krumins, and Jorn Bettin for their kind permission to use their artwork and illustrations in this book.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the ongoing love and support of my friends and to thank Lee Clifton, who has sustained me with his faith in my perspective not only in writing this book but in navigating the world with an autistic sensibility.

This book was written with the support of Wellcome Grant Number 218124/Z/19/Z.

Introduction

Beyond the neurological subject

Autism as a node of address and as a record of a sensibility

The focus of this book is not so much what autism is or autistic people are, but rather what does it take for autistic people to participate in a shared world as equals with other people? I will argue that the difficulties and possibilities which individuals face originate from those individuals' unique circumstances of embodiment, culture, and social status; they are not generalizable into the epiphenomena of the universal deficits model that is so often applied as the conceptual framework for the 'understanding' of autism. If these generalized models are intended to help with developing more inclusive environments, why do we have so little input from autistic people as to which models may be most appropriate?

As a 'neurologically atypical person', I can attest to the value of the frameworks that autistic life writing and community-oriented counternarratives have provided for me to understand my own experiences. More generally, I argue that individual identity stories can become the basis for counternarratives that resituate individuals as the source of the meaning of their experiences or facilitate recognition of the agency that enables the articulation of projects, plans, and the sense of what is normal, right, and desirable – even if this is at odds with what 'people like us' are supposed to be doing. For instance, I suggest in Chapter 2 why narratives that employ the concept of Monotropism may be far more useful in enabling autistic people to make sense of their experiences than the cognitive model of 'Weak Central Coherence' which is entangled with assumptions about interpersonal connectedness according to earlier characterizations of autism as 'Mindblindness'. However, I also discuss the risk that counterstories may become cultural master narratives in other situations, or otherwise fail to mesh with the tapestry of stories that provide ways of being a person in local contexts. While I make some generalizations about constraints on narrative and political agency in the Western cultural and

DOI: 10.4324/9781003036807-1

cosmological milieu, I also describe how other worldviews inform new imaginative horizons and constraints on disclosure. In exploring this, I suggest that a practical identity is the constantly shifting, and sometimes necessarily contradictory, understanding of our actions through time. I argue that there is far more to making sense of experiences than simply that which resides in neurology as defined by positivistic neuroscience.

At the same time, my interactions with other autistic people have led me to believe that there is something about autistic embodiment that I assume to be a consistent part of the diverse expression of the human nervous system. This includes at least two of the following: relative difficulties with fast-paced verbal speech and, therefore, difficulty with engaging with social spaces that depend on having access to a world of shared symbolic meaning; a relative preference for iconic and indexical modes of association and interaction; and a sensory orientation to the world. The question of whether I am qualified to make that judgment is one that I will leave for now. Recent commentators have argued that proponents of a neurodiversity paradigm[1] – and autistic narrators in particular – make assumptions about autistic people who, from their perspective, seem to have very different experiences of the world. And yet very little attention has been paid to the need to find more democratic and pluralistic ways to articulate and understand our subjectivity. I argue that autistic individuals experience constraints on their narrative agency – understood here as their presumed capacity and authority to make sense of themselves in relation to others through time (Lucas 2016). Some of these constraints are inherent to communicative norms and the practices of facilitating or providing support to individuals within the West which may privilege high-affect verbal speech and highly stratified social roles, and others are produced by the ‘organic ensemble’ of stories within a culture about what it is to be a human self (Nelson 2001). Within the West, autistic people face misrecognition because of dominant medical narratives, regardless of whether they are interacting in private or public spaces. At the same time, they experience specific challenges engaging with public discourses about autism, as I explore in Chapter 1 of this book. Yet insofar as autistic individuals and groups are allowed/invited to intervene in public discussions about autism and thus about themselves, we can learn from these instances about the ways in which political recognition is granted. This is the theme of Chapters 2 and 3.

In the final chapters, I grapple with what it may mean to think about autism in terms of other cosmological perspectives. This is not for the sake of trying to create a universal model of autism but to think about whether it is possible that an ‘autistic sensibility’ may foster new forms of solidarity at a planetary scale, which have the potential to disrupt the categorical distinction between ‘life’ and ‘non-life’ that is fundamental to the operations of power within late Liberalism (Povinelli 2016). In light of both the grassroots neurodiversity movement originating in North America and Europe and institutional efforts to develop a coordinated global approach to the management of those with ‘autism spectrum disorders (ASD) and developmental disabilities’ (WHO 2014), the question of how we interpret the experiences of autistic people has an inescapably cosmopolitical dimension and one that we do not yet have the means to understand within the Medical Humanities as currently practiced.

This text has been written with an awareness that my own narrative agency may be undermined from the outset by my mode of address. That is, I write as an autistic and otherwise neurodivergent person who has a background in the humanities. My positionality entails that my own work may be read according to clinical master narratives about autism that would cast me as an unreliable narrator because I am autistic and therefore presumed to be unfamiliar with experiences that are regarded as definitive of personhood. My disciplinary home, however, means that I do not align straightforwardly with epistemic approaches that seek to understand autism as either the product of historical social structures and/or neurology, but propose something that I think is new. I outline how ‘sensory subjectivity’ provides a more inclusive framework from which to consider ‘lived experience’ than symbolic, structural or neurological models. I focus on individual acts of sense-making rather than the social structures or cognitive structures that would implicitly deny these. This is why this book does not offer any systemic appraisal of all autistic-authored autobiographies from an Anglophone and Anglo-American tradition: my selection of texts has centered instead on identifying particular patterns that manifest at the level of personal disclosure in Britain and North America. I then proceed to map how sense-making practices operate across geographical and cultural borders. I do not seek to capture these in any comprehensive way, but I register how these narrators challenge the construction of autism as a deficient form of subjectivity or as one that precludes interest in relating to others – even if some of these others are nonhuman. I consider how images of autistics as ‘new animists’ may seem potentially liberating but, in reality, are used to reinforce existing power arrangements that extract not only capitalist value but also inhibit other modes of collaboration. I, therefore, argue that questions about what autism is, in the context of personal disclosure, cannot be separated from the political realm, and questions about what it means to be acting in a world that is historically and materially interconnected in both oppressive and potentially emancipatory ways.

Autism was initially a diagnostic classification that gained traction during the 20th century within North America, Western and Northern Europe, and Australia but has spread in the 21st century to other parts of the world. To the extent that psychologists have attempted to argue for a universal diagnostic category across cultural contexts, there is typically a consensus on the value of a worldwide acceptance of the diagnostic criteria for ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder as defined in the APA DSM-5, see APA 2013) notwithstanding culturally enacted ‘differences in the presentation of autistic symptomatology’ (Matson et al. 2011: 1598–1599). Yet, cross-cultural comparisons are sought even when it is unclear that participants are discussing the same research object. For instance, the term autism is used in ‘low- and middle-income countries’, and it is ‘associated with an intellectual disability’ (Russell 2020: 2). Some have speculated that intellectual disabilities, in general, are only meaningful in the context of the intensifying social demands posed by industrial societies (McKearney and Zoanni 2018: 6).

We might further extrapolate that autism as a social disorder, a relatively independent condition from intellectual disability, gains meaning as a disorder in post-industrial societies where service industries provide the main source of employment even if, under capitalism, these same capacities alone are insufficient to allow more apparently ‘neurotypical’ people to thrive (Chapman 2022). Certainly, even if we believe that there may be a globally prevalent autistic neurology or autistic condition of embodiment it is difficult to see how this could lead to a meaningful strategy to intervene in heterogeneous cultural contexts, where ‘behaviors’ that would elsewhere lead to diagnosis are not considered culturally relevant or where the risk of stigmatization for families outweighs the perceived benefits. In many instances (and I would argue, including in the West), attitudes to autism are entangled with ideas about developmental and/or ‘cognitive’ disabilities and depend on a broad range of factors including attitudes to marriage, social competence, religion, and stigma (McKearney and Zoanni 2018: 6). Autism is also implicated in a tapestry of stories about what it means to be ‘healthy’ as a distinctive kind of individual socioeconomic success that is, even in the West, available only to a few.

The WHO nevertheless believes that a universal diagnostic category of autism is possible and that early detection and individual treatment promote socioeconomic well-being for autistic individuals and their families across global contexts (2023). In a related but distinct vein, the neurodiversity movement situates autism as a universal feature of the ‘diversity’ of the human genome (Walker 2021). In contrast to the approach of the WHO and national policy frameworks in the United States and the United Kingdom, neurodiversity frameworks deny the construction of autism as an inherent disorder (Chapman 2020) and regard intervention as a matter of individual circumstance (Pukki et al. 2022). Each approach presents different methods of identifying and supporting autistic people and their families. Neurodiversity-informed research typically draws on qualitative research to explore external barriers that autistic people face as a distinctive political group in accessing social goods and equity within the West, while quantitative models of mainstream autism research identify treatments to mitigate individual traits that are perceived as universally affording inclusion in social life. So far, neither has engaged with the cosmopolitical dimensions of the capacities, objects, and relationships that they identify and the implications of these for other subjectivities. What happens if we look to neurodiversity theory to broaden our understanding of other people's capacities and potentially our own, but remain conscious of the fact that our existing concepts and methods of investigation may do them an injustice? What if we continue to conduct quantitative research on autism across international borders but question approaches based on Western Educated Industrialized Rich and Democratic (WEIRD) ideas of divisions and hierarchies of capacities, with a view to considering how globally diverse knowledge practices shed new light on the differences that autism is thought to entail? This book seeks to contribute to the movement to challenge the logic of 'implementing' universal Eurocentric practices to address socioeconomic inequalities regardless of their appropriateness to particular cultural, racialized, regional, and ethnic groups, and to reconceptualize care and well-being with a wider intellectual heritage (Cooper 2016; Mills 2014; Montenegro and Ortega 2020).

My hope is to build on burgeoning interest within the Medical Humanities in 'lived experience', with a focus on how this concept may be used uncritically to draw attention away from the available modes and forms of expression within a given culture and (particularly in the field of medical anthropology) how 'lived experience' can signal attention to realities that are beyond the possibility of direct expression. In particular, I wish to highlight how narrative makes tangible those dimensions of reality that cannot be accessed by any supposedly neutral perspective. I draw on philosophers and anthropologists who engage with first-person narrative accounts and explore how 'people regulate and evaluate their associations with one another at both communal and intimate levels of life' (Crapanzano 2003: 4). Their work articulates but does not encompass the plurality of imaginative horizons through which we 'determine what we experience and how we interpret what we experience' (ibid 2). This helps me to confront the way that the 'singular has often been sacrificed to the general in the human sciences and that, more often than not, this has resulted in a distorting simplification of the human condition' (6). To do so, I focus on narratives that disclose sensory and attentional differences as they manifest across lives that are experienced through intersecting sources of identification and oppression even if, from my own perspective as someone who occupies a privileged rational identity, I benefit from the difficult work of many others before me to address the 'many different ways of accessing meaning that is constructed against the grain of oppression' (Lugones 2003: 7).

This book shares concerns with the ontological turn in anthropology – and considers the possibility of autism as an ontological difference, as a mode of being in the world, and one that entails differences in subjectivity, communication, and thought. In this way, I share with the neurodiversity theorists an interest in questioning the presumed 'psychic unity of mankind' (McKearney and Zoanni 2018). I place further emphasis on questioning the assumption that culture is shaped exclusively by 'cognitive' processes. As part of this, I center on the agential, interpersonal, material, and sensual practices through which autistic people 'remake' themselves and others through creative and reflective practices, including writing and making art.

Throughout this work, I aim to draw wider attention to what – following the philosopher Sarah Lucas – I term narrative agency and its relationship to creativity, transgressive possibility, ethical reflection, and imaginative play. In focusing on modes of association between relational selves, I argue that aspects of experience that we currently refer to as 'autism' are impossible to disentangle from the other features of our social lives and question the logic that would seek to inform efforts to do so. In referring to Maria Lugones' praxes of loving perception and worlds of sense in *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes* (2003), I aim to supplant the idea that the sources of ethical recognition are necessarily cognitive and based on a categorical logic. For Lugones, the world is a locus of meaning which can be an 'actual society, given its dominant culture's description and construction of life' or it can be 'such a society given a non-dominant, a resistant construction', or an 'idiosyncratic construction' (87). Recognition is therefore also dependent on willingness to perceive the worlds that an individual inhabits through their sense-making practices and acts of resistance. While Lugones develops decolonial epistemic practices, and ultimately rejects the categorical logic that would arguably underpin any scientific investigation, her work raises important questions for the project of creating taxonomies surrounding autism and the politics of living under them.

The need for narrative agency

Nicky Walker's book *Neuroqueer Heresies* identifies the origins of her ideas about autism in the broader autism rights movement, which responded to

> [T]he fact that autism-related discourse and praxis is dominated by what I've termed the pathology paradigm, in which autism is framed as a form of medical pathology … and the fact that this pathology paradigm consistently results in autistic people being stigmatized, dehumanized,

> abused, harmed, and traumatized by professionals and often by their own families.
>
> (2021: 12)

Walker attributes the autism rights movement – and the broader neurodiversity movement, which has in some ways superseded it – to the idea that the 'diversity … among minds … is a natural, healthy and valuable form of human diversity' (19). The new contention shared by Walker and other neurodiversity theorists was that 'the social dynamics that manifest in regard to neurodiversity are similar to the social dynamics that manifest in regard to other forms of human diversity (e.g., diversity of race, culture, gender, or sexual orientation)' (20). Within this context, Walker introduces the idea of 'neuroqueering' as 'the practice of queering (subverting, defying, disrupting, liberating oneself from) neuronormativity and heteronormativity simultaneously' (160). This means that 'embodying one's neurodivergence' or foregrounding other people's 'neuroqueer experiences, perspectives, and voices' can lead to opportunities to productively disrupt 'one's performance of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and/or other aspects of one's identity' (162).

Many of the authors included in this book show how awareness that intersecting sources of group identification besides autism place competing claims on their actions, and these originate in the conflicting norms that define what it means to belong, and what counts as normal and valuable, to each of these groups. This may lead us to register how heteronormative, gender normative, and white rules coincide with 'neurotypical' norms, and to recognize that what it means to be a neurotypical man is also defined by practices of racialization.[2] In the effort to regain the self-trust that allows us to pursue our preferred actions, rather than those that others expect of us because of the assumptions they make of us, we may begin with a strategy of deliberately sabotaging norms that we are compelled to follow to participate in mainstream society. 'Neuroqueerness' registers this impulse to resist dominant, and interconnected, constructions of gender, race, sexuality, and neurology (Walker 2015; Yergeau 2017). It involves '[P]ractices intended to undo and subvert one's own cultural conditioning and one's ingrained habits of neuronormative and heteronormative performance, with the aim of reclaiming one's capacity to give more full expression to one's uniquely weird potentials and inclinations' (Walker 2015). Expressing our 'potentials and inclinations' may help us to disidentify with conventional ways of appraising our actions according to a normative social identity. Neuroqueerness potentially provides an interpretative structure through which to reconfigure our understanding of our lives, regardless of what gender, neurological characteristics, and sexuality we are born with and, when circumstances allow, to collaborate in shared acts of resistance.

But the performative model of agency upon which neuroqueering rests seems to place a very heavy burden on individual acts of sense-making as the basis of political action against multiple oppressions, especially when institutional practices of classification support monological understandings of autism. While one aspect of our narrative agency depends on being able to recognize oneself as an individual with the capacity to bring new meanings into the world, rather than simply to be put to use by others (see Chapter 1), the political agency is formed by awareness of the plurality of selves that emerge as we coexist with other people. This means that while we may find ways to resist subordination within our own networks of relationships, this may not be something that makes sense to someone outside that field of relationships.

In her powerful work on recognition of the plurality of gendered, sexualized, and racialized embodiments of womanhood, Maria Lugones analyzes the conditions that support our awareness of other people's intentions to resist, where, in a dominant Eurocentric culture, our resistance is intelligible through a circumscribed range of actions – such as organizing a rally or standing for political office – which render them as sociality or 'within bounds' sense (2; 20–26; 85–93). At the same time, other acts of resistance, such as refusing to engage in a prescribed treatment for a mental health condition, may be rendered unintelligible and invisible if they do not conform to the 'worlds of sense' that are sanctioned by culture and reinforced by its institutions. Lugones identifies the everyday strategies through which we can come to recognize these resistant intentions and nurture them as the basis for collaborative action despite the lack of institutional backup, which requires that we resist the fiction of a uniform collective or a 'mirage of individual autonomous intentional action' that is actually produced via institutional arrangements (211).

This is to say that awareness of, and willingness to subvert, our intersecting group-identity determinants may contribute to an ethically valuable redefinition of one's self-concept rather than the mandates that we have internalized through contact with hierarchy-enforcing institutions (Meyers 2000). However, when it comes to acting in worlds that assume the 'naturalness' of whiteness, able-bodiedness/able-mindedness, 'Anglocentrism', and masculinity, we are perceived as speaking with the intentionality of a 'we' who are all the same (Lugones 2), who may be assumed to be subject to the same kinds of experiences. But to do this is to participate in a polarized logic of unity or fragmentation – as though any individual agent or part can be replaced with no overall loss to the whole, even when we know that the group for whom 'we' speak is not homogeneous (128). This means that we are summoned to speak when we suggest that the complexities of power can be captured figuratively and as though interlocking rather than intermeshing (3; 223).

But a WEIRD concept of agency requires us to lose sight of, or potentially downplay, our ambivalence to the linguistic practices of our culture and solidarity with 'tactical strategies of making sense against/in spite of/in the midst of domination' (224). I would further argue that acting in dominant worlds of sense, without acknowledging that hegemony contributes to the logic of excluding others whose experiences, including those who inhabit the borders between different worlds of sense, are regarded as 'too complicated' to merit our attention.

On the other hand, articulating 'active subjectivity' (which is neither the agency of an autonomous 'I' or homogeneous 'we') requires different strategies (224–226).[3] In this case, having an intersectional understanding of our identity may require us to interact in multiple real and imagined 'worlds' amid existing institutional structures, each of which presents opportunities for acting and disclosing experiences without conforming to a singular logic or evaluative framework. Articulating any such perspective entails communicating the barely expressible or the only peripherally perceptible, and therefore entails the risk that we will be regarded as failing to make sense.

While Lugones focuses on the emancipatory potential of active subjectivity for women of color within specific interpersonal and geographic contexts, I identify a more limited set of conditions that support individual acts of narration by autistic writers who resist the dominant worlds of sense found in Britain and North America. Narrative agency, in this view, is not equivalent to univocal, autonomous choice, neurological determination, or power ascribed to us as a result of our social location; it results instead from the freedom to act in unexpected ways, which can be enhanced by aesthetic practices and in collaborative efforts at worldbuilding. This concept of agency contrasts with ideas of power residing in innate cognitive capacity and instead consists in the sense of ourselves, which we gain through our relationships with others and with ourselves, through time and in particular geographic locations. We deploy this agency not only when we speak or write, but also when we act, gesture, or touch others. It does not require that we have a complete understanding of our position in relation to others, but it does require that we formulate a 'practical identity' that gives us a sense of what is normal, right, and desirable for us (Korsgaard 1996).

Once again, here I find it helpful to return to the idea of 'loving perception' as a means to consider the implications of the above discussion for my own methods. Maria Lugones articulates one notion of solidarity as moving into and traveling with another person in their own world, rather than trying to understand them as thoroughly *defined* by oppression or resistance as rendered legible within dominant worlds of sense (2003:

79-80). Nick Walker's theory of neuroqueering recognizes the importance of nonlinguistic and embodied practices of sense-making, including stimming, which are accessible to autistic and other neurominority modes of embodiment (187–191). Together, these theories help me to recognize that solidarity involves learning to inhabit another's world of sense so that we may better understand their intentions and support their realization in action. It is this act of traveling beyond existing subject destinations based on binary divisions, and it is this movement that turns intentions into sources of sociality and solidarity. My effort to define a narrative theory of agency is aimed at supporting the emergence of new, and more liberatory, worlds of sense.

I illustrate this with reference to narratives by autistic individuals and 'neuromixed' groups who are engaged in generating more equitable interactional norms than those that exist in mainstream society. In this view, it is not enough to 'give more full expression to one's uniquely weird potentials and inclinations' (Walker, above), but one must also recognize that our agency to do so may depend on our participation in hegemonic worlds of sense (Lugones 211). The aim is instead to understand our ontological multiplicity according to the many worlds we inhabit. My efforts may not always be successful – indeed, I feel them to be relatively undermined from the outset by the time I have spent inhabiting academic spaces and practices (albeit precariously) and intend for others to improve on my work. This includes the premise that this is an academic book by a supposedly autonomous individual about autism, which implies that autism can be separated at the level of inquiry from other intermeshing experiences through sense-making practices. I nevertheless hope that it may intervene, at the least, at the level of academic praxis. It is also worth pointing out that without neuroqueer and decolonial theory, and those who developed and refined these ideas, my own project would not have been possible insofar as it requires an understanding that neurodivergence cannot be disentangled from other aspects of our perceived social identities or from our cosmopolitical outlooks.

Outline of Narrating the Many Autisms

In considering the possibility of an 'autistic mode of address', I focus on five texts published in the last 40 years since the incorporation of autism into diagnostic atlases widely used in the West. I choose these texts because they demonstrate how both the constraints and possibilities of narrative disclosure and intelligibility are produced within localized fields of interpersonal relation. These long-form texts I engage with are written by authors in Britain and North America and are locations that share a Western diagnostic framework and cultural master narratives about personhood, but the texts themselves provide multiple ‘worlds of sense’ including disability theory, critical race theory, gender theory, class politics, decolonial theory, and African and Māori cosmologies. As the book progresses, I focus on how diverse modes of articulation can lead the reader/audience to discern ways of being that resist animist hierarchies that construct certain forms of life as resources.

While the authors of these narratives differ in the particular diagnosis they have received (variously, childhood autism, autism spectrum disorder, apraxia, Asperger’s syndrome) and work within different genres and modes, I move away from the specificities of diagnosis and focus on how their works share a concern with articulating experiences that are rendered invisible by current clinical framings of autism. While the possibility of narration is typically constrained by the availability of culturally digestible stories about what it is to be a certain kind of person, I argue that there is always an excess of meaning that comes from the unique circumstances of disclosure in particular ‘worlds’.

I argue that the communities that have emerged around online autistic self-advocacy have provided an ‘abnormal moral context’ (Nelson 2001), which provides ‘moral and cognitive norms that are’, from the perspective of the group, ‘better than the ones shared by the dominant group’ (Nelson 174; see Chapter 2). Rather than seeking to pathologize the ‘abnormality’ of autistic-community contexts, I argue that they have produced counter-stories about autism that offer more robust explanations of the relational differences between autistic and non-autistic subjectivities. However, insofar as these counternarratives internalize Anglocentric epistemic norms, they participate in the dominant worlds of sense at a global scale.

As I move toward a focus on autism as ‘sensorimotor differences’ that are uncoupled from existing cognitive categorizations, I draw on a range of multimodal texts across cultural locations that express and represent sensorimotor differences in published memoirs, essays, blogs, vlogs, photographic essays, academic articles, zines, poetry, and film. In considering these, I address constraints on the intelligibility of narratives that disrupt generic demands for chronological ordering, communicative independence, and conceptual coherence, and how these originate in a Western disregard for those aspects of our mental lives that can’t be fixed according to a monolithic spatial (de-temporalized) imagination. They require the reader to recognize the habits and strategies that enable them to endure in a broader, more-than-human world of selves. In my discussion of an ‘autistic sensibility’, I refer to the construction of autistic people as ‘genealogical subjects’ who are, like other marginalized minorities, lacking a sense of the oppositions between ‘life’ and ‘non-life’.

In the final section of the book, entitled ‘autistic collaboration’, I return to urgent questions about the role of community-oriented understandings of autism and their role in addressing the senses of thwarted belonging, perceived burdensomeness, and loneliness that undermine the belief that one has anything to offer to the world. I argue that scholarship within the arts and humanities has a central role to play in amplifying knowledge that circulates within more intimate kinship settings, including those that unravel dominant worlds of sense.

Throughout this text, I propose that longer-form narratives in different media show how our imagination shapes our understanding of others. Such narratives are invariably oriented toward the future and are the basis upon which we interpret our own and other people's experience (Meretoja 2018). Therefore, rather than serving as a 'direct report' of lived experiences or of attitudes that remain relatively fixed, life narratives provide an understanding of the fragility of our self-understandings and their basis in unique interactional circumstances. I will argue that narratives are not only about the conceptual schemes that we deploy but are also a source of 'affective significance' when 'a schema is unavailable or inconclusive as a basis for interpretation' (Miall 1988: 260–261).

The texts are chosen because I have some experience of two-way 'world traveling' with the authors. The starting point for this came through reading Anand Prahlad's nature writing/memoir *The Secret Life of a Black Aspie* and his poetry collection, *As Good as Mango*, which, alongside my background as a scholar of nature writing, provided a context for us to collaborate in a conference panel on 'AutEcologies'. In this period we learned a little more about each other's interests and ideas. When I began this project, I was motivated to think about the difference that autism might make to our experiences of nonhuman nature. I had previously become aware that well-known autistic-identifying environmental activists including Greta Thunberg and Chris Packham were being talked about as though their autism meant that they were somehow 'closer' to nature (where nature meant something apart from the human). This seemed to me to resemble Eurocentric narratives about pre-colonial American cultures, which failed to recognize distinctive epistemologies and ecological dynamics (Stenning 2022). I argued that the 'ecological saint' narrative applied to Thunberg and others presented autistics as ahistorical and undifferentiated beings who are passive subjects of natural forces rather than active participants in a culture. When I mentioned this, Prahlad explained how he had proposed to his publisher that *The Secret Life of a Black Aspie* should be classed as nature writing, because it grapples with the ethics of relating to the planet or cosmos. The publisher chose to categorize the text as a disability memoir, suggesting that Prahlad's chosen framework would be unintelligible to his readers, who would struggle to grasp how sensory-perceptual differences and disability bring any new knowledge about human-nature relations. Even so, Prahlad's memoir expresses his sense of interdependence with a wider cosmos and it defies any claim that autism limits his perspective on a broader ecological whole. In contrast, Chris Packham's 2016 memoir *Fingers in the Sparkle Jar*, which was published after he had disclosed his autism diagnosis, and was celebrated as nature writing even if, in fact, its structure is more akin to a traditional disability memoir and it presents autism in mostly conventional ways. This suggests that, within an Anglocentric perspective, the genre of nature writing may exclude recognition of epistemic frameworks that question the possibility of separating the human from the natural world, or which offer a more expansive framework for considering neurological differences or disability.

Although poetry is not the focus of this book, it is, within diverse Anglophone traditions, a field I am relatively familiar with and for which I am grateful insofar as it disrupts sedimented habits of sense-making according to categorical logic. I first encountered Joanne Limburg as a poet whose collection *The Autistic Alice* resonated with my own experiences as a late-diagnosed autistic woman who found in diagnosis an opportunity to confront both general British and familial expectations of what it is to be a middle-class, cisgender woman. I was also lucky enough to have the opportunity to talk to Joanne at an online interdisciplinary autism research conference (IAR Festival) that I co-organized in 2020 and to which she contributed her time, as both a facilitator and speaker. Our conversations about her epistolary memoir *Letters to My Weird Sisters: On Autism and Feminism* were sustained by the excellent community spaces that we have accessed within the United Kingdom, including the Narratives of Neurodiversity Network and AMASE (Autistic Mutual Aid Society Edinburgh).

Daina Krumins, whom I was first introduced to through the inclusion of her memoir fragments in *Women From Another Planet*, inspired me via her film projects to think beyond the bounds of linguistic narrative in exploring what it means to have a sense of self that one deploys in action. Through our email conversations, I have learned about the family context of Krumins' work and their shared history of forced migration to the United States. I have encountered other narratives which are referred to in this text more indirectly, through personal connections with people for whom the stories had redefined their understanding of autism or their own lives. I also included texts that expressed an experience (often something that would be typified as minor, but which may be essential to the process of developing narratives that resist stereotypical assumptions) that I had shared but hitherto been unable to express. Some of the texts I have included because they have come up in discussions with psychologists or other academics who have typically seen them as 'exceptional' in some way. In my analysis, I try to balance attention to the narrator's uniqueness with a sense of the existence of overlapping strategies for resisting the assumption that one's life can be contained by a story told by others.

The scope of my analysis is therefore texts written from within North America, Britain, and Australia, at a time when – through the influence of the DSM-5 and ICD 10 – an autism diagnosis was not regarded as either entailing or excluding 'intellectual' disability or difficulties with verbal speech. I also refer to texts that precede this, from the period when autistic self-advocacy and the social model of disability had created a context in which autistic people could be regarded as speaking not only to clinical professionals for the sake of improving 'knowledge' about autism but also to each other, regardless of support needs or what would formerly have been regarded as levels of 'functioning'. The community context created a platform for sharing strategies for survival and resisting stigma, including in the context of intersectional marginalization, and underpinned Steven Kapp, Ari Ne'eman, and others' vision for the DSM-5 (Kapp and Ne'eman 2019).

I also refer to a text by Jolene Stockman, who combines ideas from autistic self-advocacy with a te reo Māori cosmology, which affords a different understanding of what it means to be an autistic or Takiwātanga. Takiwātanga invokes an individual who exists within a broader kinship network or whānau, rather than a nuclear family, and implies an orientation to the collective capacities of groups who are defined by relationships of interdependence and kinship. In the same section, I refer to Anand Prahlad's writing about his understanding of his way of being in the context of his fusion of West African, American, and Hinduist cosmologies. Ultimately, his sense of his 'Asperger's' difference makes sense as part of his ongoing difficulties and opportunities to resist racist discrimination and fragmentation, rather than as something that can be defined at the level of disorder. Both Prahlad and Stockman resist the meaning that their experiences would be attributed from the point of view of a pathology paradigm, even if Stockman ultimately offers a more encompassing framework for approaching disability.

In presenting ideas from these texts alongside some of my own sense of their shared strategies, I try to articulate the difference between two projects that might otherwise be conflated: how autistic people communicate with one another, and the importance of recognizing how we might resist WEIRD knowledge practices that may limit the emergence of new forms of solidarity. The former underpins sharing strategies for survival, seeking support and resistance against stigma, stereotyping, or loneliness, and the latter raises questions about the existence of a universal autistic condition as a medical pathology of 'functioning' regardless of heterogeneous interpersonal, financial, social, and cultural contexts.

Section one – on autistic intelligibility

How do we come to make sense of our lives when how we experience ourselves is at odds with what we are told about ourselves? Chapter 1 of this book considers the difficulty of communicating experiences that do not conform to stereotypical understandings of autism or the culturally sanctioned matrix of ideas about personhood more generally, with reference to identity narratives by autistic authors and biomedical constructions of autism from the last few decades. When autistic people intervene in public discussions about autism they are typically subject to similar forms of misrecognition but with the further issue of institutional constraints on the types of knowledge about autistic lives that are regarded as worth pursuing. I argue that normative demands for self-disclosure within the West place unhelpful demands on autistic people who struggle with symbolic verbal communication and pose hurdles for those who experience a more porous or diffuse sense of their identity. At the same time, autistic narrators – both individually and collectively, and in public and private spaces – draw on a wide tapestry of narrative understandings of their lives; and in so doing, they resist master narratives that undermine moral recognition for autistic and otherwise neurologically atypical individuals and groups.

Chapter 2 of this book considers how an extended narrative theory of identity can encompass the experiences of subjects who regard their lives as fragmented, either by intersecting sources of oppression or through sensory discontinuities and a sense of permeability with one's surroundings. This narrative theory of identity reflects the everyday ways in which people make sense of their experiences alongside others and through recourse to norms of personhood within a culture or one's subculture; these ways bestow a sense of belonging. However, many of the prevailing clinical narratives surrounding autism mark autistic individuals as lacking not only in the capacity to access certain social goods but also as lacking the self-awareness that would underpin the (hypothesized) universal capacity for developing autonomous goals and plans. Drawing on the work of Hilde Lindemann Nelson, I explore how counterstories about a subgroup identity can contradict the assumption that members of a group are unworthy of moral respect (2001: 151). I argue that autistic-focused counternarratives about Monotropism, sensory differences, and the reality of autistic collaboration enhance narrative agency, contribute to individual self-trust and confidence in developing projects and plans, and support ongoing social relatedness. In concluding, and drawing on the work of AutCollab, I gesture toward the arguments of the second half of this book – which question the assumption that linguistic narrative that embeds abstract symbolic roles is the only way of sharing information and feeling or being social.

Section two – toward an autistic sensibility

Chapter 3 introduces the idea of 'sensory subjects' who are not defined by their capacities to use symbolic language but by distinctive patterns of perceptual and affective responses to other bodies. This enables us to capture the agency and distinctiveness (or ontological agency) of neurodivergent individuals through facilitation that supports their unique habits, patterns, and rhythms of response, including those that are currently described as ‘hypo’- or ‘hyper-sensitivity’, synaesthesia, apraxia, and dysnomia. With reference to essays, blogs, and vlogs by nonspeaking and speaking autistic narrators, I describe how facilitation (specific modes of communicative support provided by technology, or the interaction with another human or with an environment) can either support a range of responses that confer the appearance of normative symbolic language skills or allow us to counter master narratives about autism and enable the expression of a practical identity. Drawing on a wider range of cultural understandings of selfhood, agency, and communication, I explore how an ‘autistic sensibility’ can allow us to express our uniqueness in relation to other human selves and how it can unsettle the binary logic that maintains an artificial division between the affects, agency, and intentionality of life and nonlife.

Chapter 4 examines how anthropologists have recently come to explore how institutional arrangements support or constrain the communicative capacities of disabled individuals (Wolf-Meyer 2020), including institutions built by and for disabled people (Fein 2020; Friedner 2014). Crip theory encourages us to bring atypical forms of communication based on gestures, images or sounds into the realm of the specifically human by highlighting the ideology of normative language within existing neoliberal institutions (see, for instance, Henner and Robinson 2021). While Crip theory productively focuses on those strategies to resist the exclusion of disabled individuals from dominant social practices within the West (focusing on experiences of dehumanization and resistance to such), I argue that some contemporary autistic narrators focus on strategies for survival within a more-than-human realm. While an older generation of autistic life writers have explored how autism is compatible with ‘self-sufficiency, authenticity, and integrity’ (Valente 2016), other writers have linked the desire for ‘self-sufficiency’ to the acceleration of neoliberal social practices. In contrast to the impulse to rehumanize disabled people’s lives, I am interested in how texts may ‘reanimate’ or reframe disabled people’s lives so that they are no longer regarded as lacking the qualities that define human life within a broader relational context.

Chapter 5 follows the argument made by autistic activist Jorn Bettin that ‘commoning’ is what happens when you break with the assumption that the only possible form of human collaboration is one that deploys abstract symbolic roles aimed toward the accumulation of capital. He shows that the premise is underpinned by a notion of intersubjectivity based on the supposedly ubiquitous access to a shared symbolic realm which entails the exclusion not only of the neurologically atypical but also minorities who are denied access to the institutions that confer symbolic subjectivity. The dominant construction of human collaboration as an innate capacity of individual brains to access a shared symbolic reality also enforces an anthropocentric distinction between human thought and mere animal 'sentience' (Wolf-Meyer 45). Drawing on ideas from AutCollab, Stimpunks, the Autistic Task Force and Wolf-Meyer's writing on modular institutions, I explore how the idea of 'conviviality', as autonomy within interaction, can apply to autistic people's distinctive ways of responding to the world and a cooperation across neurotypes and cultures.

What would it mean to develop a 'community-oriented' research strategy? In the conclusion of this book, I propose that a focus on the macropolitical level of communities pushes against the 'divided medicalization' (Fein 2020) that underpins rhetorical recognition of positive and negative qualities in autistic individuals but which all simultaneously homes in on ideas of impairment and suffering as though they may stand in for the whole. This means that characteristics that are presumed to underlie autistic suffering – struggles with symbolic language, sensory sensitivities, hyperfocus, and pleasure in repetition – are seldom allowed to perform critical cultural work. I argue that it is necessary to trace these characteristics as they manifest in key areas of social and cultural life – in aesthetics and patterns of affiliation – without ignoring the real-world constraints on cultural participation for those who are subordinated within a dominator culture (hooks 2003). While practices established by and for autistics are typically regarded as failing to intervene in the disorder that autism represents, we might consider instead what it is that dominant representations of autism and their proposed treatment interventions inhibit, at the level of both individuals and communities. I argue that existing 'structural' understandings of autism undermine the potential for the designation to improve cultural agency for individuals and communities.

Notes

1 'Neurodiversity' is a concept with a contested history and no clear sole originator; see Martijn Dekker 2023.

2 I use neurotypical here to refer not to the assumed non-autistic subject but to the idea of a 'cognitive functioning' that is regarded as both widespread and desirable within a given culture.

3 "For a phenomenological exploration of the way that intersectional agency is experienced and mobilised, see Dyi Huig's 'Tension in Intersectional Agency: A Theoretical Discussion of the Interior Conflict of White, Feminist Activists' Intersectional Location', in *Journal of International Women's Studies* 13.2 (2012) Article 2."

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Part I

On Autistic Intelligibility

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Chapter 1

The matter of a first-person perspective

Introduction: the possibility of autistic narrative

In her book *Letters to My Weird Sisters: On Autism and Feminism*, the poet and teacher Joanne Limburg illuminates a moment of mutual recognition with her friend Caron Freeborn who, like her, is a writer who had come to regard herself as autistic. As with the other letters that comprise this volume, Limburg addresses her friend posthumously, since she died before she could read the last chapter.

> You were so much a part of the process of writing this book – as you were for every one of my books, ever since I met you.
>
> (Limburg 2021: 235)

Limburg explains that her confidence in writing the book depended on her friend and fellow writer's judgment both about her autism and her work. She needs her friend to understand that she is consistently 'Joanne' regardless of whatever else she might be.

> When I first suspected that I was autistic you were one of the first people that I went to, to see if my suspicion might be confirmed. There was autism in your family, so I felt confident that you would understand both me and autism thoroughly enough to make a sound judgement.
>
> (236)

Like Limburg, Freeborn defied stereotypes of autism as a white, male condition, characterized by social deficits. Joanne has sought diagnosis, and there is 'symmetry' to the relationship, since the women supported each other through 'formal diagnosis' (238). Having achieved professional and social success, both women had slipped under various radars for an earlier diagnosis. While Limburg had depended on her friend's judgment in her

DOI: 10.4324/9781003036807-3

confidence in presenting herself as autistic to the world, her friend struggled with self-promotion.

> You were better at relationships, and much, much better at speaking up when speaking up was needed, so it struck me as strange that you found it impossible to promote your work.
>
> (237)

While Limburg describes in other letters how she finds public speaking difficult due to challenges with verbal processing, she finds ways to promote her work, even if it means that she is subject to various kinds of prejudice when she discloses her autism. By the end of the book, and as a result of both personal reflection and friendships with other autistic writers and allies, she appears confident that she can go into the world and speak on behalf of other autistic women. This is not as straightforward for Freeborn.

In her essay about autism and her passion for the poetic line, Freeborn explains her difficulty with presenting herself in public as the author of her work, uncertain whether she will 'hide behind, get lost in, the detail of a line ending' (2019). While, in *Letters to My Weird Sisters*, Limburg offers an account of how understanding her own autism has led to a process of self-redefinition, she appears to remain confident that some aspect of her authorial self – her who-ness – is unaffected by this. Freeborn appears to lack confidence that who she presents to the world will be an 'authentic' self 'If I enact the self, it is never just myself' (2019).

Freeborn and Limburg's observations get to the heart of the puzzle that motivates this book. What does it mean to be an 'autistic self' and writing from that perspective? Can we be the same person both before and after diagnosis if it fundamentally changes our sense of ourselves? What does it mean to consider oneself as autistic, when our understandings challenge prevalent cultural assumptions about the condition and some of the most widely circulating clinical hypotheses, such as that it undermines empathy or creativity? In writing against stereotypical assumptions about both autism and her gender, Limburg demonstrates authorial agency. In describing her efforts at redefining her identity, she presents a narrative understanding of her life. In what follows, I consider how they combine to form an idea of narrative agency, which consists of the 'ontological' dimension of making sense of oneself through time, and the 'political' dimension of drawing on one's self-concept to resist normative understandings of one's life (Lucas 2016).

In exploring these questions, I draw on the idea of narrative agency developed by the political philosopher Sarah Lucas, as a tendency of all humans to make sense of themselves through time and in relation to others. This theory is normative, in that it entails that our understanding of ourselves has implications for our choices for action (or inaction) – even if those understandings need not be 'true' or comprehensive. I try to account for a model of ethical judgment that does not entail conventional standards of universalizability or rationality and which is not discriminatory toward multiply disabled people[1] – I suggest that understanding is always something that is reached alongside, and with the support of, others. In bringing this conversation to discussions of autism, I emphasize that it is a condition that may place constraints on collaborative ethical reflection, but that the constraints are predominantly due to misunderstandings about autism, rather than internal to the condition itself.

I argue that narrative agency informs our perspective on the future and allows us to make choices about how we see ourselves in relation to others. Limburg suggests that this is not an easy process, and – especially when we have been through multiple subordinating or even traumatizing experiences – this may defy the limits of any linear or coherent explanation of our life. Following Lucas, I will argue that this does not undermine our ontological agency as the ability to bring something new to the world through appearance at a distinct location in a shared world. However, it may not be consistently possible for us or others around us to recognize our agency, and I will argue that this has implications for our possibilities for thriving when oppressive relationships undermine our confidence as political agents. While much of what I explain applies to identities beyond autism, I will explain that there are distinctive constraints on autistic people's appearance in the shared world because of the dominance of misunderstandings about autism. Additionally, received understandings of what it means to be a subject who communicates with the world are prejudicial toward autistic people. All of these contribute to a shared world of experience that is distinctively exclusionary to autistic people, and which suffers from the lack of enrichment that the inclusion of autistic people would provide. The effects of this are most acutely felt by autistic people themselves, insofar as they may experience the acute form of 'loneliness' that consists of feeling one has nothing to offer to a shared world (Lucas 2016: 210).

In presenting a narrative understanding of agency, I anticipate the objection that I succumb to the normative demands for certain kinds of, if not exclusively verbal, at least highly emotive linguistic performances as prescribed by Western, middle-class culture. Given that many autistic people also experience alexithymia (Fletcher-Watson and Bird 2019) – conceived as a difficulty in identifying and explaining emotions to other people – any demand for narrative as the basis of shared understandings may seem overly prescriptive.

I agree that normative demands for certain kinds of self-disclosure – or disclosure by friends and family on our behalf – place an unhelpful burden on autistic people, who may lack access to the material, cultural, or conceptual tools to enable mutually enlivening interpersonal experiences. I therefore urge that we need to combine an understanding of how language and communication create a shared, and often disabling, social world, with recognition that subjectivity is not the same as communicability. For this reason, I resist conceiving of selves or subjects as fundamentally determined by historically specific processes of cultural, social, or political recognition. While conventional subjects are recognized as persons insofar as they can differentiate themselves from others through time and in relation to others, autistic people may find value in their sense of either spatial or temporal interconnection with other selves even if this can't be fully conceptualized– experiencing the self as porous with other selves and objects in one's environment, as Freeborn suggests.

In writing about the importance of the 'first-person perspective', I affirm my own autistic tendency to dwell on details and reluctance to differentiate myself from a heterogenous autistic 'we' with whom I identify not only comparable struggles in making myself clear but also an expanded ethical perspective on my own life. In presenting to you the contours of autistic narration, I do not intend to speak 'on behalf of' all autistic people or their families, but to overturn the assumption autism can be identified with any singular subject position or location in discourse. Instead, I propose that understandings of autism can be enriched if we consider the narrative complexity that autism brings to the world of shared experience. After this, I explore some of the third-person perspectives on autism that have developed in recent decades and suggest that their focus on communicating a third-person perspective has elided both the conditions that would support individual narrative agency for autistics and an understanding of the social that may speak to the 'sharing act of projecting meaning: cooperation between agents of enunciation' (Berardi 2017: 24). In doing so, I will seek to convey how collaborative sense-making supports life-enhancing practical identities and ameliorates the reductive forms of identification and symbolic thought that undermine the possibility of a shared political world.

What can narrative do?

Narrative as collaborative sense-making[2]

To begin, I will present my definition of narrative as a process of 'collaborative sense-making' – which need not include words and can be formed of images, sounds, words, or gestures, or a combination of these. Narrative sense-making may be temporally and spatially distributed so that we can take part in a narrative exchange with ourselves.

Figure 1.1 'I didn't have an image of what it looked like'. Source: From *A Deeper Country* (blog), by Amanda Forest Vivian, copyright Amanda Forest Vivian 2010.

Amanda Forest Vivian's blog *I'm somewhere else* illustrates the process of distributed narrative sense-making surrounding an autism diagnosis – both in its form and in the process of composition. In it, the author (who is a college freshman at the time of writing this post) adds to her discussion of herself in relation to others, through her sense that she wants to feel better about stimming.[3]

In the post, she discusses how her understanding of stimming had been shaped by 'vague negative stuff, or silence', and by hearing 'people on the internet saying it was okay but I had trouble applying that to my real life' (Forest Vivian 2010). She explains,

> I took these pictures because I didn't know what I looked like when I was stimming and I assumed it probably looked scary. As soon as I started taking them, I realized it looked sort of cool, at least in pictures.

Later on, Forest Vivian wrote an essay on sharing experiences of stimming with her friends. Reflecting back on this and the earlier pictures in her blog, she describes how she now found her earlier 'standards for being normal' problematic and, as a result, had started to see stimming as 'a tool and a joy':

> I guess this spring it occurred to me that I'm not the only person in the world to ever hold my hands differently and I started to think about what I was afraid of looking like … I realized it was just the way some people with ID [intellectual disability] and ASD walk and hold themselves all the time.
>
> (ibid)

Revisiting these images later, she realizes that the difficulties she had are not due to a lack of either a non-pathologizing term or a sense of how it might be positive for her – she saw from her friends that it could be 'natural and unselfconscious' if it wasn't suppressed. What she had needed was time and an interactional space to consider how it might be possible for her to stim in public and still be herself, if she wasn't 'holding herself in place'. The post entitled 'Run, Forest Run: On Movement and Love' presents her subsequent reflection on the earlier photos, in the light of what she had learned not only about autism and other disabilities, but her decision to 'own the possibility of looking disabled' (ibid). The photographs, therefore, serve as a record of her earlier experiencing-self, whose attitudes are an important source of her future, revised, self-concept.

In bringing her pictures into the world – Forest Vivian explains that she shared her photos with an Asperger's *Live Journal* Community – she demonstrates narrative agency, which is the 'capacity to make sense of ourselves as unique beings in the world' within a plurality (Lucas 2016: 103). Even if she subsequently comes to reject her earlier interpretation of herself – if the sense she makes is inaccurate as she later comes to see it – she demonstrates her ongoing narrative agency through spontaneous action in relation to others.

Narratives that record misrecognition

The narrators I refer to throughout this book come from diverse socioeconomic, regional, and cosmopolitical contexts that interpenetrate both their sense of their identities and experiences of autism, which is to say that there are very few generalizations that can be made about their approaches to representing autism. However, while these contexts and embodied differences make a difference to the narrators' sense of their identities and the possible pathways to cultural personhood, the disclosure of autism presents some comparable challenges to ontological and political agency.

Autistic life narratives often illustrate the harm that comes from stereotypical understandings of who someone is, given dominant constructions of their identity. Individuals may be misrecognized either because they are regarded as autistic and therefore lacking self-awareness according to cultural master narratives, or because they are seen as ‘not-autistic-enough’ for this to be a salient fact about them, according to the other culturally sanctioned identity markers. In either case, there are externally imposed constraints on our ability to make sense of ourselves through time and in relation to others. Alternatively, autism may be invoked to deny political agency, when it is taken to imply an impaired understanding of oneself in relation to others (Yergeau 2018: 139). For some, writing and/or typing with assistance can help with the process of communicating experiences that, due to difficulties with verbal speech, they are presumed not to have. For instance, using facilitated typing initially enabled Tito Rajarshi Mukhopadhyay to communicate his early life in India and his subsequent move to the United States, in *How Can I Talk If My Lips Don’t Move? Inside My Autistic Mind* (2003), *The Mind Tree: A Miraculous Child Breaks the Silence of Autism* (2005), and *The Gold of the Sunbeams And Other Stories* (2008). Even so, other people’s recognition that he is indeed a ‘thinking self’ (2005: 77–78) was constantly threatened by the appearance of his ‘acting self’ within a public world marked by unjust social stratification.

Plankton Dreams: What I Learned in Special Ed was written independently when Mukhopadhyay was in his twenties, and it reflects on his experiences in a particular educational environment during his teens. The school had been fundamentally unable to acknowledge his need for movement to coordinate his actions and thoughts. He explains, the school could only provide a place for him “by virtue of being a form of ‘matter’,” consigned to a seat and given generic and age-inappropriate worksheets. Mukhopadhyay explains:

> There is the typical domain of typical beings who aren’t doubted or tested repeatedly, and who have a real place in education, work, and decision making. And then there is the “special” domain of “special” beings, where all is shadow, formless and wobbling, and hope itself lies sodden and submerged.
>
> (2015: 83)

By this time, however, Mukhopadhyay had already written two memoirs and had received widespread public recognition that he defied assumptions about non-speaking autistic people. In this context, *Plankton Dreams* shows how narrative acts can testify to and thereby challenge acts of misrecognition that treat us as a stereotype, a statistic, or an object instead of as a person with a story of their own. While it is typically assumed that autistic people who speak have very little in common with nonspeaking autistics, both groups are subject to misrecognition, of having their lives assumed to be a tragedy or triumph, according to whatever perceived quality of our lives is deemed most noteworthy. This ignores how our possibilities for action are constrained, not only by autistic embodiment but by the other visible aspects of our identities that, typically, define how others see us. Insofar as we are normatively regarded as conforming to our culture's idea of what it is to be *someone like us*, we are denied recognition for the constraints and possibilities that emerge through intersecting aspects of our lives.

Joanne Limburg explains:

> Not long after I was diagnosed, I embarked on a PhD and – thinking it was the proper thing to do, applied for Disabled Students' Allowance. The assessor was thrown by me. Very early on, he pointed out how different I was from his other autistic clients: I made eye contact, my answers were relevant to his questions. I had naively thought that diagnosis was all I needed to gain the assistance I was asking for – I hadn't realized that this role necessitated some kind of perceptible inferiority to my assessor. I had often failed at being a woman. Now, apparently, I was failing to be autistic.
>
> (60)

Limburg perceives that subordinating assumptions about womanhood undermine her capacity to articulate her differences in ways that would contribute to a shared understanding within this assessment process. Yet, the systematic misrecognition of autism in relation to gender is exceeded by more widespread assumptions about race that still undermine the possibility of diagnosis.

American poet and folklorist Anand Prahlad describes how his appearance in the world is shaped by other people's assumptions about either his blackness or autism in general, so that his own autism is invisible (2017):

> People don't like imagining difference, and so, when they can, they see what they want to see. So being a black man is like an accidental sleight of hand. Many white people can't see black people at all, much less see with the discernment that it would take to notice Asperger's.
>
> (8)

In identifying the filters through which others see him, Prahlad indicates throughout *The Secret Life of a Black Aspie* (2017) that his interactions are shaped by narratives about race, which constrain his ability to disclose his autism. Autism is associated with childhood, whiteness, and tragedy. Since he can 'hold a job', he is further barred from disclosing his autism even in white spaces where he might otherwise be able to (8).

Mukhopadhyay, Limburg, and Prahlad deploy their life narratives against threats to their ontological agency, and this requires what Sarah Lucas described as ‘confidence that one will appear in the world and be recognized by others as a unique being’ (2016: 20). Ontological agency is, according to Lucas, a precondition for developing political agency as ‘individual subject’s understanding of herself as an ‘I’ in relation to other selves’ (20). In each of the three narratives, recognition by a friend or family member underpins the ongoing process of navigating a political identity in a shared world.

However, we can appear in public as distinctive individuals without reliably being able to articulate our uniqueness. At the start of *Letters to My Weird Sisters*, Limburg lacks a sense of her life as an autistic woman that can allow her to argue against stereotypes, but regains this, through her friendships and reflection on the broader context of her life. This is not the case for Prahlad, since his confidence in making sense of his experiences is constrained by public appearances that require him to mask his autism and genderfluidity. Tito Rajarshi Mukhopadhyay can appear in public through facilitation – the use of a computer, assistant, and screen – but doing so threatens recognition that his multiple sensorimotor differences exceed any possibility of technical remediation. Insofar as ontological agency is threatened by sustained acts of misrecognition of our distinctiveness in relation to any other person who has ever lived, we may experience a sense of ‘loneliness’ that our actions are unable to contribute to a shared world (Lucas 210–211)

Narratives that record resistance to the stories we’ve heard about our lives from peers or family

For Lucas, narrative sustains both political and ontological agency, since narrative involves ‘making sense, whether of one’s own practical identity, of one’s memories, of other people’s opinions, or of events of the distant past’ (22). Identity narratives – those that communicate to others our sense of our practical identity – contribute to building a shared world of action. Insofar as they draw on a constantly changing web of stories that we encounter about ourselves and others, narratives allow a space to resist objectifying labels that others have given us. However, when this web involves autism, this can be undermined at the outset.

Confidence in our ontological agency may be threatened even within the intimate context of family and friends. In *Drama Queen: One Autistic Woman and a Life of Unhelpful Labels* (2021), the comedian and writer Sarah Gibbs describes the common responses she received from friends when she explained that she met the diagnostic criteria for autism:

1. I’m so sorry to hear that;
2. No you’re not;

3. You must be very high-functioning;
4. That's offensive to my relative who's really autistic;
5. Aren't we all a bit autistic?;
6. Autism is a bit of a fad at the moment;
7. Wow, you're so brave;
8. I don't like labels;
9. Don't you go using that as an excuse for everything now;
10. I wondered what was wrong with you! (319).

Each of these responses constrains the possibility of further sense-making, or mutual understanding, and contributes to Gibbs's own ambivalence about initial self-diagnosis via an online questionnaire; she felt like autism could be 'a cop out for my poor behavior' (318). Gibbs's narrative articulates how her confidence is constrained by other people's attitudes, which are determined by their own evaluative frameworks:

> It turns out that if people have a long-established view of you as a drama queen, a sudden self-diagnosis with a disability only validates their view of you. It's just another one of Sarah's attention-seeking schemes.
>
> (319)

Gibbs's mother and husband, however, believed that her self-assessment was plausible, and this provided the necessary confidence for her to seek an 'official diagnosis'. This confirmed that the self-assessment had indeed been correct and she is subject to a dual diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and Asperger's Syndrome (a now-defunct diagnostic category in the DSM and ICD, which was then being 'phased out') (323). Yet official confirmation produced a new difficulty, which surrounded being aware that her former goal to be 'normal' was now impossible (324). Furthermore, how could she now trust her judgments of social interactions, since she had lived her life with a 'neurological disability' without realizing it (327)? However, diagnosis provided a framework from which Gibbs could challenge her internalized self-understanding – that she wasn't trying hard enough to be normal – and offered a structure to understand her past, present, and future possibilities. This is a process that happens alongside others, including Facebook and Twitter support groups for autistic adults (330). Gibbs's subsequent self-understanding of autism as a neutral difference in the right environments is one that accords with a broader concept of neurodiversity:

> It has taken me several years of exploration but I am now at a place where I see my autism as neither an affliction nor a superpower. It is just the blueprint for who I am.
>
> (331)

Gibbs's early efforts at self-diagnosis came up against both her friends' existing understandings of who she is, which invoke a contemporary counterstory about autism (see Chapter 2) – that it is 'just a label'. After diagnosis, she navigates between the idea that autism may entail a 'superpower' and the idea that it can be defined by social deficits. While the understanding that autism is a superpower has emerged from first-person perspectives, such as Temple Grandin's exploration of her visual thinking in *Emergence: Labelled Autistic*, it fails to serve as the basis for enhanced political agency for autistic people who lack appropriate support for their sensorimotor embodiment or who are subject to multiple forms of oppression. However, like Gibbs's memoir, *Emergence* is also the record of resistance to stories the author has heard about her life, in Grandin's case, that her difficulties are psychogenic in origin.

In the light of rising diagnostics among both adults and children in the West, alongside recognition for infinitely varied manifestations and difficulties with identifying a 'core deficit', some have argued that autism is exclusively a label or social construct that fails to correspond to any biological reality (see, for example, Timimi 2018). While there are many problems with existing models within cognitive psychology (see Chapter 2) and there are unhelpful stereotypes that pertain to identifying as autistic, the concept still offers an interpretative structure that, within certain contexts, helps individuals to overturn more limiting understandings of their lives in relation to others. Further, there are alternatives to reductionist models of autism, and these both resist the eugenic impulse of existing psychiatric classifications and register the interpenetration of 'biology' with social ontologies.

Gibbs's psychologist demonstrates how our political agency can be catalyzed through individual acts of recognition that we appear in the world as a distinctive self:

> She praised my grit and determination for carving out a place for myself in the world, despite none of it being designed for me. It was a shock. I was so used to people telling me I wasn't trying hard enough that someone taking the opposite view felt like being shaken upside down in a snow globe.
>
> (323)

From this starting point, Gibbs eventually develops political agency to argue for a distinctive observation about the social world that 'the world would be so much easier for everyone if our first assumption was that people are acting in good faith and speaking honestly' (336).

Narratives that show the process of making sense of ourselves through time

Prahlad's memoir, *The Secret Life of a Black Aspie*, shows that it is possible to regain narrative agency when he is subject to multiple forms of misrecognition. In this case, it is not the word autism but his relationship with his wife that instigates the process of seeking to understand interpersonal differences and articulate what it means to be an ‘older black man with Asperger’s’ when ‘the three things don’t go together in most people’s minds’ (7). Prahlad regains narrative agency through writing the book insofar as he draws on his own understanding of himself in relation to others to resist assumptions that other people might have about him, such as that he is ‘lazy’ or ‘stupid’ or that he can’t be autistic because he is ‘successful and can hold a job’ (8). While he explains that he felt he could not disclose his autism as a disability in black communities because ‘they can’t believe in anything that would make our “race” seem vulnerable’, for most of his life, ‘Americans had no general awareness of neurological disorders’, and it was only through his childhood on a plantation where ‘almost everyone had neurological disorders’ that he ‘made sense’ to others:

> Although I was more eccentric than anyone else in my family, I was still familiar. I made sense to them. They could understand some of my dysfunctions because they had them to a lesser degree themselves. They very patiently taught me many simple things about how to get along. How to create a habit and live by it. How to deflect sounds. How to guess what people wanted. Some of these things were what had helped slaves to survive.
>
> (9)

The text offers a retrospective attempt to connect together the aspects of his life that he had subsequently kept ‘secret’ in different contexts because they would prevent him from living by the habits that had protected him. This means explaining to the reader how his interactions with different kinds of people entailed different possibilities and constraints on his disclosure. For instance, he could not reveal his gender fluidity or suspected neurological difference in relationships with white girls, because white people lived in worlds where ‘the only place for those parts of me were closets or cages’ (161). People like him are among the ‘homeless, or in red-light districts, psych wards or ashrams’ but these are also places where he does not feel safe (162).

But as time went on, it took him more effort to maintain his strategies and filters. He found that with his wife and children, he could not always be the self that they liked to be around, because his efforts to discern other people’s patterns and also find ‘beauty, order, sense, meaning, joy, and reason’ in the objects and spaces around him overwhelmed him (217). The book records the process of conveying these intricated strategies as a process of maintaining connection even when he needs, in real time, to disconnect (162). At the end of the text, Prahlad explains that the context of his Asperger's diagnosis is the effort to maintain his relationship with his wife who has experienced him as two distinctive selves – one who is 'loving and connected' and the other 'who did not seem to recognize her' (217). Writing the memoir appears to fulfill the dual aims of allowing him to draw on his understanding of himself to resist 'neurotypical rules' (162) and maintain his sense of distinctiveness, but it is threatened by interactional norms in the present which would seem to undermine his ontological agency, or 'who-ness' by eliding the effort that it takes to inhabit other people's worlds of sense.

At the outset, Prahlad explains that in the stories he tells he wishes to put his mind 'on display' because it is a way of organizing and potentially remembering his experiences in the way that other people do through talking (10). The book invites the reader to contribute to an intersubjective context in which his 'sense' of himself, rather than the events themselves, is most significant. It invites us to perceive him as he sees himself in different interactional contexts, rather than through a supposedly neutral depiction of events that would render his life intelligible within dominant frames of meaning.

While Prahlad presents his early life through the lens of a family who all had 'neurological disorders' of their own, Joanne Limburg first took to poetry in *The Autistic Alice* (2017) to fictionalize aspects of her life that she believed were autistic, but beyond her awareness prior to diagnosis. In doing so, she pays painstaking attention to the question of what it means to write from the perspective of being autistic without being conscious of doing so. As Limburg explains in her essay 'The Shape of the Problem', Lewis Carroll's character of Alice is an 'autobiographical figure' and 'vehicle' for exploring her own experience without committing it to the realm of extratextual reality (2017b). This is because Limburg recognizes that her subjectivity, and understandings of autism, have been shaped by those around her to the extent that there is no space for her to reflect on her understandings of her earlier autism except in the realm of the imagination.

'Alice' is a persona presented in the third person, and she is a fictional character containing elements of what Limburg believes to be true about herself and in relation to others as a child. While apparently autobiographical details are included, such as the fact that Limburg's mother had described her daughter as, like Alice, 'curious', and 'constantly questioning' (2017b), Limburg makes it clear that her persona is *not* Carroll's Alice and does not share Alice's facility for logic. Alice appears closer to the stereotype that dominates contemporary psychology of a robotic concern for rationality (Chapman 2020). But in articulating her difference from Alice, Carroll's texts provide Limburg with a 'notional, atemporal conceptual space' in which to communicate experiences that do not fit 'conventional rhetorical forms' (2017b). Joanne-as-Alice also symbolizes Limburg's real-life 'special interest', or autistic passion for Martin Gardner's *The Annotated Alice* (1960), which is itself a digressive reinterpretation of Carroll's fictional world.

Limburg shows that our recognition of our lives in relation to others does not always happen in direct interaction or even in a real-world scenario – it can be facilitated by reading, writing, fiction, or poetry. Poetry offers a dynamic space to reimagine ourselves to *ourselves*, even if it may not provide any direct political intervention.

Narratives that allow us to explain our sense of our projects and plans

For Lucas, following feminist philosophical interventions in narrative identity theory, a practical identity is the sense of ourselves we deploy in action (100). It is neither static nor necessarily coherent, incorporating both our desire for belonging through dominant identity narratives, and solidarity with others through counter narration. A practical identity enables us to deliberate about action, based on what we think of as normal, desirable, and valuable for us, and in justifying our actions to others. Insofar as we possess narrative agency – recognition by others for our uniqueness and a sense of ourselves as having a continued existence through time – our practical identity can embody reasons for action that do not conform to generalized assumptions about people like us.

David Miedzianik is somehow who may seem to lack any form of agency in authorizing an understanding of his life. Recording his life up to the age of 25, *My Autobiography* (1986) was written in response to an initial study by the National Autistic Society into the 'predicament of the able autistic person' (i). He records his five hospitalizations and, at a time when autism was believed to entail violence, a treatment regime of antipsychotic medication. Reflecting on his recent unsuccessful attempts at getting a job – which he attributes to his 'monotone voice' – he also recognizes that he faces discrimination because he has been in hospital for his 'mind' (33). He describes bullying by neighborhood children and at school, and how he had to live at home with his mum and grandmother because he couldn't get a job. While he attended writing classes and joined a folk club, writing songs and poetry, his grandmother, in particular, couldn't understand his passion for poetry; he was not an 'intellectual' and most poets had PhDs (88). But he understood the value that writing had in his life:

> Living is more or less one constant bore. I think if it wasn't for the writing I don't think I would have been alive, I think I might have ended it all; but the writing has somehow given me some reason to carry on. (i)

Miedzianik wanted to challenge the political context of his life, but saw this as futile given the lack of interest, in Neoliberal Britain, in helping unemployed disabled adults. Writing to Elizabeth Newson, who went on to publish his memoir at the University of Nottingham, he asked:

> What's happened to that report you were doing to get us jobs or training places? Years have gone by and we never hear anything … I could have written more about myself (in this autobiography) but I left bits out, because life hasn't been much fun for years.
>
> (i)

Insofar as the memoir did not change this situation, it still achieved something for him and the conversations with psychologists had given him a context to explore his uniqueness. It informs his practical identity as 'a description under which you value yourself, a description under which you find your life to be worth living and your actions to be worth undertaking' (Korsgaard 1996, 102, quoted in Lucas 77) even if the reality of his life was otherwise very difficult. His autobiography provided a sense of himself as an agent with a life that was, despite being almost entirely constrained by subordination, still provided opportunities for recognition and hope.

Narrative challenges to political injustice

Throughout *Letters to My Weird Sisters*, Limburg suggests that identification with autism and disability affords a re-appraisal of middle-class feminism. Learning from other autistic and disabled women, she recognizes that the identity she presents as 'Socially Gracious Joanne (SGJ)' is harmful to herself and other autistic women. While 'SGJ is a rigid container for an unruly social self […] SGJ is middle class. SGJ is white. SGJ can pass for neurotypical' she conforms to the 'emotionally muffled, verbally indirect, distinctly middle-class mode of relating' which is always 'disadvantageous to people with developmental disabilities (224–227).

Through identification with other autistics, she realized that SGJ was a product of internalized misogyny, ableism, and antisemitism that 'Jewish women are loud and pushy', that contributed to 'class-bound standards of female behavior that were designed to mark out "nice" middle-class girls, from "common" working-class ones' (228). Limburg explains that autism gave her not only a better understanding of herself and her experiences but also a reason to 'speak up' (234). She identifies overlaps between ableism toward autistics and patriarchal views of women who are 'not supposed to make assertions that cause others … to feel bad about themselves' (ibid).

What narratives can't do?

If our political agency can only remain intact insofar as we retain otherwise supportive relationships, narratives cannot change circumstances that are overwhelmingly hostile, where we are always constrained by other people's subordinating stories. In this way, for Anand Prahlad, disclosing autism posed the risk of being further ostracized. After desegregation in the United States during the 1960s, it was easier for Prahlad to think of himself as fundamentally different in an unspecified way rather than as autistic. He explains: the stories he heard about people with disabilities made him realize that they were either pitied or despised and growing up black meant he had already seen the reality of living in this way (7). Autism is, symbolically, connected to one of the other 'white objects' that came into people's homes that made them feel like they were betraying each other.

His family had taught him to hide from white people those aspects of himself that made him seem vulnerable. He developed rules for interacting with others based on what they were willing to share with him. But later in life, he realized that this was not enough, because '[e]verything, every day, all day long, is part of a perfect system that no one else can see' (221). After diagnosis, he realized that his 'difference is more profound than most neurotypicals can imagine' (221). But living with others requires the possibility of mutual understanding (217).

Prahlad's 'secret life' is to an extent narratable because of his subsequent status as an academic. His life, like Limburg's, is intelligible because it can be seen to fit within the model of 'triumph' over adversity, even if this is at odds with the latent design of the text and the semiotic structures it invokes. As I go on to argue in subsequent chapters, it is through our appearance as at least privileged in some respects that we are regarded as self-governing subjects capable of making sense. Yet, the circumstances that allow him to become an academic are themselves governed by subordinating norms that require conformity and meant he could not speak out against broader discrimination faced by black students at his college: 'they started making anyone who used the 'D' [diversity] word the bad one, like the body wanting to rid itself of a splinter' (209).

This hints at broader constraints on the occasions in which we are recognized as individuals having a story to tell – when the notions of willpower and individual autonomy are re-inscribed over what we say about the distinctively relational circumstances of our lives. Without an understanding that we live according to intersecting vectors of identification, autistic life narratives risk becoming the basis of new master narratives that deny agency and recognition to the multiply marginalized. In the drive to develop ostensibly more inclusive diagnostic and therapeutic interventions, it may be easy to assume that what is needed is one 'story' that can be applied to lives in widely ranging cultural circumstances (see Chapter 5). In these instances, less overtly narrative forms – such as poetry, film, and visual art – may be more helpful conduits to individual expression (see Chapters 3 and 4). Similar challenges to narrative and political agency are faced by scholars who identify as autistic and who attempt to intervene in public discussions of autism. I will argue that, insofar as autistic researchers interact in discursive spaces where our identities are fixed into a structural model of individual and interpersonal forces, there is very little room for understanding the role of culture and the imagination in creating multiple worlds of sense through which our subjectivity may be expressed.

In what follows, I argue that autistic-informed research into social ontologies and perception-first models of autism which emphasize how cultural niches that favor non-autistic modes of interacting, are overlooked by mainstream autism researchers because they do not conform to institutional practices of sense-making in the psi disciplines.

Narrative agency within scholarly contexts: introducing the 'master narratives'

While cognitive psychologists recognize that autism is varied as it manifests in individual, cultural master narratives suggest that it is often assumed that it is a condition of masculinity, whiteness, absent social motivation, and a lack of interest in establishing connections. Although there is disagreement as to the existence and nature of a core social deficit, it remains foundational to many research projects on autism that one should exist.

A newer body of work, inspired by autistic self-advocacy, draws on qualitative interview techniques and focuses on the social production of autism within two-way interactions between differently situated interlocutors. As a pioneer in this field, the British sociologist Damian Milton has shown that non-autistic people also struggle to take the perspective of autistic individuals, so there is a two-way or 'double empathy' problem between autistic and non-autistic people, which is at least partly responsible for difficulties with two-way communication (2012). Furthermore, autistic people may find different aspects of a situation noteworthy or relevant for communication, rather than being simply unaware of the context of communication (Williams 2021). Research incorporating autistic self-advocacy is given little credit within the majority of research on the condition, since it is perceived as lacking a fundamental meaning if it is not conceived as a disorder (Chapman 2020), and it is seen as counter to the needs and interests of either parents of autistic children or autistic people who conceive of their autism, rather than the lack of societal understanding, as the main source of their difficulties.

At the same time, questions about the ontological status of autism have fuelled some within a broader critical psychiatry tradition to question the validity of autism as a psychiatric classification (Timimi 2018). This is at odds with the stated aims of researchers such as Milton, who makes it clear that autism has utility as a diagnostic category, even if it is, for him, a predominantly social construct[4], because it allows us to consider the '"problems of living" [that] people on the autism spectrum have in navigating a social world that was not designed for their needs' (Milton 2017). The problems of living as an autistic person are evident in the figures surrounding autistic mental health problems, unemployment, and suicidality. The idea that autism is 'just a label' would seem to offer little to address this.

As with other psychiatric classifications, research efforts have typically focused on finding an area of individual impairment, rather than exploring the social or cultural conditions in which a difference in functioning may become disabling. One prevailing understanding within cognitive psychology of the 'core deficit' in autism within cognitive psychology is that it entails 'weak central coherence', or a processing style that entails a limited ability to understand context or to 'see the big picture' (Happé and Frith 2006). This has, in turn, been used to define behavioral symptoms in communicative contexts, such as disinclination to grasp the global context of a sentence's meaning in sentence completion tasks (Booth and Happé 2010).

Both Damian Milton's theorization of a double empathy problem and Frith and Happe's model of Weak Central Coherence were developed as alternatives to the Theory of Mind (ToM) deficits or Mindblindness model of autism. Both a psychological model of autism as Weak Central Coherence and a social ontology of autism as double empathy problems engage with the limitations of the Theory of Mind deficits model insofar as it fails to account for the experiences of autistic people.

While many have criticized Mindblindness at the level of theoretical inadequacy and empirical support, I provide a relatively full account of it here because it remains one of the most prominent master narratives about autism (especially in the United Kingdom) and, having some understanding of it, provides 'institutional backup' to beginning to have a conversation about autism in a research context, even if it is not explicitly stated. However, more importantly, I explain it here in order to show how it is entangled with a worldview that is governed by the assumption that the most relevant qualities of a person are what they offer to a supposedly universal world of symbolic sense.

ToM was originally postulated as a cognitive explanation for how humans, in contrast to other species, could attribute mental states (including beliefs, desires, and emotions) to others in seeking to understand their behavior. In suggesting that autistic children lacked a 'Theory of Mind' in their 1985 paper, Simon Baron-Cohen, Uta Frith, and Alan Leslie proposed that autistic children lacked an important component of what makes us human. To simplify the reasoning that led to this conclusion, it begins with the idea of imaginative play that Lorna Wing and colleagues at the Maudsley in London, had described as absent or impaired in autistic children (1977). Alan Leslie proposed that 'pretend play' is an early form of metacognition, in which one learns that it is possible to replace a primary representation (of the sort that 'I see a banana') with a secondary representation (for instance, 'I believe that it is a telephone' in specific contexts) (Leslie 1987). For Leslie, the ability to form beliefs about our beliefs – such as that 'in this situation, this object is actually something else' – supports the development of the ability to understand that other people can pretend and have beliefs that are different from our own. Baron-Cohen and colleagues proposed that pretend play was the ontogenetic basis of ToM abilities in typically developing children, and its absence would suggest that something had gone awry with the cognitive mechanism for forming and maintaining secondary representations or 'metarepresentations' of one's own and other people's mental states.

What the model of metarepresentation offered to the purported Theory of Mind explanation of social cognition in higher primates was the proposal that a 'decoupling' mechanism could explain how it would be possible to hold two apparently contradictory beliefs (such that you know it is a banana but behave as though it is a telephone) (Leslie 1987). Baron-Cohen and colleagues conducted a series of studies on autistic children who, they argued, were unable to form second-order beliefs (he believes that it is a telephone) despite otherwise attaining developmental milestones (1985). In the now-famous study, 20 autistic children under the age of 11 were shown to 'fail' to recognize that someone (in this case, a puppet) may be tricked into holding a false belief about the location of an object (a marble), while still being able to form true beliefs about the actual location of the object.

This was interpreted as implying that the autistic children, evidenced by the false belief tests and absent imaginary play, lacked a capacity for decoupling primary and secondary representations, so it would otherwise be possible to simultaneously hold a primary representation (the true location of the marble) and an apparently contradictory secondary representation (he believes the marble is elsewhere). The supposed deficit in 'decoupling' was therefore taken as the origin of 'social' deficits in other 'real-world' contexts: autistic people could not move from first-order beliefs about the perceptual world to the intersubjective realm of other people's likely perspectives, emotions, and beliefs, including those pertaining to symbolic roles (Baron-Cohen 1985). This was taken to offer a fundamental explanation of the behavior of autistic people, in their apparent inability to engage in social relationships.

The ToM model could offer theoretical support to understanding autism as a ‘Triad of Impairments’ in social and communicative behavior, which was developed by Lorna Wing (DSM III). It also conformed to the then-fashionable model of mental ‘modules’: the decoupling mechanism serving as a candidate for a ‘social module’ among typically developing humans and other ‘higher’ primates. A Theory of Mind deficits model of autism would typically be interpreted within a developmental perspective that would seek to intervene to support an individual’s Mentalizing ‘precursor skills, including following eye-gaze, establishing joint attention, imitation, pretend play, and emotion recognition’ (Fletcher-Watson 2014).

On the other hand, the Weak Central Coherence allowed autistic individuals the possibility of invoking a distinctive cognitive style, rather than absent social motivation, in explanations of their experience. For instance, it could allow someone to affirm their own sense of having ‘strengths in perceiving details’ (Frith 2003). Yet Happé considers Weak Central Coherence as conceptually connected to a ‘core deficit’ in Mentalizing or Theory of Mind, even if such a deficit may not be apparent in any individual (1994). Furthermore, the Theory of Mind deficits not only preclude awareness of other people’s mental states but also of one’s own (1999). Within a Theory of Mind deficits framing, we have little reason to trust the testimony of autistic people (Hens et al. 2019) even while the very existence of first-person testimony about the mental lives of autistic people would seem to undermine this assumption (Van Goidsenhoven 2017).

Within a recent articulation of autism by Frith, even if autism does not produce Theory of Mind deficits, this is regarded as a property of autism rather than autistics. As Greg Hollin has observed, this view of autism as both inter- and intra-personally heterogeneous – that there may be two or more cognitive features each of which could individually explain their symptoms – reduces the potential for us to conceive that autistic individuals may have agency that does not come from their autism (2017). This also leaves little room for autistic individuals to argue for their own, unable to have anything relevant to share about their experiences, since anything they say can be taken to be irrelevant to knowledge of the condition in general and unable to account for the social deficits that would be apparent to external observers (Happé 1991).

Against this background, Frith argues that those who have particularly pronounced ‘symptomatic behaviors’, such as difficulties producing spoken language, would have very little chance of demonstrating a ‘rich inner mental life’ through techniques such as facilitated communication (2016). In light of the publicity surrounding cases where facilitation through the use of letter board devices and various forms of motor-control support were shown to be fraudulent or manipulative, clinicians have tended to disregard the possibility that nonspeaking autistic people, or those who struggle to reliably speak, can be supported to produce independent communication through any kind of prosthetic or support. Weak Central Coherence therefore casts autistic people as having an impaired form of subjectivity and a 'thin' emotional life. This contributes a further barrier to regarding autistic people in general as having anything to communicate about their experiences.

Researchers outside of the main U.K. labs have sought to further distance themselves from a psychological model of autism, regarding specific difficulties with verbal communication as founded on sensorimotor aspects of embodiment, which might themselves be the target of intervention and treatment (Pellicano 2013; Bodgashina 2003: Markram and Markram 2010; Fournier et al. 2010; Donnellan et al. 2012; see the discussion of Temple Grandin's theorization of autism in Chapter 2). If autism is primarily a difference in sensorimotor experiences, rather than intersubjectivity, researchers could seem to have a reason to listen to what autistic people say about their lives, even if this makes it harder for autistic people to speak about an aspect of their lives that is not related to perceptual experience. But while a social ontology of autism, such as Milton's, would question the assumption that autism is fundamentally an impaired form of subjectivity, perception-first models of autism may propose that autism entails an enhanced form of subjectivity.

However, some cognitive scientists have argued that this does not lead to an understanding of how perceptual differences may exist without entailing difficulties in social relations; therefore, a model of social dysfunction emerging from perceptual differences is needed (Bervoets and Hens 2020). This would suggest that an understanding of 'autistic perception' could be reached that did not logically entail difficulties in two-way sense-making, as the Theory of Mind deficit model does. This is based on the assumption that empathizing with autistic people requires a theoretical understanding of what autistic perception is like in general and therefore what are regarded as 'thin' experiences within a Weak Central Coherence model become noteworthy and morally relevant.

One alternative model seeks to understand the difficulties that autistic people experience in social interactions in terms of differences in perceptual attunement but regards the 'deficit' in ecological terms, as a mismatch between autistic perception and cultural 'niches' that create cultural affordances – 'meaningful structures or situations of the environment'. These are 'structured for and by' non-autistic people and produce noisy and dynamic sensory environments (Legault, Bourdon, and Poirier 2019).

> 'Deficit' is a normative notion, meaning that something that should be working in a certain way is not. Viewed from a 4E [*embodied*, *embedded*, *enacted*, or *extended*] predictive perspective, that 'something' can

> be the brain but also, and equally, it can be the body, the environment or the complex set of relations that link them.
>
> (248)

Ecological 4E models of mental functioning, such as the one proposed by Legault and colleagues, allow for recognition of environment *and* culture in producing specific functions or dysfunctions. The differences between autistic and non-autistic people's experiences of social interaction could be fed into the cultural niche in order to create environments that enable interaction for both neurotypes – for instance, environments where sensory overwhelm is avoided and where information is provided unambiguously.

> We are not speaking of, say, eliminating social interactions to favor greater stability. We are rather imagining the possibility of a social environment where interactions are perhaps not governed by implicit norms and not dominated by implied meaning. The appearance of autistic traits or difficulties is intimately related to the nature and structure of the particular cultural niche people find themselves in.
>
> (263)

The key challenge, however, is the lack of 'interpretative [...] resources to describe the experience of neurodiverse [sic] people, which results in their experience being misunderstood or even ignored by neurotypicals' (264). The hermeneutic privileging of non-autistic social niches – where eye contact, spontaneous interaction in noisy environments, and small talk are the hallmarks of sociability – is reinforced by the testimonial injustice against autistic accounts of their own experiences to produce a 'loop of empirically inadequate self-realizing prophecy' (Legault et al. 265).

Recent discussions about 'what autism is' therefore, while potentially supplanting the assumption that autism can be represented in terms of a lack of what are presumed to be morally salient human qualities, are typically disempowering for autistic people themselves, given existing injustices facing autistic people's knowledge and testimony (ibid). As Bryce Huebner explores in conversation with Remi Yergeau, 'Patterns of deindividualization and dehumanization seem to pervade discussions about what it "really means" to be autistic' (2017: 285). These attitudes seem to stem from both a lack of ability to imagine what it would mean to be perceiving the world in a different way and an unwillingness to consider how other ways of perceiving the world might entail different understandings of the world and our place in it. This is particularly the case when autism is accompanied by the absence of, or difficulties in regularly producing, verbal speech, where dominant discourses cannot conceive thought or intelligence as compatible with specific functional difficulties. While it is typically regarded as valuable for a non-autistic researcher to empathize with autistic people in general, this very effort may inhibit the sharing of experiences that are not regarded as the consequences of a universal neurology.

The conditions that produce autistic loneliness

Many autistic narrators consider that sensory and perceptual processing differences may define their understanding of autism – as I explore in detail in Chapter 3. However, I argue that many of the interactional difficulties between autistic and non-autistic interlocutors within clinical settings result from a failure to recognize uniqueness – assuming a model of subjectivity which posits that behavior can be fundamentally *explained* by neurology. The consequences of this are that autism as a clinical-diagnostic object falls short of its potential in understanding individual autistic lives, even if it may be perceived as explaining autism from an outsider's perspective. Furthermore, it contributes to conditions in which autistics may indeed experience themselves as failing to achieve intersubjectivity – defined in terms of Hannah Arendt's understanding of loneliness. While autistic individuals who retain sustaining relationships with family and friends may experience isolation, the more devastating condition of loneliness concerns the loss of 'the capacity to add something of one's own to the common world' (Lucas 2016: 346).

Loneliness is increasingly recognized as a factor that accompanies autistic experiences of depression and suicidality – which are significantly higher than among non-autistic peers. Loneliness accompanies the feeling that one does not belong, for instance through the need to mask autistic traits to be included in social activities (see Cassidy and Rogers 2017; Hedley et al. 2018). Researchers have begun to theorize autistic loneliness as absent 'belongingness' and perceived burdensomeness, and to posit this in connection to suicidality among autistic people (Cassidy and Rogers 2017): this work challenges the assumption of absent social motivation among autistic people. However, insofar as this research focuses on generalized models of neurology, it does not register the pleasures or meanings that may come from interaction with trusted individuals In other words, such research overlooks the importance of collaborative sense-making and narrative agency.

As Lucas explains:

> Isolation, too, is distinct from, but a potential precursor to, loneliness. The condition of isolation arises when the political realm is impoverished; that is, when individuals are no longer invested enough in shared interests and concerns to act in concert. In isolation, the individual may

> still enjoy relationships with friends, family, and intimate community. The pariah, for example, exists without the world but often within a community of other pariahs. The isolated individual may also enjoy the pleasures of work (the making of art, for example) without care for the world. Isolation becomes loneliness when politically isolated individuals lose the sense that they have something unique to contribute to the world in common; that is, when they feel superfluous.
>
> (Lucas: 213)

For Arendt and Lucas, the condition of loneliness is the result of a situation – typically defined as that of Totalitarianism – when we are no longer able to see ourselves as human. This means that it is harder for us to explain ourselves to ourselves, except in terms of a process that comes from a supra-human logic of ‘Natural process’ (Arendt’s understanding of the ideology behind dehumanization), as we move from understanding history as the product of actions and toward a perspective defined by homogeneity and conformity. Insofar as we may regard ourselves in the terms defined by others, we are deprived of the conditions in which we may conceive of actions as manifestations of our resistance. However, this condition does not undermine ontological agency, even if external circumstances constrain its expression. One context in which autistic political agency remains fundamentally constrained is in research on autism that is typically conducted to enable the ‘commodification of autistic brains’ (Michael 2021).

> One day a senior academic, who I had been working with for several years, asked me to participate in his talk. I stood on the stage as I was introduced to the packed conference: “This is Cos, an autistic adult.” So, there I was, a woman in late middle age, fully equipped with white hair and breasts; yet apparently this needed stating, out loud, to my face, in front of an audience. I was being shown off as a specimen and I was mortified. Nobody else was introduced as an adult, as people are assumed to be adults, unless they are children. … This prompted me to begin questioning the respect and sincerity of the nonautistic research community toward autistic research participants. Were we there because they valued our input, or were we tokens, useful for ‘authenticity’ and snippety quotes, to validate the researcher’s inclusive credentials?
>
> (Michael 2021: 118)

Conclusion: beyond superfluousness

The remainder of this book explores conditions that may support the production of a collective political agency that would reinforce narrative agency for activists such as Cos Michael who seek to intervene to ensure autism is understood as a feature of lives 'complete with the messy detritus of our bodies, mucked up with imagination and opinions' (Michael 118). While negative experiences are presumed to be entailed either by autism or stereotypes about autism, we need to reconsider the conditions that produce loneliness within individual lives. As one part of this, we might look at the development of 'policies and practices aimed at modifying those aspects of neurotypical cultural niches that make environments unsuitable for the full development of all individuals' (Legault et al. 267). However, we might also consider whether 'development' is something that can be articulated outside of Eurocentric discourses.

In this chapter, I've argued that ontological agency matters for autistic people to feel that they have the possibility to contribute to a shared world. Following the political philosopher Sarah Lucas, I've argued that ontological agency – defined as 'confidence that one will appear in the world and be recognized by others as a unique being' – is a prerequisite for feeling that we can risk giving our opinions in public. At the same time, we develop narrative agency – or the capacity to make sense of ourselves through time and in relation to others in more intimate settings. I have argued that the demonstration of political agency – as the 'individual subject's understanding of herself as an 'I' in relation to other selves' (Lucas 2016) – is consistently thwarted by the prevailing cultural conditions for our appearance in the shared world. These conditions mean that, even if we can enter an interactional space with a non-autistic interlocutor, what we say about ourselves will only register insofar as it accords with what others take to be the most relevant features of our lives from a dominant perspective.

I have argued that the most widely circulating models of autism – those which focus on innate deficits in Theory of Mind or Weak Central Coherence – undermine the agency of autistic subjects insofar as action or behavior is presumed to be fully determined by neurology. Similarly, enactive approaches to autism are not necessarily more helpful when they rely on the assumption that interactional difficulties result from the autistic tendency toward inflexibility of predictive processing (for example, see van de Cruys et al. 2014), instead of recognizing that communication is also dependent upon cultural norms that are often unhelpful for autistic people. All of this has implications for the possibility of flourishing which is undermined by the 'infiltrated consciousness' of pathologizing narratives and the absence of access to social goods available to others (Nelson 2001). However, individuals and groups of autistics do resist dominant third-person perspectives, both by constructing their own explanations of their lives in terms of monotropism, sensorimotor differences, or describing the damage caused by social deficits models to self-esteem and social inclusion. In the following chapter, I discuss how individual and collective 'counterstories', which often originate in nonclinical settings, offer more plausible and robust explanations of behaviors and attitudes that are typically regarded as symptoms of an impaired subjectivity. Insofar as they may become the basis of self-stories, counterstories may enhance confidence that our ontological agency is intact and repair the 'damage' caused to narrative agency.

Notes

1 While many autistic people do not consider themselves to be disabled, autism can be understood within the social model of disability, which proposes that disability is imposed on those with impairments or differences through social structures and attitudes that produce barriers to participation (see Woods 2017 for further discussion). Autism is also legally classed as a disability within the United Kingdom and United States, according to the medical framework in which it entails a functional limitation in capacities that are regarded as normal for a given population. The neurodiversity paradigm is consistent with the social model of disability (and therefore may be used to accompany an understanding of autism as a disability) but places a greater emphasis on the idea that what are typically thought of as impairments are more accurately conceived as differences in perceiving, sensing and responding to the world that are widespread within society but which often only become disabling in a society that supports a limited set of ways of responding to the world. The majority of neurodiversity theorists acknowledge that some differences or combinations of differences to a perceived norm may be inherently challenging or painful and benefit from support or treatments, including medical interventions, but consider that these differences are inseparable from what is or may be valuable to a society or an individual that the search for a cure cannot be justified *a priori*. See, for example, Kapp et al. (2013). I would further argue that we need to recognize the plurality of ways of responding to the world, including those that become visible outside of Eurocentric epistemologies, before we can begin to understand what counts as a limitation on capacities at the level of individuals or groups.

2 While, within literary studies, narrative has been defined variously, and I will argue that this is itself often constrained by dominant understanding of subjectivity, as a symbolic configuration or as the properties of a brain. In either case, narrative is assumed to manifest a uniquely human capacity and attitude toward time, even if this is simultaneously recognized as a product of enculturation and normativity.

3 Stimming is 'self-stimulatory movement', often designated, when it is performed by an autistic person as an intentional 'repetitive behavior' that constrains social interaction. Within autistic and, ADHD or 'kinetic cognitive style' (KCS, see Walker and Raymaker 2021) communities, it's recognized that 'self-stimulation, or stimming, helps [people] to focus, to deal with overstimulation and anxiety' (Oolong 2017).

4 Milton suggests that autism is a social phenomenon underpinned by biological reality, insofar as it consists of 'monotropic' patterns of attributing attention (2017). For more on the idea of Monotropism, see Chapter 2.

Chapter 2

Master narratives, counterstories, and the challenges of mutual recognition

Introduction: how stories expand or restrict the possibility of mutual understanding

> Most of us have a theory of mind in that we can guess what others are thinking and how that might differ from what we are thinking. Those with autism can be thought of as mindblind in that they cannot imagine what others might be thinking, or even that others are thinking […] To them, it would be like looking at the headlights of a car to determine why the car just did what it did, or what information it is trying to convey to us.
>
> (Soper and Murray 2012: 125)

> Frequently, though, these stories deny the validity of the thing the master narrative can't accommodate by undermining the cognitive validity of the person who is in a position to point out the incompatibility – a move that is often suspect.
>
> (Nelson 2001: 161)

In the previous chapter, I explained how a practical identity is composed of our dynamic and reflexive interpretations of our lives, formed through our engagements with other standpoints, stories, and voices. A practical identity is not a cohesive causal account of the person we are, and it is open to reinterpretation as a 'constantly shifting constellation of beliefs, desires, emotions, and attachments' (Lucas 2016: 64). Such stories are normative in that they often include ideas about what is good, right, or normal (87). Insofar as they incorporate politicized understandings of our identities, our identity narratives will incorporate both master narratives and 'counter-narratives' about what it means to be a person like us (Nelson 2001). Our narrative understandings of our experiences provide reasons for acting or making specific choices, which allows us to take part in family or political life. Our ability to present ourselves as having both a unique identity and individual reasons for action is determined by stories that embody broader

DOI: 10.4324/9781003036807-4

cultural norms or resist them, through counter-narration, when we are part of a community that understands things differently.

As this work employs a narrative theory of identity, it builds on criticism of 'strong narrativity' (see, for example, Woods 2010 and 2011) but recognizes alternatives. Even if we engage an understanding of ourselves as 'fragmented', the concept of *fragmentation* provides a narrative structure to experiences. I draw on the notion of a narrative identity as practical because it enables action, even if it is constrained by external understandings of what it is to be someone like us. There is some sense of an 'I' that is part of experience, and this will be an interpretation of our experiences based on both aspects of our embodiment and available conceptual frameworks (see Mackenzie 2008 and Mackenzie and Poltera 2010; Zahavi 2008). The narrative understanding of self is the only one that matters when it comes to explaining to ourselves and others why we did something, even if we also theoretically consider ourselves as determined by forces that we cannot control. This does not mean that we can always express this understanding in words – as I consider in the following chapter, it may consist of embodied habits and patterns of experience.

To act in the world, we must regard ourselves from the first-person perspective, as 'agents, capable of choice, deliberation, and practical reason' (Mackenzie 2008: 8 – see Chapter 1). Through discovery, memory, and critical interpretation, we exercise agency over our experiences, even if this does not produce narrative closure or completeness. If we consider ourselves to be part of a community, our practical identity will be intelligible to us insofar as it may also make sense to others within such; in this way, it reflects the 'modes of personhood' available to us from without our culture or community (Lucas 2016: 12). For instance, the autistic self-advocacy movement has, contrary to cognitivist models of autism, affirmed that autism is a way of being a person: as Jim Sinclair affirmed, 'My selfhood is undamaged [...] I find great value and meaning in my life, and I have no wish to be cured of being myself' (1992: 302). Within the self-advocacy community, autism is a valid way of being a person, and this requires skepticism toward any approach that regards autism as a core deficit.

In referring to the models of autistic mindedness from cognitive psychology as 'master narratives', rather than as hypotheses or understandings, I do not wish to say that they are unrelated to states of affairs in the world or that they are intended to deceive. The Weak Central Coherence (WCC), Extreme Male Brain, and Mentalizing Deficits models of autism have been used to explain, and therefore justify, the inclusion of specific symptoms as diagnostic criteria for 'Autism Spectrum Disorder' during the last four decades. However, while the models may incorporate some claims made by autistic people, insofar as they are predominantly based on third person, outside perspectives that do not access autistic 'second-person' understandings of others that are the basis of everyday social interaction, they incorporate reductive and stereotypical representations of individual behavior and subjectivity, and therefore fail to achieve predictive power or replicability at the level of individuals. Both the diagnostic construction of autism as a core deficit and the absence of a framework that supports interpersonal understandings have implications for the experiences of and the moral status that are assigned to autistic people.

Chapter 1 explained how a practical identity draws on a tapestry of narratives that provide constraints and opportunities for action. This chapter considers how dominant third-person perspectives, described as master narratives, typically construe autistic mindedness as an impaired subjectivity, and this places constraints on the intelligibility of first-person accounts and, consequently, on narrative and ontological agency. It argues that, as master narratives, they serve a '*preservative*' role in reinforcing the values of the dominant culture (Nelson 116).[1] This is particularly the case when we notice the interconnections between discrediting stories about autism and colonial constructions of gender and race.

Challenging a master narrative is not simply a matter of exchanging a 'bad' for a 'good' story. We need to be alert to the constraints and opportunities that exist for any individual narrator and the social group with which they identify. For this reason, this chapter considers narratives from psychology alongside discourses originating from, or informed by, the autistic self-advocacy movement but I do not assume in advance that either is better or worse. Instead, I explore whether particular configurations enhance self-trust and facilitate mutual recognition and solidarity.

This is because it is not at first sight clear that judgments about the ethics of a narrative practice can be made outside of a particular context. It can be argued that affirming one's 'autism' or 'neurodivergence' may undermine the possibility of a 'shared vision and sense of solidarity around mental difference' and 'hinder treatments and interventions for those who are suffering' (Evans 2021; see also Runswick Cole 2014). However, identifying oneself as autistic or neurodivergent does not necessarily signal a static neurological self-concept but may entail a political judgment of resistance to the 'dominant societal standards of "normal" neurocognitive functioning' (Walker 2021: 35). Furthermore, neurodiversity-affirming forms of collaboration may be predicated on equality-in-difference (rather than capacity), even if this requires supporting others to access a shared space (see Betts et al. 2023). Affirming one's status as autistic or neurodivergent may be less about stating that one has an insight into one's own neurology than acknowledging the belief that there are 'different ways of perceiving, making sense of the world, having reason for action, etc' (Van Grunsven 2020: 118).

Even so, strategic essentialism, such as the idea of a unified autistic identity based on neurology, can be used to challenge aspects of the medical model, such as its tendency to focus on functioning (De Hooge 2019), or to resist other subordinating labels that may be applied to us. If we approach all those who use neurological explanations for their differences as failing to show proper concern for those who experience their difference as impairment, we miss the point that we live in a culture in which neurology is seen as the symbolic center of 'selfhood'.

As Matthew Wolf-Meyer argues *in Unravelling: Remaking Personhood in a Neurodiverse Age*, within the neurological model of subjectivity that dominated psy disciplines until recently, the self and consciousness are explicable only with reference to the brain and its functions. This entails that while sentience, feeling, and emotion may in themselves entail the existence of human subjectivity at a more base or animalistic level, they are only conditions for personhood when accompanied by explicit consciousness of their value in relation to biological survival. For Wolf-Meyer, this is the case because Western culture privileges the forms of subjectivity and communicative practice, which are mutually reinforcing. Within this model, someone who struggles to communicate their desires and intentions would be seen as lacking any awareness of self, where selfhood and personhood are regarded as entailing a particular relationship to verbal language. For Wolf-Meyer, verbal expression of individual intentions is only part of the story of what human communication is. Yet, within a neoliberal model, this atomistic communicative self is considered an essential component of functional relationships between individuals, who require no further support or facilitation.

The danger of this is that the very effort to produce a 'normal' subject may undermine the very kinds of relationships upon which atypical subjectivity and thriving depend (11). So, while, particularly in the US, autistic individuals are granted the status of personhood according to their engagement with institutions that aim to normalize them, this undermines opportunities for meaningful interpersonal relationships.

Symbolic subjectivity – the rival model of human subjects within the psy disciplines – posits that 'language is the basis for the elaboration of the self and the basis of personhood and subjectivity' (63). This concept underpins psychoanalytic models of subjectivity, where highly symbolic relationships mediate affectual relationships between parent and child and between child and society, and these underpin the formation of normative subjects. Freud's construction of human development was also underpinned by a desire to differentiate human psychological capacities from those more 'base' tendencies of other animals.

Wolf-Meyer further argues that Freud's early work on neuroscience – such as his efforts to identify the basic material components of the brain as neurons – offered a bridge between the material basis of the brain and symbolic modes of subjectivity, which was in part responsible for the contemporary fascination with communicative difficulties as indicative of psychological disorders (96). In this tradition, the capacity for complex symbolic thought is necessary for the production of individuals and this is installed in individuals who become invested in a shared symbolic ordering through the entrainment of their families. The symbolic model of subjectivity would hold that those who interpret the world through facilitative technologies are precluded from this supposedly immediate access to a shared symbolic world, because their understandings can only ever be partial in comparison to those of others.

However, for Wolf-Meyer, this framework is based on a deterministic concept of communication that does not allow for the possibility of 'horizontal' and 'vertical' structures of interpretation based on situational experience (103). This means that for Wolf-Meyer, symbolic subjectivity is not only anthropocentric but also ignores 'epiphenomenal demands of communication that are governed by an individual's sociotechnical environment and its facilitations' (65), which include 'practices of repetition and differentiation' (71).

Both the symbolic and neurological frameworks render cognitive and sensory differences as inherently harmful to our collective future insofar as they disrupt the sharing of our internal states and intentions with others in normative ways. As I have hinted, the idea that neurological differences are harmful has been resisted by those who propose that individual neurology should be understood as part of a broader collective 'neurodiversity' that is regarded as both natural and beneficial to collective and relational flourishing.

If we ignore this context to autistic people's narrative practices and reject in advance the possibility of employing a strategic neuroessentialism or deployment of one's neurodivergence to highlight the conditions through which otherwise neutral differences or interventions become disabling, and we criticize autistic people for invoking neurological understandings, we inadvertently re-affirm the master narratives about autism as fundamentally defined by a lack of concern for others.

Finally, those who suggest that neurological identities undermine solidarity may be under the impression that identity narratives are generic, rather than 'tailored to conform to the contours of an individual life' (Nelson 2001: 130). At the very least, narrative explorations of neurological identities are unlikely to remain static and will be shaped by the unique circumstances of the narrator. To ensure a good fit, we mix the narratives we use to constitute our own identities with all the other stories surrounding us. Unless the mix is a judicious one, the identity won't be credible even to us (Nelson 2001: 131). And it is not the case that our judgments about our lives are always more accurate than those around us. Nonetheless, sometimes, the stories that we tell about our lives are more accurate than those we encounter from others because we have a better understanding of our own resistant intentions (Lugones 224-226).

Even if we have judiciously tailored our stories to those that surround us, there are practical constraints on using them to resist the stories that other people would tell about us. For stories to stick and not just for us but for those around us, we need a cultural space that can enable more nuanced understandings. And this is the point where problems with the dominance of the Theory of Mind (ToM) deficits view of autism become most apparent. When we are subject to forms of identification that place us in intersecting 'currents and eddies' of power relations (Nelson 2001), we may be denied the opportunity to deploy our sense of ourselves in action. This may limit our confidence that we are speaking 'in the right way' during a medical assessment, as Limburg describes (see Chapter 2). This is because, in a world where white, able-bodied masculinity is a supposedly normal state of embodiment, we cannot anticipate in advance what will seem noteworthy to others in terms of our statements about our accomplishments or challenges. If we conceive of ourselves as occupying an intersectional identity, we cannot anticipate in advance what another person may regard as the most relevant aspect of our departure from gendered, heteronormative, or racialized stereotypes. To an outsider, this may seem to reinforce the notion that autistics are 'mindblind'.

At the same time, counter-narratives may help us to make sense of experiences and actions, at least to ourselves. Kourti and McLeod, for instance, cite research participants who used a counter-narrative of autism as Monotropism to reframe their self-concept so that it could accommodate interests and activities typically deemed undesirable for their gender (2019: 5). If we are lucky, others, within our chosen or found community, or in emancipatory research contexts, will recognize 'that [e]ach of us has a unique identity, articulable from a specific place in the world, and we are not reducible to any one slice of time or aspect of consciousness' (Lucas 2016: 102). The question this chapter poses is how might these moments of recognition lead to the development of new stories that might fundamentally expand the possibilities of mutual understanding? This is to acknowledge that the situation described by the 'double empathy' problem (Milton 2012) is not insurmountable, but that the failure to recognize another person's narrative agency is seldom only about unfamiliarity with experiences that are different from our own.

I write at length about some of the dominant clinical constructions of autism and this is because I want to explain both their allure and the ways in which they reinforce other assumptions that form part of a 'worldview' beyond discourses about autism. And while others have focused on the possibilities of articulating a shared autistic political identity, I am interested in stories that record what Lugones calls a 'resistant intentionality'

(208) even as their tellers lack institutional backup in registering as political agency proper. A core feature of this is recognizing that social life is heterogeneous and multiple, and therefore, contrary to a logic of hierarchy and exclusion, it is this aspect that sustains political action against multiple oppressions.

On the other hand, I do not wish to say that all clinical constructions of autism are equally likely to undermine self-confidence and narrative agency for autistic people. Certainly, they may serve a useful role in identity narratives when an individual wishes to articulate their distinctiveness. However, resisting a disempowering master narrative about autism may lead us to lose sight of the 'complex relational web in which multiple different parties interact within multiple different relations of power with each other' (Moya 2011: 89). I focus on three specific counter-narratives about autism because they have the potential to reveal the plurality of the 'worlds of sense' (Lugones 2003: 20–26) that we inhabit in sustaining a particular set of social relations. In this way, I seek to move beyond the assumption that there is just one correct approach to the 'nature' of autistic experiences, and that this is accessed either through a dispassionate gaze or through an abstract understanding of our social location.

The moving targets of stigma

Within her theorization of cultural master narratives that define marginalized social groups, Hilde Lindemann Nelson (2001) considers how storytelling can reconfigure our assumptions about other people's capacities and commitments at the level of individual and collective beliefs. She views narrative as the means through which we come to regard ourselves and, to be seen by others, as morally trustworthy persons, who act in accordance with individual projects and plans. The sense we make of our plans and desires is essentially a process of co-construction, where we identify our plans, and articulate them, alongside the stories that others tell about us. In this way, Nelson's understanding of freedom and constraints on action within a shared social world is consistent with Lucas's idea of narrative agency, which proposes that our narrative acts, and the limits imposed on them by others, are the bases of both ethical and political agencies. However, Nelson provides a more explicit analysis of how stories may reconfigure a normative or oppressive understanding of our identities for the sake of imaginative freedom. Her theorization of how both individual and collective identities can be 'degraded, distorted or rendered unintelligible' (108) also provides a remedy in what she describes as 'narrative repair' (22). This is itself a helpful alternative to the idea of spoiled identities produced by stigma as a constitutive feature of interactions between individuals.

Stigma is, for those following Erving Goffman, a way of falling short of societal standards for persons (1963). The established standards provide interactional norms that target individual characteristics (typically mental illness, physical traits, or individual attitudes) for extreme social disapproval, meaning that their identification would preclude, or, in Goffman's words, 'spoil', recognition for the individual's embodiment of norms that are otherwise valued by the society. However, while Goffman characterizes the nature of stigma as having little to do with any inherent deficits at the level of the individual, and therefore as inherently unjust, he ultimately suggests that stigma is an inevitable feature of a society that shares rules for social interaction. As Imogen Tyler explores in her 2020 re-appraisal of stigma in the age of neoliberal-induced inequality, Goffman therefore elides the historical circumstances of social structures through which configurations of stigma – and strategies for resistance – emerged (2020: 99–118). While Tyler focuses on the macro-level construction of stigma power as a form of governance within neoliberal economies, my interest is in the much narrower area of how industrialized autism research produces forms of identification that differentially undermine personal confidence and restrict access to broader social and cultural goods. I begin by arguing that this is due to the way that power operates through scientific practices that would typically be regarded as neutral and unbiased, rather than characterized by the social norms that govern other areas of social life. Nelson's focus on master narratives helps me to explain how scientific models of autism are ideologically inflected and incorporate tendrils that are hard to unravel.

Stories that reinforce existing power arrangements

In her 2001 monograph, *Damaged Identities: Narrative Repair*, Hilde Lindemann Nelson describes 'damaged' or 'injured identities' as those that occur when 'a powerful group views members of her own, less powerful group as unworthy of full moral respect' which 'prevents her from occupying valuable social roles or entering into desirable relationships that are themselves constitutive of identity' (xii). This is an abuse of power when it creates a 'morally degrading identity' that identifies 'certain groups of people as targets for ill treatment' (xii–xiii) such as exploitation or social exclusion. The master stories that embody the group's third-person understandings of the target group are oppressive because they deprive them of 'the goods and opportunities that are on offer in the society', which would 'allow the members of the subgroup to exercise their moral agency more clearly' (xii). The dominant third-person stories created by the powerful group members may also go on to damage the 'subgroup's identity from the first-person perspective' when the members of the subgroup 'accept the dominant group's stories of who they are or take the norms of the dominant group as the unstated standards against which they are to measure themselves' (107): this constitutes 'infiltrated consciousness' and erodes self-trust. In the absence of an alternative narrative about themselves, individuals who see themselves in terms of one or more oppressive master narratives are 'constrained from developing and exercising their capacities and expressing their needs, thoughts and feelings' (108).

Nelson considers the way that master narratives position a subgroup according to ideological forces that are *expulsive*, where the 'group is driven out of the larger society', *dismissive*, where it is 'tolerated only on the fringes of society', *pressive*, where the group is 'pressed into serving members of the dominant group' and *preservative*, where the subgroup is 'the necessary Other that keeps the dominant ideology in place' (Nelson 113). Her examples of the 'nurse mother' master narrative for women are both pressive in that it creates an image that supports pronatalist, racist, heterosexist, and patriarchal ideologies and expulsive through its creation of images of childless women as deviants or failures to live up to their defining feminine goals regardless of how appropriate this is within the individual's circumstances (138). The same image can be used to oppress the *wrong sort of mothers*, who are stereotyped as constitutionally unable to inhabit the role assigned to them according to other master narratives, eliding the social and economic circumstances in which other people's motherhood depends (142–143).

The pictures that emerge from master narratives about a subgroup 'capture the imagination' and proscribe certain courses of action (149). But they do not determine outcomes for individuals within a subgroup or those around us who may help us to develop more empowering alternatives as counterstories. Escaping a master narrative is no easy matter, given that it is often little more than 'ensembles of repeated themes that take on a life of their own' as 'an altered political economy or other social contingency can push a master narrative in a new direction' (158). For instance, the 'Extreme Male Brain' narrative reinterprets the Theory of Mind deficits model with an ideological investment in a particular construct of white, heterosexual masculinity, which was driven by an emerging preoccupation with the contributions made by autistic people within Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) fields.

Stories that resist existing power arrangements

Nelson's concept of identity repair though counterstories is underpinned by her narrative approach to ethics. She explains:

> I believe narratives feature prominently in the moral life: they cultivate our moral emotions and refine our moral perception; they make

> intelligible what we do and who we are; they teach us our responsibilities; they motivate, guide, and justify our actions; through them, we redefine ourselves.
>
> (70)

Like Korsgaard, Mackenzie, and Lucas, Nelson believes that narratives are 'useful tools for participating directly in practices of personal, interpersonal or political responsibility' (66). Counterstories, in particular, provide a perspective through which individuals can test and reidentify values that are dominant within a culture (67). Because they do not seek to reinforce the status of those who are already privileged and because they reveal the interpenetration of personal identities within groups, there is no singular 'form' that they should take (186). However, for counterstories to serve as the basis of identity-constituting narratives, and therefore the basis of ethical reasoning, they would need to be able to meet what Nelson refers to as the 'credibility criteria' of explanatory force, correlation to action, and heft (151), which she discerns in certain autobiographical narratives. This is not to suggest that the story must in some sense be objectively true, but it needs to be seen as contributing to a 'system of meaning – a semiotic representation of the things that contribute importantly to one's life over time' and 'whether the story can reasonably be seen as a part of that system' (93). These are the basic credibility requirements for a story to serve as the basis of a collective understanding of existing power relationships.

Explanatory force

The first requirement on the possibility that a narrative will serve as the basis of renewed individual or collective self-understandings is that it should meet 'standard epistemic criteria for evaluation – being consistent with the data, being coherent and being sufficiently broad in scope' (93). Insofar as they are explanatory stories, they will be able to help individuals to make sense of their past and current experiences, and there is no competing story that would do a better job. The available data will include not only our own memories and experiences, but the opinions of others.

Correlation to action

While a story needs to help individuals and groups to explain their lives, it must also correlate to observable action, so we can rule out the possibility that the story reveals self-deception or fantasy. This would mean, for instance, that the narrative must 'structure the field of the person's actions so that she can continue to act in accordance with who she understands herself to be' (95). This is the case even if others see little reason for us to accept a new interpretation of our life, given that it is, within an individualized Western culture, necessary for individuals to be provided with the freedom to define the terms on which they are held to account (105).

Heft

The story has to include features of a life that the individual, and to a lesser extent, those around them, care deeply about. The example Nelson provides is of a story about the length of a man's hair which, on its own, would seem to be of little significance to explaining who he is unless this feature was an essential part of his identity. It may be difficult to decide about the heft of a story if what we believe to be important aspects of our lives contrasts with that which most people would understand as significant.

Master narratives about autism: stories with a tenacious hold on culture

The British psychologist Francesca Happé claims that a memoir fragment by the autistic scientist Temple Grandin fails to include the most interesting feature about herself, which are her social deficits (1991; 211) – implying that her story lacks 'heft'. For Grandin, however, sensory differences are more important to both her social differences and her sense of the possibilities open to her and others like her. Grandin uses her own identity story to propose a counter-narrative about autism as somatic difference, in defiance of the then-prevailing idea that autism was caused by unloving mothers.

Rather than assuming that a third-person perspective, such as Happé's, must be more accurate in its supposed impartiality, we have good reasons to disregard it if we show that it is based on prejudice and constrains the actions and opportunities of whole groups of people (Nelson 98). As it turns out, Happé's reading is informed by a master narrative about autism, centering on the idea of Mentalizing Deficits/impaired social motivation, and through it she creates an autistic 'character type'.

What makes something a master narrative? Nelson explains they are 'often archetypal, consisting of stock plots and readily recognisable character types, and we use them not only to make sense of our experiences [...] but also to justify what we do' (6). Master narratives are stories in that they offer an interpretation of events that are typically conceived as depicting a chronological sequence of human experiences, and they are rich in connective associations with other stories (14–15). While master narratives need not be oppressive, they are when they 'improperly identify certain social groups as useless, dangerous, or necessary means to a more powerful group's ends, since this produces or limits moral regard for members of the group' (149). Such stories 'retain their tenacious hold on a culture' since they 'are organic ensembles that grow and change, they constitute a world view, and assimilate opposition' (159).

Insofar as clinical framings of autism propose that it should be understood as impaired social motivation, I will argue that they 'improperly identify' autistics as undeserving of moral respect on two levels. Firstly, they contribute to 'infiltrated consciousness' for both autistic individuals and groups through providing a singular story about what their lives should look like, which erodes confidence in other possible ways for them to imagine their lives. Secondly, they constrain the general conditions through which individuals gain support in accessing social goods (such as being valued for other skills one may possess) and are encouraged to express their individual needs and preferences.

I support these contentions with observations on the evolving master narratives of autism that interact with other master narratives about race and gender to reinforce the untrustworthiness of autistic narrators. Within the Theory of Mind deficits/Weak Central Coherence models of autism, autistics who regard themselves as socially motivated are likely regarded as trying to pass as something they are not, as failing to understand the rules by which others navigate the social world. They thereby fail to perform their preservative function for culture, in serving as 'the necessary Other that keeps the dominant ideology in place' (Nelson 113), and are subject to either dismissal or expulsion to the margins of society.

In later adaptations of a Theory of Mind deficits model according to an 'extreme male brain'/hyper-systematizing theory of autism, autistics who regard themselves as female or non-binary or not white must lack introspective awareness (or empathy), since to be autistic means to be involuntarily predisposed toward a preference for white-male coded activities such as science, technology, and engineering (Baron-Cohen 2005). In this case, autistics who reject or are unable to occupy these fields are failing to comply with both pressive forces through which their lives may become visible and valuable according to a dominant worldview. The subgroup so identified – autistics without an interest in systematizing and, I will argue, autistics who otherwise fail to perform white heterosexual masculinity – are at risk of expulsion to the fringes of society and allowed to remain there 'as long as its members don't lay claim to the goods and opportunities that are enjoyed by those in the dominant group' (Nelson 116).

Master narratives about autism

Stories about children who don't engage in imaginative play

While it is unlikely that they were intended as such, dominant clinical framings of autism operate as master narratives in that they have depicted autistic people not to be taken seriously except insofar as we manifest the symptoms of autism. This is because, firstly, stories based on autism as a deficit in 'Theory of Mind' 'explicitly deny autistic people the basic social-cognitive abilities making up moral agency' (Bervoets and Hens 2020: 8). Like other master narratives, clinical framings of autism are closely entwined with other stories that are normative, such as those that define the roles for men and women, the proper relationships between parents and children, between the disabled and non-disabled and articulate divisions between humans and other species. Stories about autism are often connected to core beliefs that we hold about our place in the universe, and when they are threatened, send new tendrils to ward off 'disconfirming instances, complaints, and other forms of opposition' (Nelson 160). Most often, 'these stories deny the validity of the thing the master narrative can't accommodate by undermining the cognitive authority of the person who is in a position to point out the incompatibility' (161).

The Theory of Mind Deficits model of autism was proposed by psychologists working at the Cognitive Development Unit at the University of London, in the attempt to provide a unified model for a cognitive disorder that could explain a triad of impairments in social communication, social interaction, and repetitive behaviors, which had been used since the 1990s to diagnose autism in the UK. The theory was based on the impression that autistic children didn't engage in imaginative play, tended not to lie or to keep secrets, and 'appeared oblivious to social rules' (Askham 2022; Costandi 2011), which had been the prevailing orthodoxy since Lorna Wing's work at the Centre for Social and Communication Disorders in the 1970s (see Chapter 5).

Proposing a hypothetical 'decoupling mechanism' that would allow for Mentalizing/theorizing about other people's mental states, Uta Frith, Simon Baron-Cohen, and Alan Leslie offered a cognitive explanation for the purported social deficits and apparent 'egocentrism' of the autistic child, without the need to draw on unconscious drives and motivations (1985; see also Evans 2017: 320). Proposing that this constituted a developmental delay, Baron-Cohen and colleagues could propose target interventions that would situate the child as a target for interventions that would instill a version of normative cognitive capacities. Later, Simon Baron-Cohen and Bonnie Auyueng then linked the subsequent state of 'Mindblindess' to purported difficulties with 'cognitive empathy' (Baron-Cohen 2011) and to sex-hormone-based differences in neuroanatomy, wherein the autistic brain exhibits a hyper-male characteristic in its tendency toward systematizing (Auyueng 2009).

Stories about children who see other people as objects

The 'false belief' test described in the previous chapter has subsequently failed to achieve the degree of replicability that it would need to if it were to explain autistic ‘behaviors’ in all cases. Its design has been critiqued on methodological grounds, that it did not test for what it purported to test, since as a third-person observation on two-way interactions (between a child and a puppet), it offers ‘only a poor and distant description of a second-person relationship’ (Plastow 2012: 293). Furthermore, like all interpretations, it is open to the objection that it does not offer the best explanation of actual phenomena: namely, the experiences of autistic people themselves (Gernsbacher and Yergeau 2019). The theorization of autism as a disorder in social cognition connects to a view of human exceptionalism:

> The landmark theory of mind paper on autism (Baron-Cohen et al. 1985) was titled after and takes the definition of a seminal corresponding paper on chimpanzees. It asked: ‘Does the autistic child have a theory of mind?’ (answering in the negative; Baron-Cohen et al. 1985), while an earlier study asked ‘Does the chimpanzee have a theory of mind?’ (answering in the affirmative […]). Furthermore, Baron-Cohen (2000) quoted Whiten (1993) as asserting that ‘a theory of mind is one of the quintessential qualities that makes us human’.
>
> (Kapp 2019)

The implicit and unfavorable comparison of autistic children to chimpanzees could be argued to serve a preservative role in defining what it means to have a ‘mental life’ and thereby to be deserving of moral respect. It relies, in essence, on a claim for the moral supremacy of a distinctively symbolic model of human subjectivity that it resides in discrete (human) subjects who intuitively discern the dominant symbolic (coded as social) significance of a scenario. In this wider framing, this initial theorization of ToM is also premised on the assumption that deception and fantasy are beneficial to moral life and autistic people and animals lack these important social skills. The later designation of autistics as ‘morality-negative’ and deficient in empathy (Baron-Cohen 2011) infiltrated both third-person narratives and individual self-concepts:

> The myth of an empathy deficit in autism is now so well ingrained, that for an autistic volunteer to report they do not lack empathy is either to question the views of the large majority of medical and scientific professionals, or even to deny their diagnosis. As such, they may report empathy deficits even when they frequently experience empathic feelings.
>
> (Fletcher-Watson and Bird 2019: 4)

Yet, the assumption that autism is fundamentally characterized by impaired social cognition or a lack of those entalizing skills which would otherwise allow us to recognize that others have mental states that are different to our own, provides the basis of a master narrative that continues to influence third-person representations of autism. This is the case even while several of those who proposed these models no longer hold onto these views.

The trope of empathy deficits among autistics interacts with the third-person objectification of clinical subjects, who are already routinely deindividuated, perceived as lacking in agency and assumed to be dissimilar to their investigators (Haque and Waytz 2012). Since autism has been identified primarily by behaviors, rather than biological features, almost any behavior can be interpreted as evidence of a core deficit. For instance, the purported inability to produce 'metarepresentations' has been used to suggest that autistic people are incapable of the kind of self-awareness that would allow any first-person life narratives to be questioned (Frith and Happé 1999). Thus, a Mentalizing Deficits master narrative about autism has an add-on 'tendril' that resists evidence to the contrary by cognitively discrediting individual autistic testimony. While assuming any kind of incompetence would be regarded as suspect in relation to other groups, the construction of autism as moral deficiency entails that autistics are untrustworthy informants about their lives.

How master narratives assimilate opposition

British-based developmental psychologist Francesca Happé draws on the Mentalizing Deficits narrative in her discussion of Temple Grandin's autobiographical essay 'My experiences as an autistic child':

> It might also be an inability to empathize to the normal extent that leads Temple to fail to distinguish what is unusual in her experience from what is universal. So, for example, she tells us that 'Even as an adult, I find that it is easier to learn something if I can actually do it instead of watching' — an almost universal experience, in much the same way as she tells us of her extraordinary early 'fixation on spinning objects, refusing to be touched … destructive behavior … inability to speak … and intense interest in odours'.
>
> (Happé 1991: 210)

Attending to Grandin's actual observations in her article for the *Journal of Orthomolecular Psychiatry*, what she reported about her childhood is part of an argument about the importance of kinesthetic (motor-sensory) experiences for autistic children, based on her observations and evidence she found in existing research to support a somatic model of autism as an 'immature or damaged central nervous system' (1984: 147). Grandin describes the importance of kinesthetic experiences as an antidote to sensory hyper-sensitivity and what she perceives as difficulty coordinating kinds of sensory input (151).While this may not be enough to convince us of a new understanding about autism in general, as a story about her *own* life, Grandin's text offers greater initial credibility than Happé suggests, because it appears to offer a 'semiotic structure' (Nelson ibid) through which she can make sense of her past and future actions, such as the example she gave in this essay of making a 'squeeze machine' to produce deep pressure so that she could learn how to tolerate touch without recoiling (1984: 151). Her observation that she finds it easier to learn by 'doing' rather than watching appears in the context of her claim that autistic people learn through motor-feedback (164). She compares this to animal studies that suggested common social learning pathways with other primates in coordinating movements with others (165).

In her re-narration of Grandin's embedded life narrative, Happé asserts that Grandin is mistaken in assuming that she is unusual in finding it 'easier to learn something [she] can actually do it instead of watching' (1991: 164). She argues that if Grandin had been sensitive to how other people learn, she would recognize that 'doing' something makes it easier for people to learn in general. Re-affirming the master narrative of Theory of Mind deficits through her reinterpretation of Grandin's story, this essay excerpts the preservative force of autism as a contrast to the 'normal' subject, and the dismissive force of rendering Grandin's perspective inadmissible on the basis of her cognitive impairments. Happé offers an alternative narrative about Grandin's life that accords with not only autism as Mentalizing/empathy deficits, but which also suggests a conceptual division between humans and non-humans or *subhumans*, by noting Grandin's failure to notice the 'divide' which 'most people feel the need to construct between animals and humans'. Happé suggests that even if Grandin has insight into aspects of her own experiences, it is not the sort of understanding that someone like us would apply:[2]

> One explanation for Temple's merging of human and animal data may be that she ignores or discounts the importance of our affective or emotional life […] This lack of interest in the affective and emotional significance of events is perhaps most striking where she talks about her view of the fundamental deficits in autism […] She seems throughout to disregard the fact that most people would feel the social handicap to be the most striking aspect of autism. Instead she is more interested in the autistic person's differences in cognitive style, perceptual experiences and underlying nervous system.
>
> (1991: 211)

Happé suggests that Grandin's embedded life narrative lacks heft because it fails to account for what others would regard as most interesting about her life. However, within the context of an article written for a journal about the relationship between nutrition and health, it is unclear to what extent there is scope for a prolonged discussion of the emotional significance of Grandin's life or her ethical attitudes to other species. Not only does she fail to explain the context for Grandin's original essay as an intervention in somatic understandings of autism, but she fails to mention that what she offers is a selective reading of the embedded memoir fragment. Her subsequent take on the style of autistic autobiographies reaffirms the idea of autistic Mindblindness.. Offering this reading as an 'impressionistic account' (208), Happé downplays both the status of Grandin's narrative as a cultural artifact of a particular place and time, and the possibility of alternative interpretations for the sake of demonstrating an 'authoritative tone' (Meretoja 2018: 113).

In the same article, however, Happé affirms the view that autistics can develop Mentalizing-like skills. Highlighting David Miedzianik's awareness of his painful social experiences in *My Autobiography* (1986), she suggests it is possible for autistic people to gain some degree of insight into how others see them, even if it depends on 'copied or taught expressions' (219). At the same time, however, this admission anticipates what became an increasingly apparent problem for the explanatory power of the Mentalizing-deficiency model: it did not explain all autistic behavior, particularly as it became harder to ignore the self-reports of autistic people themselves through new forms of self-advocacy. While Happé has gone on to regard autism as a 'detail oriented' cognitive style and to focus on neglected autistic subgroups, she has never retracted the comments she made in this essay. I do not believe that Happé intended any malice by reading Grandin in this way, and nor was she doing something unusual for psychologists at that time. In writing about this example in detail, I wish to highlight the way that dominant narratives hold a particular sway over the imagination for everyone until another perspective comes into view.

However, Happé's writing about Grandin serves as one of the earliest examples of the use of published autistic life writing to reinforce pre-existing 'semiotic structures' and thereby, to preclude the possibility of mutual understanding. As I explore in Chapter 4, a similar process underpins more contemporary readings of autistic life writing, where it is used as evidence to support the claim that autistics have a distinctive, and potentially valuable, cognitive style; they also underpin the claim that this cognitive style lacks sensitivity to the 'affective and emotional significance' of specifically human life.

Stories about wanting to be understood

The philosopher Victoria McGeer pointed out soon after Happé's article was published that many autistic 'self-reports' demonstrated 'a basic human desire to be known and accepted by others for what one is':

> [A]utistic individuals are not only aware of their own experience but aware that others could not have the same experience, else they would not find autistic individuals so hard to understand. This is a sophisticated capacity. Thus, the moral concern raised in relation to responding to these individuals as self-aware in the ways they articulate translates into a substantial methodological concern [about ToM deficits].
>
> (2004: 240)

McGeer explained that at a theoretical level, the ToM-deficits view could not account for autistic people's wish to be understood by others, and that this entailed a further ethical difficulty with the model, since it precluded the mere possibility of differences in subjectivity that that did not undermine self-awareness. In support of this, McGeer also offered evidence from autistic life writing which demonstrated recognition of how different non-autistic people's experiences were.

McGeer described a further 'methodological concern' that behaviorist interventions designed to instill social behavior through Mentalizing skills would lead to interventions that were directly at odds with desire among autistic individuals to be understood for their differences (24). McGeer suggested that researchers should consider sensorimotor differences and 'lower order' processes as explanations for any apparent difficulties with social communication (241). In doing so, McGeer argued that was both scientific and ethical value in exploring the possible sensorimotor basis of interactional difficulties.

But as Donnellan et al. explained in 2012, 'sensory movement differences are manifest in autism and many other disorders in strikingly unique, personalized and dynamic ways' and this is deeply problematic for 'research strategies that rely heavily on a positivist-reductionist philosophy' (np). Such strategies respond to the demand to simultaneously quantify and characterize a heterogeneous group of people and their families so that they may be targets for large-scale and cost-effective services aimed at self-management and economic inclusion.

In light of the demand to provide a model that could explain both Mentalizing difficulties and cases where individuals passed Theory of Mind tests but still exhibited stereotypical autistic behavior in other settings (Frith et al. 1994: 118), Frith and colleagues sought an alternative cognitive explanation, where sensory differences would be the result of a 'second-order' cognitive deficit in processing, rather than meaningful in themselves (McGeer 2004: 241). In this view, autistic people's reports about their sensory experiences may no longer be in doubt for their veracity but they remained relatively insignificant compared to purported cognitive deficits and the challenges they posed for normative social interaction.

Epistemic rigging: normalizing and naturalizing autistic behaviors

Frith's idea of Weak Central Coherence in autism is based on the assumption that autistics are good at perceiving details, but struggle to put together the bigger picture (Happé and Frith 2006). In Frith's reasoning, excessive 'segmentation' of sensory input could lead to difficulties with responding to external sources of information about the world, while at the same time being able to 'track another person's mental state' or 'know one's own mental state' (in Evans 2017: 317–319). For Frith, Weak Central Coherence could explain the 'metarepresentational deficit' that undermines both the ability to successfully track other people's mental states and engage in pretend play (Frith 1989: 163).

If 'Weak Central Coherence' undermined the decoupling mechanism, then Mentalizing should be impaired to the extent that Weak Central Coherence could be demonstrated. However, Francesca Happé's PhD thesis provided evidence that this was not the case (Happé 1994: 1469). At this time, she argued that autism differed not only between individuals – only some of whom possess what she regarded as Theory of Mind deficits – and within individuals whose 'social' deficits could be assumed to be due to either Weak Central Coherence or Theory of Mind deficits (Hollin 2017: 16).

Autism was now essentially a heterogeneous condition, which may either manifest in both impaired Theory of Mind and Weak Central Coherence, or Weak Central Coherence without a corresponding Theory of Mind deficit. Since WCC had originally been postulated as an explanation of ToM deficits, the emerging consensus at the Cognitive Development Unit was that there were 'two rather different cognitive characteristics that underlie autism' (Frith and Happé 1994: 126) even if for Frith, 'nothing captures the essence of autism so precisely as the idea of Mindblindness' (ibid). Weak Central Coherence, as a hypothesized second-order cognitive deficit, and Theory of Mind deficits, as a consequence of this, remain two entrenched understandings of autism that constrain mutually recognitive conversations about the condition across neurotypes. While Weak Central Coherence apparently naturalizes autism as a distinctive cognitive style, it retains an association with affective disturbances through association with Theory of Mind deficits. However, an alternative conception came about that shifted the focus from anxiety about social interaction, to concerns about reproduction and love.

In 'The Mating Life of Geeks: Love, Neuroscience and the New Autistic Subject', Willey and colleagues center on the emergence since the 1990s of fictional, news, and scientific stories about autism that center not on the absence of feeling or social motivation among autistics but on biological sex mechanisms (2015: 370). Focusing on the postulation of an 'Extreme

Male Brain' and the process of 'assortative mating', the authors note consequences for a 'broader [conceptual] terrain around gender, race, and sexuality', specifically insofar as these discourses serve as 'sites for the biologized re-inscription of normative ideas of gender, race, and sexuality, including the naturalization of sexual dimorphism, whiteness, and heterosexuality' (ibid).[3] Noting the role of science in inscribing sociocultural processes in bodies, Willey et al. describe how autism has been re-constructed, through the concept of assortative mating, to re-instate ideals of gender complementarity, and through the model of sexualized brains, to a racialized ideal of white masculinity. While Frith and Happé connect Mentalizing difficulties to Central Coherence and the search for 'hidden' autism among women and girls, Baron-Cohen associates Mindblindness with masculinity, via the preponderance of known cases of autism in males, and his theoretical commitment to the existence of sexually dimorphic brains. This latter attempt at normalizing autistic people's distinctive cognitive styles from the perspective of non-autistic observers entailed reaffirming other problematic narratives.

In 1997, Simon Baron-Cohen proposed an alternative explanation for some of the 'essential' social deficits among autistics in his proposal that autistics were routinely unable to 'naturally and spontaneously [tune] into someone else's thoughts and feelings, whatever these might be' (2003: 35). Acknowledging that it was possible in some circumstances for autistic people to ascribe mental states to others, he maintained that it was not something that came about spontaneously, and Baron-Cohen proposed a causal mechanism in prenatal exposure to testosterone. His central claim was that prenatal testosterone produces extreme male brains in the case of autism, and male brains more generally, in the form of tendencies toward 'systematizing' and deficits in empathizing (Baron-Cohen, Knickmeyer, and Belmonte 2005).

As Willey et al. explain, 'the new autistic subject, whether male or female, has an extreme male brain' (375).

Yet neither the 'empathy deficits' nor 'Weak Central Coherence' explanations offered very much by way of what were the 'non-triadic' features of autistic people that were increasingly coming to light as a result of autistic self-advocacy and life narratives, such as their potential strengths in particular fields, or self-reports of atypical sensory experiences and intact social motivation. Baron-Cohen's subsequent 'Extreme Male Brain' theory of autism could, potentially, be seen to be compatible with Weak Central Coherence but offered the advantage in that it could explain, more thoroughly, the compensatory strengths that non-autistics perceived in certain autistic individuals. Both theories normalize autism, insofar as they present their new models of autism as part of a broader continuum of human experiences, for bottom-up or top-down perceptual processing and 'Empathizing or Systemizing among the wider population. In this respect, they function as an ‘add on’ to Theory of Mind deficits narratives, while seeming to ‘make it inevitable that certain groups of people must occupy certain places in society’ (Nelson 163).

Further, insofar as Baron-Cohen and his co-researchers also hypothesized that the preponderance of autism among families where both parents are ‘systematizers’ can be explained by the tendency to choose partners with similar traits (Baron-Cohen 2005; see also Chapter 5). For Baron-Cohen, systematizing is therefore both passed on through genetics and prenatal exposure to testosterone. As interpreted by Lizzie Buchen and Steve Silbermann in science journalism, this contributes to anxiety about the consequences of reproductive choices that may lead to autism ‘When Geeks Meet’ (discussed in Willey et al. 376–377).

Willey and colleagues note that Baron-Cohen’s understanding of masculinity as entailing intellect, emotionlessness, temperedly virile, and rationality, and of femininity entailing empathy and sympathy, coincide with ideas about ‘natural and complementary dimorphism in sex’ that underpinned claims about ‘European evolutionary superiority’ from the 18th century (380). These ideas manifested in the claim by influential sexologist Richard Von Krafft-Ebbing that ‘the higher the anthropological race, the stronger these contrasts between man and woman’ (quoted in Markowitz 2001: 921). The connection of autism to racialized gender ideologies means that the nerdy autistic is effectively recuperated ‘as a potential romantic/sexual subject’ if he otherwise conforms to the other expectations of white European masculinity, including heterosexuality (280). Noting that the ‘new autism subject’ leaves out many autistic people who fail to instantiate its logic, including women who are problematically ascribed ‘male brains’, Willey et al. note that it has allowed the (white/male/heterosexual) autistic subject to be recouped, if precariously, from the undesirable side to the desirable side of eugenics (385). Furthermore, it perpetuates both the normativity of Western ideals of Romantic love between complementarily sexed, but racially matched, human individuals (380) and anxiety about women entering the sciences (378).

The utility of such efforts at ‘normalization’ should be weighed against the harmful effects of stereotyping as ‘socially impaired’ or being unworthy of love. Furthermore, even if individuals lack a conventional route to a social interaction, this does not mean that no form of connection is possible or desirable (see, for example, Hillary 2020). Finally, the neuroscientific evidence for binarily ‘sexed’ brains is arguably less significant in comparison to within-sex variability and the extent to which our brains are shaped by our experiences (Rippon 2019).

And despite the widespread methodical concerns and evidence that it is difficult for *anyone* to attune to the perspectives of those who are very different from them, or to communicate in ways that work with all kinds of people, the idea that innate Theory of Mind, empathy deficits or social disinterest *characterizes* autistic people remains prevalent among clinicians and researchers. This leads to a situation in which autism is underdiagnosed in those who appear to show empathy, sympathy, or a degree of social success. Undiagnosed autistics remain unsupported with sensory sensitivities and communication differences and delays, unable to access opportunities that would otherwise be beneficial, and subject to less helpful labels for unconventional behaviors.

The understanding that autism undermines empathy makes it harder to understand the value that autistics place on sharing feelings and knowledge, and to recognize the disorientation that can involuntarily stem from experiencing too much empathy, as many autistics report (a phenomenon known as 'fusing', see Shore 2003: 189–190). Empathizing/systematizing narratives make it potentially dangerous to disclose autism, since it may lead others to regard us as lacking any value if we do not possess the STEM skills that would allow us to perform our remedial function.

Non-autistic-authored counterstories

I have previously argued that practical identities are the sense we have of ourselves in action, through our internalized understanding of our memories, other people's opinions, and stories we have encountered (see Chapter 1). Nelson regards the different strands of our identity narratives as consisting of the themes of our responsibilities to others; our interests; our sense of the relative value of our different commitments; and our needs for survival (77). These elements may also incorporate a sense of what we and others think is important about the social groups to which we belong (87). Drawing on Sarah Lucas's theorization of narrative identity, I have explored how identity stories are composed of our experiences and what we discover about ourselves from others.

For both Lucas and Nelson, identity narratives need not be linear, explicit, or comprehensive (although we may perceive the form as having a particular significance for who we are); they are more like a fabric of ideas that we may call upon as the situation emerges. A first-person identity narrative will encompass other people's stories about their lives and, in turn, itself serve as the basis of a 'third-person' narrative about 'who' we, or others in our group are, and the possible ways of relating to us (Nelson 170). For this to be a useful 'counterstory', it needs to resist the idea that the individuals in a group are morally impaired (Nelson 150). This means that the story must provide an alternative explanation that 'repairs' what the master narrative gets wrong (Nelson 151). Provided that it gains circulation – and this is a complicated matter – a counter-narrative will then be reconfigured by individuals who will tailor it according to their needs.

The Theory of Mind Deficits/Mindblindness master narratives about autism have led to the assumption that all members of the group so identified are morally impaired. Regardless of any individual strengths and capacities they may have, they identify autistics as needing to be treated with, at best suspicion since, at least, '[c]hildren with autism may sadly be blind to the very existence of other people's feelings, which can lead them to pursue their own desires regardless of the other person' (Baron-Cohen 2011: 82). The master narrative of autism as Mindblindness has an in-built mechanism for discrediting any evidence to the contrary, because autistics have in general been denied the capacity for self-awareness upon which such testimony would depend.[4]

While concerns about explanatory limitations of the Theory of Mind explanation for autism have led to alternative proposals, it retains its influence in the words of clinicians who consider that it, 'captures the essence of autism' (Frith and Happé ibid), as it seems to them. This is despite the potential that Weak Central Coherence may offer as a possible counter-narrative to support the agency of autistic people. As it metamorphizes into a view that autism entails 'hyper-systematizing' in the form of an 'extreme male brain', it purports to offer the possibility that autistic 'strengths' might come into view, since systematizing offers benefits to society through its productive relationship with science and technology. This is because some people are '[H]yper-systemizers [type S 'brains'] because their minds are wired to seek out patterns all the time, and they include autistic people' (Baron-Cohen 2020: 49). Baron-Cohen believes this 'wiring' is shared by autistics and, to a lesser extent, all men, and is caused by intrauterine testosterone exposure.

The 'systematizing' view of autism, therefore, seems to offer to contradict the moral damage caused by the Mentalizing Deficits perspectives, even if Baron-Cohen side-steps the issue of harm enacted by his earlier theorizing on the narrative agency of autistics. It even explicitly offers a view on how autistics can be moral and suggests that they may be worthy of receiving social goods such as respect and status.

> To every autistic person, and to your families, I extend a warm thank-you. Science has confirmed my everyday experience of meeting you: that even if you struggle with cognitive empathy, you are more moral than others, because you combine affective empathy with a strong love of logic and an overriding belief in fairness and justice.
>
> (Baron-Cohen 2020: 160)

However, Baron-Cohen suggests that autistic people's preferences for matters of justice and fairness result from an innate propensity rather than the kinds of intentional deliberation about consequences that are typically considered to belong to the realm of moral decision-making.

The Empathizing/Systematizing view has been critiqued at the levels of methodology and theory (see, for example, Furfaro 2019). One of the studies that suggested autistic women's brains had 'male features' was retracted in 2019 (Ecker et al 2017). Others have argued that the research relating to prenatal hormone differences was predicated on a pre-existing assumption that there is only one, 'masculine-coded', path to autism (Meng-Chuan Lei 2015).

At the level of ethics, a counter-narrative should not contribute to other oppressive master narratives, which would constrain opportunities for other subordinated groups (181). The empathizing/systematizing model repairs the damage to some autistics at the cost of reinforcing the assumption that women are 'naturally' empathizers, eliding unequal distributions in labor and rendering power dynamics invisible. The model suggests that 'solitary' activities such as invention are fundamental to the nature of autistics, ignoring the call among autistic people for more accessible social spaces. It casts men and women as systematizers in a specific way that they may contribute to fields that are typically regarded as masculine and white. It does not help autistics who do not recognize themselves through gender binaries, nor does it provide men with a reason to demonstrate cognitive empathy or for women to explain interests in highly complex systems.

The possible overgeneralization at the heart of the 'extreme male brain' narrative, as it implicates individuals throughout their lives, may be regarded as what Nelson calls a hostage story, where other 'groups identified by these other master narratives may be thought of as innocent bystanders, held hostage by the counterstory' (Nelson 179).

This is not to deny the usefulness of empirical research on autism when it is designed to intervene with real-world difficulties that autistic people and their families report, or to deny the possibility that autistic differences are part of the conditions that may preclude mutual understanding in some instances. However, endeavoring to make autistic behavior comprehensible in terms of purportedly innate brain features, rather than the relational properties of individual lives and their worlds, inhibits autistic subjects from accessing roles and relationships that would themselves be constitutive of identity (Nelson xii). It may also exacerbate underdiagnosis in women, who are likely to have difficulties attributed to a more 'properly' female-coded diagnosis, such as Borderline Personality Disorder or anxiety (Adams and May 2022). Such narratives constrain the agency of autistic individuals to access social and cultural goods that are available to others (such as, in the 'extreme male brain' theory, the possibility of accessing locations coded as feminine or requiring cognitive empathy). Furthermore, insofar as they provide totalizing arguments about autistic subjectivity, cognitive models of autism predicated on an innate deficit (Theory of

Mind, Central Coherence, or empathy) infiltrate self-understandings and infiltrate confidence at the level of individual projects and desires that would otherwise be constitutive of a practical identity.

Counterstories and autism

Autistic-authored counterstories: Monotropism as a model of autism

Since personal identities are not made of single stories but are a fabric of stories that shifts over time, 'which weave together around the features of ourselves and our lives that matter most to us' (Nelson 72), they need not deploy a single counterstory about autism but may, at different times, draw on different ones or several. For a story to repair moral damage produced by third-person perspectives, it must allow an individual to dislodge some aspect of a master story from their self-understanding, and to serve as the basis for a new identity story. Here I explore some of the emerging third-person stories about autism that stem from both individual and collective autistic efforts to resist or reconfigure master narratives that have become oppressive.

Dinah Murray, Wenn Lawson, and Mike Lesser developed an influential counter-narrative about autism as a counter to the Weak Central Coherence model of autism, to better explain the aspects of the diagnostic criteria and, most importantly, to incorporate what autistic people say about their lives (all the originators of this theory identified as autistic and have written about their public lives in this context elsewhere). Honing in on both the idea of 'special interests' and 'repetitive behaviors' in their article on *Autism*, Murray et al. explain that autism should be seen as a predisposition to allocate attention in a specific way, as Monotropism:

> It is generally accepted that focus is a quality of attention. However, this optical metaphor may be extended to parameterize focus of attention between diffused light at one extreme and a torch beam at the other. That is to say, attention may be broadly distributed over many interests or may be concentrated in a few interests. The authors propose that the strategies employed for the allocation of attention are normally distributed and to a large degree genetically determined. We propose that diagnosis of autism selects those few individuals at the deep or tight-focus extreme of this distribution of strategies.
>
> (Murray et al. 2005: 140)

Later on, Murray emphasizes not only the need to recognize the varying patterns of attention, but the importance of understanding the relevance of such to the force of attention:

> [W]e now prefer a water analogy, as water has flow and turbulence, and finds its way through gap: monotropic people appear especially good at spotting the cracks and gaps. To "seed the dry zones" successfully, irrigate them with interest first.
>
> (2018)

The distinction between being autistic or not would therefore consist of 'the difference between having few interests highly aroused, the monotropic tendency, and having many interests less highly aroused, the polytropic tendency' (140). The model does not simply describe a detached or disembodied experience, but one that entails having an 'interest charged with feeling' (140). While Monotropism is compatible with aspects of both Weak Central Coherence and the related 'Executive Dysfunction' theorizing (see Bryson 1997), it also explains aspects of the data that cannot be accounted for when attentional differences are assumed to entail a core deficit in global processing.

> Research results that favour 'central coherence' types of explanations in which the drawing together of information is treated as a core problem are generally equally well explained by monotropism in an interest model of mind. However, a number of studies […] have found that local processing does not necessarily take precedence over global. There may be no problems in integrating information when it is attended to.
>
> (141)

This 'hyperawareness' explains, within this account, the hypo- and hypersensitives that autistics experience in relation to sensations (142), as well as the pleasure that comes with completing a task that one has a pre-identified interest in undertaking: 'Attention is the resource which is competed for by task demand, and a task is an enacted interest' (141). Rather than positing that autism is essentially a core deficit through an absent or deficient form of cognition that underpins normative social behaviors, Monotropism entails that autistic cognition can only be fully understood in relation to highly individual interests. Since they are endogenous to the individual, they may underpin ontological and narrative agency based on recognition of uniqueness.

Monotropism, more than Weak Central Coherence, can explain the variation between autistics in their apparent social behavior because 'the uneven skills profile in autism depends on which interests have been fired into monotropic superdrive and which have been left unstimulated by any felt experience' (143). However, given that language use is developed through practice, and that monotropic individuals prefer sharp category boundaries through which attention can be more thoroughly engaged, the 'structured interrelated semantic categories of language' can fail to engage autistics unless language itself becomes 'an object of interest' (2005: 143–150). Monotropism explains the difficulties many autistic individuals report in relation to symbolic communication:

> We are expected to maintain multiple channels of communication in socially acceptable configurations at all times, despite missing a lot of non-verbal cues throughout our lives. It often takes conscious effort to emote 'appropriately', display expected body language and suppress urges to regulate ourselves with motions people might find weird … all while trying to make sure not to say anything daft. Learning to do all this can be a valuable social skill, but it takes a lot out of a person, and it just doesn't always work.
>
> (Oolong 2019)

Murray and colleagues' explanation of Monotropism incorporates first-person narratives by Grandin, Williams, Lianne Holliday Willey, and others, showing how the master discourses in cognitive psychology do not offer the best explanation of the phenomena – which include sensory features, atypical social experiences, and distress at not being able to complete a 'self-generated task' (141). Monotropism offers a perspective on first-person experiences that is not available within the social deficits perspective – and this presents opportunities for refinement in the light of new understandings that would not be possible with the competing theories. Insofar as it offers a 'coherent' explanation of behaviors typically regarded as autistic – including not only the 'triadic' features but also sensory sensitivities that are now incorporated in the DSM-5 (2013) – it may offer the basis of practical identity that has more explanatory power and correlation to action than social deficits views.

For instance, Julia Leatherland has shown in her PhD thesis that Monotropism explains better than any other cognitive theory the difficulties that autistic students face in education (Leatherland 2018: 416). It allows autistics to narrate their sense of individual strengths (in relation to attention and focus on details) as emergent in particular environments and tasks. Referring to innate 'strategies' for allocating attention rather than deficits, it does not preclude autistics from achieving any kind of experience, even if it may come about atypically. Finally, Monotropism gestures toward other kinds of neurodivergence through infinite 'patterns of resource distribution' (Murray 2018: 1).

A narrative based on the idea of Monotropism does not take other identities as 'hostage' through agency-undermining stereotypes of other identities (unless one supposes that it implies non-Monotropic individuals are incapable of sustained attention). In this way, Monotropism does not propose a limitation on moral behavior in the light of formative understandings of ethical judgment based on ‘cognitive empathy’ (see Stenning 2019). In the first exposition of Monotropism in *Autism*, Murray and colleagues suggest that empathy may be possible for autistic people. In her later account, Murray explains that autistic people may see monotropic interests or passions as the basis for shared ethical practices.

> Some of those things may involve shared experiences with meanings passionately connected to a common weal and transcending issues of profit or gain. In contrast to the notion of reading other individuals’ minds in order to guess what they are thinking, or where you stand in relation to them and using language effectively to manipulate others’ interest systems, this way of sharing experience is not about presentation of self to self but about a freedom of shared joy and wonder that entirely transcends self.
>
> (Murray 2018: 2)

Insofar as Monotropism does not necessarily require an understanding of competing models of the mind, or dislodging internalist models of the mind, it may be easier to communicate than counterstories that emphasize ecological or cultural niches (see below). It may therefore offer a counter-narrative that supports individual first-person perspectives on autism, through its framework ‘structure for experience’ that supplants the moral import of the cognitive deficits perspectives. It allows us to explain why we may choose certain tasks or projects over those that may be regarded as more appropriate in light of our perceived gender or race. It can offer a framework for explaining our past and present situation, taking advantage of shared understandings of difficulties that autistic people experience in certain situations, such as difficulty switching between tasks, communication challenges, or the ‘loops of concern’ (Hallet 2021) that exist in relation to living in a predominantly non-autistic world. It can also help to create non-pathologizing shared understandings of phenomena such as ‘stimming’, or ‘inertia’: it can also explain distinctively autistic pleasures:

> When my attention is fully focused on something, my brain seems to throw everything it can get at that thing. I credit this with my senses often seeming to be more intense and detailed than most people’s. I seem to get more than most people out of being absorbed in my interests, in general; I think this relates, again, to flow states.
>
> (Oolong 2019)

Monotropism provides a counter-narrative that can become the basis of individual stories that enable political agency – understanding self in relationship to others through time (Chapter 1) supporting ontological agency as individual narrators adapt the idea to their personal contexts and relationships. However, since Monotropism *does* purport to name a first-order cognitive difference, it does not necessarily offer an account of how those with different cognitive styles may come to understand each other's experiences. Insofar as it 'naturalizes' autistic differences within a broader spectrum of different strategies for allocating attention, it may also be regarded as insufficiently accounting for the difficulties that more Monotropic individuals experience. For this reason, we need to pay closer to interactional circumstances.

Autism as sensorimotor differences

There is an increasing number of what may loosely be described as 'perception-first' models of autism (Bervoets and Hens 2020), of which Monotropism is just one instance. These offer counter-narratives, rather than master narratives, because they do not pose a priori limits which would mean that autistic people are 'constrained from developing and exercising their capacities and expressing their needs, thoughts and feelings' (108). These share an understanding that autism is primarily characterized by atypical sensorimotor experiences, either sensory hypo- or hyper-sensitivities or atypical 'patterns of [mental] resource distribution' (Murray et al. 2005).

This means that rather than seeking to identify a cognitive mechanism that is purportedly faulty in all autistics, such models develop from the ground up, based on everyday sensitivities/relative weaknesses that many autistic people report, and speculating on their consequences for 'higher order' cognitive processes such as social interaction, attention, or language. Perception-first, rather than cognitive models of autism, explains how autistic embodiment makes social 'synchronization' with those who are differently embodied less likely, but it does not see resultant difficulties inevitable or inherent to autistic embodiment. There are many different articulations of this idea (see, for instance, Savarese 2013; Mottron et al. 2006; Pellicano and Burr 2012; Williams 2021).

Monotropism on its own does not explain what we may gain, in general, from understanding how other people experience the world, perception-first models do suggest how we can distinguish between restrictive social conventions and interactional frames that allow for mutuality and a moral imagination (Bervoets and Hens 2020). The Double Empathy problem in particular, as articulated by Damian Milton (2017b), suggests that a moral insight can be gained from questioning whether social norms developed by a majority neurotype provide access to intersubjective truths.

One relative advantage of sensorimotor understandings is that they allow room for the exploration of environmental scaffolding in the form of ‘societal and personal contexts’ (Van Es and Bervoets 2022), which make outcomes dependent on the efforts of both interlocutors. If rather than thinking of autism as a strategy for allocating attention to environmentally enacted interests (Monotropism), we can think of it as a widely heterogeneous perceptual orientation toward the environment that leads to particular cognitive habits:

> Autistic bodies tend to covary in a more precise way with their environments, picking up regularities in their environment in a more precise way. By that token they will tend to be less sensitive to social habits which rely on abstracting from the concrete perturbations in the environment.
>
> (Van Es and Bervoets 399)

Van Es and Bervoets argue that autistic attunement to the salient sensory properties of an environment leads to a relative inattention to the less precise social habits taking place, and therefore leads to the impression among those not so attuned that the individual is not participating. However, comparing autistic sensory differences to other forms of atypical embodiment, we can understand how it would be a mistake to deduce a difficulty in accessing a shared ‘state space’ to an inability to attain such. There are many cases when we do adjust our interactions to accommodate visible sensorimotor differences such as, in the most everyday example, differences in height between speakers.

For instance, considering the social norm that we should establish eye contact immediately upon meeting a new person, we can see how awareness of the changes in the environment may direct attention away from this, even if this is not immediately apparent to a non-autistic observer as it would be if we struggled to establish eye contact because of differences in height or blindness. Insisting on eye contact may, however, lead to lasting tension that precludes any possibility of future interaction. For Van Es and Bervoets, failure to achieve neurotypical habits for engaging in social relations should not be mistaken for not wanting interaction, even if one’s previous exposure to normative social relations has left one feeling unnerved by the possibility of having to sustain another’s gaze or shake hands. For instance, while it may be difficult for a blind or deaf person to enter the ‘interactional space’ of a meeting without specific aides, it is not typically questioned that such an interaction may occur. The problem is exacerbated if we mistake the conditions that lead to an interaction – the cultural rules that prescribe, for instance, eye contact or a certain response to certain behaviors – for a mutually-recognitive and ethically significant interaction.

With a change in attitude, they argue, we could regard autism in similar ways:

> Where autistic people are sensorimotorically skewed to attune more precisely to the here and now of environmental perturbations, this is not the case for the majority of (neuro)typical people. It is in this way understandable that the latter mistake their specific way of coming to reactive attitudes for minimal, or essential, preconditions of achieving them. Whether it is by shaking hands, recognizing specific facial expressions or in other ways abstracting from environmental cues deemed inessential, typical people will tend to mistake a sensorimotor preference for certain habits in social interaction for the essence of that social interaction.
> (404)

Van Es and Bervoets suggest that it is important to distinguish between our sedimented, sensorimotor habits from the authentically social, which is a one-off event that is sustained by mutual participation. They suggest that for a given social interaction to be the basis of an ethical judgment, it needs to accommodate the participation of both actors through recognition of differences in the degree of our sensorimotor habits (400–401). For Van Es and Bervoets, this interaction should sustain the possibility of a shared ethical understanding, despite embodied differences.

While Bervoets and Hens suggest that reactive attitudes are the basis of all judgments about the moral status of another person's actions, I have argued for the importance of a narrative framework that allows us to identify another person's (ethically relevant) decisions to act. However, Van Es and Bervoets also suggest that our 'norms of identity' through which we identify ourselves and others in apparently neutral ways are often unconsciously connected to 'norms of response' (Nelson 147). This is to say that it is not only how willing we are to compromise our habitual responses that determine how likely we are to recognize someone as a moral agent, but also our willingness to challenge narratives that identify the other as morally blameworthy or compromised, and these stories are unlikely to be exclusively about autism.

Sensorimotor approaches are consistent with autistic people's life narratives which, as I explore in the following chapter, often address environmental barriers to social interaction and moral recognition. Such personal narratives also suggest that these barriers contribute to career and life choices. Importantly, narrative articulations of sensorimotor experiences may serve as the basis for new norms and strategies for redirecting attention, finding pleasure or avoiding situations that are overwhelming. But they do not necessarily explain why others should be willing to change their interactional habits, unless we are already committed to liberatory social projects.

Do counterstories of autism as sensorimotor differences or Monotropism undo narrative damage by Theory of Mind deficits views? Once again, we need to consider if these 'narratives' can support the development of first-person stories that have explanatory power and heft, and correlate to action (see above). We need to decide whether they can convince others that social practices must be adapted so they are accessible to those with sensory or attentional differences without assuming that this is all there is to be said about whether an ethically significant interaction will occur. And if we are willing to rethink social practices in the light of invisible and variable sensorimotor differences in general, this will not necessarily lead to collective conscious change towards valuing differences or recognition for how they influence our ethical judgments. Instead, narrative agency depends on the emergence of a space in which individual projects and plans can be articulated and evaluated on a case-by-case basis, without undermining access to other social goods.

Autistic ways of being and collaborating

Hilde Nelson talks about legitimizing contexts through which those who are typically deprived of cognitive authority, who lack either social status or a sense of competence as knowers, can be promoted to the status of knowers within an 'abnormal moral context' that provides the norms through which authority can be acknowledged (Nelson 173). This is required when standard contexts fail to acknowledge a subgroup's actions as having anything to say about who they are as moral agents (172). This is a precondition for confidence that one's credible and justifiable stories can serve as purposeful counterstories, designed to overcome oppressive master narratives (175). The difference between the two contexts can be explained as the difference between an 'arrogant' and a 'loving' gaze, only the latter of which permits 'people to evaluate one another according to moral and cognitive norms that are better than the ones shared by the dominant group' (174). On the other hand, the arrogant gaze deploys narratives that:

> Construct the identities of certain classes of people from the perspective of the arrogant eye, dismissing and degrading anything about the members of the class that does not directly bear on their value to the dominant group [...] As viewed by the arrogant eye, subgroup members can't possibly know what they are talking about, can't be concerned with anything significant, must be stupid or unreliable or devious or crazy. The narratives that depict them in these ways typically represent the group members as morally impaired as well as cognitively defective.

> The trouble here is not just that the group members don't conform to the evaluative standards adopted by those in the mainstream […] it's that the stories depict them as being *incapable* of conforming to those standards.
>
> (Nelson 173)

The social deficit perspective on autism encourages the arrogant eye so that autistic perspectives on autism are regarded in advance as unreliable or deceptive, based on an exclusionary idea of what it means to be social. From the sensorimotor perspective, we can see how environmental scaffolding – such as minimizing the requirement for eye contact, reducing sensory demands or the requirement to speak in a specific way (or at all) – may support the inclusion of autistic people in evaluative conversations, such as those that surround discussions on the purpose of autism research. But this may not be enough for an individual to challenge internalized ideas about what it means to be autistic, especially when oppression comes from multiple sources.

We can also see how, in specific cases, it may be necessary for individuals to speak out against evaluative practices that are themselves oppressive: for instance, to question research that is premised on the assumption that autism entails absent social motivation. The value of such research may be questioned from the epistemic viewpoint afforded by oppression: it is not only that autism does not *necessarily* entail social deficits (the evaluative framework surrounding autistic cognition within a dominant perspective), but also that a subgroup may have a different, yet valuable, understanding of what it means to be social. This is where autistic community-built narratives about collaboration and belonging provide a new evaluative framework, and from this perspective, we can recognise that normative social conventions based on conformity entail an inability to embrace difference:

> All humans are on a neurological spectrum that ranges from individual identity to collective identity. At one extreme end you have the ultimate individual who acts based on their individual judgment alone, remains immune to any outside influences and regards everybody as an equal (no more and no less), no matter how different they may be; at the other end you have the ultimate social person who has absorbed all expectations of the group they are part of without any sense of individuality and who regards their group as superior, therefore ostracising and discriminating against all other groups, outsiders and misfits.
>
> (Ludwig 2021)

From the normative social perspective, embracing the values of a dominant group is part of what it means to belong. Those who are unable to do so, however, may develop a critical stance toward the group's identity narratives, especially where group stories define themselves through opposition to other ways of being. This may lead to the development of a subgroup, whose 'abnormal moral contexts permit loving perception because they allow people to evaluate one another according to moral and cognitive norms that are better than the ones shared by the dominant group' (Nelson 174). Community-focused narratives that center on overturning the shame that comes from dominant framings of autism exemplify the 'loving perception' that constitutes 'abnormal moral contexts'. These first- and third-person perspectives emphasize qualities not previously thought to accompany autism – collaboration, shared joy, belonging, friendship, kinship – and in doing so, provide new cognitive and evaluative norms that confer value on those who are sensorially, cognitively, or behaviorally atypical. Whether the community is defined by neuro-status, shared projects, or encompasses a more expansive elective framework, what counts is the shared desire to challenge the value assigned to members by normative evaluative frameworks.

What emerges from this, is that it is not only necessary to challenge social norms and practices, but also to re-evaluate the roles that are assigned to us on the basis of overlapping master narratives. This means that it needs to be possible for individuals to develop practical identities that deploy multiple strategies for counter-narration to challenge oppressive master narratives within Western post-industrial nations. Stories about individual autistic lives in different contexts of community advocacy often deploy an understanding of roles that come from other contexts including indigenous culture, ecological theory, queer and critical race theory, and the neurodiversity paradigm. What these stories share is a critique of the pathologization of diverse forms of being. While sensorimotor approaches help to reconfigure the social norms so that a wider range of actors can participate, an 'abnormal moral context' can allow us to regard many social norms as destructive of planetary and human health.

While autistics have typically been regarded as unable to internalize social patterns and rules, life narratives suggest that not only are dominant forms of collaborating inaccessible for autistics, but they are unsustainable for all humans. For Jorn Bettin and colleagues at the Autistic Collaboration Trust, autistics need a human-scale kinship/peer network that can sustain ways of living and projects that are beneficial beyond their immediate context. Drawing on the modern Māori concept of *whanau* as 'extended family' and Keri Opai's te reo Māori word for autism, *Takiwātanga* (Opai 2017, see also the discussion of Jolene Stockman's vlog in Chapter 4), Bettin argues that in the absence of sustaining family and economic relationships:

> We have to co-create our whānau in our own space and time. In many indigenous cultures children with unique qualities are recognized, are given adult mentors with similarly unique qualities, and grow up to fulfil unique roles in their local community, connected to others with unique knowledge and insights, perhaps even in other communities. If we are embedded in an ecology of care, we can thrive and share the pain and the joy of life […] Whānau is much more than the Western notion of "family". It is a deep connection, a bond that you are born into that no one can take away from you.
>
> (Bettin 2022b)

Fictive kinship networks – such as those outlined by Bettin – offer a space for recognizing autistic ways of being, caring, and depending on others, centering on 'sharing information and knowledge, and not by negotiating social status' (AutCollab). Within such social practices, we see the value of skills for pattern recognition and tendencies towards awareness of personal limits, loyalty, a dislike of deception, task focus, and passionate interests, which can displace pathologizing master narratives. From the perspective of 'human-scale' collaborative relationships, conventional social interaction is competitive and transactional, and founded on the desire to ignore cognitive limits for the sake of symbolic status (Bettin 2022a). This standpoint also makes clear how dominant culture pathologizes autistic ways of being that rely on interpersonal support and intrinsic motivation, through coercion, control, or manipulation (Bettin 2022a). The dominant cultural perspective also encourages us to overlook our interdependence with the more-than-human, which has also been lacking value because it lacks the symbolic forms of intelligence we attribute to humans. Bettin and colleagues argue that if competition is not regarded as the 'natural state' of humans, then we can understand that the coping mechanisms that autistic people deploy, such as social withdrawal, are the products of trauma rather than 'symptoms' of autism. It also encourages us to find ways to support them in re-establishing trust and confidence (Bettin 2022a).

Once we decenter the value of deception and coercion, storytelling with its emphasis on sharing 'seductively simplistic beliefs' can itself be questioned (57). While language may be thought of as the essence of human thought, there are other ways of sharing information that allow for greater complexity:

> Mathematics, the arts and music are human-scale tools for communicating the essence of complex patterns of mental states (knowledge, feelings and awareness of agency and motivations) that don't survive simplistic attempts at serialisation and deserialization via stories. The

> outputs of mathematics, the arts and music are highly generative; they can't be described in a simple story. Instead, they open up and invite a multitude of complementary interpretations.
>
> (Bettin 2021: 55)

In the final chapter of this book, I return to consider how we might create models for autism research that incorporate the values of non-normative collaboration themselves.

Conclusion: the potential for resistance through counterstories

This chapter has argued that master narratives surrounding autism have constrained the freedom of autistic narrators to articulate desires, projects, and plans that are distinctively our own, and to achieve recognition for capacities that are typically devalued within the dominant culture. I have explored how the master narratives surrounding autism form an 'organic ensemble' and are interconnected with other oppressive and essentialist understandings and are epistemically rigged to discredit evidence to the contrary (Nelson 162). However, in their aim to provide a totalizing conception of autism, each of the candidate models for autism possess tensions within (Nelson 166) insofar as they fail to account for phenomena that are now widely recognized – such as sensory hypo- and hyper-sensitivity (DSM-5) or underdiagnosis in women, older people, black people, and minority ethnic groups (NICE 2020). Furthermore, there are tensions between Weak Central Coherence, Mindblindness, and Extreme Male Brain models, particularly in their disagreements about whether it is possible or helpful to identify subgroups within autism (Happé 2014; Baron-Cohen). Finally, social deficit perspectives fail to account for evidence to the contrary when autistics affirm that they value social goods such as friendship, kinship, and belonging, even if they are reimagined in atypical ways.

I have described how three counterstories about autism – as Monotropism, environmental attunement, or a different understanding of what it means to be social – offer the potential to repair damage to personal and collective identities, by providing more plausible and robust explanations of behaviors and attitudes that are typically regarded as symptoms of an impaired subjectivity. Each of the counterstories provides 'semiotic systems' that can be used to challenge cognitive norms that undermine the articulation of plans, projects, and needs that are not encompassed within the master narratives. However, the final counter-narrative, about autistic collaboration, shows the need for shared evaluative frameworks for talking about autistic lives beyond subgroups who are already committed to recognizing diverse forms of human subjectivity. In the following chapter, I consider those limitations on narrative agency that stem from reluctance to acknowledge intersecting sources of identification and oppression that structure normative social interaction in the West, which I return to in the following chapters in relation to the idea of politics as the project of broadening perspectives on what counts as the shared world.

Beyond the immediate context of a chosen community, we may struggle to find any recognition for individual and group identity stories:

> To be optimally successful, a counter story must be culturally digestible and widely circulated, taken up by not only those who are on the receiving end of abusive power arrangements, but also by those who have benefited from those arrangements
>
> (Nelson 151)

Constraints on the adoption of counterstories about autism as cultural master narratives exceed the dominance of autism-specific discourses. These include the privileging of linguistic and disembodied cultural practices and commodified forms of technology that rely on a limited distribution of the sensible. There is equally a danger of appropriating and generalizing non-Western knowledges and practices or decontextualizing them from their existence within localized struggles, which I consider further in Chapter 4. In the following chapter, I propose that textual and visual narratives that record an individual's habits of responding to the social and material environment communicate 'manners of living' and 'modulations of behavior' that exceed the categorical divisions of genre, 'voice', or style of narration. This 'sensory writing' suggests how agency-enhancing mutual recognition already exists within both particular social environments and through fictive kinship and acts of loving perception in the mainstream world.

Notes

1 Remi Yergeau (2018) has provided the most extensive study of the rhetorical function of autism in constructing normative personhood.

2 Happé presented Grandin as unable to distinguish between 'Life' (life that can be developed or 'fabricated' in Povinelli's terms) and 'non-Life' – see Chapter 4 and Povinelli (2016).

3 Maria Lugones explained the racialization of biological dimorphism in 'The Coloniality of Gender', *Worlds & Knowledges Otherwise* 2 (Spring 2008), pp. 1–17.

4 McGeer (2004) argues against the neo-perceptual model of mental state attribution, upon which Happé and Frith's claims about autistic errors in self-awareness are based – see Chapter 3. I argue that the neo-perceptual model is one part of the organic ensemble of master narratives typically deployed in relation to autism and which also constitute a broader 'worldview' about subjectivity.

Part II

On Autistic Sensibility

Chapter 3

Sensory subjects, facilitated

Introduction: kinship as doing

> Most scientists do not expect to be able to prove things like dreams, and love, and freedom, and what it is like inside you, to live your own life.
> (Sequenzia and Grace 2005: 12)

> I am not a healthy being in the 'worlds' that construct me unplayful.
> (Lugones 1987: 14)

The last chapter concluded that there are cultural constraints on the recognition of first-person and third-person stories about autism. These consist of a broader ensemble of cultural beliefs about what it means to be a human subject which presents the individual brain as a metaphor for a spatially contained subjectivity that possesses all that we typically assume to be relevant to human agency, communication, representation, motivation, affect, intentionality, and morality. This is evident in both 'neurocentric' (Fulton et al. 2020) approaches to sensory writing by autistic narrators and wider neglect of non-Western cultural practices that register the body and extended sensorium as bases of knowledge and social relations. Therefore, in addition to prevailing master narratives about autistic social motivation, autistic narrators encounter both neurocentricism and Western ratiocentrism as they try to convey sensory experiences and their role in everyday life. Insofar as unusual sensory experiences are central to what many autistic people consider to be the meaning of autism (see Chapter 2), this becomes a further constraint on the disclosure of what we see as our distinctiveness in relation to others. In this chapter, I will show how aesthetic acts by neurominority subjects often exceed and problematize authorized subject positions – including the 'symbolic' and 'neurological' selves that are produced and policed in specific institutional arrangements (see Chapter 2).

DOI: 10.4324/9781003036807-6

In this chapter, I introduce a discussion I continue in the following chapter, of what Elizabeth Povinelli calls the trope of the 'genealogical' subject, where the subjectivity and intentionality of individual autistics are rendered inert or as lacking the kinds of distinctiveness that would otherwise constitute individuality. In this chapter, I show how narratives that record an idea of kinship as doing rather than 'being', or which record awareness of other people's attentional and sensory habits, contribute to the emergence of new forms of agency and sociality.

As the French anthropologist, philosopher, and psychoanalyst François Laplantine explains, Western culture tends to ignore aspects of our mental lives that can't be fixed into a spatial imagination, such as temporal processes of transformation or the interpenetration of bodily and mental experience. This presents a further barrier to the disclosure of how the environment and other bodies help us to coordinate our thoughts and actions. Insofar as we overlook the role of the body and our awareness of its sensory and attentional habits in generating reasons for action, we also overlook the role that language itself plays in structuring our recollected or shared experiences, so that we tend to assume that linguistic exchange is the only natural form of social interaction. This leads to the further assumption that individual capacities for symbolic language are the only means available to identify individuals and interpret their relations to others.

For those who are unable to demonstrate a normative capacity for symbolic language or who find that engaging in symbolic language undermines the satisfaction of more immediate needs, efforts social connection may be taken as further evidence of deficient subjectivity, or the basis of a denial of personhood. As I explained in the previous chapter the dominant models of subjectivity with the 'psy' disciplines typically view communication as enacted through the internalization of a singular system of linguistic meaning, which can then be shared with all other competent language users. This leads to an understanding of sociality as the innate ability to internalize a society's interpretative structures through cues in their behavior and body language, regardless of how rewarding this may be in our own context.

Based on this monolithic understanding of subjectivity – which entails a notion of health as attainment of a species-specific standard of capacities – those who lack access to a shared symbolic realm can only achieve relation through rule-following behaviors which imitate the interpretative strategies of typical subjects. I argue that dominant constructions of autistic people as 'pattern seekers' ignore the ways that those with a sensory orientation to the world are also social agents with distinctive sensory and attentional habits. Regarding autistic people in general as merely pattern seekers deprives autistic individuals of history and a context in which other forms of intentional behavior can be registered. Pattern detection can be a survival strategy and a way to camouflage aspects of one's identity that would otherwise mark us out for ill treatment or a way to structure dynamic temporal experience and make predictions about our own and other people's experiences.

In this chapter, I begin to argue that there is far more to social interaction than the internalization of linguistic structures. The life narratives I explore in this chapter suggest that communication can be epiphenomenal and uncoupled from a historical system of symbolic meaning, where interlocutors respond to the most noteworthy aspects of their surroundings or its emerging interactional rules. Within forms of facilitation where a parent or aide and a non- or minimally speaking autistic individual use a letter board or typewriter, the words that are produced do not describe everything that happens in this interactive, social phenomenon. Narrative artifacts themselves such as those by Curious Autistic testify to autistic embodied habits and patterns of responding to other people's behaviors, gestures, and sounds, and these form cross-neurotype 'cultures' that 'enable future interactions with others and with our own body' (Wolf-Meyer 14). I argue that a 'loving perception' (Lugones 2003) may also be fostered by attending to the temporal habits of different kinds of bodies, and this disrupts the 'arrogant perception' which results from the 'injunction not to look to and connect with each other in resistance' (Lugones 80). This provides a further way in which we can engage with each other's 'worlds of sense' (ibid).

At a further degree of abstraction, reading longer-form narratives that attempt to communicate the authors' sense of their uniqueness in relation to others, we may discern the possibility of an autistic sensibility that does not rely upon categorical divisions. Through either a fictive kinship imaginary as shared forms of doing rather than 'being' – or a 'loving perception' oriented toward other people's habits of responding to a world – we contribute to new fields of social relation, facilitation, and animation (Chapter 5). Within this framework, we can begin to understand how it is possible to disclose one's sense of one's uniqueness in relation to others and through time, even though we are typically subject to misrecognition.

Sensory subjects, facilitated

Conventional responses to autistic sensory differences aim at mitigating the social consequences of autism for the individual and to society more generally, rather than recognizing that atypical sensory experiences may be key to individuals' sense of who they are, as Autismdoggirl suggests below. And while 'sensory sensitivity' is typically seen as underpinning competence in the arts, autistic subjects, those who disclose autism or rely on facilitation or assistance for their communication, are regarded as without agency in the form of authorship if they disclose that their sensory responses fluctuate over time. I believe that this betrays not only the dominant paradigm of 'neurological subjectivity' that recognizes just one possible way of being a human subject but also a misunderstanding of how communication works more generally, which is typically regarded as the mapping of individual mental states (which are purportedly transparent) to the medium of symbolic language (which is unmediated by individual practices of interpretation and imitation). As Matthew Wolf-Meyer explains, 'every symbolic subject exists in some variance from institutionalized norms as an outcome of mimesis' (104). I am concerned with how we may express atypical subjectivity beyond the confines of normative language. Here, I focus on the role that sensory experiences play in the autistic narrator's efforts to make meaning from their lives within relational models of selfhood and agency.

Facilitation[1] can sometimes enable atypical subjects to communicate in symbolic language (through technologies such as letter boards and typewriters), but it can also happen through participation in shared projects and activities, or lively sensory interaction with an environment. This is to say, facilitation occurs even when we are not using technologies that are designed to support linguistic communication but also when we are willing to share a sensory experience as the basis of shared forms of thought. If we focus on the immediate context of interaction, rather than the assumption of a shared history, we can develop interactional norms that are communicative of a much wider range of desires, interests, and roles. However, this kind of sensory facilitation may be more meaningful for those who are typically denied access to a shared realm of symbolic meaning.

Stories about sensory subjectivity

To begin, I focus on linguistic articulations of individual habits of seeking rewarding sensory experiences, which can serve as the basis of stories about connection, pleasure, and learning. In their preface to the anthology *Typed Words, Loud Voices*, Remi Yergeau invokes the sensory properties of sentences, including their sonic textures and rhythmic patterns.

> As a child, I found patterns: books with cryptographic lines that carried seemingly intrinsic rhythms, synesthetic soundscapes and eyescrapes and armscrapes, pustules artfully arranged. With my tongue I popped them, word guts everywhere. Talking is like mad libs. I find the pattern. I find the rhythm. I horde parallel sentence structures. What is there to communicate when the tongue gels?
>
> (Remi Yergeau, in Sequenzia and Grace 2015: 8)

Yergeau presents their story as a celebration of ‘thoughts forged outside the grip of the other’ (9), in a collection that foregrounds the importance of individual choices about when or how to communicate and the difference made by different styles of facilitation. It would be a mistake to interpret Yergeau’s narrative as a direct record of failed ‘episodic memory’ (8), as we might if we were to interpret life narratives within a Mentalizing/Theory of Mind deficits model. Yergeau’s description and demonstration of their predilection for repetition and pattern invokes authorized psychological constructions of autism, which see it as a manifestation of ‘restrictive and repetitive interests’ (DSM). However, Yergeau suggests that the meaning of their sentences can only be comprehended through their sensuality. Their narratives

> Sometimes […] emerge from fingers. Sometimes they emerge from eyes that divert or bodies that rock and wrench. Sometimes they escape the mouth. Performance acts, much like actions perform. I often think of my life, of my speech, as a database of words.
>
> (9)

Beyond their immediate significance as an invocation of feeling, Yergeau’s subsequent ‘narratives on repeat’ are material for ‘performance acts’ (7). They are ‘Scripts, commonplaces, canned monologues that I recall, sometimes at will, sometimes by force’, are potentially more powerful than text-to-speech technology which can, according to another author in this collection, only offer a ‘one line script’ (106). Insofar as Yergeau’s scripts draw on intertext fragments from other sources (i.e., sentences overheard from clinicians and other people’s parents, lyrics from MC Hammer’s ‘U Can’t Touch This’), they are regarded by others as ‘meaningless repetition’. But Yergeau shows they are a communicative response to a much broader context. Yergeau also emphasizes the body as the source of meaningful interaction with the physicality of objects: in response to the symbolic depiction of autism by non-autistic autism charities as a ‘puzzle piece’, their body ‘viscerally opposed to puzzles … It cringes when local buses in jigsaw deco round the street corner’ (8).

Yergeau suggests that non-autistic use of language is truly puzzling since it presumes that there are some for whom their ‘telling can’t be told’ (8) and where norms of communication ‘have more agency than I do’ (8). Instead of normative conversation, they invite us to participate in the ‘ordered fuckery’ of shared sentences and ‘tempoed lines that never meet’ (9). As ‘self-consciously subversive bricolage’ (Stimpunks), it paves the way for collective forms of expression that are modular and lively.

This book has so far questioned the assumption that agency is exhausted by deployment or resistance to normative conceptual rules, and this chapter builds on this by proposing that embodied habits may also provide the basis of practical identities as the 'sense of ourselves' we deploy in action (see Chapter 2). While such understandings may not be linear in the way that conventional stories are – and therefore, they cannot serve as either counterstories or master narratives about autism – they may offer the basis for new forms of what I refer to as sensibility. And while narratives 'on repeat' provide a distinctive aesthetic that takes pleasure in patterns of language and sound, and which may serve as the basis of a shared expression, they have an ambiguous relation to ontological agency.

In discussing autistic sensibility, I may be seen to fall into the trap of assuming that narratives are always truthful and accurate representations of experiences, rather than registering that our interpretations of our experiences are culturally mediated. Neoperceptual models of introspection, such as those upon which claims about autistic introspective deficits are based, begin with the premise that we have direct access to our own 'beliefs and desires, our own emotions, our own immediate sensory states', even if this process may sometime go awry, and we are conscious to the extent that we can track these states (McGeer 2004: 243). Within this model, when we make statements about introspective experiences, we are producing second-order judgments about those first-order perceptions, and these are reliable insofar as we possess the relevant cognitive mechanism. When Happé and Frith referred to autistic reports about unusual 'sensory awareness' as unfounded (i.e., sensations are not really painful or stimulating or overwhelming), they suggest that autistics have mental states but are 'unable to reflect' on them (244).

Alternatively, we may hold that reports about our mental states and processes are either direct expressions of our mental states or are an expression of our inclination to judge that we are having such an experience. McGeer draws on the second understanding in her response to Happé and Frith, suggesting that it does not make sense to think of self-reports as simultaneously referring to 'experiences' and to 'awareness' of experiences: instead, we are affirming an experience of the world according to how we typically experience things. According to McGeer:

> Self-reflection in the sensory case, just as in the case of intentional states, does not involve any special sort of inward looking; it involves, instead, a special sort—that is, a focused sort—of outward looking (or smelling, or tasting); it involves, in other words, the attentive redeployment or reengagement of my sensory systems toward some aspect of the world. (248–249)

This model means that we can take autistic reports at face value, as 'detailed expressions of abnormal modes of experience' rather than as 'inaccurate quasiperceptual reports of normal modes of experience' (McGeer 2004: 249). In this chapter I am expanding on this and argue that narrative expressions of sensory experiences may serve as the basis of new forms of interpersonal relations. This is not how autistic interaction is typically framed, either by cognitive theorists or those who propose perception-first models of autism.

For Peter Hobson, who makes explicit the enduring connection between neurodevelopmental classifications and psychoanalytic models of subjectivity that present the brain as the symbolic center of subjectivity, the meaning of autism is the 'limited engagement with other people's engagement with a shared world' (2014: 11). However, if we recognize that all experiences are mediated by language, then what we conceive of as a shared world may, in fact, be an illusion brought about by the dominance of symbolic models of subjectivity and the models of recognition that they affirm. In earlier chapters, I have argued that a shared world is brought into being by the ongoing process of negotiating interests held in common through sustained acts of mutual recognition. Why does the idea of autistic deficits in social motivation persist?

Stories about what it means to relate

McGeer considers that differences in social cognition among autistics may be due to 'sensory-based inability to interact with others in a normal way throughout early development', which leads to being 'deprived of the very kinds of interactions that give rise to ordinary psychopractical know-how' such as the self-regulation of distressing experiences (McGeer 2001). A more common way to conceive of autism is that it is a cognitive disorder of 'intersubjectivity', produced by an innate feature of autism.[2] While Baron-Cohen and colleagues considered that our relations to others are determined by cognitive mechanisms for 'Mentalizing', Hobson invokes relatedness as based on 'perceptual-affective sensibilities toward the bodily appearances and behavior of others' (Hobson 1991). Both cognitivist theories and Hobson's psychoanalytical interpretation represent autism as an innate condition that produces cognitive deficits in understanding other people's behavior. However, Hobson argues that among 'typically' developing humans, there is an innate tendency to internalize shared structures of language and meaning. This begins in infancy with the child's

> [P]ropensity to identify with another person's bodily-expressed attitudes toward a shared, visually specified world. If movements in mental stance generated in the context of non-verbal communication between people can become movements in mental stance within an individual's own mind – and if this is bound up with the achievement of self-reflective

> awareness and creative symbolic functioning, as Mead (1934) and Werner and Kaplan (1963/1984) suggested – then deficits in basic forms of interpersonal engagement in autism may have far-reaching cognitive-developmental implications.
>
> (Hobson 2014)

In line with Damian Milton's theorization of a 'double-empathy' problem between autistic and non-autistic individuals we might ask, what if the difficulties with intersubjective engagement are produced by two-way differences in 'perceptual-affective sensibility'? According to recent investigations 'autistic individuals often do seem to be able to intersubjectively attune to other autistic individuals' (Chapman 2019: 427). Robert Chapman applies Wittgenstein's understanding that 'human thought and language' is 'something that can only occur within a shared "form of life"' (422), to their consideration of interactional difficulties between autistic and non-autistic people:

> [M]embers of each kind being more able to attune to other members of their own kind, and yet remain less able to attune to members of the other, without needing to make the further claim—which, as we have seen, is unsustainable—that one side or another simply lacks the capacity for empathy and interpersonal relatedness as such.
>
> (428)

In developing this idea further, I suggest that literature, and the arts more generally bridge between distinct and overlapping forms of life, drawing out the sensory and attentional qualities of engagement with the world, and exceeding their representational functions. This function of the arts allows us to respond to those whose perceptual embodiment differs from our own. To clarify my meaning, I draw on the concept of 'connectivity'.

For Matthew Wolf-Meyer, human relations are not a product of direct interactions between individual mental states and intentions but sustained through culturally specific forms of mimicry, underpinned by the interactions between bodies and their environments (2020: 12–14):

> Mimicry can be seen in the calls for children to parrot language and behaviors, to become civilized in their culture-bound interactions with others in their worlds as well as their own body. Mimicry can also be seen in the practices that individuals use to interpret the actions of others. Through replication or deduction […] the capacity for mimicry brings bodies together in their intentions and experiences.
>
> (14)

While we typically conceive of imitation and internalization as the basis for connection, what is more central to interaction is the 'ability to reproduce with difference, based on difference' (73). This means that, rather than focusing on 'making children imitate the actions that are socially meaningful for their parents, physicians and teachers' but not for the individual, we may 'destabilize the interpretations of language and place emphasis on its epiphenomenal enactments' (65). While 'theories of subjectivity that depend on the symbolic, on language and self-referentiality [...] render those without normative forms of communication as mere objects – animals at best, obstacles at worst', we can base communication on the 'immediate context of communication' (105–108). For Wolf-Meyer, subjectivity is produced by 'reciprocal animation' and interdependence (167), which consists of 'making something lively through media' (29) which can then be mimicked by another as the basis of ongoing interaction.

Stories as a way to facilitate sensory subjects

The authors in *Typed Word, Loud Voices* narrate their individual struggles with spoken language but also describe their alternative responses to language, gesture, and touch, which can also sustain lively interactions. Several of the contributors use speech and type as a 'backup'; some only use type; some type with facilitation, including the 'rapid prompting method' (133-134). In support of their assertion that 'all our communications are equally valid', the editors chose not to arrange the contributions by form, style, or diagnostic criteria but instead compiled them according to the software they used (16–17). The reader is encouraged to move beyond horizontal interpretative practices that ascribe meaning based on existing understandings of autism and toward the sociocultural and technical environment of the narrators.

Yergeau's entry not only plays with the authorized meanings of autism, presenting repetitive actions and rhythmic repetitions as a pleasurable activity, but it also gestures toward the possibility of a shared autistic 'habit' that can serve as the basis for social relations. Yergeau writes 'I long for the parallel' and invites readers to 'abstract' together (8). Writing itself can contribute to a dynamic script where 'words are preceded' and grammar 'borrowed' from others (ibid). If this borrowing and repetition is understood as mimicry rather than imitation, repeated text fragments can be interpreted as part of a broader interaction between bodies that celebrates 'rituals' which are 'demonized and prized by shrinks' (ibid).

Other writers in the collection challenge the notion that not speaking is equivalent to having nothing to say. Spoken, rather than felt or typed, words are a poor equivalent for thoughts which are 'vibrant or muted', which have 'color', and 'make sense internally, but they have no words'

(Bridget Allen 2015: 104). Explaining why she does not use text-to-speech, where ‘someone else’s voice breaks the delicate chain of thoughts to words’ (106), she reserves vocalized words for emergencies and communicates by typing on an Ipad or gesture. Not speaking may, in certain contexts, be deliberate and meaningful, a way of registering that we ‘matter’ (106). As Nirmala Erevelles notes in the same collection,

> We learn to ask ourselves why we privilege speech over all other means of communication. We learn that all communication is interdependent. We learn that all non-normative modes of communication should not presume incompetence. And we learn quite simply that silences are always so full of loud words.
>
> (2)

While prompted typing or facilitation has been controversial insofar as it may reflect the intentions of the facilitator rather than the facilitated, the compulsion to produce verbal speech can lead to verbal scripting. Within the anthology, Bridget Allen explains that verbal speech rehearsal and scripting based on normative social identities is a ‘performance art in which I play the part of someone warm and charming’, which produced ‘a sea of debt, sacrificed health, and unbidden touching [...] Only in the written word can I protect myself’ (106–107).

Some of the writers in *Typed Words* celebrate the independence that facilitated communication via text-to-speech helps when they can’t speak, others, such as Autismdoggirl, note that typing alone is better than text-to-speech because it still allows time for sensory thinking.

> My first language was my senses, there has always been so much information coming into them, so much communication smells, tastes, sounds, sights, and textures all had information and meaning for me and they all shaped the way I understood and saw the world. This was the major source of my memories.
>
> (99)

In its totality, the collection does not value one method of facilitation above all others but suggests the different ways in which facilitation may allow narrators to recognize their distinctiveness.

The experiences recorded in *Typed Words, Loud Voices* highlight, not only the diverse forms of facilitation afforded by adapted typing, stencil, letter, picture boards, and touch, but also what Merleau-Ponty calls the temporal structure of the body, the way in which present actions are made possible by the ‘accumulated habits and capacities of past actions and present new possibilities for action in the future’ (1962: 162–168). The habits described in this collection exceed what can be communicated by any one of the facilitating technologies on their own. The narrators gesture instead toward what cannot be directly conveyed in symbolic language: distinctive pleasures that can be found in locating, sharing, and reproducing rhythms and patterns within the flow of sensory experiences. Ibby Grace describes the rationale behind the project for including those who speak in words some of the time or who are non-speaking but not autistic, as providing 'bridge testimony' against the assumption that 'non-speaking autistics are naturally incompetent' (13). Typing, pointing, writing, speaking, and touching serve as means to participate in reciprocal interactions based on a sharing of pleasure in repetitions, rhythms, and patterns. Insofar as written or typed words can be part of this, it provides a habit that can create new possibilities for action.

Stories that record our social habits

Narratives may also use conventional language to record interactions that are decisively non-normative. Direct, embodied contact may support other methods of communication that rely on the use of non-linguistic (non-symbolic, or at least not exclusively symbolic) signs to point to some aspect of a shared context that constitutes meaning. Indexes such as a vocalized sound or gesture (the sign vehicle) can signal the presence of an object spatiotemporally contiguous to but distinct from them, such as an aspect of the environment (The Peirce Edition Project 1998). For example, a pointing finger can be used to signal the presence of a tree outside a window, for one who has come to understand pointing as a method of directing attention. An icon signals an object by perceived resemblance: for instance, a human imitation of a bird call can signal a type of bird even when it is not present. While indexes and icons may be thought of lacking the complexity of symbolic communication, they may be used to structure interactions. As one autistic blogger, Curious Autistic (AKA Raiden), explains,

> [W]hen I was younger I met another autistic boy (nonverbal). He placed his hands around my arm and patted my face with a smile. Following that, he made a chirruping noise and grabbed my hand. I echoed this back at him. That was my first encounter. I quickly learnt that tactile stimulation was vastly important to him and that feeling things, such as running his hands over stones, allowed him to process his surroundings. Furthermore, he would express affection or fear via touch. It was his primary method of communication.
>
> We both found sensory pleasure in water and would swim together; the feeling of the water was a major touch point and connection. It was a way that we could use sensory seeking to understand each other and

> often the best form of interaction was to give him something to hold or feel (a sensory pleasure). In mild distress, he would latch onto an object for comfort and to soothe him you could hold his hand.
>
> For another friend, it was hearing. Our communication occurred in vocalized noises and expressions. He would play with toys that made pleasant sounds and mimic them to express moods.
>
> My sensory pleasures increase the joy of a situation and therefore my interest in it … Identifying the things that are enjoyable to me and incorporating them into each part of my day dramatically improves my mood. Each time I engage with one of these pleasures – I have a chance to catalogue how I am feeling.
>
> (2020)

In attempting to explain this to his reader, he begins with a story about how an octopus uses its body to solve challenges that emerge in response to its interaction with its environment, driven by the pleasure of sensory reward. He concludes that octopi are

> [H]ighly aware of their surroundings and delight in solving puzzles – such as opening boxes or removing shells. Their key functionality, however, lies outside their brain. Two thirds of the neurons in an octopus (hence its processing ability) lie within its eight arms … The key to an octopus's intelligence lies within its ability to process sensory information. Their arms provide the ability to touch, feel, taste and understand the subtle changes of their environment. (For example, they can sense emotion through taste.) Furthermore, they will use sensory seeking behaviors to communicate by grabbing, holding and exploring new objects.

Curious Autistic explains that sensing is entangled with thought and communication. This same intelligence is responsible for the octopus's interaction with its 'preferred humans', where 'the octopus will watch the behavior of others and learn to mimic them to express delight – whether it be another of its own species or a human'. The story provides an analogy that allows the narrator to introduce a 'not uncommon' feature of autism, which is that sensory-seeking behavior is important for 'processing and communication'. For both octopi and autistics, sensory processing serves as an 'anchor point' for shared sense-making.

Curious Autistic does not draw on the symbolic meaning of autism, but instead uses natural history to offer an analogy of communicative interaction between human bodies and those of other organisms. Within this broader context, autism is not at odds with being a human person, but instead a distinctive style or stance of embodiment, characterized by the body's capacity for thinking 'outside of his brain' alongside the textures and resonances of the material world. In narrating his attitude toward his embodiment through this shared natural history, Curious Autistic provokes readers to rethink their existing understanding of social connection within a narrowly human perspective. In doing so, he provides a 'footing' (and an abnormal moral context – see Chapter 2) for the reader to understand the significance of his exchanges with other non-speaking autistics, taking the octopus and human interaction as a starting point for interactions between different subjectivities. Insofar as what Curious Autistic describes relies on indexical associations between sensations and moods, which are typically conceived as involuntary responses, such communication could be falling short of a specifically human agency, which is perceived as a capacity residing in symbolic thought.

Matthew Wolf-Meyer notes that the dominant concept of subjectivity within both psychoanalysis and neuroscience relies on the image of a brain as 'an actor with intentions' (2020: 98). Furthermore, within both the neuroscientific paradigm developed by Antonio Damasio and the psychoanalytic tradition following Freud and Lacan, knowledge of the self depends on a capacity for language that is symbolically determined. While the neuroscientific model proposes to be fundamentally materialistic, its notion of subjectivity retains an attachment to the idea that the brain is the source of an immaterial Cartesian self. Within either the psychoanalytical or conventional neuroscientific traditions, behavior is a manifestation of brain states that can be directly mapped to symbolic language (8–9).

Both models construct sociality and subjecthood in an investment of the individual in a singular symbolic order that is both geographically localized (in the brain) and transhistorical, simultaneously reinscribing a singular narrative of 'the human', which is granted an exclusive moral status. The responsibility of reproducing the symbolic order is either, according to the 'neurological model', the responsibility of the individual, who must overcome any adverse experiences through medical intervention or, in the 'psychoanalytical model', the job first of families and then of the individual who must ensure that their wards internalize by rote the structures of a national symbolic structure. This belies the role of broader material circumstances that make it impossible for individuals or families to conform to the roles afforded to them by their culture (100) or to internalize the connection between symbolic signs through which those roles would become manifest.

The symbolic understanding of subjectivity presents symbols – signs that communicate through their relation to other signs – as the basis of the individuation of unique humans and the distinction between humans and 'brute' animals (96). Anyone who is unable to 'imitate the signals they receive to produce the basis for communication, and interpret the signals of others authorized by others' is therefore deprived of subjectivity (74).

As I explored in relation to the authors of *Typed Words*, typewriters and letter boards facilitate subjects into communicative persons, which may allow atypical subjects to be recognized as having a sense of what is normal, right, and desirable for them. However, facilitation also occurs within institutional settings that bestow specific interactional norms, such as that one must be seen to be learning to communicate in more normative ways. Within *Typed Words*, all communications are registered as equally valid and equally mediated by the technologies upon which their authors depend. However, within everyday life, communication is registered as valuable insofar as it incorporates 'normative identity categories' (Wolf-Meyer 18) rather than emergent upon the existence of a shared medium. Curious Autistic suggests that even something as simple as water can be an expressive 'medium' when it is recognized as the basis of the interpretation of behaviors and capacities.

Within the symbolic model, subjectivity is fixed, and the 'categories and relations that lay the basis of individuals' subjective understanding of themselves are static in their referentiality' (Wolf-Meyer 107). Curious Autistic and Autismdoggirl suggest that connection and self-knowledge can be established through a much wider exchange of 'information' and 'affect' with other agents and the environment (Wolf-Meyer 8).

A modular approach to communication – one that conceptualizes 'capacities for interaction as shaped by the institutions that individuals interact with' (Wolf-Meyer 14) – is evident in the Intensive Interaction approach to social learning that was developed in the UK during the 1980s. This theory provides recommendations on how to engage in social interaction with learning-disabled and/or autistic people.[3] Its central idea is that communication is successful only when appropriate and person-specific two-way interactional practices have been established, and this is achieved through mimicking or otherwise responding to whatever is meaningful to the learner even if this seems meaning*less* to the teacher. These practices include 'blended repetitions and imitations of the learners' physical behaviors' (Jefferies 2009), running commentary, and joint focus activities (Leeds and York Partnership NHS Trust 2020), all of which are designed to provide a context for enjoyment to be shared. Theorists have argued that similar methods may be beneficial for individuals with late-stage dementia and multiple sensory disabilities (ibid).

While the aim of such interventions in educational and therapeutic settings is to instill the basis for a more typical social interaction, intensive interaction theorists resist the idea that autistics lack social motivation or intrinsic pleasure in socializing, and instead recognize the possibility that communication can exist beyond normative models.

However, the 'intensive interaction' theory is ultimately aimed toward a 'coercive performance of the self' (Wolf-Meyer 14), insofar as it aims to become the basis for installing a more normative ‘social interaction’. If we are to understand the role of institutions in facilitating diverse subjectivities, there is also a need to theorize the role of ‘spaces for care without the need to impose normative demands on the articulation of subjectivity’ (ibid 15).

Moving beyond Western ideas about personhood

How can ‘new institutions and new modes of social engagement’ create new ‘persons and subjects possible’ (Wolf-Meyer 26), including for those who have typically been defined in terms of social deficits? What possibilities exist, in relation to selves who are not constrained by the symbolic order of Western psychology and neuroscience, both of which require that individual subjects are able to differentiate themselves from others through a dominant symbolic order?

I draw on two attempts to translate a Western/white language of neurological disorder to cultural practices where subjectivity, agency, and communication are not seen as exclusively the domain of individual humans. These narrators show how it is possible to draw on multiple symbolic domains to develop a story that respects their sense of their distinctiveness. Their stories suggest that symbolic modes of thought are dependent on specific historical and material arrangements, beyond the comprehension of any individual human agent, and dependent on modes of thought that we share with other species. Insofar as these stories imply that all humans fall short of omniscience, they provide room for interactional strategies that defy the impulse to pathologize behaviors that may not be immediately understood.

Both Prahlad’s memoir *The Secret Life of a Black Aspie* and Jolene Stockman’s personal vlog on her Māori / Tangata whaitakiwātanga identity show that stories from one’s extended kinship network provide recognition for atypical subjectivities within particular contexts. ‘Takiwātanga’ is a Taranaki and Te Re Māori word for autism, coined by Keri Opāi in 2017: it can be translated as ‘In her own space and time’. For Stockman,

> Takiwātanga honours who I am as an autistic person, a word that captures how I feel and the best way to be with me in a clear, concise, empathic way … [T]he Te Reo Hapāi glossary [of ‘language of enrichment’, of which Takiwātanga is a part, and which also includes terms for other disabilities and health conditions] has been released into the world, the ripples have spread … Takiwātanga, in particular, has been embraced by the global autism community, with people from Taranaki to Germany proud and relieved to have a mana-enhancing way to describe themselves and their loved ones.

Stockman suggests that autistic differences may be compatible with distinctive forms of flourishing and personhood; in the Te Reo Hapāi, the words are designed to allow 'people with disabilities to become people again' (2020). As Stockman deploys it, 'mana' is a concept of agency or power that is bestowed on us from birth through our relationship to a broader kinship network. It invokes a concept of power or authority beyond the everyday human world, which one receives through birth rather than demonstrating particular capacities. Stockman acknowledges her kinship relations to Keri Opāi as a reason for embracing the new concept of Takiwātanga.

If employing the concept of Takiwātanga, rather than autism, enhances mana, through its invocation of uniqueness within a kinship network, it parallels the idea of ontological agency, which I defined as 'the ability to bring something new to the world through appearance at a distinct location in a shared world' (Chapter 1). Sarah Lucas considers ontological agency as deriving from the features of natality and plurality. Natality is, following Hannah Arendt, the 'innate capacity of each individual to begin in the world, given by birth', which is itself an animating principle when we enter a 'plurality' of other beings (Lucas 2016: 151). A 'Plurality' is the property of humans for whom 'nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live' (Arendt 1958: 8, in Lucas 108). If mana persists along a kinship line, we can talk about the importance of an individual's 'beginnings' within a specific relational context. Takiwātanga suggests that, for autistics, what comes from the mana is not to be measured according to developmental milestones or even what is typical for a family but according to a unique temporal and spatial logic.[4]

In *The Secret Life of a Black Aspie*, Anand Prahlad comes to recognize himself through the term 'Asperger's Syndrome', but he interprets his neurological difference in relation to longer historical processes and continuities between human and non-human survival strategies. His inheritance of African belief systems and the aftermath of slavery provide a context in which he can articulate both his distinctiveness from and his similarities with kin.

Prahlad explains that he had inherited the ability to 'see things', 'to know what people wanted before they started talking' (33). This refers not only to his ability to 'see spirits' (36), which he inherits from his mother and grandmother, but his sensory hyper-sensitivity provides unique strategies for interpreting other people's behavior:

> I learned to grow masks for school. I had to be careful there. Covering up was like instinct, though. Like a brown walking stick turning green when it sits on a leaf. Watch. Watch. Watch. Watch hands. Watch lips. Watch eyebrows. Watch the paths that come down beside noses and

> curve out and around … I had learned a lot from insects about how to live around people. I had learned a lot from growing up in the shadow of slavery. Slaves had to have six senses. They had to pay attention to small things, to small routines, to other people's view of things. They were always strangers, ready for the next trauma.
>
> (69)

The trope of the mask recurs throughout *The Secret Life of a Black Aspie*. The narrator expresses how he learns to hide aspects of his identity that would otherwise single him out for scorn – such as his being 'sweet' in a world that valued toughness (58) and that he delights in sensation and rhythm in an academic world where 'rhythm is criminal' (203).

Within autistic life writing more generally (see for example, the discussion of Limburg's persona of Socially Gracious Joanne, Chapter 2), masking is an imitation of non-autistic traits, but Prahlad suggests that masking can be something else. Learning early in his childhood about the stick insect's camouflage, Prahlad developed a strategy for concealing aspects of himself that would be targets for ridicule. In childhood, Prahlad noticed that he could see camouflaged insects more easily than others due to his heightened visual sense, which showed colors as vibrating ridges of light (80). He learned, in this way, that an insect's iconic similarity to a non-prey object is a product of the limited capacity for noticing among its predators. As Eduardo Kohn observes of the Runa inhabitants of Ecuador (see Chapter 4), we need to recognize the perspectives of those who would otherwise see us as prey. This kind of perspective-taking is not the operation of a cognitive 'theory of mind' but one that is based on the senses and attuning to what is perceptible, or confusing, to another. This same mechanism was the basis of practical jokes on schoolmates 'who cared so much for things being according to their words and their rules' by moving their things or 'telling them truths they couldn't see' (93).

If insects and plants are regarded as though they communicate their secrets to chosen humans, what else might we be missing if we only attend to what people say? Prahlad's manner of living with his family involved accepting that they could 'read all things' through their iconic or indexical connections to other beings. Such habits can serve as models of interaction oriented toward understanding what is happening or what will be, even if they do not provide a causally exhaustive account of why something happened:

> Both my mama and granny 'saw things', and I inherited their gift. The gift was handed down on my mother's side. In the DNA, I guess. It helped us survive in slavery. To know things. To know what we needed to know but were never told. It helped us learn to read, to read all

> things. To know when someone would be sold, when someone else would be coming. To know what people wanted before they started talking. Before they even got to our house. To know yesterday, when the thought first lighted on them, like a sparrow on a branch. To visit those far away and never leave home. Mama and Granny often shared their dreams, especially dreams about things to come. The evenings were filled with talk about such dreams.
>
> (33)

These patterns endured well beyond Prahlad's childhood, even when he was living on the other side of the country. He observes how his surroundings trigger memories, which are themselves the manifestations of spirit. 'Working in the garden is my granny's spirit. Is mama's spirit. Is the spirit of all the generations from the plantation' (217–218). Earlier on, when he was a student in another city, he described how the trees in a park conveyed feeling of safety: they 'held me like I was a shadow, like Uncle T and the other old people where I grew up held me' (184).

If our interpretations of other people's narratives center on ideas of spirit or mana, we may be reluctant to subject their expressions to the 'arrogant gaze' and perception embodied in master narratives about autism. Stockman and Prahlad refer to cultural and historical contexts that enable them to articulate aspects of their experience to themselves that would otherwise be unspeakable, but this also makes them vulnerable to new configurations of psychophobia or racism within the dominant Western culture. Can sensory writing open up new ways of responding to the sensory forms of knowing within a mainstream culture?

Life writing and sensibility

Modal anthropology is a field that has promised to pay closer attention to the way that the senses and body structure our experiences of time and space. As Laplantine argues at length in *The Life of the Senses*, the focus on public forms of disclosure, with their classification of public life into conceptual designations, elides the varied emotional and bodily reality of social events, which are experienced physically and sensorily. These are the basis of public and shared experiences of the rhythms and temporalities of life. He describes *gingar*, a particularly Brazilian form of walking characteristic of the hustler character (the *malandro*), as a social practice that itself generates multiple ways of knowing and experiencing the world, both in art and in everyday life (2014: 3–13). Such practices promote a shared feeling of vitality and problematize the idea that there are universal sensory forms that are governed by orderly cognitive subjects.

The everyday and artful practices of samba and capoeira, based on gingar, sculpt subsequent experiences, suggesting a historical dimension to sensing that has political consequences (Laplantine 86). They offer a potential resistance to 'rationalocentric' forms of knowledge that prioritize shaping social reality into concepts. For Laplantine, the urge to ascribe semantic meanings reduces sensation to simulation, 'the present of a clear percept, untroubled by affect and less still by [minor deceptions], hard and fast difference, never what elaborates itself in a deferred temporality' (41).

Laplantine recommends that modal anthropologists attend to the 'rhythm, intensity, modulation, resonance' of people's speech and behavior (52), and attend to the affective components of thought, which are necessary for the survival of any individual through time. He recognizes that this is most noticeable in the development of cinema in the late 19th century, which presents the body in movement, or the experience of what Bergson called time in 'duration' (63). In contrast to the experimentation of other fields of social science, Laplantine recommends a study of experience *through* experience, which is the only way in which we can grasp living processes, through attention to 'social acts', defined as 'fragments of the social in the process of making and unmaking themselves' (65).

For Laplantine, filmmaking – which is a process achieved by a filmmaker and a spectator – is uniquely suited to revealing lived experiences of time. This is because cinematic thinking,

> Is a form of sensory thinking … since it is constructed with only fragments and images and moments of sound, is a resolutely aconceptual and adiscursive thinking. It is interested, like ethnography, only in concrete singularity … It allows us … to relearn how to see and listen.
>
> (33)

> An important part of cinema's charm comes from the expectation, less of what will enter the screen than of what is engendered by the unexpected or at least strange encounter between a story that has begun to be told and an off-screen of which we know nothing … it allows us to sense/think that which is not shown.
>
> (44)

Cinema therefore provides access to modes of knowing that are not linguistic but affectual and embodied, as we interpret the gestures and behaviors of actors. Insofar as a director may choose to reveal everything through panoramic shots and explicit narration, this undermines cinema's potential to disrupt totalizing narratives about the world, suggesting that everything can be seen and known immediately, given that 'a large part of the political takes place through the manners in which we deal with the sensible' (88). Training our sensibility through cinema can lead to a conception of a shared life in its particularity, awareness of a 'shared world' that is constantly in creation:

> Aesthetic experience, which is connected to the possibility of multiplying and diversifying ourselves, while at the same time recognizing the multiplicity and diversity among others who are not replicas of ourselves, in a way of going through life. It introduces fiction, that is to say vitality – the capacity to lead other possible lives – but also a resolutely critical negativity toward the social and language. It simultaneously questions, on the one hand, the univocality of concept (reconsidered in the light that it is also percept and affect) as well as its definitional and totalizing character, and on the other the transparency of sign, aimed at perfect accordance between words and things, and finally the symbol's tendency toward concordance.
>
> (122)

Curious Autistic's explanation of his 'sensory seeking' behavior, revealed through the fragments of his past interactions and his ongoing methods for organizing his moods, provides one source of understanding atypical social actions. Stockman's evocation of 'mana' in relation to autistic forms of life and the 'ripples' that spread from the transmission of the concept of Takiwātanga suggests the possibility of a fictive kinship network based on 'doing' (sharing understanding) rather than 'being' a specific kind of a subject. As Laplantine explains, mana is 'an elusive object we can just manage to name (calling it energy, force or life), without being able to say what it is' (68). Prahlad's evocation of spirits and the spectral offers a way for him to understand himself in relation to loved ones, through sensory forms of recollection.

These records of atypical memory, kinship, and social relation, which may only 'reveal themselves' through a deferred temporality, push back against full articulation. Laplantine advocates for a multimodal anthropology in which the researcher engages their senses and which, particularly as it exceeds capture by a disembodied visual spectator, defies linear conceptual closure. For an author to explore the full meaning of sensory experiences, it may take multiple attempts at articulation and, particularly as they depend on auditory or haptic sensing, do not begin with a specific purpose in mind.

Stories about feeling our way into new habits

In *Somebody, Somewhere*, Donna Williams explained her various strategies for what she considers indirect forms of interaction that avoid the overwhelming stress caused by 'incoming information' (174). Since direct interaction was painful, she felt unable to express herself in ways that did not seem empty and meaningless (177). Her solution is to ‘trick’ herself ‘that there was nothing personal or emotional in what [she] was doing’ (176). For instance, she ‘found the courage to sing out loud, to myself, unable to let even my own mind know that what I was singing was a means of communication’ (148). She uses her own experiences as the basis of recommendations for parents of autistic children who are seeking to improve communication: that they must first accept ‘who and where their children are’ (174). This means that the child does not need to reach out, as a ‘role-playing robot, but as a feeling, albeit extremely shy and evasive, human being’ (174).

In a later memoir, Williams explained how she had drawn on the sensory properties of words to teach autistic children to use language:

> Words were used with rhythm, music, actions, and images. Words were something the children and I could talk ‘through’ and not just ‘with’. We explored them as far more than mere assaults upon the ears, distancing weaponry, or vehicles for other knowledge. I used words in this class with the intimacy and love for them as objects that had led to my own compulsive and obsessive exploration of them, their feel, their variations, their categories, and their use as playthings.
>
> (1994: 140)

The lessons themselves have a distinctive temporality and rhythm:

> My lesson had pattern and rhythm, it was visual and concrete, and everyone owned their own learning and could find their own level of strength while still exercising and building upon their weaknesses. The dancing and music, the logic and the flow, the structure and the consistency, gave me everything I needed to teach a lesson well.
>
> (1994: 142)

Other autistic writers describe pleasure in the sensory properties of words, which are preferred over referential meanings that are more ambiguous or hide a speaker’s true intent.[5] Within the interpretative context of master narratives about autistic social deficits, these admissions can only be seen as symptoms of a desire not to communicate. However, in invoking the rhythms and textures of words, Williams provides an example of ‘epiphenomenal communication’, where speech acts gesture toward the immediately salient properties of the situation, as a means to draw out the more ambiguous aspects of their reference to distant objects of knowledge. In her earlier experiments with singing, expression depends on playing with the iconic suggestion of emotion through sound, without any particular purpose, and this serves as the basis of later, more mediated, forms of expression.

Williams suggests that mimicry of and experimentation with sound, rather than imitation, are the basis for her to communicate her atypical subjectivity. If imitation relates to the reproduction of a token object without understanding more about its context in a broader type, it can be seen as a kind of 'pattern' thinking. Mimicry involves experimentation with forms that we perceive. Patterns, as forms of structure and consistency, contrast with the rhythm and flow that Williams also attributed to her lessons. Here, I wish to draw out Laplantine's distinction between 'rhuthmos' and 'skhêma' where:

> Democritus opposes rhythm and pattern. Whereas pattern is the result of a mental operation aimed at fixing the trajectory of atoms, at subtracting them from their movement in a fixed configuration, rhythm is a process. The former gives rise to shapes, but the second is prone to transforming them.
>
> (55)

For Laplantine, these divergent concepts of change reveal broader attitudes toward life and whether it should be conceived as an ongoing process in the world or the disembodied concepts of the mind. Williams suggests the necessity of both in order to 'teach well'. Her recognition of the students' preference for the rhythms, physicality, and variety of words problematizes any understanding that autistic thought is bound to 'systematizing', a point I return to shortly.

Sensory irregularities and their meanings

Both speaking and non-speaking autistic narrators write about the pleasure and meaning they find in their sensory engagement with their surroundings. For instance, Temple Grandin writes:

> I could sit on the beach for hours, dribbling sand through my fingers and fashioning miniature mountains. Each particle of sand intrigued me as though I were a scientist looking through a microscope. Other times I scrutinized each line in my finger, following one as if it were a road on a map.
>
> (Grandin and Scariano 1986 [1992]: 22)

Experiences such as the one Grandin describes are sometimes the basis for stories about the imagined journey or encounter. Writing in *How Can I Talk if My Lips Don't Move?* (2008), Tito Mukhopadhyay describes how he believed 'if you cared enough to listen, you could hear the sky and earth speaking to each other in the language of blue and brown' (1). But since autism is typically conceived as an absence of typical subjectivity, these descriptions of a shaping rather than merely imitative imagination cannot be understood within Western models of autism. Bonnie Evans has described how, in the UK, the diagnostic category of contrasts autistic capacities to those associated with imagination and creativity (2017). Grandin and Mukhopadhyay show that creativity can involve imaginative play with perceptions and their inferred causes. As Alice Wexler notes of Mukhopadhyay, 'his relationship with people and things is associative, they grow around his being, enveloping it and becoming it rather than mastering the other' (2016: 48). Temple Grandin observes that her own thought is similarly 'associative' and 'bottom up' (2009).

While many regard autistic responsiveness to their sensory environment as compulsive or mechanical, first-person narratives suggest that this very awareness of acoustic, visual, or tactile forms can inform a practical sense of self and agency. They are not simply the records of fixed patterns or fixed forms in a visual field but of bodily participation with material objects and their latent energy. That such experiences could be regarded as meaningful not only runs against the normative demand to share experiences through mimetic language but also unsettles the separation of the animate from the inanimate, and from the idea that objects are simply there to fulfill a mechanical purpose. But processes of mimicking or responding to the external environment form the basis of what Wolf-Meyer calls epiphenomenal communication which is 'a semiotics of the present that depends on the immediate situation rather than history and the institutional regimentation of signs' (108).

One short film demonstrates how a 'semiotics of the present' unsettles the normative models of interpreting autistic behavior. In Mel Baggs's seminal YouTube film, 'In My Language' from 2007, they describe their primary form of communication as being 'conversation with every aspect of my environment'. The first, unnarrated, part of the film focuses on Baggs's movements, gestures, sounds, and tactile interactions with various domestic objects. When the camera is still, Baggs moves their body in and off-screen. Their gestures – flapping, swaying and rocking or tapping and scraping – unfold in sync with cadenced and patterned vocalizations. Rather than suggesting an objective gaze, the camera itself, 'becomes an extension of the hand, its closeness to things almost tactile' (Gatto 2020).

The text-to-speech narration in the second part of the video which is explicitly described as 'A Translation' explains that 'my language is not about designing words or even visual symbols for people to interpret':

> I am just interacting with the water as the water interacts with me. Far from being purposeless, the way that I move is an ongoing response to

> what is around me. Ironically, the way that I move when I am responding to everything around me is described as 'being in a world of my own', whereas, when I interact with a much more limited set of responses and only react to a much limited part of my surroundings, people claim that I am opening up to true interaction.
>
> (2017)

Baggs engages with the liveliness of their surroundings through their multisensory engagement with it. For instance, they show their hands waving a piece of paper in the air in a rhythmic counterpoint to a flag fluttering in the wind outside their apartment (2.52 mins). Baggs translates their interactions as a 'conversation', but they are clearly not so by conventional standards. They invite a viewer to 'put into practice some of its lessons' as the filmmaker Júlian Gatto explains (2020).

As they explain in their translation, Baggs's interactions with their home environment can be interpreted within a modular framework. A fictive kinship context might lead us to recognize that Baggs's sensory-seeking and repetitive actions may serve as the basis of a distinctive sensibility and understanding (I explore this further in the following chapter, in relation to Daina Krumins' oeuvre). Our involvement in activism may lead us to draw on a counter-narrative about autistic environmental attunement, such as the one that Baggs provides in their translation and assigns a more overtly political meaning to the content and construction of the film. Yet, as I explored in relation to Francesca Happé's response to Temple Grandin's memoir fragment in Chapter 2, autistic actions are almost universally interpreted hierarchically within clinical institutions. This mistakes the way that interpretation works in the ordinary world, as a social and 'situational act', which involves a communicative interaction between actors which is subsequently interpreted according to its possible meaning and intent (Wolf-Meyer 65). According to an affective model of subjectivity, the 'mode of interpretation will itself determine who can engage in the system and be recognized as intentional, self-directed communicators' (76).

In describing 'horizontal' interpretative practices, Wolf-Meyer draws on memoirs by the adult family members of those diagnosed with neurological disorders. He describes how families may rely on media, such as cartoons and comics, that, through fictional roles and sensitivity of their children to 'subtler' emotions, facilitate new forms of connection with children who are unable to internalize the full structures of symbolic language (68). Insofar as animations may inspire acts of mimicry rather than full linguistic comprehension of their meaning by those who are neurologically disabled or their families, these structures enable the communication of affect (13). If families can use creative media to set up new communicative practices in the home, can life writing do something similar for autistic subjects between each other and for non-autistic peers, not only for those who are unable to use symbolic language but also for individuals who find pleasure in a combination of the sensory and referential properties of language? Can we introduce not only new concepts but also shared habits that might serve as the basis of new interpretative practices, which can in turn enhance recognition of ontological agency?

Autism is increasingly, if not universally, associated with sensory differences, including what are clinically conceived as hypo- and hypersensitivity to certain stimuli and 'unusual interest in sensory aspects of environment' (DSM-5). 'Sensory integration dysfunction or disorder' is no longer recognized as a distinct neurological condition from either other 'developmental disorders' or learning difficulties; although synesthesia is considered a 'neurological condition', it is not listed in any diagnostic manuals. Generally, these conditions are considered disorders insofar as they are assumed to be exclusively negative in their effects.

Within the neurological model of subjectivity, the human sensory faculties are, unless they are impaired, regarded as isolable sources of different kinds of 'sense data' that are potentially the basis of authoritative knowledge about the self and the external world. Vision (and to an extent, hearing) is afforded a distinctive role in providing objective representations that are taken as the basis of knowledge. Within cognitive models of autism, sensory differences are regarded as evidence of deficits in the cognitive mechanisms that would otherwise process sensory precepts according to their social relevance. As I explored earlier in relation to Victoria McGeer's criticism of the 'neoperceptual' model of self-reports, it is unlikely that sensory experiences provide propositional knowledge of the sort that cognitive psychologists typically claim.

Recent work in theoretical psychology has demonstrated the interdependence of perceptual modalities – for instance, showing that visual perception can be modified by auditory input. This has led some to speculate that there are multiple forms of sensory interaction and unity (see, for instance, Fulkerson 2014). However, this would require a paradigm shift away from the idea that there is only one form of 'fully' human subjectivity, as there would be if there is just one kind of symbolic subject who is in command of their sensory faculties.

Both speaking and non-speaking autistic narrators disclose the interpenetration of sensory modalities and the emotions they produce, and thereby unsettle the conventional division between the animate and the inanimate, the social and their material surroundings. The crossing of sensory modes leads to an impression of interpenetration between the inner and outer worlds, of perfect and affect, which for Henri Bergson led to an intuition of ‘real duration’ as ‘continual novelty or generation’ (Burwick and Douglass: 4). For instance, Prahlad describes how the color of morning glory would trigger the cross-modal association of a musical note, like the ‘C note on an oboe’ … and the sense that the ‘colors vibrated […] They rose like the spirits of the dead and hovered around a thing’ (82). Lucy Blackman, who communicates via a typewriter, explains:

> In my childhood, I experienced sight and sound as an almost identical sensation, but one that had the translucence of a slightly transparent glass chime. On the good days, my world was one of time and `feeling’ and light and movement all in one.
>
> (2001: Kindle Location 545)

Where perception combines with a passionate interest, visual hypersensitivity can also be the source of a recognition of similarities between the world of inner experience and the dynamic movements of an external world. Referring to his earlier self in the third person, Chris Packham explains:

> Glitterlight sparkled through the dancing canopy and lime-lit the compacted soil with a jigsaw of chasing patterns, swishing and mixing as his eyes chased them to find regularity, snatching spots and smudges that almost returned as the branches bounced and shade fell for a cloudbound moment. [T]he sun shot a shard of light, the leafscape formed and for a second the soft patches and shadows projected on the smooth path conformed with a precise familiarity.
>
> (17)

Packham follows the rhythms of movement and light in search of a visual pattern that has become familiar. But the pleasure seems to come, not from fixing the pattern, but from watching the light shift into new shapes before settling into a settled pattern. The alliterative ‘s’s’ echo the sweeping motion of a ‘search for “smudges”’, while the repeated ‘l’ sound intercedes toward the end to provide an auditory equivalent to the visual sensation of harmonious light.

For narrators such as Blackman and Prahlad, sensory hyper-sensitivity and cross-modal interactions contribute to a feeling of ‘real duration’, or what Henri Bergson called the ‘irreversible succession of heterogeneous [mental] states melting into one another and flowing in indivisible process’ (quoted in Burwick and Douglass 1992: 4). In each case, heightened sensory experiences provide an intuition of the continuity of mental experience in a life that defies containment by language.

Stories about symbolic language as the basis of being able to distinguish 'Life' from the inert

In recent years, as noted in the last chapter, there has been a move toward conceiving autism characteristics as an accentuated form of a more general human mental characteristic, of the tendency to seek mechanistic explanations of the external world. As much as with the Theory-of-Mind-deficit perspective, this comes with a hypothesis as to the nature of human mental life in general, and to autism in particular, with a neurological model of subjectivity that focuses on supposedly basic 'brain and cognitive functions' (Crespi 2021: 1). As cognitivist theories proliferate, theorists compete to discover a single cognitive mechanism behind the heterogeneous manifestations of 'repetitive behaviors' and 'restrictive interests' (DSM-5). This has led Bernard Crespi and Simon Baron-Cohen and colleagues to describe autism as either 'increases and enhancements to pattern perception, pattern recognition, pattern maintenance, pattern generation, pattern processing, and pattern seeking' (x) or, as 'hyper-systemizing', as 'part of the cognitive style of people with autism spectrum conditions' and which consists of 'detecting "if p, then q" rules (or [input–operation–output] reasoning)' (2009a: 2020). For Crespi, pattern perception is related to systematizing insofar as it may manifest in a concern for cause-effect relationships. For theorists such as Crespi and Baron-Cohen, following attending to mechanical causation is distinct from recognizing self-produced causation and intentionality.

I focus on Crespi's work here because it does not involve the further claims about gendered brain typologies that Baron-Cohen and colleagues posit in relation to systematizing (2009b). For Crespi, the 'pattern sensitivity' among autistic people results in a 'non-pattern avoidance' that undermines social engagement, since 'social interaction and cognition exhibit low levels of predictable pattern because they result, in large part, from idiosyncrasies in the minds of others', even if social patterns are discernible in some cases (4). However, this claim doesn't necessarily follow from Crespi's claim that enhanced perceptual sensitivity among autistics results in enhanced 'visual-spatial pattern' detection but relies on the idea that autistics are mechanistically compelled to ignore anything that does not conform to a visuo-spatial pattern.

While what I argue in this chapter supports the idea that autistic people enjoy finding patterns and forms in a wide array of phenomena, this is not confined to visual and spatial phenomena, nor is it simply a way of controlling sensory input. It allows room for creativity in the detection of 'patterns of patterns', or rhythms, which serve as the basis of both continuity and differentiation. As Prahlad explains, these cycles are a way of relating to others:

> People don't know it, but they are forests and cities of sounds. Of colors and scents. And each forest and each city has its own patterns. When I live with people, I have to find all of the patterns. I have to know where everything fits. Where the endings of cycles are. Where in the cycles I am at any given moment.
>
> These patterns are my time, like your time is clocks, hours, and minutes. Seconds and years, and decades and months. My time is the patterns the patterns make.
>
> (187)

Prahlad discerns patterns among the activities of those he interacts with, among their scents and sounds, but this does not mean that he renders them as *inanimate*. He assigns an iconic meaning to patterns of movement, scent, and sound, even if what results are not the symbolic meanings of verbal language. This may be an equally valid way of arriving at a mental state that is parallel to another's: as I explore in the following chapter, it may even be a more accurate way of accessing this than symbolic language would allow.

Crespi believes that pattern seeking impedes appropriate socio-emotional behavior. He recommends training autistic people to detect the patterns in the social world (encouraging us to treat animate beings as inanimate beings defined by logical connections), and project animate traits to inanimate entitles (where 'things become the components of people'). His reasoning is that autistics regard people as mechanistic objects rather than as animate beings and that they can be trained to perceive actions as possessing symbolic meanings if intervention starts soon enough. And even if this is possibly true that autistic infants do not regard other people as agents (as it may be of all human children at some point in their lives), it seems unlikely that the kind of imitative practices advocated by Crespi could create lively and animating interpretative practices for those who experience the world through their senses. Crespi advocates behavioral interventions that are effectively treating autistic people as objects devoid of a mental life.

Prahlad's trope of the mask demonstrates the limitations of attempting to create a normative subjectivity by developing abstract knowledge about social conventions. When he becomes an academic, he develops metaphorical masks that serve as reminders of the unwritten rules of university life: learn the rules of 'the crowd'; 'always wear a mask'; 'don't talk about real things'; 'don't speak everyday talk'; 'don't touch anybody'; 'don't dance with my body'; 'don't hang out with rhythm in public'; 'be a single gender' (203). Masking becomes a way to avoid having his colleagues look at him like 'the way people passing by on the streets sometimes looked at me when I was homeless, or confused, or having a day when I couldn't hold it together' (208). He describes how others are treated this way, when colleagues would

> [T]urn tide on someone, and drown them, if they didn't fit in […] it was usually a woman, burned at the stake […] They would put gags over the person's mouth with their looks and silences.
>
> (207–208)

Prahlad had learned early in life that the way to survive intersecting ebbs and currents of power was to hide both those features of himself that would single him out for disapproval and features which show how other people's behavior hurt him; he had learned 'how to scream silently' (9). But in his later life, he needed to develop masks that could give him qualities that he did not perceive himself as having. These were based on his own synesthetic associations between textures and images, sounds and feelings. The metaphorical masks mediate his interactions with other people, facilitating the responses that others expect of him:

> There had always been a lot more 'different' looking people than me for other people to stare at … I could pass good, as far as how I looked, especially on a college campus. But professors are paid to stand out, and so they do. They wear different clothes. They look like they're carrying heavy weights and at any minute, they could topple over. They look like their bodies are there, but their minds are some other place.
>
> (201)

Prahlad developed a strategy to fit into a social role that made little sense to him other than in terms of financial stability. He had to 'only use intellectual words that mimic thought' (202). He had to hide his bodily responses to objects and his desire for touch and feeling, by creating a metaphorical mask made of copper. 'When I touch wood, there is a soft humming … . Copper is a friendly hand, reaching out of water' (49).

> At first, I tried wearing a paper mask, but too much got through it. All the things
>
> getting through were hurting. Then I tried wearing a silk mask, because it felt so soft against my skin. But that only lasted for a week, and I came home in tears. Then, I tried wearing wood, but it wouldn't bend around my head. Finally, I tried copper, and I knew that was it. The copper talked to me and reminded me of things. 'Remember', it would say, 'don't try talking about real things in an unreal place'. 'Don't be blinded by the silver light'. 'Don't fall asleep and get killed in the quiet jungle'.
>
> (201–202)

Insofar as masks facilitate the imitation of normative social roles, they seem to allow Prahlad to join in with other people's projects and plans, and a shared social context to interpret other people's intentions and behaviors. Masks provide a 'pattern' for behavior that mimics normative behavior but without allowing Prahlad to disclose his distinctiveness. However, insofar as the masks serve as a token of what other people value, they obstruct the habits and objects that he values and which would otherwise sustain him. Masking obscures his recognition of what would otherwise ensure his health, including the objects that helped him to evoke spirits or connect with his feminine self. This meant he 'would miss any flavour of sweetness, any sense of comfort or being refreshed' (182). He found that he had

> [A]bandoned all the things that fed me. My poetry couldn't get through all the costumes and masks. I had no space in my mind, or any peace, and so poems stayed as far from me as a butterfly from a hive of bees. (180)

While autistic people may find distinctive pleasure in finding and maintaining patterns – including, in Prahlad and Limburg's texts, 'the patterns of how language worked, and the patterns of thought that went along with the words' (207) – this does not mean that patterns are ways of accessing other people's inner states. Attending to patterns could also be a way of maintaining a monotropic flow state during times when we lack activities that maintain our interest (Oolong 2019). Icons (which can include rhythms) and indexes can provide structures that enable us to share feelings. Unlike symbolic language, they are rich in sensory properties that engage autistic sensibilities.

Conclusion: toward a new distribution of the sensible

Narratives that discuss synesthesia or sensory overwhelm exceed the normative social meanings of autism, either within an affirmative identarian or medical paradigm. Within the neurodiversity paradigm, autism is conceived as a valid form of subjectivity that is devalued because of ideological commitments to regard cognitive, behavioral, or sensory differences as inhibiting social connectedness. Stories about autism that draw on neurodiversity affirm the existence and intelligibility of an autistic 'self'. Yet, both neurodiversity and pathology paradigm readings of autistic narratives deny that atypical forms of subjectivity can be expressed through language; instead, neurodivergent subjectivity is evoked through collective rhetorical practices (Yergeau 2018). Conversely, within a pathological framework, generalized rhetorical differences are read as stylistic 'errors' indicative of deficits in subjectivity (Happé 1991).

But what if we don't regard our subjectivity as defined by our neurology alone? Can we intervene against the dominant interpretative practices and perceptual regimes so that our individual differences are understood as distinctive forms of subjectivity that are not simply co-extensive with our neurology but formed through relation to other selves? In the previous chapter, I have argued that life stories about autism can contribute to the emergence of counter-stories about autism as a way to be a person. Here, I am suggesting that our interpretations of other people's stories may be both constrained by and revealed through the aesthetic practices that are recognized in a culture. This is one component of a fictive kinship imaginary that foregrounds 'doing' – paying attention to patterns of response – over 'being' or relationships defined by normative social roles.

The philosopher Jacques Rancière suggests that both art and political acts can disrupt the conventional ordering of individuals into groups according to a predefined part or role within a community. This is because the very mechanism of policing that allocates subjects as 'parts' of the social body to their objects or spheres of activity is itself produced through a discourse that is at least founded on an ideal of equality. Both aesthetics and politics share the work of

> [R]econfiguring the distribution of the sensible which defines the common of a community, to introduce into it new subjects and objects, to render visible what had not been, and to make heard as speakers those who had been perceived as noisy animals.
>
> (2009: 25)

Within Rancière's theorizing, politics is dependent on culture insofar as it defines the limits of what can be regarded as discernible and sayable within a given community: politics is constrained by the way that art is able to create the impression of a shared world. However, within any 'partition of the sensible', or authorized methods of giving form to experiences, there will be experiences that cannot be expressed.

For Rancière, language itself offers the possibility of resisting the established methods of dividing the field of experience and deciding who should be regarded as having something to say. Laplantine, similarly, regards language as one of the vehicles through which we can access the sensible, as long as we realize that it cannot contain all thought (2020: 116). Rancière emphasizes the potential for modernist aesthetics – which he regards as a form of thinking – to create a rupture from within the biopolitical organization of life, and to articulate formerly inconceivable harms that do not originate from a recognized social location.

Patrick McDonagh questions why autism had not been identified earlier than the 20th century, in the 19th-century drive to categorize forms of idiocy and madness within institutional settings (2008: 102). He traces the origins of the concept in a historical 'autistic dynamic' in artistic expression, noting the emergence of autism in an aesthetic movement concerned with the 'extreme aloneness', 'alienation', and 'disintegration' of modern society, which served as a repository for our 'secret fears' (113). He observes that later, autism figures as a metaphor for a post-modern 'destabilized, fragmented, and hypermediated' self (114). While McDonagh wrote independently of Rancière, he echoes the idea that cultural changes serve as the basis for new ways of counting people. But it is also important to note that the changes McDonagh described did not translate to a re-imagined space for democratic participation. For Rancière, the prevailing characterization of autism would surely belong to what he calls in *Disagreement* the realm of the police, who enforce the preconceived ideas of democratic action rather than a principle of equality (1999).

It could be argued that social media and online activism have re-asserted the role of a technologically mediated realism, one that renders articulation democratically meaningful insofar as it originates in a recognized social identity category. This could be seen as a return to the idea of art as subservient to a world of recognizable social and political forms as Rancière believes was the case in 19th-century Realism (2004). Equally, however, we might argue that online platforms and life writing share a potential for enabling overlapping judgments and the sources of heterogeneous experiences of failing to conform to an idealized white, 'rational', able-bodied, middle-class, and male human type.

For those who are subject to 'arrogant perception' according to multiple aspects of their identity within a dominant culture, as Prahlad is when he is racialized and required to be a 'single gender' within mainstream American life, there is a compulsion to travel to cross-cultural and cross-racial 'worlds' in which they can recognize the different attributes we have in response to how others construct us (Lugones 1987). Prahlad situates his neurological difference in relation to surviving remnants of a colonial plantation culture and explores his gender identity in the 1970s white counter-culture. While mainstream culture requires constant seriousness and vigilance, he can find creativity and playfulness in relating to those like him who are willing to resist the norms to which they are subject in a dominant culture – people in ashrams or psych wards, for instance.

For Lugones, this search for 'animating constructions' of the other is the meaning of love. This is not the search for a single counter-narrative but a willingness to engage with how others find meaning in their lives despite oppression:

> Through travelling to other people's 'worlds' we discover that there are 'worlds' in which those who are the victims of arrogant perception

> are really subjects, lively beings, resistors, constructors of vision even though in the mainstream construction they are animated only by the arrogant perceiver and are pliable, foldable, file-awayable classifiable.
> (Lugones 1987: 18)

Since non-normative social identities are incomplete since they are defined in opposition to known and idealized subject positions (for Lugones, white, heterosexual Anglo women), world-traveling allows for acts of self-definition through travel to a 'visionary non-utopian construction of life' or in a 'traditional construction of life' that is under threat by dominant colonial or neoliberal culture (Lugones 10). Lugones considers the existence of the trickster or 'fool' character in many non-dominant cultures as a sign of the possibility of inhabiting a 'double edge' where we can knowingly animate the stereotypes other people attribute to us and in doing so reveal our agency to ourselves (13–14). Prahlad draws on the trickster character of Brer Rabbit in *The Secret Life of a Black Aspie* in precisely this way, recognizing that other people's assumption that he is 'stupid' can lead to freedom to subvert the rules in his favor (201).

It would be a mistake to suggest that there is any direct equivalence between colonized cultures and the newly emerging global autistic and neurodiversity cultures. Yet writers such as Prahlad and Stockman show the possibility of simultaneously resisting disablism and Anglo domination by drawing on both visionary non-utopian and a 'traditional construct of a life' within African diaspora and te reo Māori cultures respectively. While Prahlad draws mostly on oral culture and storytelling, Stockman considers that online media may facilitate a more globally dispersed experience of Takiwātanga. However, just as we might reconfigure our identity through imaginative reconstructions of our relationships in an actual world that is rife with different forms of domination according to race, class, gender, and disability, we can travel to online worlds where customs and technologies facilitate recognition of our ontological agency, or appearance in the world as a distinctive subject. As I discuss in the following chapter, Greta Thunberg uses online media to create a new network of kinship relations that sustain her actions in the actual world.

The online social environment of 'virtual ability island' or 'The Autistic Resource Center', both within *Second Life*, suggests how ableism, rather than disability, is a barrier to intimacy (Smith 2021), Now the oldest and largest virtual online platform, *Second Life*, facilitates connections between physically remote agents through avatars, user-created environments, and both text and voice communication, providing an environment where we may no longer be defined by conventional rules for social interaction that

Existential Conundrum's ''The Great' Greeter v 2.1'
'The Great' Greeter v 2.1

Hello STENNINGA!
Welcome to the SL Autistic Information Center!

Please make room for the group to keep updated on current events, group meetings, and to receive occasional self-care check-ins.

Figure 3.1 Visiting the Autistic Resource Center on Etopia Island, *Second Life*. © 2023 Linden Research

reinforce existing power imbalances. Within the zones designed by and for autistic people, non-autistic or otherwise non-disabled people may find themselves in a relatively disadvantaged position within an environment suited to the renegotiation of interactional rules on an ongoing basis. These custom-made 'autistic sims' can facilitate new modes of expression and activism. Users can modify the appearance of their avatars to reflect alternative forms of perception and aesthetic taste, such as through the creation of a non-anthropomorphic avatar. In a similar way, Limburg draws on the idea of the 'uncanny valley' as an imaginative location for her own unmasked subjectivity (2021: 19).

In addition to the fictive kinship relation of attending to the embodied habits of those who may be precluded from inclusion in a normative social world, we may animate aspects of our own subjectivity by imaginary world-traveling. For Lugones, such traveling involves playful co-construction of a new self in relation, without the urge to produce new rules for how others should behave:

> I pick up a stone and break it and run toward the pieces to see the colors. They are beautiful. I laugh and bring the pieces back to you and you are doing the same with your pieces. We keep on crashing stones for hours, anxious to see the beautiful new colors. We are playing. The playfulness of our activity does not presuppose that there is something like 'crashing stones' that is a particular form of play with its own rules. Rather the attitude that carries us through the activity, a playful attitude, turns the activity into play. Our activity has no rules, though it is certainly intentional activity and we both understand what we are doing. The

> playfulness that gives meaning to our activity includes uncertainty, but in this case the uncertainty is an openness to surprise.
>
> (Lugones 16)

The first part of this book has demonstrated the centrality of master narratives and counter-narratives to the creation of a space that may enable or constrain autistic forms of address in life narratives, and to conditions that render some autistic lives intelligible, even while those who are subject to multiple sources of oppression will find this a fragile, costly process. The costs are paid in the form of confidence and the sense that we have something to offer to a shared world.

In this chapter, I have begun to offer a supplementary approach that foregrounds habits based on 'loving perception', which are not based on norms but on attending to the 'temporal habits' of different kinds of bodies or imagining new self-constructions that creatively disrupt the identities we are assigned within a dominating culture (hooks 2003). While other theorists have argued for the necessity of cognitive empathy or 'intersubjectivity' as the basis of interpersonal connectivity: I have emphasized the ethical importance of a capacity for 'imagining what might go on in the minds of others when they are confronted with a specific situation' (Lucas 175). Rather than focusing on the one-way influence of cognition on culture, I will argue that autism research would benefit from recognizing how a culture can support manners of living that are more convivial.

Notes

1 I refer to facilitation as a 'processual interaction between bodies that aims toward an end that only can be reached – or that can be reached more immediately – through interactions between actors' (Wolf-Meyer 2020: 11). See Chapter 5 for a further discussion.

2 While at the time of writing, it is less likely to regard autism as defined by a singular neurological or psychological essence such as Mindblindness, and it is typically regarded as a cluster of neurobiological, genetic, and cognitive dispositions (see Chapman 2020). However, these are typically defined, akin to Hobson and Baron-Cohen's models, in relation to their role in producing deficits in intersubjective attunement.

3 With thanks to David Perkins for drawing my attention to this idea.

4 Within a Spinozan/Deleuzian framework, natality could be seen as entailing a 'molecular flows' of affects, which 'produce a *singular* outcome or capacity in just one body or other relation' (Fox and Alldred 2022: 629). The birth of a singular human being constitutes a new beginning and an opportunity for other bodies to resist constraining or aggregating affects. In contrast, norms encoded in master narratives or counter-narratives produce molar flows of affects, which 'smooth out differences and divergences to artificially squeeze disparate bodies into categories such as classes' (627).

5 See, for instance, Limburg 2017; Prahlad 2017: 156.

Chapter 4

Competence, communication, and connection in the Anthropocene

Introduction: facilitating connections within the Anthropocene

> Watching birds regrounded my thoughts, and by extension my emerging self, by re-creating the semiotic environment in which symbolic reference is itself nested.
>
> (Eduardo Kohn 2013 57)

> I see a fault in the idea, put forward by neurotypical 'experts', that autistic people have mind blindness, which essentially suggests that we are unable to understand the inner workings of other people. I believe we all have mind blindness; why else would we invent language? The problem is that communication skills are developed atypically in autistic people, and, most often, very slowly.
>
> (Hannah Gadsby 2022: 274)

In the preceding chapters, I have argued for the importance of displacing confidence-depleting master narratives about autistic lives through collaborative practices of meaning-making which register the narrative agency and distinctiveness of autistic individuals. I've argued that we need to attend to the first-person perspective to make sense of atypical modes of responding to the world – including autistic counter-narratives and expressions of a kinship of sensibility. This focus allows us to consider what, if any, support may be helpful to autistic individuals to support their sense of connection, competence, and (relational) autonomy. We might consider how to recognize autonomy in autistic kinship contexts, and what connections might be afforded by an autistic sensibility. To do this, we also need to attend to communicative practices that allow us to recognize subjectivities that cannot be contained by our dominant symbolic structures, or monolithic concepts of space and time as progress.

Within disability studies, there is an emerging sense of the need to develop a 'crip linguistics' based on a 'more flexible understanding of

DOI: 10.4324/9781003036807-7

what language is and what it communicates about a bodymind's capacity' (2021: 1).[1] If we are willing to explore the communities that disabled people build in the real world, rather than focusing on institutional structures developed by an ableist society, we learn how we might embrace disabled ways of being in language through 'sensory orientations, interdependence, mutual-aid and world-building, carework, and the ways that time interacts with the bodymind and language' (Henner and Robinson 2021: 2).

In addition to this project of understanding how conventional communicative practices 'dehumanize' specific language users, anthropologists have recently sought to understand 'disability (and ability) as produced in and through interactions of people, contexts, and institutions and the power relations they crystallize' (Wolf-Meyer and Friedner 2022). This requires new ethnographic methodologies that explore how communicative capacities are enabled or constrained by institutional arrangements, as Elizabeth Fein explores in her study of autistic youth communities in the United States (2020). Insofar as disability provides a 'rupture' in ethnographic practice that questions the existence of 'intrinsic' and 'natural' human capacities,[2] it becomes harder to maintain a division between the capacities of human bodies and those of other species (Wolf-Meyer and Friedner 2022).

So, while disability theory has typically sought to bring disabled people's communicative practices into the realm of specifically human, we might also seek to resituate normative human practices within a broader more-than-human field to show their parochiality. Key to this process is an understanding of how the concept of the 'normal human' varies according to cultural contexts and can, therefore, only ever apply to a limited range of individual humans. Moving our focus from specific forms of dehumanization within the West to the processes through which vulnerable forms of life with their own norms of personhood come to endure, we may come to regard disabled people within the Global North as those who have come to 'adapt to loss and limitation and celebrate vulnerability and interdependence' (Taylor 2018). This parallels Elizabeth Povinelli's analysis of the sociocultural practices that enabled her Indigenous Australian coresearchers to endure within existing economic, political, and social orders (Povinelli 2014). As I explore below, *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism* shows how the norms of personhood deployed through neoliberal social practices at a global scale offer social inclusion at the expense of allowing individuals to orient themselves to non-human perspectives. Povinelli argues that while the inseparability of human and non-human agencies has long been visible to the indigenous inhabitants of Belyuen in northern Australia, theorists in the Global North have only begun to confront the inseparability of life and the inert in response to global and catastrophic climate change and, in so doing, have relied on conceptual frameworks that undermine the possibility of collective democratic action (2016 118-143). In her exploration of how her Belyuen collaborators resist conceptual incorporation into governance practices aimed at resource extraction, Povinelli shares how their ways of making sense alongside non-human existents make new possibilities come into view. In this chapter, I show how autistic cultural practices offer another vista on the possibilities for resistance against contemporary mechanisms of power and governance, through social worlds that are supported by new communication technologies.

The following consideration of distinctively autistic forms of connectedness aims to explore those social arrangements that may support the endurance of atypical subjectivities, within the gaps of a neoliberal politics of recognition. I will argue here that master narratives about autism fall within the realm of 'geontolopolitics', or the settler-colonial governance of the division between life and non-life (Povinelli 2016) as well as biopolitical control of specific human populations. Defined by Elizabeth Povinelli as tactics used to justify extractive capitalism, geontopolitics dramatizes the distinction between 'the lively and the inert' (5) so that neoliberal practices may accelerate even while social policy appears to respect within-population diversity. Povinelli highlights how one contemporary image of the autistic as a naïve animist echoes Eurocentric depictions of animist and totemic indigenous cultures. This understanding informs my understanding of an emerging master narrative that situates autistic people as temporally displaced and geographically distant remnants of a 'pre-modern', and implicitly inferior, sensibility.

Before turning to Povinelli's comment on autism, it is worth explaining a little about the theoretical context with which it engages, which is the relationship between life, subjectification, resistance, and political governance. Central figures here include Arendt, Agamben, and Foucault who draw on Aristotle's use of the terms 'bios', typically used to refer to the life of language and politics, and 'zoe' as referring to the life of all biological beings, to argue for their respective interpretations of changes to governance structures in Western Europe during Modernity. For Foucault, Modernity saw the transformation of political governance from a sovereign power to kill to biopower as the logic of ordering populations so as to ensure their survival, which manifested in tactics to 'foster life or disallow it to the point of death' (Foucault 1976: 36).

For Giorgio Agamben, this was achieved through a logic of difference that sought to distinguish what belonged to the political body, in accordance with its 'bios' and distinctive form of good, from the 'zoe', or mere life, upon which it is based but which constantly threatens to undermine it (Agamben 1998). Povinelli, however, regards neither the concepts of bios nor zoe as sufficient to explain the practices of late liberal governance, which are premised on a distinction between the autonomy of 'Life' and its opposition to non-life, even as this becomes increasingly hard to maintain as the Anthropocene came into collective view (2016: 14). Povinelli considers that the concept of biopower is insufficient to account for the operations of neoliberalism, as it enters a phase in which late liberal governance determines not only who will live and die, by rendering some forms of life as bare life (Mbembe 2019) but also who will have been regarded as being fully 'alive' in the first place.

If autistic self-advocacy proposes that autism is a feature of personhood that both constrains and affords opportunities for action across individuals, it is rendered within geontological discourse as a fixed and mechanistic aspect of collective neurology and therefore excluded from social practices that disclose the autonomy of life. In contrast, autistic narrators refer to a broader ecological context for their lives, which invoke what Charles Taylor described as a 'porous self', where subjectivity experienced as permeable to forces, objects, and spirits beyond it (2007: 33; see Fein 2020). Autistic social practices may be regarded as 'a way of maintaining and enhancing a manner and mode of existing' (Povinelli 2016: 25).

The politics of life in the Anthropocene

Geontologies follows Povinelli's earlier work with members of the Belyuen Community, in the far north of Australia, where she analyzed the dehumanizing settler-colonial policies around land rights. In this work, she identifies the problematic depiction of her Belyuen friends as 'genealogical subjects', or 'subjects of descent who are socially determined and constrained by their traditional obligations to the past and to each other' (Wright 2017: np). This construction meant her Aboriginal Belyuen colleagues were subject to dehumanizing limitations upon their social practices in order to secure land rights as 'subjects of descent', or to deculturalize in order to extract capital from ancestral lands. While Povinelli is focused on the particularity and incommensurability of those who live otherwise and who disrupt the social practices through which knowledges become obsolete, I focus on how the 'carbon imaginary' influences our depictions of autism *within* neoliberal centers of power and can be resisted by new kinship formations. Povinelli identifies the Carbon Imaginary in strategies, affects, and discourses that oppose life to non-life, rather than attending to existents that emerge in the entanglement of non-life and life, or 'the pulsing scarred region between Life and nonlife' in Late Liberalism (38).

Povinelli considers that white settlers are represented as 'autological' subjects insofar as they 'abide by the fundamental separation of Life and nonlife' and are thus the 'stakeholders' and 'sovereign people of geontopower' (2016, 35). Within the logic of late liberal geontopower, the autological subject is concerned with a future that is open, whereas the genealogical subject is constrained by conventional social norms to operate according to a predetermined structure, and therefore threatening to 'drag us back into the past', as repetitive machines rather than lively life (172). For Povinelli, the autological subject is an imaginary projection based on the ideology of sovereign selves whose authority lies in command of an instrumental reason, this suppresses the possibility of a politics of interdependence. Povinelli does not discuss autism in detail, so I will draw here instead on Elizabeth Fein's ethnographic study of autistic youth communities in the United States, to suggest how institutional arrangements produce a version of autism as 'static neurology' that is opposed to the development of Life and subjectivity even while broader social structures affirm a role for autistic difference.

From the perspective of geontopolitics, late liberalism can therefore be seen to be engaged in rhetorical practices that bind capital accumulation to a form of social recognition according to a temporal logic. In idealizing the 'autological' subject as the desired object of social recognition, it presents a logic in 'which Life is fabricated and Nonlife is used' (174). Within this logic, only 'Life' is capable of a real existence. The genealogical subject is therefore its 'Other', a 'social tense', of the 'backward, into the prehistory of the human, of life, into the inert and as the inert' (173). As I explain below, both positive and negative evaluations of autistic environmental orientation deploy this 'genealogical' trope. While anyone who opposes unconstrained resource extraction could, under neoliberalism, be accused of a lack of concern for national progress, prominent discourses surrounding autistic environmental orientation have a specific inflection. Even when it is celebrated within a vitalist perspective, autistic 'animism' is represented as the inability to distinguish life from non-life, to see everything as alive in the same way, and therefore being unable to 'control language and experience through self-reflexive reason' (Povinelli 27).[3] This hides the complexity of cosmologies typically subsumed under the label 'animism' and 'totemism' and undermines the social critique that comes from those who propose similarities between human and non-human agencies without suggesting that they are equivalent. In reality, narrative accounts of autistic interactions with non-human nature suggest an ongoing need to navigate what exists and what is in danger of extinction.

In *Geontologies*, Povinelli argues that the logic of the autological subject is threatened by images of climate emergency and the reality of life becoming not merely death but non-Life (Povinelli's images of the zombie or the virus). In response, however, late Liberalism deploy tactics of capital accumulation that seems to support social inclusion, even if this inclusion is now tied to the 'extension of qualities we already most value and create most of our value from to the other' (178). For Povinelli, this leads us to dwell in an imagined future in which we have overcome material limits, rather than needing to confront the reality of the threats from existing forms of life to those at the margins of global power. For instance, the figure of the animist becomes ‘all those who see an equivalence between all forms of life or who can see life where others would see the lack of life’ (18). – Povinelli suggests that accounts of autism by Temple Grandin in particular, ‘fall within the animist’. And while this tendency can be exploited by capitalism as it ‘views all modes of existence as if they were vital’ while simultaneously maintaining the legal personhood of corporations which ensures ‘that not all modes of existence are the same from the point of view of extraction of value’ (20).

The value of non-life – which consists in its ‘use’ value – can be extended to the terms of recognition for ‘Others’ who are unable to ‘differentiate the kinds of things that have agency, subjectivity, and intentionality of the sort that emerges with life’ (5). For Povinelli, Temple Grandin

> is an exemplary figure here, not merely for her orientation to nonhuman life (cows), but also for her defense of those alternative cognitions that allow for an orientation to Nonlife forms of existence.
>
> (17–18)

Late Liberalism’s image of the animist does not draw attention to vulnerable ‘practices of existence’ at the margins of neoliberal politics, nor does it seek to understand how neoliberal governance interacts with meteorological or geological forces in specific locations. This image of the animist is caught up in the ‘carbon imaginary’, imposing ‘life’ on the Being of ‘non-life’, so that we observe a univocal vitality (intentionality or agency) in non-life, rather than the distinctive ways in which non-life interacts with other entities. This framework suppresses the dynamic circumstances through which people make kin with and alongside non-human beings and entities in precarious environments, which are not based on an equivalence between life and non-life but on understanding the tendencies of distinctive entities as they appear at different scales.

The Belyuen Dreaming focuses on meteorological and geological modes of existence – including fog, wind, and mineral deposits – with tendencies and behaviors that change in almost imperceptible ways and which hint at harms that cannot be defined by linear temporal logics (134). Povinelli argues that how we interpret the behaviors of non-living existents has consequences for what comes into existence or ceases to exist, including within our own lives. For those who exist at the margins of power, health is not about conforming to a statistical average but about being able to continue modes of existence. This includes the ability to withstand entropy which is itself dependent ‘on the collaboration, cooperation, or interactive interference of many bodies and forces’ (100).

As well as depicting autistics – through their ‘restrictive and repetitive behaviors’ – as prototypical animists, we come to regard autistic people as defined by ‘autistic brains’ that are ‘understood to be fixed, closed systems, impervious to interpersonal influences’ (Weiner 2021) and defined by use rather than intrinsic value. Autistics seem to represent some latent virus-like entity unearthed from its rightful location in our collective evolutionary past. I argue that this influences recent accounts of autistic relations with non-human nature, interpreted as unreflective proclivity or some abstract memory of deep ecological time (see, for example, Reading 2022).

Povinelli’s work on the limitations of a politics of recognition in settler colonies also suggests a role for art in the practices of endurance within other vernacular and indigenous cultures. Working with the Karrabing Film Collective, Povinelli has explored how film can mediate relations between a body of people and a particular place (even if they are no longer seen to ‘belong’ to that place). The medium of audio-visual film creates a space for social practices and languages that is not defined by an authorized social group identity or geographical location. The Collective uses special effects to unsettle the logic that would define social practice as fixed to a bounded temporal and geographic location. Re-appropriating the ‘viral’ figure of the carbon imaginary, the Karrabing Film Collective resists the division between life and non-life, and between sovereign territory defined by autological subjects ‘for the sole purpose of diverting the energies of arrangements of existence in order to extend itself’ (Povinelli 19).

As I explore further below, within autistic community settings, representations of autistic subjectivity unsettle the notion of an individual who is bounded by the brain and evoke the interpenetration of subjectivity with technologies, environmental and social affordances that transcend authorized clinical locations and national borders. Fragments of images and sounds (including those captured in words) can be used to invoke the changes in subjectivity that occur as we interact with other entities. In ‘going viral’ through technological mediation, and at a time that is marked by concerns for the biosecurity of populations (rather than species), autistic subjects are subject to the same ‘intense abjection and attacks’ as those others who, in late liberalism, are forced to live in precarity (Povinelli 19).

Sociality as mutual recognition

In drawing out life narratives that center on experiences of non-human biology, *meteoros* or *geos*, I suggest that autistic narrators either deploy symbolic understandings of nature that may be the basis of a perceived ‘autological’ subjectivity and the authority to distinguish Life from non-life, or draw out the co-construction of life and non-life to resist the logic that would seem to render current social practices as inevitable. However, I argue that what may be perceived as autistic impairments in social communication are in fact a relative dis-affinity with symbolic language and an affinity with indexical and iconic communication which is the basis of distinctive social habits. When such individuals interact with institutions based on the idea that human value consists of the pursuit of symbolic status and material prosperity, they are unlikely to achieve subjective satisfaction and meaningful engagement with others.

In relation to autism, master narratives construct autistic social connections as valuable insofar as they eliminate autistic ‘problem behaviors’ (beyond those that are intrinsically counter-productive, such as self-harm and aggression). Behavioral interventions aim at the reduction of self-stimulatory behaviors (stims) and special interests (SpIns), increased eye contact, reduced echolalia, and increased verbal communication, all of which are deemed as obstructing social interaction. Such behaviors are interpreted as demonstrating an absence of motivation to gain social rewards as typically developing children do (Chevallier et al.2012: 231). Within behaviorist models, autistic social motivation can be induced by an environment that reinforces or deters behavior, through methods of incentivization and punishment – otherwise known as Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA).

Autistic self-advocates, such as Ari Ne’eman, Steven Kapp, and Julia Bascom, have criticized ABA both on the basis that the punishments used are intrinsically harmful and because atypical behaviors might be ‘personally meaningful, useful, or simply not harmful’ and simply require additional ‘interpretative effort’ (Ne’eman 2021: 570). Furthermore, according to one of Ne’eman’s interview participants, passing as non-autistic, the goal of such interventions, itself produces harm, since it requires the internalization of external goals, which thwarts internal motivation (ibid). Camouflaging has been associated with poorer mental health and suicidality (Cassidy et al. 2018) and with feeling that one doesn’t belong. These experiences are typically attributed to deficits in the autistic subject’s capacity to relate to others. As the journalist Sarah Kurchak explains in *How I Overcame My Autism and All I Got Was This Lousy Anxiety Disorder*,

> I believe the way that we currently talk about social issues in the autistic population is grossly oversimplified. Yes, we struggle with them [...] There are always other factors involved, from the behavior and taste of the people around us to the conventions of the culture in which we’re interacting. If our solutions only address one aspect of this complex situation, we’re really not doing anything to make autistic lives safer or more fulfilling. Learning and regurgitating someone else’s often arbitrary rules of engagement doesn’t guarantee that those people will grant

> you base level tolerance in return. Nor does it guarantee that you'll find anything of value in the connections that you do make this way.
>
> (Kurchak 2020: 78)

From Ryan and Deci's organismic perspective, which contrasts behaviorism's exclusive focus on a conditioning environment, 'living entities … under supportive conditions … progress toward increased differentiation and integration' (5). Cognitivist and post-modern accounts of human selfhood and self-organization regard subjectivity as a manifestation of symbolic coherence, while ecological perspectives suggest that human thought and subjectivity are part of an open system that is constituted only partly by specifically human histories. In both Wolf-Meyer's cybernetic model of subjectivity and Eduardo Kohn's anthropology-beyond-the-human, human selves are shaped by the media (such as spoken language, bodily gestures, and facilitating technologies) through which they interact. If a medium is supported by a framing that is recognizable to both interlocutors, it can be the basis of communication that signals the acceptance or rejection of an institution's norms (Wolf-Meyer 192). For Eduardo Kohn, subjects or selves are formed through mutual interpretation. The interpretation of a 'sign' by another individual or through another thought becomes a future self: thoughts take place in 'minds-in-the-world' (37).

Through these apparently incongruous theories from anthropology, social psychology, and semiotics I propose that autistic connectedness, like any human connection, depends on the social partner's willingness to engage in appropriate communication modalities. The question of dependence becomes not only an issue of what supports one's bodily continuity but also the existence of structures that support relatedness through non-normative communication.

The philosopher Ian Hacking has argued that autism is a way of being a person that is produced through the language that comes about through social interaction (Hacking 2009a and 2009b). He argued that the interactional difficulties between autistics and non-autistics lead to a specific understanding of autism from the outside, relating to how autistics appear to a non-autistic majority, specifically in medical and institutional discourses.[4] This has changed to include the discourses that emerge in autistic self-advocacy and popular culture, in both helpful and unhelpful ways for autistic people themselves (Hacking 2009b). Yet, even with the growth of autistic-authored life narratives, those that have attracted most attention have focused on individuals who possess what can be framed as Savant-like talents, whereas Savant Syndrome and Autism seldom coincide (511).

My argument in this chapter is that the development of shared language between autistics and non-autistics for describing the subjective experiences of autistics is not enough. Since Western culture privileges specific forms of verbal communication this remains both a barrier to those who rely on different forms of mediation and a reaffirmation of neoliberal concepts of value as located in certain human individuals (Wolf-Meyer 19). Autobiography is itself one mediated form, as Hacking recognized, for developing a language of autistic subjectivity (2009a). Here and in the previous chapter, I have argued that narratives do more than present ideas that can become the basis for shared thought: they provide individuals with narrative agency and the opportunity to define a life that cannot be contained within existing social categories. Further, narratives can also urge for changes to interactional habits and present new aesthetic forms that may serve as the basis of new social practices.

I propose that autistic preferences for the sensory properties of language – and relative disinclination to deal in symbols except insofar as they may be necessary – may open different kinds of social connections within specific cultural and environmental circumstances. In what follows, I argue that relative difficulties that some autistic people (and not only autistic people) experience in producing symbolic language may be understood as being neither contrary to thought or communication nor incompatible with symbolic thought as we live within a broader ecology of selves. Furthermore, what may be perceived as a failure to understand social conventions could in fact be a rejection of norms that are experienced as oppressive.

In *Living on the Spectrum*, Elizabeth Fein observes in relation to her clinical-ethnographic study of autism in the United States that, despite the promise of a 'neurodevelopmental turn' to recognize the complexity of individuals through their different dispositions to learning, socializing, and perceiving the world, the diagnostic framework reconstitutes an older 'pathogen' model of such conditions as material features of individuals. The problem with this, for Fein, is that even as the neurodevelopmental 'whole package' model offers a way for diagnosed individuals to make sense of their atypical personhood, the pathogen model – with its focus on eliminating autism or autistic traits within the individual body – still dominates clinical spaces (187). This means that interventions that may otherwise help autistic people to deal with the consequences of social ostracism can only approach it indirectly, in artificial and highly generalized scenarios that do not approximate the real-world conditions of social life or lead to reliable connections (245). Further, this hides the wider nervous system in which autistic difficulties, confusions, and potentials are produced:

> Aspects of experience that transcend the bounds of the physical body – the connections between our selves and our social partners, between our senses and the things being sensed, between our attention and the material to which we attend, and so forth – are thus occluded, rendered invisible. This individualizing process of expansion and constriction

> perpetuates a severing of the self from its surroundings. What lies outside our skin is construed as irrelevant, or even antithetical, to who we are.
>
> (Fein 2020: 5)

Fein notes that the idea that autistic individuals are defined by fixed individual qualities – akin to what I term the symbolic model of subjectivity in the Introduction – is manifest both in those strands of neurodiversity discourse – where autism is regarded as a static but polyvalent feature of personhood – and in the rhetoric surrounding a cure for autism. On the other hand, Fein notes how both autistic-led and mixed social groups co-produce spaces and resources to intervene against situational differences that autistic people experience and which are the sources of isolation and loneliness:

> Through attending to their shared social practices, organized around the care and maintenance of locally interconnected systems, we can gain some insight into how to mitigate the loneliness and isolation that too often accompanies autistic difference, by intervening at the troubled intersection between the individual and their social surroundings.
>
> (5)

Fein notes that, despite the pathogen model's invocation of a disorder located in the material of the individual's body, the difficulties and possibilities of autistic lives are located elsewhere:

> [O]ther people (social interlocutors, potential relational partners, co-participants in social failure), and other things (interests, routines, activities, objects, stimuli), are always a constitutive component of autism.
>
> (6)

Fein draws from her experience of shared autistic social worlds to consider how we might understand autism as a feature of permeable and shared worlds, through specific cultural and aesthetic practices. While noting that an autism diagnosis 'brings together people who share a particular interpretive style which often includes an intense interest in structured systems, such as those that produce social scientific classifications' (9), the communities she engaged with also developed cultural niches of storytelling, symbolism, and activities that served to connect the groups' shared sense of the ways autism resists being broken into discrete parts but permeates their whole worlds:

> They experience and interpret their existence through a phenomenological interface characterized by intensely fluctuating sensation, radical

> discontinuity, and a symbiotic relationship with extrasomatic materials that blurs the distinctions between physical and cultural. They are always already changed and changing – mutable, permeable beings, scaffolded with pins and routines, bound up in bedsheets. They are, as Trevor says, always mixing it up.
>
> (230–231).

Fein describes how the young autistic adults she talks with create their own cultural and imaginative resources to navigate 'their relationship with their condition, with themselves, and with each other' (231). Students had found inspiration in comic books and graphic novels of antihero 'archetypes designed to be inhabited, reinvented, recombined, transformed' (231). These character-types – with their indissociable difficulties and strengths – provided the structure of expressing accessible forms of social and moral agency which could be 'cultivated through deliberate practice over time' (239). Fein considers that the stories she encounters in autistic 'affinity spaces' – about bowling groups and role-playing games – are not only about sharing individual experiences but also ways to create a collective moral identity and purpose. For Fein, the realities of life for autistic youth required not rules about undesirable behaviors but rather story structures that could encompass elements of individual personality, which could be either destructive or creative, depending on the context and configuration of agents and facilitations.

Stories about the limits of symbolic thought

In *How Forests Think: Towards and Anthropology Beyond the Human* (2013), the Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Kohn has engaged in a widespread analysis of the ontological continuities and discontinuities of the human and non-human. Inspired by Charles Sanders Peirce's Monism, he focuses on the differences between human-specific language and representation:

> The alignment between humans, culture, the mind, and representation, on the one hand, and nonhumans, nature, bodies, and matter, on the other, remains stable even in posthuman approaches that seek to dissolve the boundaries that have been erected to construe humans as separate from the rest of the world. This is true of Deleuzian approaches, as exemplified, for example, by Jane Bennett [2009], that deny the analytical purchase of representation and telos altogether – since these are seen, at best, as exclusively human mental affairs.
>
> (2013: 40)

For Kohn, the idea that representation as exclusively a property of 'mind or spirit' endures as a form of dualism in work that otherwise seeks an analytic to encompass ‘nature’ and ‘culture’. What is accomplished, for Kohn, is instead a ‘mixture’ of ‘little homunculi at all levels’ (41). In approaching the study of humans, for instance, where we take as a given that the identifying properties as culture, language, and society, we create a version of humanness that excludes what we share with the non-human world. We tend to think of ourselves in terms of those representational forms that mark us apart from other living beings, rather than in terms of semiotic modalities that we share with other species.

> [T]he analytical object becomes isomorphic with the analytics. As a result we are not able to see the myriad ways in which people are connected to a broader world of life, or how this fundamental connection changes what it might mean to be human.
>
> (6)

It is also this distinction (between exclusively human forms of representation and those that we may share with other species) which seems to characterize depictions of autistic communication as ‘impaired social communication’.

In his ethnographic work with Runa inhabitants of Ávila in Amazonian Ecuador, and with particular attention to their interactions with predator and prey animals, Kohn explains how the Ávila Runa have sought to understand how other creatures think about them, both to allow them to eat and to avoid being eaten. Runa Shimi, the version of lowland Quechua spoken in Ávila, is a language that is abundant in acoustic icons, which allow for the development of new indexical and symbolic relations. All communication shares the property of gesturing toward something that is not immediately present. Kohn considers how words can be sometimes used as icons, and they provide ‘an image that is a likeness of that object’, even if it is not the likeness that is perceived but an absence of difference (52). For instance, we might use a human word to signal a bird call that is isomorphic with it but not present, or an insect may resemble a twig, and in so doing, bring forth the image of something that is not to be eaten.

Out of these perceived likenesses (which are often a result of not noticing differences), something else may be perceived, which emerges from an association between icons (52). This is an index, and examples include a sound that reverberates around the forest and which brings to mind (human or otherwise) images of danger from our previous encounters with that sound (31). All of these are forms of unconscious thought that are emergent on perceived regularities in the environment. Finally, symbols ‘are built from a complex layered interaction among indices’, meaning that, as words, they provide the context in which further words should be understood (53). As I explain in the following section, they allow for sharing abstract forms of thought that have been advantageous in the emergence of a specific kind of human relationship.

This offers a way to think of agency and habits more closely aligned to what I wish to say about autistic ways of representing the world, locating human moral practice as a distinctive form of behavior emergent from – but not equivalent to – a broader ecological context rather than individual biology. Objects or words used as symbols may be useful in that they allow us to reflect on meanings that are not discernible in our immediate environment and help us to coordinate toward collective goals. Yet there are alternative collaborative practices that do not rely on the historically enacted symbolic relations but on mutually agreed and mutually beneficial rules for participation.

If we posit a specifically human capacity for symbolic thought, this is not the same as claiming that there is a shared social symbolic world that exists independently of enculturation (see Introduction). For instance, there are different ways in which a being, object, or group can be figured as persons (Wolf-Meyer 34). These other ways of conceiving persons may recognize interdependent, nested, or 'dividual' selves, and all of these models reject the idea that one should aim toward a static, independent existence (see, for instance, Bollier and Helfrich 2019). In Fein's study of autistic youth affinity spaces we can find a way to think about how those who experience themselves as porous or interdependent can benefit from trusted relationships with peers (248).

In all of these theoretical domains, human thriving is not 'turning oneself' inward after having one's social needs satisfied, but 'becoming-with and un-becoming with' multiple others (Haraway 2008): at times, this means we should abandon symbolic thought. Symbolic thought may be detrimental when it comes to *feeling for* another since it pulls us away from attending to others as individuals. For instance, as the anthropologist Terrence Deacon suggests, our pets may be better at reading emotions than we are (1997: 336). Symbolic representation may encourage us to see others as abstract symbolic objects rather than centers of activity. Against the logic of symbolic subjectivity, we might come to see that all forms of relation are semiotic but not necessarily symbolic – even if most humans tend to think otherwise (Kohn: 84).

Developing the extended semiotic repertoire

There is some evidence to suggest that autistic children are more likely to internalize highly iconic images as signs than those that rely on linguistic prompts (Wainwright, Allen, and Cain 2020). While the authors regard this as evidence of Theory of Mind difficulties, it could also be explained as the children's predisposition to regard what is immediately present as more relevant to communication than other, more remote meanings.

The psychologist Laura Sterponi has pursued more in-depth explorations of atypical communication in autistic children and provides a plausible account of how the sonic patterns of specific words come to be a part of how we enter the perspective of another. For instance, the sounds of the word ‘shoe’ can be part of what we experience when we encounter the object denoted by the term (2019). This perceptual attunement to sound and imagined vocalization as ‘tone, rhythm, prosody, the sound texture of words and phrases’ could explain how echolalia serves interactional purposes for autistic children and their caregivers. Here,

> [R]epetition is an act of revoicing that can support identification with the other, an experience of embodied, sensuous perspective taking. When we consider the experiential dimension of language, revoicing as linguistic resource makes possible an experience with the other, rather than solely an experience of the other.
>
> (np)

Terrence Deacon speculates that autism may be an example of ‘symbol acquisition difficulties’, shared with other neurological conditions. He argues that this is supported by the relative strengths (although he calls them, disparagingly, ‘islands of abilities’) among some autistic people in mathematical, artistic, or musical ability which, he argues, do not require symbol manipulation, but instead depend on ‘spatial cognition’ (415). The converse is a neurotypical tendency toward being ‘savants of language and symbols’ which means ‘dividing [the world] up according to opposed features and organizing our lives according to themes and narratives’ (416). Autistics and non-autistics alike tend to ‘apply our one preferred cognitive style to everything’ (416), even if, for Deacon, this process is somehow *more involuntary* for autistics.

Drawing on Deacon’s model of the social origins of language,[5] Kohn argues that symbolic thought works by signaling a habit, but it is not a habit that lives in any individual’s mind but an element of collective human thought that transcends any single language user. Being exclusively human habits, they draw us away from the patterns of the material world and other beings, and towards those aspects of ourselves that are like them. For Kohn, there is a particular joy that comes from breaking our semiotic habits. He exemplifies this with an example from his own life, when he was traveling to Ávila by bus during a period of heavy rainfall. He and his fellow passengers were nearly hit by a landslide. However, it is not the landslide, but his subsequent thoughts that cause him the greatest anxiety:

> [W]e were trapped by a series of landslides scattered over a distance of several kilometers. The mountain above was starting to fall on us. At

> one point a rock crashed down onto our roof. I was scared. No one else, however, seemed to think we were in danger […] It was the tourists that baffled me. These middle-aged Spanish women had booked one of the tours that visit the rain forests and indigenous villages along the Napo River. As I worried, these women were joking and laughing.
>
> This discrepancy between my perception of the world and that of those around me sundered me from the world and those living in it. All I was left with were my own thoughts of future dangers spinning themselves out of control. And then something more disturbing happened. Because I sensed that my thoughts were out of joint with those around me, I soon began to doubt their connection to what I had always trusted to be there for me: my own living body […]
>
> (Kohn 2013: 46)

For Kohn, symbolic thought can produce a radical separation from our feeling for our bodies: 'symbolic thought run wild can make us experience "ourselves" as set apart from everything: our social contexts, the environments in which we live, and ultimately even our desires and dreams' […] He describes how it was only when he encounters a tropical bird the following day – and pays particular attention to its own interaction with its surroundings for the sake of survival – that he feels restored to his body:

> [S]ighting that tanager in the bush at the messy edge of town taught me something about how immersion in this particularly dense ecology amplifies and makes visible a larger semiotic field beyond that which is exceptionally human, one in which we are all—usually—emplaced. Seeing that tanager made me sane by allowing me to situate the feeling of radical separation within something broader. It resituated me in a larger world 'beyond' the human. My mind could return to being part of a larger mind. My thoughts about the world could once again become part of the thoughts of the world.
>
> (2013: 49)

Kohn considers that selves transcend bodies insofar as they are made through semiosis. Following Peirce's metaphysics, however, our bodies remain the indexical grounding of thought that is connected to a broader whole (49). This is because we recognize the body itself can function as an iconic sign in relation to other organisms: in the process of recognizing this, Kohn recognizes he is no longer alone.

Kohn draws extensively on Peirce's semiotics and attributes more importance than Deacon does to the relationships between different kinds of communication than to the hierarchical divisions between them according to whether they are automatic or conventionally acquired. Regarding all life as concerned with representation in the form of 'something standing to someone in some capacity to something else', Kohn argues that symbolic forms of thinking are emergent on indexical associations that are themselves dependent on non-human forms of representation. Living with the Runa, whose language is rich in iconic language that amplifies the 'sylvan thought' of the Amazon forest, Kohn recognizes that to live in close proximity to many non-human beings, there is a need to be able to communicate with them on their terms as they interpret their environments. However, it is a human habit to attribute moral significance to different levels of abstraction from an immediate context – to ignore the generative potential of thinking about how what are typically perceived as lower-order non-living forms (such as rubber-producing trees in the Amazon) constrain human possibilities. But to attend to non-human forms in this way may be seen as an unwillingness to change in a way that is regarded as appropriately modern.

Stories about the extended semiotic repertoire in autistic life writing

Kohn's example of his renewed sense of his body as a sign in relation to other signs is echoed by the autistic writer Dara McAnulty in *The Diary of a Young Naturalist* as he goes for a walk near his home in Northern Ireland.

> As we move away from the gaze of Slieve Muck, I can feel my feet treading more lightly and my heart rate start to slow – my anxiety about school flowing into the earth. Then I feel the sizzling anticipation that something is waiting for me, and as I glance down there's an orange fluttering, a gauzy light sprinkled over amber wings: small copper butterflies, about ten of them, communing. Some are ragged, others pristine. They flit and rest on each other, those with worn wings and those with still velvety and bright wings, journeys beginning and ending, all as one.
>
> (94)

McAnulty suggests that his feelings about school come about from this disconnection between what he perceives and what is apparent to those around him. Through redirecting his attention to the shared ground of experience, or a 'larger mind', he can interrupt a pattern of thought that has led him to think that he has no place in a shared world.

Do autistics struggle with symbolic thought? It seems possible, and if it were true, it would perhaps suggest why neurotypical society causes such anxiety for those whose habitual manners of relating to others are sensed, rather than structured according to pregiven concepts. Furthermore, the symbols, tokens, and words others use and expect us to return as a gesture of our connection to them are often impenetrable or lacking a value that we can reciprocate. Certainly, there is evidence in the life writing to suggest an autistic preference for objects with a more obvious ecological, rather than social and symbolic, value:

> It was a warm summer day like this one, and we've just left the library on Ormeau Road with some friends. I see a jackdaw feather on the ground, so I pick it up and give it to a girl standing next to me, 'my friend'. I had frequently confused her by my actions, and this day was no exception: she looks at the feather with disgust, then her mum grabs it and throws it away. 'Horrible', she says. 'Dirty'.
>
> I can still feel the heat rising inside me, like particle soup, exploding, crashing. I couldn't control the roar. I roared so loudly and for so long that my brother Lorcan started to cry. Mum, I know, could see the hurt and confusion in my eyes. But what could she do?
>
> (McAnulty 49)

Kohn talks about generals, such as kinds and classes, emerging 'from and through a form of relating based on confusion', or iconic associations between things (86). A jackdaw feather, for instance, may surprise us into recognizing something startling or new about the group of objects to which it conventionally belongs, things that may otherwise be confused with each other, by appearing in a situation we would not expect it to. Alternatively, a feather may be regarded, symbolically, as an object of little commercial value.

The artist and filmmaker Daina Krumins suggests there may be an autistic 'aesthetic' that she recognizes in her own filmmaking: it is one that is attuned to nature's propagation of form.

> NTs … don't like the images that are more like textures. There seems to be a female-AS [Asperger's Syndrome] aesthetic. Perhaps this is some sort of evolutionary mechanism for repetitive activities like sewing fishing nets, planting row upon row of seeds, collecting berries one after another after another; a desire and tendency to do such things might give some sort of survival advantage. Maybe there are two survival methods: collecting food for oneself (AS) vs depending on others, specifically men (social).
>
> (Miller 2003: 70)

While it seems problematic to assume that these are innate, gender-specific neurological differences in autism, it is plausible that an autistic aesthetic might be attuned to finding similarities among iconic tokens of a broader type or across multiple kinds. Perhaps it is even true that autistic and other sensory thinkers are particularly susceptible to registering similarity-despite difference, or similarity across difference. (When I asked autistic peers on Twitter what gave them joy, they shared with me pictures of marbles, origami cranes, and mosaics; I was also sent snapshots of waves and sandy beaches. In each case, the images show textural and visual patterns of great intricacy.) This associative sensibility seems to avoid being captured by conventional linguistic forms and requires, instead, a way to capture non-linguistic thought – its proliferation of images and ideas – in concrete time. While this may be described by an outside observer as behavior aimed at 'pattern maintenance' (see Chapter 3), I argue that attention to 'patterns of pattern making', or efforts to record processes of transformation, are often triggered by an ethical sense of the importance of the non-living components of the environment.

Autistic filmmaking as an encounter with texture

Daina Krumins has described how her film *Summer Light* (2001) originated 'from [her] texture-driven, non-neurotypical way of finding delight and meaning'. She explains, 'It's not verbal meaning', although 'it does in fact, have meaning' (Krumins n.d.). In what follows. I argue that the expression of a 'texture driven' although not generically 'autistic', way of engaging with the world may inform our understanding of her practical identity, as the understanding of herself she brings to her actions and choices.

Krumins communicates her own habits of responding to touch through her facilitation of an experience akin to interaction with textures in the real-world. As Lucy Fife Donaldson has explored through her work on the 'material qualities of cinema – its tactility and substance', through attending to its 'tangible properties' we can notice the 'ways in which cinema conjures a range of sensory experiences beyond sight and sound, the way film moves us and works to immerse us in its worlds' (2017: 74). This involves paying 'minute choices that shape the fabrication and feel of film' specifically the 'surface of objects and environment' (ibid). These are the sites of 'tangible exchanges' where vision can function as a substitute for 'a haptic contact whereby the eyes function like a hand brushing over an object' (75).

Krumins' 17½-minute film consists of live-action human figures and time-lapsed not-human figures within a bucolic and domestic landscape. While symbolically coded as a Victorian childhood, we are not sure exactly when or where the action is unfolding. The choice of natural lighting is key to the characterization and the plot since the 'textures created through lighting tells us something about how the film feels about the past, and how it is using this to address its audience' (Greenlagh 2003: 117). In the

Figure 4.1 *Summer Light* explores Daina Krumins' 'texture-driven, non-neurotypical way of finding delight and meaning', copyright Krumins 2001

third scene, a baby tries to raise itself to crawl and sits on a blanket that floats on water that is appearing to turn to grass. A woman in a Victorian-style dress walks diagonally across a field that is rippling like water.

Because the film denies us a way to take our bearings in relation to the depicted scenes, we are encouraged to reject our conventional, indexical responses that would assume an unattended baby is at risk of danger. We are instead required to use our own bodies as a point of reference. The textures we discern may include weight, motion, and muscle sense: do we experience a feeling of being pulled by the currents that draw the wispy seeds toward us? What do our muscles tell us about the baby's chances of moving themself off the rug?

In a subsequent scene, we see two infants seated in a forest clearing; the baby from the first scene has been joined by another, slightly older child. Here, the older infant pulls out a leaf from a pile beside her which appears to catch fire, as she holds it out for the other child to see. Both children watch the flame dance and then expire, before they take turns to pick out more leaves. As the film continues, Krumins continues to explore the movement of light across entities that cannot always be separated into living or non-living entities.

Krumins makes use of indexical and iconic associations between textures and ostensibly creates a film without narrative in the form of linear structure. In an interview with *The New York Times* in 1992, Krumins explained that the kinds of plots that were typically conceived as stories are ultimately about human power, which didn't interest her (Nash 2002). Certainly, the human actors aren't so much agents in the film as much as participating with the material and energetic flows within their surroundings. However, as the film progresses, the human characters become increasingly *inattentive* to the other entities in their surroundings that are making their way through it. For instance, in a later scene, a group of children making shapes in the sand with shells on the beach are oblivious to a fish vertebra which is also making patterns in the sand.

Summer Light suggests how sensory experiences can constitute social relations that exceed the symbolic but, typically, give way to human relations based on the attribution of objects and individuals with a particular symbolic value. As the various children who appear throughout the film come to focus on a shell – endowing it with a particular value – they become oblivious to other phenomena. As Krumins, Sola Shelly, and Jean Kearns Miller discuss in *Women from Another Planet*:

> [Daina] Simon Baron-Cohen keeps talking about how social people don't live in a world of perceptions, thoughts and feelings, so much as a world of 'metarepresentations' […] In other words, a fantasy world (albeit, perhaps, a pleasant one) made of smoke and hooey. It isn't just a question of social skill […] but of believing in a social agreement.
>
> [Sola] This […] [R]eminds me of Jim's [Sinclair 1995] presentation on the communication deficits of NTs. He said that NTs do not care so much about the absolute truth but about what is perceived to be the truth by society. (55)
>
> [Jean] I think maybe we don't find images loaded with dread/joy/nihilism, whatever, as often or in the same way. Our associations aren't codified as much. We regard things more as phenomena than as rational, cogent entities and events … so along comes a, a, a, um, a giant floating puffball or a string of fish vertebrae in a meadow and it just is. And we have the kind of imagination (speculation here) that allows us to consider puffballs of enormous size with blissful freedom and consider the symmetry of the fish bones […] (Now who are the unimaginative ones?) (69)

According to Daniel Tammet, pure patterns removed from any empirical context are the basis of pure possibility, to which he attributes a moral significance (2012). Might iconic reflections on pure quantity, for instance, lead us to consider potential ways of recognizing the ways other existents might respond to their surroundings? In her essay 'Coming Alive in a World of Texture', Krumins asks, 'If a bird flies between two blueberry bushes and one bush has lots of berries and one has only a few berries, how does it know where to go?' (in Miller 2003). She explains, 'the same [process is happening] with a monkey looking at banana trees, or perhaps even a billionaire considering his various bank accounts' (ibid).

Summer Light may seem to offer a glimpse of the world through a Monotropic focus, to be drawn to what are our pre-existing deep interests, rather than to what might be the most conventionally relevant aspects of a scenario. And it may suggest the 'environmental attunement' that comes from autistic sensorimotor differences, as proposed by Van Es and Bervoets (see Chapter 2). However, insofar as the film does not present named protagonists or propose an 'inside view' on autism, it seems less concerned with an explanation of one particular human life than with communicating a textural orientation toward the world in contrast to more 'typical' responses. As with the methods of production for the Karrabing Film Collective, the process of making the film itself involves collaboration (including with her family members), forged through different human capabilities and technologies, alongside a vision that is distinctively Krumins' own.

Like *Summer Light*, Krumins' oeuvre more generally presents phenomena that cannot be categorized into distinctive parts of human/non-human/non-living. At the same time, these works do not project human qualities onto non-human entities but suggest how we might interact in such ways that register the agency and habits of non-human entities. But insofar as Krumins' work communicates primarily through images and sound rather than verbal language, it may be seen to fall short of demonstrating the kind of '(ab)stracted mutual understanding that is institutionally mandated' (Yergeau 2018: 86).

Stories about meaningful encounters with non-human nature

Life writing by autistic narrators amplifies our awareness of the possibilities of connection to more-than-human selves which, like human selves, are semiotically mediated. And insofar as our relationships with other species are seemingly voluntary – at least for the human participant – they are often experienced as positive. While symbolic thought is typically conceived as the distinctly human capacity that produces sociality, Eduardo Kohn shows that it can also produce anxiety or disconnection from one's body and the more immediate social context of one's experience. Indexical and iconic communication can produce, on the contrary, feelings of connection, but it is not a connection that is ultimately within the control of the human.

Here, the context is also important: and it is one that has not escaped autistic narrators, including those who rely on technological facilitation or are otherwise barred from full symbolic subjectivity. The context is that the situation in which humans now find ourselves is described as the Anthropocene, or the Sixth Mass Extinction: in other words, a time in which we cannot continue to act as we have and continue to survive in the same way during the coming centuries. These two premises – that autistics are aware of threats facing human survival as a whole and that humans are unable to continue our current forms of life – may lead us to ask what forms of connection will be possible in the future? And are autistic lives among those that will be disproportionately affected? As for any social group, the anxiety that young autistic people face in relation to environmental threats is not one that can easily be soothed by hopes of transcendence or utopian political solutions. While fantasy role-playing and storytelling may provide moments of solace, other narrators find that encounters with non-human nature may provide more help towards conveying aspects of their experiences to more neurotypical audiences than medical discourse about autism.

Drawing once again on Chris Packham's narration of his childhood in *Fingers in the Sparkle Jar*, we can see that his interactions with other species are important to him not only because it allows him to tell us something about his competence at recognizing patterns, but also because it connects him to a broader whole:

> He lay back and whistled, the bird spluttered on, he wet his lips and whistled again adding a flourish and the bird whistled back mimicking his notes, he waited, the bird rambled through its repetitive repertoire, then he whistled again and the bird replied. The duet went on until the mimic vanished and then he whistled and answered himself, stroking the polka dotting of daisies with sweeping arcs of his arms, in synchrony and symmetry. He swam in his paradise, his heaven of a million living things. (2016: 10)

The young Chris creates a sonic icon of the bird's call by whistling, but also allows himself to play with the sound in ways that resonated with the bird. Once the bird had left, he continued to explore the environment through touch, meanwhile 'allowing the sonic form of the vocalization to propagate' (Kohn 178). By intuitively recognizing the bird's call as the basis of a potential social connection, Packham responds accordingly and, in doing so, allows himself to be recognized as a self by the bird, albeit one who is subsequently recognized as a threat. In return, Packham seems to recognize an iconic similarity between his own exploration of the garden environment and the bird's activities. His bodily amplification of the sonic and textural patterns around him – the bird song and the distribution of daisies in the grass – signals how regularities or form might be represented within the apparent randomness of overlapping meteorological, geological, and biological phenomena (Kohn 169).

Packham's text is one of a handful of recent autobiographical works by autistic authors that have been celebrated as exemplary 'nature writing', emphasizing the restorative potential of human encounters with wildness and green spaces.[6] However, autistic narrators who refer to nature typically deploy interpretative frames that circulate in a wider culture, including specifically those that pertain to a 'carbon' imaginary, of transcendence over the conditions that produce life and death. As such, they suggest a normative impulse to capture and contain non-human forms of thought within the hierarchical roles of human social life.

Packham's text is organized around the titular and idiosyncratic image of a Sparkle Jar, which is a jam pot for collecting bugs, which stands in indexical relation to his subsequent attempts at capturing and preserving wild creatures. This image of a transcendent beauty in nature (in contrast to, but ultimately dependent on, the human agent) is unsettled by the conclusion of the narrative. The mature narrator is forced to accept the mundane and domestic world of death and pain, in the hope of rare moments of transcendence. The sparkle jar, therefore, comes to be associated with an Edenic realm of promise, which defies rational explanations or control by a human agent. At the end of the narrative, hope is symbolized as a rainbow, 'rising on pretty flaps of winnowing wings' (369).

Other popular texts among mixed readers also rely on conventional nature symbolism, such as the 'Mother' archetype. This suggests that autistic authors are not immune to conventional symbolism, including their own potential status of 'wild children' whose job is to remind us of something that has been forgotten. Both of these symbols are evident in Naoki Higashida's claim that nature is actively therapeutic to autistics:

> We do take pleasure in one thing that you probably won't be able to guess. Namely, making friends with nature. The reason we aren't much good at people skills is that we think too much about what sort of impression we're making on the other person, or how we should be responding to this or that. But nature is always there at hand to wrap us up, gently: glowing, swaying, bubbling, rustling.
>
> (2013: 77)

Higashida's indexical associations of nature with calm, and of human contact with stress, is the basis of his symbolic association of nature with maternal care. Appreciating nature is, within this matrix, akin to a mother who gives but does not demand a response. Higashida's use of symbolism suggests how mediated forms of communication, such as typing – or perhaps, more importantly, typing with his mother's facilitation – provide the context for this symbolic association between nature and other forms of nurture or animation.

Other writers suggest that symbolic thought may be unsettled by experiences grounded in bodily contact with other living things. Ido Kedar writes in *Ido in Autismland* about how it feels to be treated as a defective self because of difficulties with spoken language. He has come to see himself as at odds with a world that wants him to look and sound like everyone else and struggles to define himself in a normative framework that equates value with the capacity to produce verbal speech.

In one of his diary extracts, Kedar talks about the 'messiness' of the nature he experiences in a woodland, which unsettles his expectations of how the world is, based on his familiarity with urban nature in 'landscaped lawns' (119). Nature in the form of woods, with its flooded human and animal paths, soil erosion, and erratic growth, demands a new perspective, even if it's one that defies full conceptualization. He notes that a woodland path provides a viewpoint from which he can observe a more diverse nature than what he has seen in human towns. This echoes Kohn's observation that perceiving non-human semiotic creatures' habits helps to align us to the broader 'us' (62):

> It is only when the world's habits clash with our expectations that the world in its otherness, and its existent actuality as something other than what we currently are, is revealed. The challenge that follows this disruption is to grow. The challenge is to create a new habit that will encompass this foreign habit and, in the process, to remake ourselves, however momentarily, anew, as one with the world around us.
>
> (63)

Kedar describes how being in the woods reminds him that, contrary to what he sometimes thinks, he is part of a bigger order, where he is 'teamed up with God' (2012: 119). Kedar draws from the woodland to create an alternative image of his subjectivity:

> I am so at home in the messy beauty of nature. I relate to it. I see the system is messy, but it works and it is WOW. I see my illness in this way. It's not pretty. It's messy. It has erosion and rivers of mud too. But it is part of nature in the same way.
>
> I am not a mistake, nor a sorry state of messy neurons. I accept my messy neurological state because it has given me a way of seeing life. I fit in with the path in the wood.
>
> (118)

Within this narrative, the woodland path serves as the basis of an indexical association between his own body and other non-human lives. However, it also serves as an analogy for other pathways, including his own nervous system. Out of these iconic and indexical associations, Kedar develops an image of the path as an extension of his own neurology, 'teamed up with God', rather than cut off due to its messiness. For Kohn, it is the 'breakdown of old habits and the rebuilding of new ones, that constitutes our feeling of being alive and in the world' (Kohn: 66). Here, Kedar rejects the habit of conceiving of himself as beyond the scope of nature, where a 'normal' brain may be thought of natural akin to a harmonious, balanced system akin to a well-tended garden and protected from forces beyond it. Nature includes meteorological and geological forces that constrain possibilities for all lives.

In *Wintering: The Power of Rest and Retreat in Difficult Times*, the writer Katherine May considers the clash between the seasonal habits of life we share with other creatures and the specifically human habit of living as though we are immune from external influences. Connecting human illness and emotional distress to natural cycles, May encourages readers to notice how the embodied reality of living in time is unsettled by contemporary culture:

> We seem to be living in an age when we're bombarded with entreaties to be happy, but we're suffering from an avalanche of depression. We're urged to stop sweating the small stuff, yet we're chronically anxious. I often wonder if these are just normal feelings that become monstrous when they're denied. A great deal of life will always suck.
>
> (2020: 267)

While Kedar noted how human practices of organizing urban spaces have elided our relationship to a broader ecosystem, Katherine May notes that human experiences of *time* have lost nuance insofar as they are premised on normative milestones. May argues that her undiagnosed autism resulted in 'a childhood permanently out in the cold', where temperature signals both bodily discomfort and a lack of sustaining social connection (10). She describes how she experienced her first breakdown at age 17, but that this also allowed her the 'chance to build a different kind of person' (10). Rather than seeing her earlier depression as different in kind from non-autistic experiences of mental distress, May creates an analogy between shared experiences of actual winter and mental pain, which the experience of being neurodivergent had acquainted her with early in life:

> Winter is a time of withdrawing from the world, maximising scant resources, carrying out acts of brutal efficiency and vanishing from sight; but that's where the transformation occurs […] you'll expose all those painful nerve endings, and feel so raw that you'll need to take care of yourself for a while. If you don't, your old skin will harden around you.
>
> (14)

May describes how she realized that her busy lifestyle was making her ill but, even with the knowledge she gained from her earlier experiences, she had not been able to admit this to herself because each life stage demanded new story structures to resist the normative compulsion to busyness. This change in habits requires a different way of relating to others so that she does not find herself alone, through the rejection of her former status, as well as unwell. May describes how, soon after she quits her job, she grieves the loss of social esteem that seems to come with being busy. Making gingerbread with her son becomes an ‘act of defiance against the life I’ve been living’ (22). These activities are themselves the basis of a new story about what matters to her:

> That’s what humans do: we make and remake our stories, abandoning the ones that no longer fit and trying on new ones for size. I am now telling myself the story of a pattern of work that I fell into mistake, because I was afraid I would never find my feet again after I had my son.
>
> (23)

She explains early in the text that she needs to learn more about how others have lived through both literal winters and ‘illness, failure, isolation and despair’ (14), seeking to understand what strategies they offer for her own survival. However, she also presents a moral argument, which allows her to abstract from her own circumstances, but she does not suggest that nature offers any straightforward answers. In contrast to other species, she argues that humans

> [F]lourish 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.
>
> (236–237)

But this is only apparent after May has shifted the habits that had formerly allowed her to achieve a more normative social identity. It is only when she frees herself from these, through her immersion in physical tasks and sensory experience, that she is able to shift to new fields of relations. Within Kohn’s monist ontology, it is not enough to simply re-awaken our senses or reconnect with our ‘authentic selves’, since all living entities are mediated by ongoing processes of meaning-making. Instead, we are sustained through interactions with other selves and their distinctive perspectives: in her process of healing, May meets with people who have survived comas, illnesses, and loss. She suggests that even painful experiences serve as the basis for interpersonal connections, if we attend to their specificities rather than their symbolic connotations within abstract social roles: ‘[W]e learn to look kindly on people’s crises, because they are so often portents of our own future’ (143).

Katherine May sees herself as morally obliged to share her knowledge about wintering even as knowledge comes from her autism-specific experiences of social exclusion. This sharing is both a responsibility toward others and an act of reaching out toward her future self: for May, any practical sense of what is right for her must speak to other selves who may be fundamentally unlike her (142–143). As Stella Bolaki notes, 'Wintering frames the care of the self as an essential individual as well as relational/communal act' (2023).

For many, communicating with 'Others' 'can also be very threatening to a more distinctly human sense of self' (Kohn 18). But the communication we tend to deploy is constrained not only by biological possibilities but by the conventions of our social group and the interactional structures that define its existence. When these conventions suppress the possibility of feeling safe when expressing emotions – because they are perceived as too intense or unjustified as a response to sensory stress – one experiences loneliness as the feeling that we have nothing to contribute to a shared world (see Chapter 1). Survival *as a self* may depend on creating specific acts of intimacy beyond the confines of symbolic communication.

In *Songs of the Gorilla Nation* (2004) the autistic anthropologist and primatologist Dawn Prince records her impressions of an encounter with a silverback gorilla called Congo, who she describes as the first person she feels connected to in adulthood. She explains how she had, through the gorillas, come to see her 'permeable self' as inherently at risk from the need to feel and act in a way that 'no longer had any context':

> My archaic animal nature had no place in a modern world. My kinds of sacrifice [of feeling deeply] were no longer needed in a world of buildings and machines.
>
> (130)

Observing Congo on a daily basis through a glass observation window in his zoo habitat, Prince explains how she believes Congo could discern her emotions in ways that other humans could not. This responsiveness, which comes initially through gestures and touch, becomes the basis of her confidence that, for the first time, she 'knew what another person was thinking and feeling, and that my actions were a direct cause of their subjective experience' (135). This happens when Congo points to signal that he wants her to give him her drink, and conveys his disappointment that she won't through his body language:

> Something about the directness of his communication, combined with the honesty of his body language and his emotions, painted a kind of consistent and forthright picture that allowed for a moment of communication that was, paradoxically, more intense and more subtle

> than that of a human person. It demanded that I stay engaged until the moment had resolved with both of us as participators. It is clear to me that not only do apes have a language that is complex and holistic, but by communicating with us, they illustrate that it may be us who are less skilled at the art of sharing true subjective experience.
>
> (135–136)

Prince tells a story about the gorillas and endows them with an idiosyncratic symbolic meaning. For her, being a person means having the capacity to recognize a feeling in others, and so the gorillas can teach us everything we need to know about human interaction. Paradoxically, it is her own feeling of alienation from conventional human social relations that allows her to create a more intimate connection with the gorillas. When the zoo gives her a job that allows her to approach Congo more directly, she instinctively creates a way to feed him that instigates a direct encounter. This leads Congo to synchronize his movements with hers and to begin to touch her hand. Noting the gorillas' ritualistic behavior and shyness in their interactions with the public, she explains, 'if it were not for ritualistic habits of my autism, I would never have experienced what it felt to touch and connect with another' (25).

Genealogical selves and autism

In her series of talks about the climate crisis, Greta Thunberg also describes how early in her life she had felt she lacked a social context that would enable her to share feelings about climate change. As she describes it, the dominant construction of climate change as an existential threat produced by dominant human forms of life, at the same time that those forms of life were allowed to continue unchecked, produced a feeling of unreality and disconnection. In her speech to the audience at the launch of Extinction Rebellion in London during 2018, she explains:

> When I was about eight years old, I first heard about something called climate change, or global warming. Apparently, that was something humans had created by our way of living. I was told to turn off the lights to save energy, and to recycle paper to save resources. I remember thinking that it was very strange that humans, who are an animal species among others, could be capable of changing the earth's climate.
>
> But. No one talked about it. Ever.
>
> If burning fossil fuels was so bad that it threatened our very existence, how could we just continue like before? Why were there no restrictions? Why wasn't it made illegal?
>
> To me, that did not add up. It was too unreal.
>
> (2018: 9)

While at first she cannot find an audience who share her concern, she communicates her message in other ways, organizing the school strikes outside the Swedish parliament. In the same address at Parliament Square, she explains that it is the concept of the future that is at the heart of her disagreement with what others have told her about how she should live: ‘why should I be studying for a future that soon will be no more, when no one is doing anything whatsoever to save that future?’ (11).

From the outset, Thunberg has described her response to climate change as partly a feature of her autism, as a result of seeing things in black and white (7). Unsurprisingly, in line with a carbon imaginary, she has been portrayed as an animist, both positively and dismissively, possessing either an ‘intuitive love of nature’ (Silberman 2019) or a ‘premodern lack of affect’ (Brendan O’Neill, the British editor of *Spiked* magazine). In either case, she is considered unable to imagine the future because she is stuck in the past, in the past perfect tense of someone who sees social relation as a product of internalized rule rather than something open to intervention. Either as an ‘exemplary neurotype’ (Duan 2018) or trapped in a static neurology, the contemporary image of the autistic is one who is outside of historical time.

But Thunberg points out that it is impossible to continue with an image of human life as independent of the conditions that would enable its survival. She makes it clear what future it is that she would like, and it is one in which Western Industrialized nations would have ceased to consume fossil fuels at a rate that jeopardizes not only human life but all life on the planet. Insofar as her critics have also accused her of being an environmentalist terrorist (3), she is presented according to another trope from Povinelli’s ‘carbon imaginary’, that of the virus incorporating the ‘agency and intentionality of non-human life and non-life’ (2016: 19).

As Thunberg gives voice to the agency of ‘non-life’ in the form of CO_2 emissions, she challenges the disciplinary structures of biopolitics confined to national borders. Furthermore, she questions the validity of a distinction between the human bios and animal species, suggesting instead that climate change is contingent upon an assemblage of zoe, bios, geos, and meteoros. She remains a ‘genealogical’ subject in the popular imagination – in the sense of either being a ‘premodern’ who lacks the capacity to bring something new into the world or as a kind of noble savage, who is both infantilized and charged with reminding us of something we have forgotten in our modernity. Despite this, Thunberg positions herself as aligned to a planetary future and as unencumbered by generational or provincial bias, which provides a perspective to reflect on the likely consequences of particular human choices for those who are currently sheltered from the most catastrophic effects of climate change. She illustrates how we might recognize autistic individuals, who are drawn to see phenomena as they really are rather than as social constructs. She suggests the value of autistic modes of analysis within a 'collective' human nervous system.

Facilitating relational autonomy and connectedness within lively institutions

Life narratives can record the relational possibilities afforded by different methods of communication, telling us something about what survival as an autistic person involves. But this often comes with the development of a network of abstract symbolic associations, often invoking complex analogies between humans and other species rather than ones based on either equivalence or contrast. On the other hand, autistic narratives reveal the relative value of interactions based on that which is explicit, tangible, and concrete, as opposed to what supports status within a specific institution.

Yet, within the dominant culture, autistic patterns of attending to and sharing perceptions and feelings are ascribed an abstract symbolic meaning that exceeds the specificities of any communicative context: autistics lack a hypothesized 'central coherence' (Frith and Happé); they are 'systematisers', or serve as an intermediary with non-human nature (Grandin and Johnson).[7] These are generalized approaches to autistic competence and value that originate in a universalized approach to human flourishing that is premised on independence, freedom from constraints, and material growth. Non-hierarchical or heterarchical social organizations such as grass-roots movements, peer networks, and owner co-ops can create a space for individuals to pursue alternative ideas of value and competence, within a specific ecological and cultural niche. These organizations find a collective value and competence in responding to the dynamics of the more-than-human world as well as the needs of individual members, rather than in the production of capital.

As I explore in the final chapter, organizations that ensure 'value sovereignty' maintain a 'moral and cultural identity' and retain control of the value which their members produce (Bollier and Helfrich 2019: 90). Peer-to-peer networks may be well placed to support the needs of neuroatypical subjects. While mainstream culture may inhibit recognition for non-normative subjectivities, with master narratives that reduce others to a single story or stereotype, peer-to-peer networks support 'transversal' relations (Wolf-Meyer 116) and 'vernacular law' (Bollier and Helfrich 2019: 88–89) outside of mainstream society.

Self-determination theorists have argued that mutually sustaining relations with partners, friends, siblings, and teachers depend on a perceived sense of connectedness and recognition of one's autonomy and competence (Deci and Ryan 2000: 296). This is the case regardless of whether we are recognized by others as dependent (rather than independent), individuals.

Further, satisfaction of this need for connection is essential to 'growth, integrity and wellness', 'the frustration of which can play a causal role in ill-being' (297). According to their review of studies on this theme, our feelings toward our relationships depend on our sense of relative autonomy in pursuing them. In fact, we experience more sense of connection if we engage with the distinctive values of the other person (300). This is because in a sustaining relationship, one does not objectify the other – we respect each other's uniqueness. Similarly, as the recipient of care in a relationship, we don't tend to benefit from a connection if we feel it is based on an impersonal understanding of our interests (314). To the degree that an individual relates to the partner as an object, stereotype, or thing, rather than as a person intrinsically worthy of respect, both partners will accordingly experience thwarting of the basic psychological needs, resulting in a lower quality relationship and poorer well-being (314). I have argued in this chapter that alternative communication modalities beyond the symbolic enhance our potential to develop meaningful connections.

This contrasts with the normative understanding of relationships that regards them as satisfactory to the extent that they meet externally defined goals, which often results in domination (Deci and Ryan 331). Relational autonomy, therefore, is compatible with material dependence and inseparable from other factors that influence well-being, such as one's sense of competence and connectedness. This means that, in many circumstances, we may have to choose between maximizing our sense of competence, connectedness, or relational autonomy, because Western cultures tend to maximize only certain sorts of competence – verbally oriented, emotional intimacy (Markus and Kitayama 1991). In the following chapter, I consider how modular arrangements support relational autonomy and animation.

Conclusion – the need for a new communicative ethnography

Since Lucretius, it has been argued that 'animal vocalisations' are lesser, because they are involuntary associations between a signifier (a vocalization) and a signified object, that is identified by its 'contiguity or proximity, that is, on a nearness or apparently ordered relationship in space taken to suggest a deeper relationship, and whose expression is involuntary or even automatic' (Stevens 2008: 529). On the other hand, it is typically thought that human language 'consists of signifiers whose connection to their signified is arbitrary and whose use is voluntary' (ibid). I have argued that, following Kohn, symbolic forms of language become solidified and often lack the deliberateness with which they are typically attributed. As Ralph Savarese explains, non-autistics are 'yoked' to the categorical (2018: 48). What happens when we look beyond linguistic communication and consider the visual but nonetheless communicative aesthetics of artists such as Daina Krumins? Or if we consider the creativity autistic narrators deploy to explain their non-normative methods of communication, to foster connection? In the narratives of human-nature encounter, what does this tell us about the importance of responsivity to the possibility of communication?

The idea that symbolic language is natural and proper to humans, whereas other forms of communication are somehow debasing, depends on the idea that there is a singular good life for all humans that is determined, in all cases, by that which distinguishes us from other species. Specifically, in focusing on forms of communication that privilege symbolic relations, we ignore the much wider ecology of semiotic practices that connect us to other species.

> Because all experiences and all thoughts, for all selves, are semiotically mediated, introspection, human-to-human intersubjectivity, and even trans-species sympathy and communication are not categorically different. They are all sign processes. For Peirce, the Cartesian cogito, the 'I think', is not exclusively human, nor is it housed inside the mind, nor does it enjoy any exclusive or unmediated purchase on its most intimate object: the self that we commonly think of as the one doing our thinking.
>
> (Eduardo Kohn 88)

As disability theorists have noted, Western cultures have weaponized ideas of communication and intelligence to reinforce existing hierarchies based on race, gender, class, and sexuality. So far, linguists have focused on linguistic injustice and so have maintained an ableist dismissal of non-verbal communication, such as signing, within linguistics. John Henner and Octavian Robinson note that 'speech and trade (capitalism)' have 'become the primary learning mission over any other kind of learning' (2021: 5). This chapter has offered a contrasting consideration of what happens when, instead, we question the assumption that communication prowess resides exclusively within individuals, rather than in communities and specific forms of technological mediation. Theorists working on visual languages, grapheme languages, and tactile languages argue that it is mere chauvinism to ignore the 'semiotic repertoire' that disabled people use to access, often in collaborative ways, 'education, employment, housing, sexuality, respect, belonging, community, agency and personhood' (6).

This chapter has considered what happens to our ideas of competence and agency if we reframe communication difficulties as misfits between individuals and their communicative environments. I have begun to argue that social connection comes from systems of mutual value and intersubjective identity-negotiation, regardless of whether we are ‘dependent’ or ‘interdependent’ selves. While autism is typically thought to entail the kind of dependence that precludes flourishing, autistic life narratives show that dependence is compatible with interdependence and recognition of competence in different areas of collective human life.

I have also argued that autism may be characterized by experiences of the self as porous, not as ‘leaking out’ into an environment but of *the world* entering into the field that others would consider the province of the mind and of inner experience. Rather than being founded upon the explicit adoption of ‘animist’ beliefs, or of a willingness to project human-like qualities onto non-human or non-living entities, such experiences of interpenetration may simply be how the world *is* according to either non-symbolic modes of interpretation or to non-Western worldviews. The forms of subjectivity this entails are not genealogically circumscribed, but immanent to specific interactions (Braidotti 2008). Furthermore, insofar as autistic narrators such as Dawn Prince-Hughes and Temple Grandin question the metaphysical division between bios and zoe, and between zoe and geos, as in Kedar’s text fragment, such experiences underpin an affinity with non-human species, insofar as they highlight shared forms of vulnerability to geological and meteorological forces beyond our control.

Notes

1 I have hitherto referred to language and the linguistic, following Terrence Deacon and Eduardo Kohn, as the specifically human capacity of symbolic and conventional indexical language. I retain this distinction while sharing Henner and Robinson’s concern with the ideological functioning of semiotic modalities in linguistics (2021).

2 These purportedly ‘natural’ capacities are furthermore situated as the basis for personhood, subjectivity, and communication – see Wolf-Meyer and Friedner 2022.

3 Mel Chen notes how Mel Baggs and Tito Mukhopadhyay resist heteronormative and ableist assumptions by unsettling the imitative practices required for ‘strict animacy hierarchies’ in their visual and textual narratives (2012: 215).

4 Hacking does not suggest that autism is only a construction of language, but instead that it belongs to a category of interactive or looping kinds that cannot be understood independently of the experiences of individuals who are ascribed to that category or kind.

5 Kohn draws on Terrence Deacon’s neurobiological interpretation of Peirce’s work on signs in *The Symbolic Species: The Co-evolution of Language and the Brain* (NY, New York: Norton, 1997).

6 Chris Packham’s *Fingers in the Sparkle Jar* was voted Britain’s favorite piece of nature writing in an online poll organized by the Arts and Humanities Research

Council. *The Diary of a Young Naturalist* was awarded the Wainwright Prize for nature writing in 2020.

7 Grandin argues that autistics share enhanced visuo-perceptual processing skills with non-human animals, hence offering insights into other species (Grandin and Johnson 2005).

Part III

Autistic Collaboration

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Chapter 5

Toward a community-oriented research strategy

Introduction: Connectivity across multiple worlds of sense

Relational ontologies (as implied by ‘Mentalizing’ and ‘Intersubjectivity’) must deal with the ethical issues they raise, particularly regarding issues of power and misrecognition. That is to say, our theories about how we relate to one another cannot only be descriptive, but they also entail prescriptions about the kinds of interactions that matter. Existing models of Mentalizing and Intersubjectivity against which autistic deficits are defined do not take into account either master narratives that inhibit our agency in disclosing our experiences or the existence of ‘porous’ subjects who regard themselves as permeable and interdependent with their surroundings and with other agents.

Gloria Anzaldúa proposed that individuals who are beset by multiple sources of allegiance that are subordinating, such as racialised identities of a colonial culture and the gender and sexual norms of a traditional culture, find themselves of necessity inhabiting forms of thought and contradictions that are not sanctioned by either the traditional or dominant cultures (1987). This ‘border thinking’ provides a site of possible, if agonistic, resistance. I take Lugones’, Anzaldúa’s, and other decolonial philosophers’ lead in questioning the notion that any field of research into human kinds should be aimed toward establishing an ontological zero point of observation and knowledge (Mignolo 2010) since such practices are themselves the way that colonial modernity maintains itself across the regions of the world. To reject such practices, we can opt to draw on knowledge located in bodies, territories, and histories that continue to exist otherwise to the geographies, histories, and categories of coloniality (Icaza 2021: 49). Earlier in this book, I have drawn inspiration from Lugones’ understanding of ‘border thinking’ as loving perception, which is part of her understanding of how we make sense of ourselves through norms that exist at the margins of a dominant culture (see Introduction).

DOI: 10.4324/9781003036807-9

Anzaldúa's and Lugones' 'border thinking' is not only metaphorical but rooted in the context of actual practices of resisting the fragmentation of Chicana identities. In this context, responding to the abstractions of modern/colonial thought requires an 'emphasis on a knowing that sits in bodies and territories and their local histories' (Icaza 49). As part of this process, Lugones traces how resistance is practiced against interconnected oppressions that transcend received social categorizations (2003: 11). This entails that, for Lugones, resistance is only something that can be sustained when it becomes social; that is to say, it is a collaborative process through which heterogeneous subjectivities may achieve shared intentions (see Introduction). And while access to the Internet is unequally distributed among autistic individuals globally, it provides one medium through which resistance can be made active.

Throughout this book, I have tried to show how autistic individuals within the Global North who are subject to intersecting sources of subordination may experience themselves as caught between incompatible sources of identification, which include but are not limited to dominant constructions of autism. In previous chapters, I have argued that micro-communities, facilitated by social media or the exchange of ideas through in-person meetups and exchanges, provide a new context for storytelling and the development of new forms of identification. Here, I wish to show how new institutional practices, facilitated by the Internet and other physical modes of exchange, do more than provide new forms of identification. Insofar as they support new models of interaction and collaboration that do not reify the existing categorical divisions of diagnosis, they support the exploration of new possibilities for neurologically atypical subjects. And while my analysis is pitched at a level of abstraction that is contrary to recognition for experiences at the level of individual bodies, I hope that it provides material for further understanding.

Stories about autistic and other neurodivergent models of collaboration and mutual support across geopolitical borders unsettle the dichotomized histories, categories, and locations of autism. If autism is something that has been excluded from dominant understandings of the social within the Global North, then resisting those understandings may require reaching beyond geopolitical borders in order to find alternatives which may challenge the fragmentation of physical and social bodies upon which coloniality is premised.

Cognitive approaches to autism describe a particular kind of cognitive-affective synchronicity between bounded individuals that is mediated by the symbolic resources of a dominant culture. These symbolic structures are prescribed as the exclusive basis of both human cultural learning and collaborative activity toward common goals. While Damian Milton notes that this synchronicity is constrained by embodied differences that work both to preclude mutual understandings between autistics and non-autistics (2012), critical approaches to autism within the social sciences have so far neglected to consider the role that micro-communities play in supporting relations between subjects for whom normative paths to connection are oppressive.

If we assume that there is a singular pathway to sharing intentions via imitating other people's goals, language and behaviors, this obscures the role of learned, culture-specific modes of interacting, and we may 'fail at our intercultural readings of the intentions of others' (Wexler 2016: 62). And while a majority of humans have access to highly developed *local* systems for forging interpersonal connections and transmitting culture, we lose sight of alternatives. As the philosopher Jerome Bruner explained,

> Ironically, we as a species seem to be capable of the closest, most sensitive forms of intersubjectivity locally while, at the same time, remaining prone to gross intercultural misreadings where the intentions of others are concerned. And our local genius for devising ever-new procedures for using and expressing our minds often has the effect of further sub-localizing us – as in the forming of social classes or by the creation of a castelike division of labor.
>
> (2005: 696)

Culturally sanctioned forms of relation may be unsustainable both for atypical human interactants and for those involving other species. Yergeau argues that atypical expressions of meaning are not compatible with the kind of '(ab)stracted mutual understanding that is institutionally mandated or implied across rhetorical situations' (2018: 86). Jorn Bettin is an autistic advocate in Aotearoa /New Zealand who has drawn on the work of Keri Opāi to resist his own white settler perspective on disability and technology (n.d.). He has written extensively about his belief that dominant Anglocentric culture categorizes individuals in terms of abstract group identities, at the expense of recognizing individual qualities and traits within smaller groups (2020a). He considers that normative social roles prohibit forms of information-sharing and communication that do not mirror the hierarchical structure. Insofar as hierarchical structures reinforce agency and resource accumulation by those deemed superior, this creates an environment in which status is valued more highly than knowledge, and in which manipulation to achieve status becomes more important than the creation of other goods. In Bettin's words, this situation leads to the 'active disablement of minorities' (2020a np).

Most importantly, Bettin suggests that the notion of global and universal forms of sociality belies the reality that humans can only manage a limited number of relations – *if* relations are valued for the confidence they inspire rather than abstract rules that reinforce status. He notes that while misunderstanding is far more prevalent than typically recognized because of different cultural assumptions, it impedes reciprocal altruism (2020b). The assumption that large-scale organizations and nations drive helpful social change is at odds with the fact that they are seldom sensitive to the cultures surrounding them – for instance, those through which we would learn the side-effects of current practices on ecosystems. In this way, hierarchical relations based on the internalization of cultural norms may impede the achievement of common goals through more democratic forms of collaboration. For Bettin, autistic cognitive limits are a signal of the need to reduce social complexity:

> Life in 'civilized' societies routinely puts people in situations of cognitive overload. People are forced to get used to the stress of transacting with anonymous strangers and are subject to social pressures to conform to norms and demands that have been decided in faraway places, by rulers and bureaucrats who have no understanding of the local context in specific parts of their 'empire'.
>
> (2020b np)

I have argued throughout this book that autistic life writers' narrative agency is undermined not only by master narratives about the human condition but also by intersecting narratives about what it means to be a human person. In the last chapters, I have also argued that this narrative is reflected in research practices that reinforce both hierarchies at the level of knowledge and in terms of who is to benefit from the research. In this chapter, I address how mainstream and commercial autism research shape the object that is autism while simultaneously refusing to acknowledge the role that belief and ideology play in fixing upon a certain ecology of practices.

At the time of writing, the UK is concerned with becoming a STEM superpower (Council for Science and Technology 2021), and from this perspective it is possible to see how the view of autism as 'systematizing' plays a role, not only in defining which autistic people will be seen as valuable but also in determining the kinds of research that will itself be used to intervene in autistic lives. And, as I explored in Chapter 2, this particular take on autism is entangled with other ideological practices, including those that produce gender, heterosexist, and racial and speciesist subordination.

I have argued that resistance depends on sharing new stories about what it means to be a person so as to create a context in which our intentions can be shared. Our ability to relate to others as selves is rooted in a narrative capacity, and this involves acting in a shared world (see Chapter 1). Narrativity – defined as the sense we have of ourselves in and through action (Lucas 2016: 27) – is therefore a relational capacity between interdependent selves, underpinned by mutual recognition of uniqueness. It does not reside in the intentionality or willpower of individual brains but in habits of mutual recognition and attention. Narratives form the basis of both practical identity and political agency, but these require renegotiation in light of the ever-changing details and nuances of stories that surround us. Furthermore, narrativity can be enhanced by specific institutional arrangements and tools, which I explore further in what follows.

Beyond Mentalizing and intersubjectivity

In sum, stories may themselves contribute to the development of systems that allow vulnerable forms of life to endure. In what follows, I trace how these stories may give rise to new institutional arrangements. Where autism is recognized as something that may shape the experiences of a self in positive and negative ways, it may also lead to our heightened awareness of those conditions that allow us to find purpose and meaning. While stories can help us to reveal projects and plans that are distinctively our own, we also need institutional structures that enable us to pursue them.

If autism is a problem with recognizing that other people have other minds (Mentalizing deficiencies) or achieving ‘intersubjectivity’, how is it that autistic people do find fulfilling ways of working with and learning from each other? Support strategies, such as those recommended in the report by the *Lancet* Commission on the future of care and clinical research in autism (2022), either aim to train an autistic child or adult to achieve social connection through teaching the rules of normative social interaction (along the lines of interactional reciprocity, shared attention, use of symbolic language) or offer cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), at different life stages, for ‘co-occurring’ mental health difficulties such as depression and anxiety. This chapter aims to create a space to consider the possibility that the ‘co-occurring’ conditions are themselves a product of the assumption that a singular form of ‘relatedness’ is beneficial to autistic subjects, or if anxiety and depression may result from the inability to be recognized as having distinctive modes or habits of relating.

For ‘porous’, sensory subjectivities experience themselves as interdependent with their environment, we should consider not only broader possibilities for relations between individuals but the external conditions that facilitate these. For those who are subject to intersecting forms of misrecognition, we need to create a space for stories that allow room for the complexity and contradictions inherent in individuals as they inhabit different possibilities.

The earlier chapters have proposed that there are political constraints on the recognition of relational possibilities that support monotropic individuals and those who are disinclined toward symbolic communication. In this chapter, I wish to develop my argument that there are pre-existing solutions to these constraints in institutional arrangements known as ‘commoning’. Commoning is an everyday and widespread practice of collaborating and sharing resources, labor, and knowledge to support the well-being of individuals, communities, and environments. While there are multiple forms that commoning may take, they are typically organized ‘from the ground up’ and may accommodate the needs of individuals and the environments upon which they depend. This may entail recognition of the interdependence of humans and non-humans, and ‘more than human relations including technology and infrastructure such that new practices of sharing, appreciating and exchanging are possible’ (Nightingale 2019: np). This contrasts with the majority of institutions within the Global North – including those focused on supporting autistic individuals – which are founded on the assumption that cooperation can only occur through hierarchical forms of governance and state intervention, based on abstract symbolic roles.

Commoning organizations assume that cooperation will occur when individuals are working in collaboration to the extent that they engage in ‘becoming in common’ (Nightingale 2019). Insofar as they can support non-normative methods of communication, interdependence with the non-human world, and deliberate efforts to disrupt hierarchical forms of knowledge transfer, institutions that are based on commoning principles may be uniquely situated to support autistic and otherwise neurodivergent people. Rather than *assuming* that actors share a common intentionality or motivation to pursue individual interests within the norms of a society, commoning practices have the potential to develop new norms for sharing intentionality and common purpose. As Andrea J. Nightingale has explained, ‘commoning places emphasis on the social relations required to transform socionatural relations and thus while not often discussed in these terms, is intimately bound up in the performance of subjectivities’ (2019: np). However, she also notes that because commoning may enable us to support new kinds of subjectivities and modes of relation, it will always entail some form of exclusion and enclosure against other human and non-human communities and social practices. This chapter proposes that commoning is a suitable model for supporting the social and economic lives of autistic people, and this confronts issues of intellectual property ownership, authority, and power, together with the need to question any new intersectional inequalities that emerge.

Conviviality and the importance of a human scale

One source for thinking about this subject can however be found in Steve Silberman’s writing about autism in the context of the Silicon Valley technology culture and its pioneers. *NeuroTribes* describes how one key figure in the development of the personal computer came to recognize himself as autistic in the form of Asperger's syndrome during the 1990s. Earlier in his life, Lee Felsenstein had been part of both anti-war and anti-capitalist movements and an engineering student, both of which contributed to his understanding of the need for 'DIY' approaches to designing the first personal computer.

> It occurred to Felsenstein that if the counterculture was serious about building a new society that was not based on mass consumption and vacuous spectacle, it would have to design new forms of media that empowered individuals and local communities instead of relying on old broadcast models. The decentralized, user-driven future of computing was already taking shape in his mind [...] Community Memory was a smashing success. Its popularity was particularly gratifying to Felsenstein because a feeling of belonging to a community was precisely the thing that had always eluded him – even in the counterculture that was supposed to offer it to those who had never fit in anywhere else.
>
> (Silberman 2015: 259)

Silberman focused on the broader societal consequences of Felsenstein and his peers' innovations for supporting 'the needs and special abilities of all kinds of minds' (474). He saw this as comparable to some enlightened parents of autistic children who, often possessing autistic traits themselves, sought to create environments in which their children could flourish. Throughout *NeuroTribes*, Silberman criticized the aims of treating autism as a disease to be cured, since he saw this as not only fruitless but as ultimately serving a eugenicist agenda, akin to racial discrimination (470). The search for a cure for autism continues to direct a majority of funding allocations to autism research in the United Kingdom and the United States (Pellicano et al. 2014).

Silberman mentions the broader social aims of some of the autistic technology pioneers, which are not only about self-help for individuals and their families, but broader social goals: a need for ethical change toward a wider social 'conviviality', or the ability of individuals to interact creatively and autonomously with others and with their environment to satisfy both their distinctive needs and those of a broader 'whole'. Yet, while both Silberman and Baron-Cohen see autistic skills in engineering and 'tool-creation' as ultimately linked to autistic preferences for logical reasoning over social conformity, this misrepresents how autistic community projects are founded on imaginative and creative labor toward collective social goals.

One such example can be found in Jorn Bettin's work in an autistic community setting about the need for 'human scale' conviviality tools (Bettin

2021). Bettin connects this human scale to the creation of trust between individuals, which he regards as not only an antidote to the stress that comes from being subject to normative social conventions but also to more equitable access to social goods more generally in society. From this perspective, it is possible to see how a desire for relational autonomy within social interactions is not 'autistic egocentrism', as it is typically conceived under a Theory of Mind deficits perspective, but a response to dominant understandings of the social. That is to say, if normative forms of interaction depend upon methods of communication that are unreliable for many but are also systematically disadvantageous both for cultural minorities and also for autistic and otherwise neurodivergent individuals,, how can they be reconfigured in general to support the self-trust that is the basis for self-worth and belonging? While autonomy is typically regarded as inherently valuable within the West, I will argue in what follows that master narratives about autism undermine the specific conditions that would support the development of self-trust necessary for autonomous reflection on which outcomes to pursue in collaborative social endeavors, such as the decision as to whether to try to modify one's behavior to conform to normative social demands or to find an alternative source of livelihood and connection.

While there may be reasons to retain the existence of a concept of autism as a 'complex, multivalent neurodevelopmental condition' that may affect an individual's access to a mainstream social world, this 'does not prevent us from grappling with its varied social and political manifestations and meanings' (Fein 2020: 10). Since autism is predominantly constructed as a neurodevelopmental disorder or 'dysfunction', this ignores the relational context in which it may – on the contrary – be part of a cluster of conditions that contributes 'either to individual or group persistence, or both' (Chapman 2021: 1365–1366). However, both clinical research and therapeutic practices frequently fail to consider the specificities of the social world at all: 'the connections between ourselves and our social partners, between our senses and the things being sensed, between our attention and the material to which we attend' (Fein 5).

Within mainstream autism research, the processes through which autistic presence becomes a relational function or dysfunction is typically rendered invisible. Yet in real social worlds, autistic people may guide us as to how strengths, vulnerabilities, and differences manifest, for instance in how we 'learn, how we remember, how we attend, how we love' (Fein 3). Autistic people are aware that many autism-specific traits may be advantageous or disadvantageous in accordance with other 'moderating influences', such as the social context, the extent to which they are manifest and according to their overall perspective or framing of their life (Russell et al. 2019). We can draw on these accounts to form a better understanding of autism across a lifespan, in its many manifestations as sensory and communicative differences with or without further co-occurring neurological conditions, and thus develop diagnostic and support practices that enhance self-trust. As I argued in the previous chapter, relational autonomy within decision-making, and well-being, may depend on such confidence.

Designing systems to support connection

Insofar as this book has hitherto emphasized the creativity of autistic narrators who work with narrative media to convey aspects of their experience that are often overlooked, I have tried to emphasize the affective qualities of recognition and misrecognition, and the consistent theme of trying to express, not only a sense of self (ontological agency) but a feeling of what one offers to a shared world (political agency). Insofar as our 'development' is typically measured in a normative social environment, how might we contribute to the collective narrative agency of autistic and otherwise neurodivergent people who wish to articulate atypical pathways to learning, playing, and loving?

In what follows, I explore the authorship of web technologies (in the form of WordPress websites) to create alternative social networks by and for neurodivergent communities. These two domains rely not only on web coding, information architecture skills and knowledge gained in technology fields but also the understanding of cultural and social practices that exist in other disciplines. Two of their co-authors – Jorn Bettin and Ryan Boren– have 'hacked' their careers in technology fields so that they can dedicate their lives to social justice. Similarly, autistic researchers from around the world who have been trained in cognitive psychology, education, literature, creative writing, and sociology are supplementing disciplinary training with philosophical inquiry to challenge the implicit and widespread assumption that autism and neurodiversity more generally can only be studied through the methods of cognitive psychology.

Such interdisciplinary work, while lauded elsewhere in academia, is typically difficult to sustain within institutional settings that support increased specialization and hierarchical forms of knowledge transfer. While I focus in this chapter on AutCollab, Stimpunks, and the Global Autistic Taskforce, there are many other organizations which connect neurodivergent academics globally and regionally and which are working to produce tools to unravel the assumption that there is a singular pathway to becoming a valuable human subject. Like the organizations introduced below, there is seldom a singular focus on neurodiversity, and participants bring their insights into the need to recognize the intersections of atypical subjectivity with differences in ethnicity, sexuality, and gender identity. Together, these organizations themselves suggest models for how we might create institutions that can support atypical forms of learning, working, and playing.

Here, I will focus on the way these organizations emphasize 'connectivity' – rather than intersubjectivity or Mentalizing – as the most fundamental feature of relations between individuals and between individuals and their environments (Wolf-Meyer n.d.). Connectivity underpins conviviality within institutional arrangements that are modular, and which enable facilitation and mutual animation for individuals. I move here from arguments about the need for individual narrative agency within competitive and individualistic institutional arrangements to models of institutions that 'are supple and supportive of individuals and their interests' (n.d.). If normative social interactions depend on the deployment of symbolic language and roles that are incompatible with recognition for atypical subjectivity, what kinds of institutions would support connections that are sustainable and rewarding for autistic people and their families?

In addition to connectivity, Wolf-Meyer refers to modularity, facilitation, and animation as mutually reinforcing qualities of care produced through institutions and practices that center the needs of disabled individuals. Wolf-Meyer's model is designed specifically to include those with 'communication difficulties' who had typically been regarded as failing to achieve the normative status of personhood upon which value – and the benefits of relation – could be conferred. These four qualities of care themselves depend on the recognition that individuals are not 'monadic' units that can be separated from an environment but instead reach beyond and through other individuals and their environments.

Modularity is Wolf-Meyer's reversal of Gilles Deleuze's control societies, and he notes that the proliferation of norms through which we are increasingly subject can also be the source of an 'opening ... to allow for new connections' (2020: 14-15). Modularity consists of 'capacities for interaction [are] shaped by the institutions that individuals interact with' and which, beyond any singular structure of symbolic meaning, 'provide the interpretive basis for conceptualizing behaviors and capacities' (14). Within a modular understanding, institutions can create opportunities for working together on shared projects that are suited to diverse skills: these projects and their norms become the meaningful context for interactions.

Facilitation is 'a processual interaction between bodies that aims toward an end that only can be reached – or that can be reached more immediately – through interactions between actors' (n.d.: n.p.). Wolf-Meyer provides the example of a manual wheelchair user who can move independently but is assisted by another human agent to reach a destination. More generally, he considers that all human capacities are facilitated by networks of agents, institutions and technologies; yet some individuals, because of their perceived disabilities, 'have these facilitations withheld, and thereby have the breadth of their personhood withheld as well' (n.d.: n.p.). A story, or a network of interrelated stories, can provide communicative facilitation for shared projects within a family setting (n.p.). These various processes of interaction produce changes in both the facilitator and the facilitated (n.p.).

Animation is the outcome of modular and facilitated interactions when they are lively and support the projects and desires of those involved (Wolf-Meyer n.d.). This is based on the understanding that 'affect', as a language of feeling and sensation, is to some extent independent of symbolic language (n.p.). Within animating interactions that solidify through time, individuals with diverse capacities can be recognized as moral agents, as subjects with desires and interests of their own.

As examples of modular and animating institutions, I refer to the **organizational operating model** proposed by Jorn Bettin, from the Autism Collaboration Trust (AutCollab), as part of the NeuroDiventures Project. I argue that the model supports 'transversal' relations, which are characterized by the ways that power and roles are disrupted' (Wolf-Meyer 2020: 64) by neurodivergent member-employees working toward a common goal. In terms of facilitation, I provide examples from Stimpunks, who offer 'Mutual Aid and **Human-Centered Learning for Neurodivergent and Disabled People**', by implementing the operating model provided by AutCollab (2023).

Situating the organizational operating model alongside a broader project of sharing information about other NeuroDiventures globally, AutCollab offers an analytical framework to consider what it feels like to bring an 'autistic lens' or Autistic Way of Being to different kinds of institutional settings. By inviting their website visitors to join the NeuroDiventures project, AutCollab facilitates interactions between widely dispersed individuals and organizations around the world. Like the methods used by Stimpunks, AutCollab also makes use of montage, visual storytelling, and intertext, often in first-person forms, to provide different ways to interact with the content. AutCollab and Stimpunks demonstrate how sharing knowledge about autism or neurodiversity more generally is made possible by institutional arrangements that facilitate individuals with diverse capacities and interests.

Within academic settings, and without shared interpretative structures and the kinds of transversal relations that would support the development of new interactional norms, it is difficult for autistic researchers to disseminate autistic community understandings to a broader public realm: knowledge exchange practices are governed by social and professional norms that are exclusionary to autistic people. This is despite the efforts of many individuals and groups to work together to present their findings in clear and rigorous ways. The Global Autistic Task Force centers on

community knowledge, through recognition of fluctuating support needs and a nuanced understanding of communication challenges that are shared across different manifestations of autism.

In prioritizing the needs of autistic people and their communities, particularly surrounding psychological well-being and safety, I outline how community organizations provide **alternative diagnostic practices** that do not subject individuals to pathologizing social norms. For adults, this may include relational self-diagnosis through direct interaction (AutCollab) or reflection on other people's life stories (Hillary 2020). While presumably failing to provide the standards of rigor that 'official' diagnosis would bring and upon which dwindling statutory social care might depend, such alternative practices acknowledge the difficulty of accessing clinical pathways for those who do not conform to cultural master narratives.

Organizations such as Stimpunks and AutCollab facilitate connections, between individuals to counter the isolation and perceived burdensomeness that many autistic people experience through dominant social practices. Given that most institutional arrangements focus on diagnosis and interventions for autistic children, who are normatively defined by their role as 'cared-for' subjects, how might our attitudes to autism change if we consider autistic people as the potential agents and recipients of care and change? Rather than focusing exclusively on intervention toward independence for children who are perceived as unlikely to attain normative developmental goals, what possibilities emerge for facilitating connections and relational interdependence across neurological differences and life stages?

Community knowledge versus expert knowledge

The Global Autistic Taskforce on Autism Research are:

> [A] group of autistic professionals and representatives of organizations run by and for autistic people. We are autistic clinicians, therapists, educators and researchers, parents, and family members of autistic people of all ages and with all types of support needs, as well as individuals with high support needs. Among us are also autistic people of color, autistic people from the Global South and Asia, autistic women, and autistic people belonging to gender minorities.
>
> (94)

The group came together to respond to a report by the *Lancet* Commission on the future of care and clinical research in autism' in January 2022. In their co-authored letter[1] as well as a more detailed discussion of the report in a journal article, the Task Force Authors point out a number of shortcomings and ethical difficulties with the Commission's recommendations. The authors note that, while the Commission's authors draw on emerging approaches to autism – such as work on environmental and social causes of individual distress and studies into the leading causes of mortality for autistic people[2] – these elements are not incorporated into the recommendations. The Task Force recommends that 'the research strategy itself should be community-oriented instead of disorder oriented' (98).

The support model proposed by the *Lancet* Commission focuses on reducing burdens to families and value for money in implementing only those interventions that would seem to have clearly established efficacy. These include 'interventions for autism' which 'aim to build skills that are absent or diminished' (287). Recommendations include early interventions to support 'social interaction, such as shared enjoyment or taking turns, and communication, including spoken language, comprehension, and use of symbols … and augmented devices' (285) and cognitive-behavioral and pharmaceutical interventions, such as the use of atypical antipsychotics, to support reducing 'behaviors or feelings that have negative effects' (285). This would seem to be in line with social justice as the equal access to both social goods such as education and healthcare and recognition for individual distinctiveness.

However, while the Commission authors note that 'a substantial proportion of the risk of poor outcomes is likely to be socially produced' (277), its recommendations situate autistic people as the unique bearers of those risks. The report's authors also note that 'many individuals with autism have profound needs and are vulnerable to harm, marginalization, and exclusion, and societal attitudes to difference, inclusion, and equity will affect their life experiences and outcomes' (272). As Desiree Jones has explained in relation to her research with Noah Sasson:

> Targeting autistic behavior places the burden of social exclusion on autistic people, when we should really be challenging the attitudes that lead others to stigmatize autistic behaviors [...] Research on race suggests that people who have racial biases tend to view that race as a monolith, assigning every member the same features. By exposing them to different people from the group, you can challenge those stereotypes. We believe the same principle applies to autism.
>
> (University of Texas 2021)[3]

The notion that social justice may be produced by a unified response across 'heterogeneous autistic populations' does not address the diversity of social and cultural contexts. Furthermore, the evidence the Commission presents in support of the effectiveness of interventions employs normative measures of 'functioning/development' or on Western concepts of 'life quality', such as employment status (274). While referring to autism as a neurodevelopmental disorder, or a ‘whole package’ of ‘an inseparable and constitutive element of personhood, with both positive and negative aspects’ (Fein 19) the recommendations focus on a pathogen model of autism as isolatable ‘impairments in social behavior’ (273). While the authors refer to the need to enhance autistic people’s ‘independence’ (273) and ‘sense of identity’ (280), the focus on interventions threatens local structures that would bring the whole package of a particular human subject into sight. The pathogen model undermines our awareness of the relational circumstances through which our identities are formed, rendering autism as ‘inert’ and defined in opposition to ‘autonomy and Life (Povinelli 14).

Finally, the authors refer to what they call co-occurring conditions, such as intellectual disabilities, attentional differences, or differences in gender identity, alongside depression and anxiety, part of the heterogeneity of autism and the social impairments it creates, rather than features of individual lives (275 and 276). This approach, while purporting to provide a more equitable approach to supporting autistic individuals across the world, does little to support ‘confidence that one will appear in the world and be recognized by others as a unique being’ (Chapter 1). Without an opportunity to see ourselves as a distinctive self among others through time, we risk feeling that we have nothing to offer except for the use-value that others assign to us.

Therefore, as the Taskforce authors note, the Commission’s approach is ‘deficit’ focused (98) and thus contributes to other master narratives that imply autistic people are in general ‘unworthy of full moral respect’ (see Chapter 2). Through misrepresentation of the politically informed counter-narratives about neurodiversity to a universal resistance to medical and psychiatric diagnosis (276), the Commission authors also undermine the political agency of autistic narrators who draw on them to resist normative understandings of their identities.[4] Furthermore, the *Lancet* authors tacitly draw on one tendril of the Theory of Mind deficits Master Narrative, in implying that autistic self-advocates and proponents of the neurodiversity paradigm are unable to understand how others are different from them. Suggesting that they have not grasped the ‘the reality of disability’ which ‘should not be underestimated’ (276), they reinforce the argument that autism is characterized by a lack of self- and other awareness through which such an understanding could be gained, as I explained in Chapter 2.[5] The *Lancet* Commission authors imply that any identity narrative that draws on an understanding of autism as a ‘natural variation’ would lack explanatory heft when it does not account for what is of most interest to them, which are the social deficits it produces. This is even while they acknowledge that ‘accommodations in the environment can make some disabilities become differences and even advantages’ (277), the agency is located outside of the individual and in the expertise of a clinician who can identify ‘microenvironmental and macro-environmental barriers to change for autistic individuals’ (277).

The report’s assertion that they ‘believe that autism allows difference and neurodiversity to be appreciated and valued for the benefits they bring to society as a whole’ (273) seems disingenuous. It deploys the discourse of autism as a ‘whole package’, which may allow ‘the power of development and the possibility of change’ (273). This is the case even when the specific interventions the Commission recommends accord to a pathogen model of ‘sensory issues’ and/or ‘social impairment’ as a ‘discrete entity separate and separable from its host’ (Fein 228). This is because they focus on ‘medical infrastructures that deliberately exclude [more generally human qualities such as creativity and pleasure], from their domain of intervention’ (164). The Commission’s discourse of ‘lived experience’ and of ‘heterogeneity’ discourages us from conceiving autism as a condition of human lives.

Autistic values and their manifestations

The motivation behind the idea of design justice reflects the idea that those who are typically most influenced by system design have the least say in their creation (Design Justice Network). This is the case for any group whose members have hitherto been regarded as being unable to conceive of themselves as selves, and therefore without insight into what would support flourishing and survival. Insofar as autistic people have traditionally been regarded as lacking the capacity to understand their own and others’ lives according to the Theory of Mind deficits narrative, autistic involvement in the design of support can mitigate the historical injustice that stems from unequal power relations between autistic individuals and those who are paid to support them. In addition to mitigating against perceived burdensomeness that some autistic people experience (Cassidy et al. 2018), participation in research and design of interventions to support autistic people could contribute to ‘opportunity conditions’ (Mackenzie 2014) that support the self-trust that is the basis of relational autonomy. Such projects provide an opportunity to recognize those ‘human qualities’ among autistic people that are typically overlooked within medical discourses.

Amplifying the role of autistic people in research and design for autism reveals capacities that are of value to knowledge creation more generally. Within academia specifically, the inclusion of different processing styles could be argued to make it more likely that ethical issues in research proposals could be uncovered (Elsherif et al. 2022). Autistic preferences for ‘fairness, transparency and care’ (Kapp 2016) may motivate efforts at discerning relevant details and noting patterns among aspects of data that were deemed unrelated by other researchers. Helen Kara and Aimee Grant note the 'autistic advantage' in qualitative research as 'long periods of concentration (hyperfocus), leading to "flow" and creative thinking, attention to detail, and detailed knowledge of topic areas' (Grant and Kara 2021). When autistic people gain entry to academia, a 'strong sense of justice can motivate activism in [open scholarship] other social movements, such as movements for social justice or opposing the climate crisis' (Elsherif et al. 2022).

As I explored in Chapter 2, the process of reflecting on one's life in light of a late autism diagnosis may lead to the development of an intersectional identity. This means that coming to think of oneself as autistic provides not only the occasion to consider how difficulties have arisen in a world built by for those who are in some ways unlike us, but also provide the opportunity to think how the dominant culture may unfairly favour us in other respects. This means that an interest in fairness may not simply result from a focus on rule-bound ethical systems as the 'autism as Extreme Male Brain' narrative would suggest but, instead, come about through direct and observed experiences of the cross-cutting eddies of power and subordination.

Insofar that I have suggested that a practical identity that incorporates stories about autism may help us to articulate projects and plans that are distinctively our own, it is important to note this is always underpinned by our interactions with specific individuals and institutions. It requires a willingness for those in positions of power to seriously consider what we have to say about our experiences, even when this disrupts highly entrenched deficits-based understandings. This seems unlikely to be the case for the care provision modeled by the Lancet Commission, which focuses on top-down models of knowledge and identity 'as a potential lifelong service user' (2022: 280).

Grant and Kara describe the challenges they have faced in receiving support that they would legally be entitled to, even in a professional field where they possess significant professional expertise (2021: 598). For those who are not able to access fields where their aptitudes are appreciated, negative employment experiences often undermine the potential goods that economic inclusion would bring, with more than a third of autistic people reporting experiences of bullying or harassment at work (Cassidy 2012). Supporting the autistic community means recognizing the stress that comes from being subject to coercive power based on 'invalid assumptions about the internal states and life goals of Autistic people' (AutCollab Trust 2022).

While there have been significant efforts to involve autistic people in research design and evaluation in recent years – for instance, with the establishment of the journal *Autism in Adulthood* – there is a risk that autistic people may once again find themselves resigned to a specific use-value, within a broader ecology of social relations that is otherwise inaccessible.

For this reason, in what follows, I argue that care for autistic people's individual capacities and commitments can and should be enacted within modular systems that recognize a plurality of interests and temperaments that have a value to a broader ecological whole.

NeuroDiventures model

AutCollab is a New Zealand-based charity, which aims to be 'a global hub for mutual support' among autistic people. Jorn Bettin is one of the organization's trustees, and he describes himself as a 'Knowledge archaeologist by day and anthropologist by night' (Bettin 2022). Bettin and colleagues developed an organizational operating model for autistic and neurodivergent people's organizations based on their understanding of the diversity of social practices at different spatial and temporal scales. This model is also quite explicitly related to Bettin's identity story and can be understood as an instance of the emerging counter-narrative about the qualities of autistic collaboration that I described in Chapter 2. As a model presented in diagrammatic rather than linguistic form, it responds to Bettin's concern that linguistic narratives oversimplify 'complex patterns of mental states' (Bettin 2021: 55).

In his book, *The Beauty of Collaboration at a Human Scale*, Bettin argues that humans are historically 'eusocial' animals, meaning that 'small groups of 20 to 100 people – are the primary organisms within human society, in contrast to individuals, corporations, and nation state' (2021:1). As 'someone who does not relate to abstract human group identities', Bettin questions the assumption that humanity has achieved anything more than 'pattern of civilized conquest and domination' (1). Focusing on the emergence of *Homo economicus* in the industrial period, he argues that Western culture's idealization of systems that enable 'plausible deniability' for elites has undermined other forms of collaboration. He considers that this cultural movement was founded on the impetus to maximize the 'efficiency of the accumulation of abstract tokens' but has led to the 'disablement' of knowledge about altruistic cooperation toward common ends, which exists in other cultures and earlier times (71).

From this perspective, Bettin argues that autism is not only an acceptable form of difference but a much-needed counter to more typical 'cognitive lenses' (286). As a result of autistic ways of being that devalue deception and prioritize truthfulness, autistic 'social life revolves around eye-level relationships that are based on mutual trust and shared intrinsic motivations, with no or very little tolerance for competitive behavior or preferential treatment of socially high-ranking individuals' (213).

Within an organization, an autistic social life requires explicit principles shown to increase learning and trust (Bettin 2021). This contrasts with the practices favored by a ‘typical cognitive lens’, which assumes a shared understanding when one does not exist. While such practices streamline collaboration, they undermine the possibility of disclosing any gaps in understanding. Elsewhere, Bettin notes how this version of collaboration makes bullying and competition almost indistinguishable since both depend on pre-existing culturally defined rules for negotiating status (nd: 4). A typical lens also excludes minorities and collaboration across cultural borders, where shared understandings cannot be assumed. For Bettin, when socially constructed beliefs are not challenged their external costs on other people or the planet are not noticed. This is why autistics are a catalyst for innovation and knowledge transfer: ‘Autists learn very early on that the only way to confirm shared understanding is by asking explicit and sometimes probing questions’ (Bettin 2018a).

Autistic participation in cultural life often requires an imitation of conformity for the sake of avoiding ostracization, with the subsequent loss of learning that this would provide. Bettin also suggests that autistic people who have experienced a lack of relationships based on trust may have the most to say about how it may be regained: ‘Trust between two agents develops through an ongoing process of maintaining shared understanding, and it correlates with the intensity and duration of maintaining shared understanding’ (2021: 217).

While autistic social difficulties are typically conceived as a failure to achieve intersubjective attunement, Bettin considers that the pathologization of autistic ‘cognitive lenses’ produces a collective ‘paradigmatic inertia’ toward recognizing other cultural paradigms or groups of paradigms (e.g., see 2021: 39). With this framing, it is possible to register how a culture based on increasingly ‘complex social groups with specific social roles’, which also ignores alternatives that reduce complexity in order to be able to respond to shifting environmental conditions, may be experiencing a form of ‘collective delusion’ (42).

While Bettin’s argument is most fully articulated in his book, the AutCollab WordPress website provides a more accessible and non-linear approach to peer-produced research on autistic mutual aid, collaboration, and education. With its use of diagrams, photographs, illustrations, and icons to support different kinds of communicators, the website shows that multimodal texts invite a multitude and complementary interpretations that speak to different cultural contexts. Since there is no single pattern for autistic collaboration, the website provides examples of what collaboration may look like, from within a family, to education and employment.

For instance, on the page entitled ‘NeuroDiventures’, the authors address how most autistic people will typically receive an education that aims to inculcate a normative ideal of social complexity, rather than one that aims to understand the broader whole of which human life is part.

AutCollab suggests that, in response to this, autistic adults may co-create their own extended autistic families who will collectively create a 'safe and nurturing environment for divergent thinking, creativity, exploration, and collaborative niche construction' (2022). Finding peers with similar interests and qualities can help us begin to 'thrive and share the pain and joy of life' (ibid).

Bettin suggests that a neurodivergent-led business or enterprise can implement 'prosocial' structures that support shared learning and creativity. AutCollab draws on a model from s23m, which in turn incorporates broader knowledge of common-pool resource management from the social sciences. This includes recognition of the importance of explicit rules for seeking and gaining advice from members, structures to prevent individuals from gaining power over others, methods of conflict resolution, and finally, explicit attention to the distribution of revenues and external costs, including on the non-human environment.

Figure three caption: Bettin's 'operating model' for autistic-led organizations – which he makes freely available on the AutCollab website via a creative commons license.

Within the broader context of Bettin's theorizing in *The Beauty of Collaboration at a Human Scale*, the 'NeuroDiventures' operating system supports transversal, rather than hierarchical, transfers of information and relations between those with different strengths. Since the model privileges information transfer over fixed social roles, it provides space for individuals to develop customized tools for interaction and communication that do not assume normative capacities. Finally, because the model focuses on learning and trust over profit and competition, it is conducive to the creation of 'conviviality' between people with different communication needs.

Prosocial core design principles @ S23M

Applying evolutionary science to coordinate action, avoid disruptive behaviours among group members, and cultivate appropriate relationships with other groups in a multi-group ecosystem
(the work of Elinor Ostrom, Michael Cox and David Sloan Wilson)

Tailored Core Design Principles:

1. **Trusted relationships within the group and strong understanding of purpose**
2. **Fair distribution of costs and benefits**
3. **Fair and inclusive decision-making**
4. **Fast and empathetic conflict resolution**
5. **Authority to self-govern**
6. **Appropriate relations with other groups**
7. Tracking agreed upon behaviours
8. Graduated responses to transgressions **to prevent a person or a subgroup from gaining power over others**

Supports an open and inclusive **neurodiverse** & creative team

A working **advice process** minimises the need for tracking

Fair and inclusive distribution of resources minimises the need for coercion

Figure 5.1 Exploring the NeuroDiventures operating model at AutCollab ©Jorn Bettin @ s23m.com 2019. See autcollab.org/community/neurodiventures/.

Stimpunks

Recognizing the injustice of the enforced 'neurotypicalization' of neurodivergent and disabled people, Stimpunks focuses on four pillars to support collective efforts to 'forge our own community': mutual aid, 'designing for the edges', open research, and a diversity consultancy (Stimpunks homepage: n.d.). While the charity also provides financial aid to members, the majority of content refers to the possibilities of a 'DIY culture' drawn from many sources: disability activism, punk, and critical pedagogy. One of the founders, Ryan Boren, is a retired technologist and former senior coder at WordPress.

Many of the charity's activities focus on the notion of 'reframing', and the creation of a shared language to enable both self-care and social change (Boren 2020). The reframing works not only at the level of the Neurodiversity Paradigm but in terms of a broader 'structural ideology' (ibid). This ideology is intended to shift thinking beyond the 'attribution error' of regarding behaviors as resulting from individual dispositional or mindset factors rather than 'situational factors' resulting from the social environment and influenced by 'policies, norms, systems, and other structural realities' (Boren 2021). Boren notes that the misleading 'mindset' mentality is evident in the demand for mindfulness as a solution for the stress that people experience as a direct result of external factors. Boren advocates a political response through design aimed at the 'edge', where:

> [O]ur societies, and the boundaries of our compassion are tested at the edges, where the truths told are of bias, inequality, injustice, and thoughtlessness.
>
> (Stimpunks 'Edges')

While within the technology world, the experiences of vulnerable users may be seen as an 'edge case', Boren considers that a better term would be 'stress case', which builds on the understanding of 'minority stress' emerging from the LGBTQIA+ community (Meyer 2003). From this perspective, individual 'accommodations' in education and employment fail to do justice to structural problems:

> [A]ccommodation models […] frustrate me. They encourage individualized responses to structural design problems. Instead of designing by default for 'proven needs' well-known in disability and neurodiversity communities, accommodations models require individual episodes of forced intimacy, repeated over and over and over for the rest of your life. We should treat each episode of forced intimacy as a stress case that puts our designs to the test of real life.
>
> (Stimpunks 'Structural ideology')

Stimpunks addresses the idea of how education may provide ‘psychological & sensory safe spaces’ that simultaneously provide opportunities for ‘intermittent collaboration’, rather than enforced large group interactions, and ‘collaborative niche construction’. For Stimpunks, the latter means creating the ‘least restrictive environment’ that enables the recognition of *all* students’ strengths, while at the same time engineering the environment to support the vulnerabilities of all learners. This acknowledges that individuals vary according to sensory sensitivity and will benefit from the development of three distinctive archetypal learning places to maximize possibilities for all learners (not only the ‘neurodivergent’) within both online and physical environments: these as the campfire, cave, and watering hole.

The cave, in particular, is suited to autistic learners or ‘orchids’, who are most susceptible to outside influences: it represents a quiet space where students can retreat to reflect on what they have experienced and engage in a ‘maker’s schedule’ rather than one that is dominated by the instructor. The campfire signifies a situation in which learners share learning in a small group of peers. The watering hole is a space that allows access to a broader ‘common space’, providing an opportunity for ‘intermittent collaboration’ that has been shown to benefit all learners (Stimpunks ‘Cavendish Spaces’).

While I focus on texts written by Bettin and Boren, both the Stimpunks and AutCollab websites feature a wide range of narrators, artists, musicians, and commentators, with external links to blog posts, Tweets, and YouTube channels. The Stimpunks website, in particular, offers multiple points of access to and ways through its content and beyond, with key definitions presented in different media, including an ‘ear read’ and a ‘plain text’ format. AutCollab focuses on linguistic and cultural plurality and has made key content available in seven languages. Each website is organized around modules of overlapping themes, and AutCollab provides the opportunity for feedback and critique. Both organizations provide material free at the point of access.

In terms of the geopolitical picture outlined in the previous chapter through Elizabeth Povinelli’s exploration of tactics used to govern the distinction between life and non-life, we can expand this analysis to discourses surrounding technology such as Bettin’s. While we typically conceive of a universal technology that emerged out of Western modernity and which expanded globally, we think of technology within the frame of cosmopolitics, and to explore the history of philosophies of technology within different epistemologies. Drawing on Chinese history to reignite a philosophy of technology, Yuk Hui explains, technology ‘is enabled and constrained by particular cosmologies, which go beyond mere functionality or utility’ (2021: np). Bettin, in particular, is inspired by Māori cosmology and regards technology as just one part of the process of organizing our relationships with each other and the non-human environment so that we might coexist in mutually sustaining ways. Insofar as Bettin's and Boren's works on neurodiversity suggest a different way to think about how specific technologies have been shaped by autistic sensibilities and epistemologies, we might also want to consider technodiversity as part of a neuro-cosmopolitics to come.

Competition for resources: technological facilitations

I wish to highlight the contrasting approaches to the development of knowledge and technology to support autistic people: on the one hand the 'pathogen' model of autistic populations, on the other the community approach to autistic collaboration advocated by Stimpunks and AutCollab. The *Lancet* Commission's approach to technology centers on its potential to capture, and potentially minimize, the costs and risks associated with autism in general. Technology seems to serve the role of controlling autistic bodies so that they may be seen to conform to neurotypical social norms (even while this runs the risk of creating further autistic pathologies, such as screen addiction (322)). The community approach, on the other hand, focuses on knowledge and technologies to facilitate connections and capacities that may support both the pursuit of individual interests and plans and collectively meaningful activities that relate to real-world challenges. In the latter case, risks, costs, and knowledge are shared (albeit differentially) by the participants in a particular project, but they are crucial part of any individual's enjoyment in participating.

I have focused throughout this book on how mutually recognitive connections between humans make certain kinds of action possible. Since our ontological agency depends on mutually recognitive interactions (which are open to the possibility of difference at the level of subjectivity), and since I have argued that autism can most helpfully be characterized as an interpersonally variable sensory orientation to the environment, it seems implausible that cognitive models could facilitate meaningful and autonomous action within a normative social world. I have argued that ontological agency as 'confidence that one will appear in the world and be recognized by others as a unique being' (Lucas 2016: 20) underpins our capacity to engage in a shared world. I have begun to argue in this chapter that autistic peer support and collaboration are essential elements of facilitating the kinds of connections that could support the development of a practical, functional identity as a distinctive sensory subject – and mitigate the distress of experiencing misrecognition or thwarted belonging.

Any system that aims to facilitate autistic modes of address or apprehension while simultaneously supporting our confidence that we are distinctive individuals will need to allow for how multiple, intersecting narratives will affect our confidence in navigating the world. This confidence, as self-trust, is essential to achieving modes of relation and belonging that preserve our narrative agency and that allow us to imagine ourselves as occupying multiple worlds in which different aspects of our identity may become visible to us. Insofar as peer support organizations embody counter-narratives about the potential value of autistic collaboration, they need to avoid becoming master narratives that imply other groups are unworthy of moral respect.

The values of scientific research

According to the philosopher Isabelle Stengers, scientific research can also be regarded as part of an ‘ecology of practices’ involving configurations of specialists, devices, arguments, and materials, which collectively constitute what is of ‘value’ within each individual investigation (Stengers 2010). As she describes the situation in *Cosmopolitics*, the social sciences are typically conducted in such a way that value consists in the ability of researchers to interpret facts in order to distinguish them from mere opinion. While this may seem logical, this project has accelerated under neoliberalism to such an extent that the actual ecology of practices regards ethical considerations as mere matters of opinion, meaning that the status quo is left with very little in the way of ethical balances that would arise if different kinds of practices could thrive. And yet all science proceeds, whether we acknowledge it or not, from beliefs or matters of faith. This produces adversarial conditions in which only those practices that are premised on their capacity to deliver absolute truths are regarded as having any value.

It is a matter of faith, for those who believe it, that scientists will identify a single cognitive, neurological, or environmental mechanism or cluster of properties that is responsible for what manifests as autism in any individual person. However, any practice that is premised on embodying certainty, and as a generalized truth, risks not only failure in those terms but the loss of competing investigative practices, and the varied and variable lived experiences of many individuals that surround it and seek to correct its ethical limitations. Stengers proposes that, instead, the investigator should assume the position of a ‘non-relativist sophist’ who acknowledges the ‘truth of the relative’, which is to say the truth that is relative to practice and which does not supplant the existence of multiple non-relative *values* of knowledge creation (2010: 43).

Cognitive models for autism demonstrate the danger of assuming that science proceeds with absolute certainty, where universalizable knowledge is taken as more valuable than investigating the many possible interactions between beings, ideas, practices, and technologies. As I argued in Chapters

3 and 4, this assumption could lead us to regard autistic people as embodying an extension of what we already value and can appropriate for our own uses: a tendency toward mechanistic reasoning or a concern for the non-human. The value of autism research is conflated with the properties of the methods that are used to investigate it rather than in terms of its emergence within specific worlds.

What values could emerge if we considered autism as part of a nexus of more-than-human ecologies of practice? We might seek those 'symbiotic agreements' which render different forms of subjectivity more stable through time (Stengers 2010: 35). Our practices should aim, at the very least, to respond to the struggles and challenges facing those modes of existence we are investigating, rather than represented in terms of the utility of those existences to a supposedly detached observer.

Cognitivist autism research enacts a particular kind of value that is presumed to reside in the thought of non-autistic, cognitive subjects (Wolf-Meyer 2020: 52–53). The value of autism research can be seen to align to the autonomy of Life, registered exclusively as non-autistic, symbolic forms of life. Yet, as Kohn also notes, thought extends beyond the mind of any individual and cannot be disentangled from the broader whole of which human life is just a part. The ability to communicate in terms of symbols may be useful for some autistics. Equally, a tendency to notice non-symbolic patterns, not only of 'data' but of responsiveness and interaction, may be necessary for more of us if we are to achieve sustainable living alongside 'non-life' and the more-than-human.

While here and in the last two chapters I have questioned the possibility of separating human life from the material, cultural, and biological world with which it is enmeshed, I now wish to return to the question of how we recognize the perspectives of other humans so that we register the challenges they face within the neoliberal ecology of practices. Insofar as much about our lives is beyond the scope of our awareness, including our location in networks of power that extend well beyond us, those who are different from us may enrich our understanding in distinctive ways. In what follows, I try to sketch out a model of 'representative thinking' that can aid decision-making about autism research.

In light of the problems we experience in translating methods of interpreting the world which differ fundamentally from our own, either as a result of cultural or perceptual differences, we can create a space for reasoning defined not by cognitive or a priori criteria but by 'setting aside our idiosyncrasies in our approach to another's point of view' (Gatta 2014: 1012). In making judgments about what research to pursue or which intervention to support, we should seek not 'a view from nowhere, detached from the specific standpoints of concrete human being' but instead 'the explosion of specific points of view into many different ones' (1012).

Since an abnormal moral context requires us to see ourselves and others differently, and loving perception requires recognition of individual distinctiveness despite overlapping oppressions, there is fellow feeling defined not as 'stepping into another's shoes' but as the creation of a space that allows for the recognition of similarity and difference. Drawing on Karl Jaspers' writing about his phenomenological approach to psychotherapy, Giunia Gatta approaches moral and political judgment as a dialectic process alongside others:

> One would begin by listening to what that person is saying. And one would explode a singular point of view into a more complex situation encompassing multiple points of view, including the listener's own. Not with the confidence that the procedure will yield a neutral, impartial (but once again singular) and just point of view, but rather in an effort to re-create that movement of thought that constitutes, in Jaspers' view, our only hope to approach truth, and of which the real voices of others must be an integral component. One would draw on such movement to prepare for a judgment that remain his or her own responsibility, in inescapable uncertainty about its rightness and justice. Insofar as listening is a political act, attention to someone's account of the situation from her or his unique perspective acquires great political meaning. (1009)

The concept of 'voices' here takes on the widest possible meaning to encompass whatever allows us to take on a different perspective and, in so doing, to this venture redefines our shared situation (1008). In exploring questions of rightness and justice, we might also think about how our cultural location may inhibit our recognition of sensibilities that cannot be conveyed through existing languages or modes of address.

A pattern thinking revisited: beyond technology

For autistic narrators who describe themselves as experts in discerning patterns in sensory experience, different kinds of value emerge according to the field in which they are immersed and the forms of relation they require. This means that those 'autistic people [who] are good at some tasks that many neurotypical people find arduous or boring' will be granted a particular value (Hacking 2009b): 'Paradoxically, the tasks are often the ones that may have special uses in our logocentric era, in which the formal codification and structuring of information plays an ever-increasing role' (514). However, a tendency to notice patterns can also contribute to new fields of relation, rather than serve to reinforce existing social practices that rely on the production and consumption of big data. An interest or tendency to notice patterns might motivate efforts to mitigate social oppression or misrecognition, or to express the potential of the non-living emergent forms that Eduardo Kohn describes as being independent of specifically human modes of representation (172). It may equally inform a love of activities that provide material and sensory sustenance. Pattern thinking can lead to new ways of imagining social life which avoid the allocation of arduous labor and precarity according to existing social hierarchies.

In this way, 'pattern thinking' is not the ability to discern abstract data from its social context, but an aspect of understanding what makes a world livable and convivial for all kinds of subjectivities. The authors of *Patterns of Commoning* describe the importance of pattern detection in the creation of sustainable social institutions:

> Patterns stimulate focused reflection. The knowledge created in this way directly influences the actions of commoners and shapes the contexts of their future activities. Patterns of commoning can promote the basic openness of a process, help guarantee that everyone involved is actually part of the discussion and decision making, and raise the question again and again: How does this process support everyday needs and the enlivenment of life?
>
> (Bollier and Helfrich 2015)

The language of patterning originates in design theory but encompasses experiential knowledge of all kinds of processes that can be shared and, through their sharing, provide new sources of intersubjective meaning. Commoning is an emergent approach to developing processes based upon mutually agreed values, rather than assuming that human activities can only be measured in terms of abstract symbolic worth. This openness toward diverse outcomes paves the way for individual actors to co-create their roles so that they disrupt existing hierarchies.

Within an educational context, the tendency to notice patterns in our own and other people's responses can lead us to develop more inclusive practices. Autistic educators, such as Donna Williams, may intuitively grasp the need for different paces and styles in interacting with their students (see Chapter 3). Neurotypical educators who specialize in working with autistic students may also acquire such habits through experience. The literary scholar Ralph Savarese contrasts his autistic students' 'visuo-spatial skills' with non-autistic 'verbal thinking', and subsequent 'diminished sensory thinking' (2018: 39). Literature is, for Savarese, a meeting point between cognitive styles because it generates sensory images for those who are unaccustomed to dealing with the symbolic-referential aspects of language; it also forces verbal thinkers to disrupt the superficial patterns of ideas that circulate in mainstream social life. He illustrates this with an example from his conversations with his friend Jamie, about Leslie Marmon Silko's novel *Ceremony*:

> Jamie revealed his considerable ability to 'sequence the pattern'; 'the pattern is what I see in the first look', he said. 'I like following it. Truly I am summoning the answers and revealing what the information connects'. [...] What Jamie describes above sounds a lot like motif tracing, a staple of literary study [...] This structure is subtle, and it requires not only searching for it in unexpected places but also recognizing it in unexpected forms. I took note of how Jamie had translated a nonconceptual autistic propensity – to see patterns – into a conceptual neurotypical one. In literature he had found a meeting point for the two processing styles. 'Books are patterning on thoughts', he said confidently.
>
> (Savarese 2018: 73)

Savarese suggests that autistics may become 'neuro-cosmopolitans' insofar as they learn to translate non-linguistic forms of thinking into a visuo-spatial symbolic language. I have argued that autistic tendencies toward sensory thinking are not restricted to specifically visual modalities and require different kinds of translation for those who are oriented to symbolic language. As I explored in the last chapter, Katherine May, Dawn Prince, Jolene Stockman, and Daina Krumins draw on the affective properties of objects and events to create a space for the communication of their distinctive perspectives. While literature, film, and poetry serve as a repository of symbols, narrative structures, and character types which can expand our semiotic habits, they can also engage us in synesthetic experiences that communicate our habits of responding to the world and coordinating our actions in space and time. While Savarese suggests that the senses offer a meeting point for different kinds of subjectivities, his analysis relies on the assumption that visuo-spatial models of cognition can be distinguished from the rhythms and patterns of temporal experience. The authors I discussed in the previous chapter suggest that it may be impossible to 'translate' one form of subjectivity directly into another; instead, we need to join in a shared practice to understand its meaning and value to those who are engaged in it.

Diagnosis

NeuroTribes advances the viewpoint that autistic people should be understood as a group which has collectively accelerated the evolution of science and technology (2015).[6] Silberman writes in the aftermath of the 1990s diagnostic shift toward recognizing a 'spectrum' of autistic conditions, and specifically Lorna Wing's influential work on children whose language acquisition, attentional focus, and behavioral differences defied categorization within existing clinical paradigms. Based on the needs of a cohort of children in south London who were more diverse than Kanner's criteria for 'childhood autism', Wing contributed to revised diagnostic criteria that could encompass children who need help through life but could also equally flourish with the right sort of learning environment (2015: 337).

Following Wing, Silberman suggested that autism be considered as a manifold of natural variations in the human genome that could not be defined by a disease model that can be calibrated by severity. Silberman celebrated the spectrum concept's ability to encompass a group of people who had hitherto not been *granted recognition* as autistic: who could then go on to contribute to increasing understanding of what autism is. Drawing on a number of family and individual case histories, he argued that autistic 'strengths' in focus *and* creativity were indissociable from difficulties and could vary through the course of an individual life.

Insofar as Silberman's concept of autism is a property of the human genome and a tendency toward 'assortative mating', it occupies an ambiguous position with regard to what lies beyond individuals, including in terms of feedback loops across different scales, between individuals, materials, and environments. This focus may overlook the extent to which autism as a form of subjectivity, a sensibility, or a mode of address may be shaped not only by discourses and concepts but also by the affective connections between autistic people themselves. As Alyssa Hillary Zisk describes their own engagement with autistic autobiography in 'Autist/Biography':

> We don't just write for neurotypical audiences – we write for each other, too. Cynthia Kim, an Autistic blogger, is explicit in selecting her autistic, or possibly autistic, audience in I *Think I Might Be Autistic: A Guide to Autism Spectrum Diagnosis and Self-Discovery for Adults* (2013). Kim mixes advice for adults who think they might be autistic, perhaps because they've recognized themselves in other Autist/biographical writings, with an account of her own journey of recognition and diagnosis (2013). Not only does she combine her own experiences with information for others, reflecting on both, but she addresses her work to others in her former situation.
>
> (329)

What happens when we center on autistic readings of autistic life texts? Hillary argues that autistic people turn to life writing, much like anyone else, in search of 'connections and confirmation of our own perceptions' (330). This 'reading for connections' problematizes received understandings of autism as Mentalizing deficits: 'Simply treating Autist/biography like the rest of auto/biography can challenge dominant ideas of autism as an exceptional lack of connection, empathy, and humanity' (ibid).

In focusing on the importance of autobiography to autistic readers, Hillary hints that narratives may serve as 'imaginative horizons', which Vincent Crapanzano described as 'blurry boundaries that separate the here and now from what lies beyond' (2003). While an identity story such as Kim's may not circulate more widely as a counter-narrative about autism, it may summon an image of a future that influences our interpretations of our experiences, so that they may seem to anticipate a more desirable future.

AutCollab's definition of 'autistic ways of being' may be read as promising a similar sense of potentiality-through-relation, in contrast to existing diagnostic practices:

> For anyone who relates to the communal description of Autistic ways of being below, this investment of time may be the most valuable investment imaginable […] If you are wondering whether you are Autistic, spend time amongst Autistic people, online and offline. If you notice you relate to these people much better than to others, if they make you feel safe, and if they understand you, you have arrived.
>
> (AutCollab 2021)

This community affirmation of the potential for belonging and safety may serve as an antidote to the imaginative horizons provided by the Catch 22 of autism research, which Bervoets and Hens describe as the situation in which it is impossible to identify as autistic and to regard oneself as experiencing good mental health (2020). In their argument for the reconceptualization of autism as 'Autism-Related Disorder (ARD)', they recognize the need to 'sever the link between autism and pathology whilst at the same time acknowledging that given circumstances, many autistics experience breakdowns of intersubjectivity that require a formal diagnosis to get access to the care they need' (13). But this focus on the need to disentangle autism from dysfunctionality does not go far enough: Bervoets and Hens' focus on a universal process for social connection misses the misrecognition that arises from stereotypes about autism and other aspects of identity.[7]

Commoning in the biosphere

For the anthropologist Timothy Ingold, the basis of human connection and social life is the attainment of a certain 'like-mindedness', 'forging a concordance' (2017: 14). For Ingold, we understand other humans not by trying to discern a universal form of human being but by 'becoming alongside' others; one way in which we do this is through communication, which is what enables us to 'come to possess things in common' (ibid). Demonstrating commonality is, following the Pragmatist philosopher John Dewey, dependent on an imaginative projection of difference as the individuals take on a shared experience:

> [H]aving things in common is not a prerequisite for communication but its outcome; not what allows us to communicate but what it achieves. To have in common is not to look into ourselves, to regress to a set of baseline attributes, with which we are similarly endowed from the start, but to reach out to others who are – at least initially – different from us. To communicate with people is then to common with them, in the participatory process of living together. Such commoning entails an imaginative stretch by which I attempt to cast my experience forward in ways that can join with yours, and you likewise, and we can thenceforth travel the same path.
>
> (Ingold 15)

For Ingold, habit is 'doing-undergoing' rather than volitional – it is something one enacts from *within* experience. This is contrary to the concept of action as undertaken for the sake of reaching a prior intention and is consistent with the affective model of subjectivity that Wolf-Meyer proposes. It is also contrary to dominant Western ontologies, which reify a binary distinction between passive and active human subjects. But for Ingold 'habit' is not passive since it requires attention, and in his view it is this attention that serves as the basis of social relation.

Ingold's idea of habit looks for ethical value in practices that humans share with other species. His idea of a habit, therefore, unsettles the anthropocentrism that regards all thought as symbolic and conceptual in nature. Yet, in disclaiming the volitional/representational aspects of human connections, he lacks a framework to consider how certain subjects are treated as *more* passive according to dominant institutional structures in the West. There is also a danger in assuming that habits can be communicated without semiotic mediation. As Eduardo Kohn notes, to survive as an 'I', we must imagine ourselves 'hailed by others – others that may be human or nonhuman, fleshly or virtual' (Kohn 27). It also depends on how we respond – it may be enough to keep responding to those other lives around us, human and otherwise, as we have in the past, as a source of connection to a broader whole that we can never fully conceptualize.

But our symbolic roles – including our status as autistic – may draw our attention to the shared features of experience with others like us, including shared experiences of completing tasks in hostile sensory environments or shared experiences of being bullied or subject to other people's understandings of what is in our interests. Such roles may also help us to find pleasure in being able to contribute to the environments and projects that enable us to endure. And while disclosing our status as an 'autistic person' may undermine our narrative agency, it may also provide an opportunity to contribute to a local system that gives meaning to our activities. Modular systems embedded in a local cultural context can facilitate us in ways that are lively and sustaining.

Conclusion: autistic connectivity in the Anthropocene

Narratives about a shared autistic sensibility may simultaneously serve as acts of care for those who may struggle more than we do with participation in a normative social world, but with whom we otherwise affirm kinship commonalities, and as an affirmation of political agency in resisting the imposition of dominant external narratives onto our lives. This is evident both in Joanne Limburg's *Letters to My Weird Sisters* and in the collective narrative acts of the Autistic Task Force, above; it is also apparent in the Stimpunks and AutCollab websites. In each case, political agency depends on recognition – if only by our peers – of what we bring to a shared world so that we retain confidence in our understanding.

Our narrativity may be enhanced when we refuse to see ourselves and others as determined by a single narrative construction. This comes about when our identity stories refer to our lives within traditional cultural worlds (Stockman) or counter cultures (Yergeau) or a combination of both (Prahlad), and the stories that come about allow us to identify attributes such as playfulness, gentleness, creativity, and interdependence. This is the case even while we typically exist in worlds where these aspects are misrecognized. Stories may record and help us solidify transitions from habits that have become unsustainable or unhelpful, and toward new habits and forms of thought that connect us to a more-than-human world (Kedar and Prince-Hughes), or modes relating to the non-human world that serve as the basis of new forms of inter-human sociality (McAnulty, Krumins, and Thunberg). Most importantly, stories can register the ways in which neurophysiological and psychological differences form part of the meanings we attribute to our lives but cannot, from the first-person perspective, explain relevant differences as we participate in a broader whole, whether that is at the level of family, friendship group, community, or chosen community.

Although this book is concerned with non-fiction writing, Elizabeth Fein has explored how 'genre narrative' within fantasy provides autistic young people with customizable character types and plot motifs that can be used to convey both the experience of reaching adulthood in an unconventional way and the simultaneous need to develop alternative ethical codes that respond to those alternative developmental trajectories (2020: 231). For instance, fictional narratives that are set in speculative futures can help us to think through how smaller-scale interactions may contribute to broader collective change (Stimpunks). It is hoped that this book, through its focus on 'the ways in which people regulate and evaluate their associations with one another at both communal and intimate levels of life' (Crapanzano 2003: 4) can contribute to a broader shift away from dehumanizing simplifications of lives that are unlike our own. In emphasizing the importance of the imagination and possibility in both autistic people's identity narratives and in our responses to them, I have sought to show that the contemporary focus on reducing all experience to universal structures of cognition – before attending to their communicability or how such experiences relate to what we hold important, whether that is their values, spiritual outlook or other intimate areas of life – is inherently flawed, and thus inadequate. Yet, even while neurodevelopmental models increasingly frame autism as part of a wider diversity of variations in human patterns of perception, memory, attention, and learning that produce a 'complex pattern of benefits and drawbacks' practices of diagnosis and treatment are governed by a 'pathogen' model of physiological differences (Fein 4; 154). This means that even while the majority of difficulties that are experienced by autistic people exist in the space between individuals and their physical and social environments, the condition is inscribed on the bodies of individuals who are marked for 'pre-symptomatic' separation and treatment (142).

Both fictional and non-fictional narratives can enhance our sense of connectedness and belonging, particularly as they draw our awareness to the patterns of behavior and interpretation that we deploy in our own lives. And while Baron-Cohen and Crespi have suggested that pattern thinking is governed by a concern for the inert and mechanistic properties of a non-human world, the autistic narrators I refer to discern patterns across diverse modalities well beyond those that could be described as inert or mechanical. What matters, from the perspective of 'community building', is how sensory sensitivity and inclination toward the perceptual properties of an environment may support individual agency within our specific social and cultural worlds. Our sensory orientations will only distance us from social relation if we lack an audience which shares our wonder at the diverse manifestations of life.

I have explored narrative texts as the basis of individual and collective political agency for autistic people in diverse cultural contexts. This has included a focus on how personal identity stories may contribute to, or be reinforced by, counter-narratives that reinstate autistic people as moral agents. Alongside these emerging counter-stories, narratives across media may express or record individual and collective habits of interaction based on the senses or textures, suggesting how the social world may be reconfigured to accommodate different kinds of subjectivity. And such accommodations would teach us that there is so much more to how we 'learn, how we remember, how we attend, how we love' (Fein, see above) than can be understood through reference to neurological and cognitive structures.

Notes

1 'An open letter to the Lancet Commission on the future of care and clinical research in autism' is available on https://eucap.eu/ 2022/02/14/open-letter-to-lancet-commission/

2 The Task Force notes that the report fails to refer to the issues identified in several Mortality Studies conducted in recent years, which indicate widespread barriers to accessing appropriate mental and physical healthcare for autistic people (94–95).

3 See also Desiree R. Jones, K.M. DeBrabander and N. J. Sasson, 'Effects of autism acceptance training on explicit and implicit biases toward autism', *Autism*, 25(5), 1246–1261. Online at <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361320984896>

4 For instance, the Taskforce authors are explicit that neutral differences require support in a world that is designed for others:

> [C]onsidering something as natural variation does not equal claiming that it 'does not need intervention.' It means preferring interventions that target systems and environments, supporting individuals to thrive as they are in place of trying to bring them closer to the 'perceived norm' (94).

5 The Task Force suggests it is a matter of empirical discovery whether those with co-occurring conditions consider their autism as a natural variation (94): the *Lancet* Commission authors suggest that it is self-evidently true that anyone who has autism and, for instance, depression would be inclined to see their autism as a disorder.

6 While I have critiqued Baron-Cohen's adjacent invocation of autistic strengths in STEM subjects in his 'extreme male brain' view of autism, it is worth noting that Silberman questions the prenatal testosterone exposure account and has proposed instead that assortative mating explains the preponderance of autistic traits among families with a history of employment in science, technology, and engineering (2015: 10). Both Baron-Cohen and Silberman draw on Hans Asperger's studies to justify the perceived connections between autism and STEM skills. But as James McGrath has noted, Asperger regarded autism as entailing potential skills in the arts as much as in STEM subjects (2017: 39). Furthermore, since women and girls are often left out of recruitment into autism research studies (DeMello et al 2022), there is a general failure to note the role of enculturation in the development of particular skillsets among autistics.

7 For this reason, it would be more helpful to propose that we create the diagnostic category of an 'autism-related condition' to describe autism-related difficulties with mental health that arise because of a misfit between autistic ways of interacting with others and dominant communicative practices.

Conclusion

Provocations on why autistic people matter

When critics take the autistic disregard for meaning and the symbolic literally, this tends to lead toward speculation on what it means to exist through 'immersion into the flow of time and event' (Skott-Myhre and Taylor 2011). Although this perspective offers rewarding aesthetic speculation about autistic experiences, it doesn't quite capture the pleasures and challenges of commonality, specifically as we focus on the practical requirements of living alongside other selves who, like us, are unlike anyone else who has ever lived. The political and ethical textures of autistic lives are manifest in both individual and community projects that seek to make life livable for all kinds of selves, including and beyond those who would currently be described as autistic.

This might focus on the challenges that autistic and otherwise neurodivergent young adults face as they transition to adulthood within a Western culture that is typically aimed at reaffirming heteronormative, racist, and ableist norms and which devalues the experiences of childhood. It could equally focus on how a particular institution might adapt to accommodate all kinds of selves, including those who refuse to identify with normative social identities. A community-oriented approach would not idealize a singular, non-autistic way of being or place individuals in a position of power to seek adjustments on behalf of all autistic individuals, however well-motivated they are. While it is true that autistic and otherwise disabled people experience distinctive challenges to accessing timely and appropriate healthcare, changes should take into account that barriers will not only consist of poor or stereotypical understandings of autism but intersecting sources of power that exclude many people, much of the time. When this does not happen, autism is used as a means of allocating resources according to existing understandings of what counts as a life worth living, rather than reframing questions about what we gain from interdependence.

Finally, a community-oriented project might explore what it means to have cultural agency, as a property of individuals and collectives that deploy cultural resourcefulness to resist monolithic and authoritarian regimes.

DOI: 10.4324/9781003036807-10

Sarah Lucas's theorization of a narrative model of agency responds to the ways in which individual engagements with social norms always produce a 'surfeit of meaning, creativity, and spontaneity' (2016: 49), a process of resignification that allows us to act with a common purpose. This understanding of narrative pushes back against the understanding that meaning is either the province of individual genius or entirely constrained by dominant interpretative regimes. I have noted that, while there is no escape from the power relations through which we are recognized as narrative agents within institutional settings, the cultural world in which we are embedded opens up a plurality of ways to imagine the significance of our actions. For this reason, and while in the majority of this book I have highlighted individual narrative agents, I want to return to the centrality of relational contexts in which we understand actions as meaningful. As Stimpunks have shown, cultural agency is developed through pedagogy, activism, language, and creative practice, and it has the potential to expand what we think of as the social.

I have referred to 'community building' as a project, rather than something that one achieves by acquiescing with the norms of a given institution. In this way, it is amenable to analysis in terms of anthropological ideas about kinship which question the assumption that there is a transparent biological imperative underlying all human forms of association. Instead, we may come to see that our understandings of biology are constrained by the available cultural frameworks. Rather than interpreting 'neurological' identities as necessarily reductive and constrained by the ideological projects of neoliberal individualism, kinship identities formed from discourses surrounding autism may creatively disrupt the supposedly discrete categories that exist within medical textbooks and clinical spaces. These explorations, and parallels in other disability community projects, can suggest new possibilities for engaged research that seeks to amplify more inclusive forms of relatedness.

Autistic kinship imaginaries

In the last chapter, I discussed how conviviality is underpinned by institutional frameworks that support accessible forms of communication and connection, including in relation to a broader non-human world. In recent chapters, I have explored commoning and collaboration in terms of autistic community-oriented research and support arrangements.

Where real-world institutional practices impede conviviality for diverse sensibilities, autistic-authored autobiographies identify the power of fictive kinships – relations that are based neither on consanguineal nor affinal ties – which provide more practical and emotional sustenance than our 'true kinship'. For Faye Ginsburg and Rayna Rapp, kinship imaginaries intervene against the opposing tendencies of 'the aspiration for democratic inclusion and the fantasy of bodily perfectibility through technological intervention' (2001: 552); they gesture, instead, toward the role that popular culture can play in creating awareness of the everyday nature of disability. Like Wolf-Meyer, Ginsburg and Rapp focus on parental narratives, which, based on a 'reimagined' idea of citizenship, 'offer what we have called unnatural histories, visions of lives lived against the grain of normalcy' (2001: 552). While focusing most explicitly on families whose children have received a statement of educational needs and as a result are now working within, and often against, inconsistent medical understandings, their conception of 'mediated kinship' (2015: 105) can also help to define what cultural agency and social capital might look like for autistic and otherwise disabled groups within a WEIRD culture. This concept registers how kinship is not only founded on sharing 'blood and other bodily substances' but also on sharing modes of interpretation and communication (ibid). Drawing on Mitchel and Snyder's work on disability film festivals organized by and for disabled communities, Ginsburg and Rapp orient us toward their functioning at the level of aesthetics where 'distinctive features of that world come into formation' (116). The proliferation of online watching, listening, and making groups which occurred during the Covid-19 pandemic merits further consideration (see Betts et al. 2023).

As I explored in relation to the work of Stimpunks and AutCollab, new media, in particular, provide public spaces that allow for discussions of the limitations of existing family structures when confronted with disability. Autistic-authored autobiographies can be seen not only as a development out of new online communities developed specifically by and for autistic people, but also in terms of these broader counter-normative social contexts that allow reinterpretation of concepts such as care and interdependence. Kinship imaginaries also support the development of counter-discourses about autism and other 'severe' neurological conditions which are not based on a reductive neuro-determinism.

Ginsburg and Rapp's work on the 'unnatural histories' of families with disabled children may also be applied to life writing by autistic people themselves insofar as these stories question the desirability of existing family structures and the developmental milestones they embody. Like the family narratives considered by Ginsburg and Rapp, autistic-authored texts show not only the practical need for 'acceptance of difference' to make life livable within a domestic space, but also the 'embrace of relatedness' beyond the family and to other forms of life, and it is this imaginative space that 'such models of inclusion present to the body politic that makes these spaces potentially radical in their implications' (2001: 551). This form of kinship based on 'doing' and 'becoming' rather than 'being', as alluded to earlier (McKinnon 2016), resembles the idea of neuroqueering

(Yergeau 2017; Walker 2021) as a social practice of resistance through new interpretative structures.

This kinship may center on both stories and the making of objects, such as blog posts, films, or longer form narratives, which simultaneously represent and produce new cultural understandings of what it means to experience connection within a community. Real families are often the source of ideas about what it means to be autistic, for instance, as late-diagnosed parents (or even grandparents) consider the sense of their likeness to their children or other, more distant, relatives (Lilley et al. 2022). Friendships with non-consanguineal autistic adults can afford the opportunity for positive self-reinterpretation akin to the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals navigating the 'coming out' process (Bertilsdotter-Rosqvist 2012a and 2012b). Since such fictive kinship as 'doing' is future-oriented and mobile, rather than retrospective and bounded within a specific geographic location, its models of relatedness are often progressive and intersectional (Ginsburg and Rapp 2011). Insofar as Povinelli's trope of the 'genealogical subject' defined by inescapable inheritances operates to reaffirm the value and aspirations of the settler-colonial subject (Povinelli 2016), fictive kinship networks provide imaginative freedom to reconsider modes and practices of relation.

Not all kinship narratives are progressive or offer the potential to challenge the idea that autistic forms of life are static and unchanging. As I addressed in Chapters 2 and 3, public 'common sense' discussions about autism often reinforce a version of kinship that is based on the gendered nuclear family structure. At the same time, fictive kinship networks can provide social knowledge about the reality of living with autism which can be elided by fantasies of autonomy. For instance, it can help actual families within WEIRD nations to reframe the idea of achievement so that it can allow room for shared forms of experience between parents and children, such as recognition of conflicting, but nonetheless real, dreams, plans, and desires (Solomon 2013).

Despite the way that disability issues are marginalized and excluded, fictive kinship networks offer a space to question the desirability of nuclear family structures and to work through new ideas of ethics, achievement, and learning. While such understandings are often part of the care work that disabled people's organizations do, they are seldom taken into consideration even in the public fields that ostensibly deal with understanding disability, which are typically focused on structural relations of power. Autistic and otherwise disabled people are seen as the source of 'lived experience' and evidence about either those structures or neurology, rather than as the potential agents of new concepts, ideas, and understandings of culture. Ideas that originate from the neurodiversity or disability community are seen as too costly to be adopted more generally, especially when they fall out of the purview of diagnostic frameworks that exclude whole realms of human social experience. In

Ginsburg and Rapp's formulation, culture is central to 'scaling up' new forms of sociality from the domestic realm and into civic life, allowing new 'counter-publics' to emerge and develop new *doxa* (120).

However, such changes do not happen without a broader social context and this creates both unique challenges and opportunities for autistic kinship imaginaries. Emerging out of a broader disability rights movement, autistic self-advocacy is based on a claim for rights to inclusion in economic and social life within a global context. Insofar as this coincides with neoliberal demands for a diverse and flexible workforce, and work that itself can be supported by practices of remote working and mediated communication by online platforms, 'autistic inclusion' in the workplace can be seen as good for business and since it may provide unique skills and strengths to the labor force. Such inclusion in economic life may contribute to the amelioration of stigma for autistics and others who are regarded as neurodivergent in this limited sense, through recognition of the 'fluidity and flexibility' of diagnostic categories, so that the formerly stigmatized can be regarded as capable of attaining the status of an 'autonomous, self-reliant, individual' (Grinker 2020: 20). Within such discourses an implicit contrast is typically made between autism and categories such as schizophrenia or addiction, which retain the former stigmatizing associations of autism (Grinker 2020). More expansive conceptualizations of neurodiversity and neurodivergence challenge the assumption that there are 'types of brains' that can be unraveled from a sociocultural context (Walker 2021: 58). But this nuance is often lost in the broader late liberal quest to harness the potential monetary value of neurodiversity, which threatens to undermine the radical potential of the concept.

The recent emphasis on including autistic people in the world of work may present access to certain social goods – such as financial security – that have hitherto been unavailable. However, a singular focus on acquiring independence through work – rather than interdependence – may undermine the possibility for disabled people to 'find meaning in other aspects of their lives', and this suggests that such 'meaning is threatening to our culture's value system' (Taylor 2004). In the fourth chapter of this book, I suggested that autism as a form of neurological subjectivity is particularly vulnerable to what I call, following Elizabeth Povinelli, the 'carbon imaginary' (2016), which is a neoliberal tactic for dramatizing the gap between Life as freedom and potential and 'that which is conceived as before or without Life' (p. 37). Insofar as autistic people are regarded through the lens of the animist genealogical subject in virtue of their supposedly fixed neurology (Fein 2020) or genetic endowment, they may be presented as inhabiting a past tense, or a social world governed by rules and deprived of freedom and possibility. As I also described in Chapter 4, the role that autistic people may play within the global environmental movement can be rendered inert by the assumption that autistics are unable to discriminate between 'Life' and 'non-life', as modern-day animists (Povinelli 17) who share a 'premodern' lack of affect. This is the case even when individual writers attend to the different kinds of agency and intentionality manifest in human life, non-human life, and non-life, or to the ways in which both new aesthetic practices and new technologies can democratize cosmopolitical space.

As a reaction to the singular focus on economic inclusion, social scientists and psychologists, often in partnership with autistic-identifying researchers, have looked at broader forms of social belonging (see, for example, Crompton et al. 2022), which include interspecies affiliations (Solomon 2015; Malcolm et al. 2018). Insofar as these accounts aim at depersonalized understandings, they contribute knowledge of how we might create more accessible worlds for autistic people in general. However, when such research focuses exclusively on the assumed fixity of autistic identity, it risks reinforcing the assumption that autistics are inevitably at a disadvantage in social interaction and exempt from the possibility of finding new modes of relating to others and expanding their points of view (see Chapter 5). As Elizabeth Fein has noted, discourses surrounding neuroplasticity have opened the possibility of registering the interpenetration of the social and inorganic into what would typically be thought as matters of biological determination (Fein 130). But in reality, Fein observes:

> The expansion of neuroscience into broader social, interpersonal, environmental terrain is often followed by the constriction of that new territory back into familiar forms, accessible through existing technologies and compatible with existing funding mechanisms.
>
> (13)

Insofar as research has identified the distress that autistic people experience when they do not feel socially connected, this is typically explored in relation to either a hypothesized universal autistic deficit or to the ways that conventional forms of social relation are inaccessible to autistic people. In returning to my original question of what it takes for an autistic person to be recognized as a narrative agent, I return to the idea of ontological agency through the related concept of mattering, as the sense that we are registered (materially, practically, and emotionally) as making a difference to the world around us (Elliot et al 2004).[1]

Belonging and mattering

We register that we matter when we are aware of us as an individual, when they invest in us, and when they look to us for resources without seeking to reduce us to our use value within a mainstream culture. This project has given me a chance to argue that autistic people matter. Yet, the book has mostly been concerned with the first condition of mattering: the sense that we are regarded as an individual, as a distinctive narrating subject. Belonging, on the other hand, refers not only to the sense of being important to others around us but to the notion that there is a good fit, in terms of complementarity or similarity between us and those surrounding us. In the sense that individuals within a minority group may struggle to feel that they belong when they do not feel their characteristics are valued even if we see that we can bring something new to the world. Belonging is, therefore, not something that individuals can achieve for themselves (Asher and Weeks 2014).

Insofar as I have argued that solidarity involves learning to inhabit another's world of sense so that we may better understand their intentions and support their realization in action (Introduction) this unsettles the authorized modes of academic practice where excellence is premised on expertise within a singular world of sense. For those of us with privileged access to WEIRD disciplinary divides, we may rely on our own fictive kinship networks within academia to try to develop new modes of analysis and work at the edges of existing funding mechanisms and technologies (Bertilsdotter-Rosqvist et al. 2023). Insofar as we only connect with individuals and groups in the Global North, we are at risk of reinforcing the hierarchies that have underpinned historical exclusions of knowledge. I do not propose that I have the answer to how to foster these connections in meaningful ways, but I believe that they will depend on trusted relationships between individuals rather than groups defined by traditional markers of academic prestige.

In the previous chapter I argued that individuals can come together to define new institutions in which a wider range of subjectivities can matter through what Matthew Wolf-Meyer calls modularity and transversality (see Chapter 5). Jorn Bettin's 'operating model' provides one possible structure for how autistic and other neurominority individuals may be recognized as mattering insofar as it supports relationships between distinctive individuals who are facilitated by new forms of communication and collaboration. But these are not the only possibilities for facilitating autistic sensibilities, and I have therefore argued for the importance of stories that express the many ways in which we can organize the social world to be more convivial. I have also argued that how we respond to these stories matters in terms of the subjectivities that exist, and continue to exist, in the world to come.

While well-being discourses have not been a central focus of this book, I would like to leave you with one final thought about the way that master narratives about autism are entangled with other culturally definitive worldviews. Emerging discourses about autism and well-being seem to suggest that there are inherent properties of autistics that undermine the possibility of living well, namely insofar as it is impossible to be autistic and participate in normative forms of social interaction. Belonging is therefore either something that individuals do when they can participate fully in the culturally sanctioned social realm without feeling that they are compromised in expressing their unique desires and propensities, or something that can be done for us through the translation efforts and prompts of non-autistic peers.

Yet, what does understanding of well-being do for us, premised as it is on a normative understanding of belonging? How does it allow for the possibility of finding new ways of mattering or living well, including those that exist in other historical periods and locations? In terms of well-being research more generally, I believe that we need to address those conditions that underpin our pursuit of what we 'value, pursue and enjoy, and what it is that subverts, misdirects or obstructs this' (Atkinson 2021: 25).

By focusing on autistic narratives that convey individual acts of sense-making, rather than on static images or concepts of autism, I try to emphasize the need to travel to worlds that foreground the ongoing temporality and particularity of autistic people's experience of the social world and relationships, for the sake of both enriching collective social and cultural life and to understand how subjectivity both shapes, and is shaped by, collaborative aesthetic practices and technologies. I hope this work does something to resist the hugely amplified voices of a few highly funded researchers who urge for increasingly *atomized* approaches to neurological difference, in line with the 'divided medicalization' that creates ever new issues for medical intervention (Fein 19). I also hope this text serves as a useful tool in helping to 'scale up' the ideas that I owe to my own autistic kinship network, and without whom this book would not have been possible.

Note

1 With thanks to Harriet Cannon for mentioning this idea to me.

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