Occupying Autism: Rhetoric, Involuntarity, and the Meaning of Autistic Lives

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> *. . . the path to empathy is the occupation of another's point of view.*
>
> – Jay David Bolter & Richard Grusin (pp. 245–246)

Abstract

Autistic people are hardly described as having the capability to form their own community(s). This obsession with our incapability transcends scholarly discipline—it is routinely portrayed as an inseparable part of autism as a condition. Across scholarly and popular domains, autistic people are portrayed as egocentric, mindblind, and asocial. Using autie-ethnographic analysis, I argue that scholars and lay publics alike represent autism as an involuntary condition. What autistic people consider rhetorical moves—e.g., ticcing, stimming, perseverating—medical practitioners consider involuntary or aberrant behaviors. In this construction, autism represents arhetorical symptoms of a problemed body rather than a valid and underrepresented form of communication.

Keywords

Autism • Involuntarity • Agency • Theory of mind • Rhetoric • Narrative • Neurodivergence • Mental disability • Autie-ethnography

6.1

"Melanie," she writes, and I imagine her doing so in an armchair, a red velvet armchair, this woman enunciating each syllable of my name, if only to make sure I comprehend her—"I hope as we go forward, Melanie, I hope you come

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to understand that at many levels what does and does not apply to you"—I stop reading, grind my teeth, poke my tongue in a developing cavity, if only to make my wince more wince-worthy—and continue on with her letter. "It's not meant to personally challenge you," she blathers, "but are the observations and ways of those with very different life experiences. Other people have different life experiences than you, Melanie, but I understand how difficult it is for you to put yourself in others' shoes."

I stop reading. It *is* difficult for me to fit into others' shoes. My feet are incredibly narrow size nines, and I often fall out of my shoes—*my* shoes. And then there was toddlerhood, me walking so feverishly and insistently on tiptoes, my mother recalls, that the doctors considered cerebral palsy! (with an exclamation point!) and hurriedly put my legs in casts below the knees, then braces, only to find out that it wasn't cerebral palsy, that it wasn't a symptom of anything with a clinically recognized name, at least not anything clinically recognized in the U.S. until 1995, at least not a symptom of anything other than Melanie being Melanie and what the hell is wrong with Melanie? There are empaths, and then there are disempaths—and as a teenager I was pegged into that escapably inescapable designation, that of the autism spectrum disorder, the one that, if you believe the charities, creeps into your child's room at night and steals her soul, steals her ability to walk flat-footed, steals her ability, as the blathering woman in the imaginary red velvet armchair put it, to recognize that "other people have different life experiences."

So much of my childhood was a search for an explanation—a search carried out by my parents, pastors, teachers, counselors, and the elementary school kids who liked to beat me up at recess. One day it's selective mutism, and the next day it's all my mother's fault. One day it's "let's get a CATSCAN and make sure she doesn't have a brain tumor," and the next day my guidance counselor asks if anyone has ever touched me. Once the autism designation descended from the diagnostic heavens, my capacity to empathize was suddenly eaten up by malfunctioning neurons. My capacity to engage in social relations or maintain eye contact vaporized alongside my personality. My capacity to *have* capacity was called into question.

What autism provided was a discursive framework, a lens through which others could story my life. My hand and full-body movements became *self-stimulatory behaviors*; my years-long obsession with maps and the Electric Light Orchestra became *perseverations*; my repetition of lines from the movie *Airplane!* became *echolalia*. My very being became a story, a text in dire need of professional analysis. This, my body, this was autism—and suddenly, with the neuropsychologist's signature on my diagnostic papers, I was no longer my body's author.

6.2

Popular autism discourse resembles an epidemic more than does autism. Media outlets routinely harp about the so-called "global health crisis," likening autism to a fate worse than pediatric AIDS, cancer, and diabetes combined (Autism Speaks

2012). An estimated one to two percent of the population—or 1 out of 68 people—resides on the autism spectrum. These days, when I read and hear the numbers, when freshmen at my alma mater tell the campus newspaper that these numbers are "so alarming," alarming enough for them to fear procreation—I think to Lennard Davis' work on disability and normalcy, specifically, when he describes the entire field of statistics as eugenics. Davis (2013) notes,

> Statistics is bound up with eugenics because the central insight of statistics is the idea that a population can be normed. An important consequence of the idea of the norm is that it divides the total population into standard and non-standard subpopulations. The next step in conceiving of the population as norm and non-norm is for the state to attempt to norm the nonstandard—the aim of eugenics. (p. 3)

When I am a number—a gendered number at that, and I mean gendered number both literally and figuratively, because I've synaesthetically thought of numbers as being gendered since I was a kid—but when I am a number, I'm a number to be avoided. A number meant to instill fear and alarm. A number meant to warn parents that *I* could happen to them. A number that signals the dissolution of marriages and other gratuitous disability-induced horrors. A number that borrows its soundtrack from that classic, repeated knife-stab move in slasher flicks. I can see and feel the numbers as eugenics—all too visually, all too tangibly.

But the fraughtness of autism discourse neither starts nor ends with numbers—it involves our very conceptions of autism, involves that tired misconception of autism precluding empathy, emotion, and personhood. Kidnapper imagery abounds in PSAs and billboards; popular nonprofits mourn the loss of the children that never were (Sinclair 1993). And as reprehensible as these mass-mediated representations are, perhaps more concerning to me (out of my own autism-induced self-centeredness?) (I pose that question snarkily) are the professional discourses that affect me, us, you, them—any and all of us who hold some connection to the amorphous numbers. For as much as we'd like to dismiss the autism-as-thief trope as the next of the myths du jour, such myths find their realities in the various professional discourses that surround autism and its theorized relations to numbers and agency and empathy and our very definition of humanity itself. As Erin Manning (2013) notes, "as we well know, without empathy you are not considered human" (p. 150). In these constructions, autism occupies humanless bodies, bodies that become puzzles for the non-autistic among us to "solve."

As John Duffy and Rebecca Dorner (2011) relate, autism is a narrative condition. Paul Heilker and I (2011) have made similar arguments—that autism is a profoundly rhetorical phenomenon. It's important to highlight the radicalness of these statements—that autism is narrativistic, that autism is rhetorical—because they represent a major departure from what scholarly literature, across disciplines, suggests about autism and empathy. Many scholars, for instance, have argued that autism precludes the ability to both compose and enjoy stories; and a series of recent articles in the *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* characterize autistic autobiography as lacking narrative structure, as lacking rhetorical facility and audience awareness, and as lacking self-reflection (Brown and Klein 2011; Brown et al 2012; Goldman 2008).

In many respects, this medicalized focus on *lack* is the crux of this essay. For autism is medically construed as a series of involuntarities—of thought, emotion, mode, action, and *being*.

Here I'd like to specify what I mean by involuntarity as a term—how I'm defining it, how I'm using it in relation to autism. In obvious terms, autism is not a voluntary condition—one doesn't "choose" autism, per se. Many parent narratives about autism echo this line of thought and speak of autism as something happening to them, as though their entire family had been struck by lightning. Particularly iconic, for instance, is the Autism Speaks "Learn the Signs" (2015) campaign, in which autism incidence is compared to car crash fatalities, hypothermia, kidnapping, pediatric cancer, and AIDS. (All of these things, despite autism being a non-fatal disability.) Numerous stakeholders in the autism world, from parents to journalists to bioethicists to autistic people themselves, have posed the following question: Who would choose autism? (Or, more broadly, who would choose any disability?)

Because autism isn't a switch that can be turned off at will (trust me, I've tried), the medical establishment writ large tends to conceive of autism as essentialized involuntarity. Its subjects are not subjects in the agentive sense of the word, but are rather victim-captives of a faulty neurology.

Of course, framing autism as neurological involuntarity is a false construct. After all, does anyone really *choose* their neurology? The idea that "no one chooses autism" doesn't negate the fact that no one doesn't *not* choose autism. And yet, even though neurotypicality is as much an involuntarity as is mental disability, the construct of involuntarity is culturally inscribed into autism as a condition. Autistics wrench and scream and rock their bodies, and they have no choice; they have no agency; they and their embodiment have no rhetorical or narrativistic purpose. Using such logic, a person does not occupy autism; rather, autism occupies a person.

And so, this obsession with autistic involuntarity goes far beyond the issue and illusion of choice—it goes to the very core of how autism is defined across diagnostic, scholarly, and popular literature. Deborah Barnbaum's (2008) *The Ethics of Autism* revolves around an understanding of autism that is the antithesis of both community and communicability, echoing the stereotypical sentiment that autistics are closed off from the larger world. "There is something intrinsically limiting in an autistic life," writes Barnbaum (p. 154). And, later, "Autism cuts people off from people" (p. 174). What Barnbaum and other scholars suggest is that autism is a world without people, that a world without people is a world without rhetoric, and that an arhetorical life is a life not worth living—a life beyond the realm of voluntary action and intentionality.

Within such a framework, involuntarity might encompass shit-smearing or body-rocking under its banner; it likewise encompasses any act of communication; it encompasses embodiment; it encompasses how one dwells in the world. It signifies a lack of purpose, a lack of intentionality, a lack of control over one's own person—and under the heading of "person," I'm including how we conceptualize mind, body, being, and self-determination. My flapping fingers and facial tics signify an anti-discourse of sorts: Where is my control? Where is my communicability? Would anyone choose a life of ticcing? How can an involuntary movement, an involuntary neurology, a state of being that is predicated on asociality—how can these things be *rhetorical*?

But involuntarity, I would argue, is not an inherent part of autism as a condition. Rather, involuntarity is forcibly imposed onto autistic bodies, onto mentally disabled bodies writ large, often to violent effect.

What I'm concerned with, in particular, is rhetoricity and the autistic subject's supposed lack thereof—and the ways in which this construction denies autistic people not only agency, but their very humanity. In support of such arguments, cognitive studies researchers, rhetoricians, and cognitive narratologists alike draw upon theories about theory of mind. Theory of mind (ToM), in short, is the ability to understand that other people have their own unique mental states, feelings, beliefs, and desires. But contemporary theories about ToM also invoke and assert other cognitive phenomena—including, but not limited to, mentalizing, meta-cognition, self-awareness, intentionality, and expressing empathy (Boucher 2012, p. 229). In other words, to lack a theory of mind is not simply to lack a theory of other's minds—it is also to lack an awareness of one's own mind (Carruthers 1996; McGeer 2004).

And so, I am writing this essay, presumably unaware of my reader and my(non)self.

6.3

This essay is a story. Or, this essay is a story as much as it can be a story. Or, this essay is a story as much as an autistic person can make a story—which, according to many a narrative theorist, we can't (see Keen 2007).

And so, I am here storying a non-story. My primary deficit is that I am not non-autistic—the non-autistic bodymind being the standard against which I am routinely held. When my writing lacks transition, it is *because I am autistic*. When my fingers twirl in the air, fidgety and tangled in series of rubber bands, it is *because I am autistic*. When my eyes dart away or when my sentences grow long, it is *because I am autistic*. When a non-autistic parent wants to discredit something I've said or done, when a colleague tells me how I should self-identify, when a social worker insists that I will never comprehend the burden I impose on others—it is *because I am autistic*.

To be autistic is to be unaware of oneself and others. To be non-autistic is to be aware of oneself and autistic others. Autistic bodies are never occupied by autistic selves. Rather, they are conditioned to submit to the control and definitional power of non-autistic people.

Disempathy is our collective story, and through this story of disempathy, autistic collectivity ceases to exist.

Autistic people are hardly described as having the capability to form and function as their own audience(s). This obsession with our incapability transcends scholarly discipline—it is routinely portrayed as an inseparable part of autism as a condition (see Greenbaum 2011; Jurecic 2007; Schuler 2003). And, in many respects, constructions of autistic incapability revolve around theories about theory of mind. As Baron-Cohen, Alan Leslie, and Uta Frith noted in their seminal 1985 article on ToM, this supposed inability to attribute motives to neurotypical minds is a "circumscribed cognitive failure," a "cognitive dysfunction," a "cognitive deficit," a "social disability," (p. 44) and a "striking poverty" (p. 39).

Autistic people are, as Baron-Cohen (2003, 2008) has claimed elsewhere, mindblind and lacking in empathy—they are limited to the confines of their skulls. As rhetoricians such as John Duffy and Rebecca Dorner (2011), Dennis Lynch (1998), and Paul Heilker and Jason King (2010) have suggested, ToM has a particular staying power in just about every academic facet of autism discourse—it's how teachers, scholars, and professionals come to know autism and thereby autistic writers.

Perhaps the most salient (and telling) quote from Baron-Cohen (1997) on ToM, however, is this one:

> A theory of mind remains one of the quintessential abilities that makes us human.... [H]aving a theory of mind is to be able to reflect on the contents of one's own and other's minds. Difficulty in understanding other minds is a core cognitive feature of autism spectrum conditions. The theory of mind difficulties seem to be universal among such individuals. (p. 3)

What's important to note here are the connections between humanity and the autistic person's lack thereof—connections made by a leading autism researcher, connections that have had profound implications for scholarship in every field, including my own home discipline, rhetoric and composition studies.

But these connections also percolate beyond academia, seeping into my daily correspondence with parents, friends, relatives, and women in imaginary red velvet armchairs. If, as Bolter and Grusin (2000) suggest, the path to empathy is to occupy another's point of view, then it would seem that autistic people are doubly disenfranchised. First, autistic people are thought to lack empathy. And second, non-autistic people are construed as the epitome of empathy. In essence, then, the only way for non-autistic people to exercise empathy is to project themselves onto autistic people—for how can an unempathetic person *understand*, never mind *define*, her own self? Autism as a construct could never survive without neurotypicality to support it.

Disempathy is our collective story, and through this story of disempathy, autistic collectivity ceases to exist.

In this essay, I am practicing the art of composing autistically. To use transition statements, to compose a coherent one-sentence thesis, to refrain from invoking my own embodiment and positionality, to censor my pithy one-liner cracks about neuropsychologists—in many respects, that would be *easy*. To compose normatively would be to compose persuasively. But composing normatively would assume a non-autistic audience; such a composition would assume a style and discursive frame that is best suited to the very ideologies that I here argue *against. Who* am I addressing when I write? *Whose* embodiment and worldview do I reify? Theory of *whose* mind?

6.4

I am tempted to say that my essay is piecemeal because when mental disability enters the conversation, rhetoricity is piecemeal. In popular discourse, puzzle logics represent disabled logics. I am tempted to say that my essay exists in chunks because those are the only descriptors afforded to me—chunky logics, slippery logics, transitionless logics, not-quite-whole logics. I am tempted to say that my essay is incomplete because it's some purposeful, wry move on my part that involves embodying the shitty things that academics say about autism, some kind of clever commentary on my part.

But it's not—it's not any of these things.

This essay is piecemeal because it's raw and personal. It's piecemeal because I don't know what to do with the stuff I read about me and my people. When talking with my therapist, I describe my scholarly endeavors as "piling bricks." When I first started doing work in Disability Studies, there was something tidy and manageable about my righteous anger. I could compartmentalize my wrath into coherent webtexts for academic journals. Now, when I encounter cognitive studies articles, it takes my whole being and willpower to refrain from stabbing at my leg with a mechanical pencil. With each article, with each conversation, with each email exchange and conference presentation and twitter flame war, another brick gets added to the pile. My body just feels heavy—lagging, dragging, collapsing.

I don't know what to do with this stuff anymore. What to do when a rhetorician describes theory of mind as a "perfect phrase"? (Woodward 2010, p. 91). What to do when a philosopher in one breath claims theory of mind is a "fundamental aspect of human relationships," and then in the next claims that autistic people do not have a "fully functioning theory of mind"? (Barnbaum 2008, p. 154). What to do when leading autism researchers claim that autistic writing is inherently unreliable and that "it might be a mistake to take what is said at face value"? (Frith and Happé 1999, p. 18). What to do when a rhetorician claims that autistic people are "masked by a cloud of social solitude"? (Greenbaum 2011, p. 46).

What to do with scholarship that denies autistic agency, denies autistic voice, denies autistic personhood?

How does an autistic person argue against the above? Anything I claim here is held suspect on the basis of my very being—because I am autistic, I lack a theory of mind. And because I lack a theory of mind, I lack both a theory of my mind and a theory of the minds of others. And because I lack a theory of my mind and the minds of others, anything I say is inherently unreliable, idiosyncratic, and special. My rhetorical moves are not rhetorical moves, but are rather symptoms of a problemed body. I will never fit into another's shoes, even if they too wear narrow size nines. Reason, topoi, tropes, narrative arcs, diplomacy—these will only ever be attempts, or, as Frith and Happé call them, "hacks" toward a normative embodiment, hacks toward a normative rhetoric. Appearing to know myself or others is merely *appearing* to know myself or others. I can appear, but I can never know. I have symptoms, and they have rhetoric.

Under such a construction of symptomology, the only arguably reliable story I've offered today comes from the armchair woman in my intro, her narratives of my autistic and disempathic selfhood. Her words about autistic identity carry far more weight than my own. In many respects, her words about my "condition" impact how I feel about rhetoric and empathy—it is a steaming pile of competing, ableist theories about distant Others that extend up to my neck. How to lob rhetoric at the wall? How to smear it on my face? Where is my intentionality? Must one have intentions in order to be rhetorical or empathetic? Again I ask: Theory of *whose* mind?

I ask these questions somewhat desperately. There is an exigency here. How can we—in rhetorical studies, in disability studies, in occupational studies, in academe writ large—how can we create more inclusive spaces to speak back to these theories of lack? How might we reinvent discourse on rhetoricity and intentionality and in/voluntarity—in ways that are critically savvy and conscious of disabled embodiment? Victor Vitanza (2008) has called this the "involution" of spaces. For my part, I want a rhetoric that tics, a rhetoric that stims, a rhetoric that faux pas, a rhetoric that averts eye contact, a rhetoric that lobs theories about theory of mind against the wall.

6.5

When we frame autism as disempathy, we position autism as rhetorical violence. When we represent autism as involuntarity, we assert our rhetorical distance from those who are not *us*. As Stuart Murray notes,

> What we might term the 'narrative appeal' of autism in cultural texts is that it easily signifies possibly the most radical form of personal otherness. Indeed, it is the personification of difference and otherness: a person, just like you or me (so the argument runs), who is in fact nothing like you or me, but rather subject to a condition that supposedly defies logic and understanding. (2006, p. 25)

Autistic people are *so different* from us that they *defy logic and understanding*—they defy community, they defy audience and expectations, they defy rhetorical worth.

We certainly write *about* autistic people. But how often do we write *for* or *to* them? We define autistic writers—as alarming, challenging, disruptive, unempathetic, egocentric, and eccentric. We define autistic writing—as "odd" (Happe 1991, p. 219) and self-focused, as having an "unfamiliar logic that is challenging to follow" (Jurecic 2007, p. 43), as unable to "define a line of argument, guide a reader from one point to the next, or supply background for references that will otherwise be unclear" (Jurecic p. 429). We do not, however, define autistic audiences—what it means to compose for those who have minds "with which we cannot truly empathize—to which we ourselves are, in many ways, blind" (Jurecic 2006, p. 4).

It's not a new statement that the academy is exclusionary, or even that the academy reifies exclusionary ideologies, perpetuates certain exclusionary systems. As Richard Fulkerson (2005) notes, any conversation concerning ways of writing and ways of knowing invokes axiological assumptions, or assumptions about what is good or right or valued: good writers, good stories, good ways of composing and knowing and being (pp. 655–658).

These axiological issues, I'd argue, are intrinsically connected to our conceptions of ability. Positioning autism as *involuntary* exemplifies conceptions of "good" or "able" literacy, speech, and intelligence, solidifies our own positions as gatekeepers, the ways in which we regulate *ifs* and *hows*: if one writes and if one speaks; how one writes and how one speaks; if one reads and if one sees and if one hears; how one reads and how one sees and how one hears. We've constrained literacy and intellectual thought to a particularized "domain of symbols" (see Schuler 2003, p. 464)—to a particularized way of thinking, communicating, understanding, and arranging. And in doing this constraining, we exclude.

6.6

While in the midst of designing my dissertation prospectus some years back, I found Adriana Schuler's "Beyond Echoplaylia: Promoting Language in Children with Autism" (2003) in a neglected corner of the library stacks.

I wasn't looking for reading material—I was scouring the library, flipcam in hand, for recordable moments. Instead, I'd inadvertently parked myself in front of the cognitive studies section, right in front of the *Autism* journal.

Schuler's piece prompted me to think about two things. First: Why I hate libraries. I'm a book-loving library hater; I admit it, as oxymoronic as that might sound. I hate libraries (and book stores too) because I don't know what to do once I get there. I observe people, all flawlessly milling about and navigating this awe-inspiring, bookish world, and then I remember my own ignorance, have a panic attack, stim uncontrollably, and/or try to resist the desire to self-injure. The feeling is similar to the one I get when I have to talk to people I don't know (or don't quite understand how to interact with yet)—cashiers, department staff, certain professors, one of my grandmothers, most of my in-laws.

Libraries have social norms that elude me. I would have never found Schuler's piece but by accident (or via an electronic database while in my own home) because I find libraries that stressful, that disconcerting, that socially inaccessible.

Second: Why I hate most "educational" essays about autism—essays that paint autism in terms of lack and deficit, essays that describe autism as a "striking poverty" (Baron-Cohen et al. 1985, p. 39), essays that portray autistic students as, first and foremost, "a pedagogical challenge" (Jurecic 2007, p. 432). A case in point:

At the 2009 Conference on College Composition and Communication, I listened to a paper, delivered in absentia, about a student writer with Asperger syndrome. Throughout the introductory remarks, the reader "lovingly" referred to this student as a "stalker student."

The typical autism essay, as a genre, is rife with neurological hierarchy.

Schuler's essay in particular examines the ways in which "play therapy" can "extend and enrich the communicative exchanges and, more specifically, the symbolic language of children on the autistic spectrum" (p. 455). Schuler suggests that autistic children have pronounced deficits in both imaginative play and "narrative thought," a claim that autism specialists routinely make (see, for example, Rogers and Vismara 2008; Young et al. 2009). So too have cognitive neuroscientists (Baron-Cohen 1997, 2003, 2008) and narrative theorists (Jurecic 2007) alike suggested that autistic students are rhetorically impaired, unable to understand or predict the intentions and motivations of audiences outside themselves. Autistic children, those tragic and woeful involuntaries. (Sarcasm.)

Schuler suggests that such narrative, rhetorical, and empathetic deficits appear in the ways that autistic children play (or, as she suggests, *fail* to play)—spinning the wheels of toy cars, for example, instead of making the cars go "vroom." Children on the autism spectrum, she maintains, engage in asocial, non-reciprocal, and repetitive behaviors, behaviors that are "incompatible" with actual "play" (p. 458). She further describes autistic language as lacking "communicative intent" (p. 467) and as a "rigid pre-symbolic mode of representation" (p. 456). When autistic children begin talking/reading/writing/hearing/playing like "normal" children do, they have only then truly gained "entry into the domain of symbols" (p. 464).

The assumptions Schuler makes about childhood play, socialization, education, and symbolic language, I'd posit, are grossly ableist. These conceptions of narrative and communication are, as Jay Dolmage and Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson (2008) describe, "rooted in a normate stance … assuming the central (invisible and normal) position that enables 'us' to diagnose others and make judgments about 'them'" (p. 314). Moreover, Schuler's conceptions of autistic repetition as profoundly arhetorical further subjugates the rhetorical commonplaces that autistic people, as well as other disabled individuals, routinely use to make meaning and order information.

I would suggest that even a cursory visit to an autistic person's blog would reveal that what Schuler argues just isn't the case. As Paul Heilker (2008) suggests, repetitive actions and language use often function as autistic forms of invention and style, as methods of organizing information, as modes of cultural expression. Furthermore, Schuler's (2003) use of architectural metaphor (a domain of symbols in and of itself) is, I believe, a prime example of Siebers' (2008) and Imrie's (1998) conceptions of design apartheid, the idea that conceptual spaces reflect the ways in which we value certain minds and bodies, or what Margaret Price (2011) has termed *bodyminds* (p. 19). Design apartheid means segregation. Design apartheid relies on the logics of involuntarity, relies on the idea that some people, as Simon Baron-Cohen (2003) once put it, "just can't help it." And when the cripples and the feeble-minded just can't help being crippled and feeble-minded, the agentive non-disabled Master We needs to segregate them from public view.

The idea that disabled people dwell outside a domain of symbols is a gross mischaracterization; it is an unfortunate and limited conception of what it means to symbolically act. To my mind, it only strengthens Gunther Kress's (2000) claim that what we need is a "new theory of semiosis," a theory that will "acknowledge and account for the … transduction of meaning from one semiotic mode to another semiotic mode" (p. 159). What we need is a rhetoric that tics, a rhetoric that shrieks and wails and sometimes bites.

Schuler's essay, of course, is only one of many that portrays a disabled way of being, communicating, and knowing as distinctly "less than," as what Simi Linton (1998) has described as "that atypical experience of deficit and loss" (p. 5). This limited conception of what it means to communicate, I would suggest, is framed in the language of ability, is shrouded by a one-dimensional conception of what it means to compose and what it means to compose well. It disregards disabled forms of invention, style, arrangement, delivery, and memory—and it locates disabled rhetorical moves within the domain of the pathological, rather than the cultural. It fails to recognize, as Patricia Bizzell wrote in 1982, that communication is enwrapped in the social, that our axiological understandings of what is good and right are products of cultural forces. And in assuming that "cognitive deficiency keeps poor [and/or disabled] writers from forming their own goals" (p. 379), we fail to recognize the rhetorical and ideological import of ability. In essence, we exclude a whole host of writers, communicators, and human beings, placing the communicative burden on them and their disabled bodies and disabled brains.

6.7

I am ending this essay on meaning. I am ending this essay by asking: What is conscious? What is voluntary? What is consciousness, and what is voluntarity, and do I have either of these things?

Autism research traffics in myths. It presupposes body-mind dualism. It collapses ideas about choice, agency, voluntary action, willfulness, and consciousness into tidy bifurcations that don't exist for anyone ever. When one scratches an itch, is that voluntary or involuntary? When one experiences sadness, does the feeling arise consciously or unconsciously? Is a blink willful?

These are questions that resist yes or no answers. And on many levels, we know this. Except for, of course, when we talk about disability.

I often search for the meaning of my stims. Three decades into my life, I still marvel over their tendency to transcend the in/voluntary. We symbiotically occupy. Hands move, air moves, sound waves, flitting fingers, motion before eyes. Here there is meaning. Stims tell a story. Stereotypy, in stereo, rhetoric of bodyminds autistic and present and disruptive of bus passengers.

I am angling toward a poetics of the in/voluntary. I am suggesting that we refrain from trafficking in the armchair psychology of those non-experts who proclaim themselves experts. Autism is a way of being.

Editors' Postscript If you enjoyed reading Melanie Yergeau's Chap. 6 "Occupying Autism: Rhetoric, Involuntarity, and the Meaning of Autistic Lives," which looks at misinterpretations of autistics' communication, Chap. 24 "If Disability is a Dance, who is the Choreographer? A Conversation about Life Occupations, Art, Movement," by Neil Marcus, Devva Kasnitz, and Pamela Block, and Chap. 14 "Occupying Seats, Occupying Space, Occupying Time: Deaf Young Adults in Vocational Training Centers in Bangalore, India, by Michele Friedner also explore non-normative communication. The story of Chap. 6 also resonates with themes from Chap. 16 "Beyond Policy—A Real Life Journey of Engagement and Involvement" by Stephanie de la Haye. Chapter 12 "Refusing to Go Away: The Ida Benderson Seniors Action Group" by Denise M. Nepveux also tells a similar story of valuing variants of community not always seen by the powerful.

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