Autism, self-determination and pleasure
Framing epistemic dis-ability

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I bring the vocabulary of disability studies in conversation with queer philosophical reflection by employing a critical phenomenological re-read of the violent "enabling" educational practices that are applied unto autistic subjects. In doing so I am in conversation with queer studies (Preciado, Foucault), disability studies (Kafer, Borths) and critical race theory (Hall). From this I claim that the diagnosis of autism within an educational context exists as an interpretation of epistemic dis-ability. The term dis-ability highlights the fact that a diagnosis is an intervention into a momentary state of disability with the explicit expectations that it should be overcome through the enabling intervention of education that allows self-determination. Yet, in reality by employing stereotypes to make sense of autism as a modality of being, these supposedly caring practices infantilise neurodiverse people into objects of pleasure. Thus, the reading of autism works as a litmus-test that reveals the underlying framing of normalising education to be a rhetoric of care, which functions as a justification for the employment of violent epistemic stereotyping as a tool to normalise disabled bodies into their most financially useful and pleasurable existence.

Keywords
disability studies; queer studies; critical phenomenology

> One way to describe the social impairment in asperger syndrome is as an extreme form of egocentrism with the resulting lack of consideration for others. […] This egocentrism seems to present a huge difficulty in forming successful long-term interpersonal relationships. Spouses and family members can experience bitter frustration and distress. They are baffled by the fact that there is no mutual sharing of feelings, even when the asperger individual in question is highly articulate. (Frith in Botha 2021, 676)

> Autistic children are severely disturbed. People seem to be no more than objects to them. […] You see, you start pretty much from scratch when you work with an autistic child. You have a person in the physical sense—they have hair, a nose and a mouth—but they are not people in the psychological sense. (Lovaas 1974, in Botha 2021).

These are two of the many quotes taken from published professional works on autism that Monique Botha had to study in order to enter the field of psychology. She collected them to highlight how deeply held ableist assumptions create dehumanising accounts that foretell of autistic people as terrible creatures, and that students who are on the spectrum need to engage with these claims as truth, despite their own lived experience. While I myself am not a psychologist, and therefore have not encountered these takes before reading Botha's article, I am a queer autistic thinker that has always felt a disconnect between what I am told to be and what I feel I am. As a "disabled" being I am defined in terms of the obstacles I face in the path to become a fully self-determined abled agent in society. To remedy this "horrible" affair, educational practices worked hard to diagnose my body in acute detail, educating me in the ways my chemical imbalances and developmental disorder intersect to make me "disabled." I apparently need help to live as the only good version of myself, a support that has been readily supplied to me by a diagnostic process and the stares of those that find me a tad too queer. Education then was sold to me as an act of care,

insofar it worked to create a state of "desired normality" from which I live my life as a self-determining adult. I was apparently not completely me until I was given the tools to be me without the flaws. Cured of what could have been a fate of eternal strangeness. And yet, there is a nagging feeling in me that asks if my story is really as simple as that?

Within the quotes above and the maturing project I found myself in, we find that the concept of disability is already presupposed as undesirable in opposition to the desirable ideals of self-determination and the enacting of a normalised societal position. As external institutions and self-perception are the consequences of these views, it becomes paramount to understand how the categories of normal and Other co-construct, enact and differentiate between dis-/abled forms of being. I am then left to wonder: "What exactly is autism? What happens to those that are diagnosed? And what justifies the moulding of bodies into seemingly desirable mature beings?"

My approach to answer these questions is through a critical phenomenology, which enriches the phenomenological study of the transcendental conditions of experiences and intersubjective creation of subjectivity with a distinct focus on how certain structures of meaning disproportionately affect marginalised groups. Guenther argues that:

> These structures are not a priori in the sense of being absolutely prior to experience and operating the same way regardless of context, but they do play a constitutive role in shaping the meaning and manner of our experience. Structures like patriarchy, white supremacy, and heteronormativity permeate, organise, and reproduce the natural attitude in ways that go beyond any particular object of thought. (Guenther 2020, 12)

In my enquiring into autism as a structure that does confines those diagnosed, I am profoundly uninterested in the discussion on whether

or not autism is a psycho-biological condition that exists out there in the world. Instead, I will take my lived experience and the cultural moment as proof that there at least is a phenomena which we name autism. My claim is then that the diagnosis of autism within an educational context exists as an interpretation of dis-ability that allows medicinal and representational practices to channel these people into stereotypical forms of subjectivity for the production of capital and pleasure. The term dis-ability, not simple disability, here refers to the fact that a diagnosis is an intervention into a momentary state of disability with the explicit expectations that it ought to be overcome through the enabling intervention of education. The reading of autism therefore functions as a litmus-test that reveals the underlying framing of normalising education to be the rhetoric of caring, which functions as a justification for the employment of violent epistemic stereotyping as a tool to make disabled bodies "abled."

My employment of the term "violence" as not only referring to the usage of physical force, but mainly to the simplification and realisation of bodies to a core pre-supposed essence they can access and be accessed as, highlights how discourses and institutions within which being is articulated gives rise to the species of being they describe and control. In other words, to be made violently into a stereotyped Other is to be framed and confined into nothing but a meaningful opposition which works to normalise the signifier which they do not represent. To ensure that the account of autism is therefore foundationally critical of the overarching structures of meaning that enforce normalisation, I draw from other field such as queer studies (Preciado, Foucault), disability studies (Kafer, Bortha) and critical race theory (Hall). These fields allow me not only to resort to a great number of critiques and re-articulations of being within the phallocentric-racist-humanist, but it also highlights the subject I study to be already embodied within discourses of power that are enforced with every word and silence I utter.

But first, I would like to clarify some of the vocabulary I use throughout this text, as well as some of its limitations. The term dis-ability refers to a diagnosis as intervention that frames a body with the expectations that it is abled through the application of re-education. Dis-/ability functions as a shorthand that expresses the possibility of being read disabled or abled depending on the perspective. Disability also refers to the opposition of ability in any given context. In using these terms, I am not hoping to cast any group as having any essential epistemic characteristics. Neither am I attempting to judge any model of being as superior or inferior. I am also not to naively insinuate that a violence-free education is ever possible, as the mere fact of looking at another being inherently simplifies them to what we can possibly see them as within the horizon we are already embodied within. What I am instead working towards, is opening the discourse to a re-interpretation of educational and representational practices beyond their naturalised narrative of care. In other words, by pointing out the contingent narratives that justify violent acts of perceiving, I am hoping to create a space in which the frames that bind us reveal themselves to be in need of re-examination. I pose the challenging question of exactly which measure of simplifications and realisations might actually be justified when the Othered being rises against the object which they have been made out to be. How may we respect rather than ignore their more-ness.

Due to an attempt at brevity, this project sadly cannot consider all aspects of autism as a diagnosis, foregoing important dimensions of eugenics and the history of sexist, racist and queerphobic therapeutic tendencies. In spite of these limitations, I hope that this work will develop some vocabulary that future thinkers can expand on and draw further nuanced argumentative attention to the scientific-cultural practices that factor into the oppressive framings of epistemic dis-ability. And finally, I hope that my words can resonate with my fellow Others, whose experiences are so much richer than the expressive tools we are given to represent it.

WHAT IS AUTISM

When engaging with autism as a phenomenon on any level, one is forced to reckon with a complicated and ever-shifting set of definitions. This uncertainty is made clear not only in the historical reconfiguration on what it means to be autistic, but also in the inability to create a clear bio-chemical ground for the condition. Despite this, I would argue that it is still possible to define what autism is as a phenomenon that affects both the diagnosed and diagnosing. This can be done by reading the diagnostic criteria employed to define who is autistic next to the socio-cultural representations that give a tangible face to the condition. Consequently, I proceed to trace what is framed as the progressing project to define and treat subjects categorised as autistic based upon their lack of self-determination. In doing so, I argue that autism should be considered a demarcation of epistemic dis-ability, insofar as the definition of disabilities hinges on the project to produce an abled body through stereotypes. My definition of stereotypes follows that of Stuart Hall as

> Get[ting] hold of a few simple, vivid, memorable, easily grasped and widely recognised characteristics about a person, reduce everything about the person to those traits, exaggerate and simplify them. (Hall 2013, 247)

The most common and widely used starting point to justify those stereotypes in reference to reality is the definition of autism as it is codified in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). This text bases itself on the realist model of mental disorders, proposing that a progressively accurate view on dis-/ability can be developed through impartial scientific study of bio-chemical phenomena (Cushing 2018, 78). The clear and universal definition that follows from this research ground the diagnostic and rehabilitative practices applied to the patient. It is within this context that the DSM V formulates autistic subjects as expressing:

> Persistent deficits in social communication and social
> interaction across multiple con- texts, as manifested by
> the following, currently or by history […] Restricted, repetitive
> patterns of behaviour, interests, or activities, as manifested
> by at least two of the following, currently or by history.
> (DSM 2013, 50)

However, this scientific articulation does not encompass the full
context in which autism is diagnosed as within an educational context.
This is due to the fact there is no scientific instrument that could
measure and treat autistic subjects completely, thus making research
contingent to cultural conceptions of engaging with dis-/ability that
depends on the gaze employed (McGrath 2017, 2). The framing of dis-/
abled bodies is then further informed by the modes and conclusions
stemming from that scientific research. In other words, both scientific
research and cultural conceptions perpetually co-create a changing
definition of what autism is. The subjects that are then demarcated as
autistic are not only viewed as beings existing in the world, but rather
they are always already fit into a larger structure of meaning that has
been developed to frame them as a certain species. To only observe a
diagnostic definition is then akin to viewing a singular frame of a film
that has been twisting and turning for quite some time. Let us
therefore visit the cinema for a moment to get the pictures moving.

THE HISTORY OF AUTISM AS A DIAGNOSTIC CATEGORY

In 1908 Eugen Bleulers used the term autism to define the tendency
of young schizophrenic patients to withdraw from the world. He argues
this to be a state in which the subject incorrectly focuses on
themselves instead of an external reality (Vakirtzi 2010, 45). As a
symptom of schizophrenia, autism is then fundamentally and
influentially conceptualised as a failure to engage logically with reality
through a misplaced inward focus. In 1943, Leo Kanners picks up the
term and expanded it to describe it as a disability that expresses itself
in social difficulties, anomalies in speech and narrow focus of interest

that disallow self-determination (Barahona and Filipe 2016, 2).
By 1944, Hans Asperger would then independently describe similar
dysfunctional tendencies, while also reading his subjects' abilities
more positively. He highlights highly original thought, mature taste
in art and the overachievement in certain cognitive areas. All of these
somewhat cohesive early research projects would then be codified in
the DSM IV, marking the first time that Autism would be recognised
not as a symptom of schizophrenia, but as a specified lifelong diagnosis
that defines a being in its entirety (Molloy and Vasil 2010, 666).
However, like many other psychological terms, the diagnoses would
not remain within academic circles and instead gain wide popularity
when entering the public sphere as a pathology that "haunts" the lives
of parents and teachers.

Due to a wide privatisation of the American education system in the
1980s and 1990s, special needs education was beginning to enter the
everyday lives of students. Framed as an effort to categorise and treat
students in their particular dis/-abilities, it can equally be read as an
attempt to hide the failures of an educational system that presupposes
certain types of learning and instead place the flaws in an individual
whose caretakers can now buy into an army of normalising structures.
(Molloy and Vasil 2010, 665). Drawing on Foucault, we can clearly see
a discourse that begins to create different subjects that can be
subjected to certain types of power. In short:

> This form of power that applies itself to immediate everyday life
> categorises the individual, marks him by his own individuality,
> attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him
> that he must recognise an others have to recognise in him. It is
> a form of power that makes individuals subjects. (Foucault 2001,
> 331)

Asperger, drawing on more positive connotations, then played a large
part in developing representational models of intellectual but asocial
autistic subjects, echoing common archetypes of nerd culture and

scientific non-sociability to make the stereotype comprehensible (McGertz 2017, 9). Autism disorder on the other hand was viewed as a disability that haunts the everyday lives of parents, peers and teachers:

> Originality is attractive even in the domestic sphere as long as it does not topple over into uncomfortable eccentricity. However, it is only a few people with ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder) who combine originality with high levels of intelligence and industry who are likely to make a sufficiently sustainable, salient contribution that their absence might be considered unaffordable. (Tantam in Botha 2021)

Both of these conceptions of the autist as subject gives rise to a complex interlinkage of cultural-medical associations that created a species of person that can now be used for both financial gain in extra-curricular treatments and pleasurably entertaining stereotypes.

However, the clear split between intelligent but asocial subjects and family tragedies radically shifted as the rising number of diagnosed subjects lead corners of the medical establishment to argue that the diagnostic criteria of asperger and autism disorder are too widely applicable on a population of socially awkward children (Cushing 2018, 81). This sentiment was shared by practitioners who found it difficult to clearly differentiate those in need of special education from those abled bodies that simply struggle to fit into a given educational system (Barahona and Filipe 2016, 3). The DSM V would therefore update the diagnostic criteria of autism/asperger and collapse them into the autism spectrum disorder (Cushing 2018, 76). This shift honed in on the allocation of resources to those bodies that can be justifiable defined as disabled in both social and intellectual faculties. Making it harder for those that can be read as abled, but a bit abnormal, to be caught up in a resource consuming special education. Or in other words, the already unstable conceptions of abled and disabled were momentarily stabilised by cutting out bodies that might rise up against being articulated as inherently flawed.

The shifts in diagnostic criteria of autism then highlights the shifting definitions as to who is in need of rehabilitative practices within an educational context, while simultaneously making those diagnosed into fields on which profitable medical-cultural industries can grow. Once a body is found to be in need, they are then not only referred to the necessary rehabilitative resources to approximate an abled epistemic being, but they become a distraction that hides the flawed modes of universally applicable education. The scientific-cultural reading of autistic subjects therefore most publicly arises in an educational context, resulting in the condition to be read as an inherently socio-intellectual pathology. The history of autism should then not be viewed as an ever-fluctuating scientific attempt to clearly map out a biochemical reality. Instead, it can be approached as the demarcation and intervention into the epistemic abilities of an intellectually and socially disabled body. In this it creates what I refer to as an epistemic stereotype, which we come to see as the ground for socio-medical representations of a wide variety of people. The changes in defining this trope reflects the ways that autism research works to realise a contingent conception of being abled and self-determined within an educational context.

It is because of the interlinkage of definition and treatment that I refer to autism as a diagnosis of dis-ability. The patient's disabilities are not articulated for the sake of understanding, but instead are an intervention that contrasts the current undesirable mode of being with the desirable abilities that can be obtained by entering enabling rehabilitative practices. To discuss autism then is to simultaneously engage with a scientific-cultural interpretation of an epistemic stereotype as pathology, as well as a project that works to remove the condition or exploit it for monetary value. In order to clearly articulate the justification of violence that follows from being dis-abled, it is necessary to establish the foundational framing that underlies education as a systematised creation of forms of subjectivity. This I argue is best done by turning to the still dominant philosophical-pedagogical ideology of self-determination as it arises during "the enlightenment."

SELF-DETERMINATION AND CONFINEMENT

The social, philosophical, and political movement of the Enlightenment period had an enormous significance on the ways we think of ourselves today. Past concepts of political organisation, religious dogmatism and essential conceptualisations of the human place in the world gave way to ideals of freedom, rationality and wide employment of public education. Kant rather daringly proclaimed that it was a time for "man's release from his self-incurred tutelage" (Kant 1784, 10). With this new found critical attitude towards the old came a call to rethink what we and the world may be, as well as how we ought to escape false views. To approach these questions, thinkers turned away from the ever developing knowledge of natural laws and looked inwards to find that truths were not given to them by an external world, but rather in co-creation with their minds. We can see this impulse radicalised in thinkers such as Fichte and Schelling, who take the defining feature of the human to be the free creative act of self-determination. Freedom was then not only thought of as a mere political state, but a discovered natural maturity through which we make our lives and world into what can be. Any state-funded institution, if it wanted to be reasonably justified within this new paradigm, would need to ensure the development of free agents who can determine their own lives and with it develop a healthy society of free individuals.

However, this ideal is one that according to Kant could not be immediately realised, as many people have been so used to restrictions, that they cannot manage the freedom that may be afforded to them (Kant 1784, 16). It is here then, where formulating education toward a gradual capability to be free is necessary for socio-political flourishing. In the influential pedagogical work of Wilhelm Von Humboldt we find this given a practical form, insofar as he places the focus on developing the ability to determine one's own life and become an un-substitutable person within a world they must express themselves in as a holistic creature (Ringer-Ladich 2019, 50).

A student must then be given the tools to come to put themselves together, come to know themselves as someone and learn of the natural world they exist within. While freedom is taken as the underlying theme throughout these reformulations of education, the needs of developing an industrial society were aspects that could not reasonably be discarded and are visible to this day. Furthermore, presuppositions on general normative ideals of civil society would heavily influence who would be getting which education. In the seminal pedagogical work Emile (1762) Rousseau for example argues that women need to be taught submissiveness to their husbands, while Fichte's self-determining "I" was only ever thought of as male. Normativity as a core tenet of education is however best exemplified by Kant himself, who proposes a linear pedagogical system that first tames the wild child by making them follow rules robotic fashion, so that they can later become a fully rational social being in adulthood. This maturity of self-determination must then be thought of as always relating to a normative societal position every person is allocated. Despite the limitations placed upon Othered beings, this education is framed as an inherent act of care, allowing the receiver to find out who they are, as well as how they best express their individual essence in a given society.

Freedom as the individual self-determination of the few, justifies pedagogical acts of violence by referring to the essential good of large-scale societal development out of tutelage. Yet, this freedom is only taken as good insofar it aligns with presupposed essential characteristics needed to develop a virtuous society of self-determined agents. Foucault pointedly highlights that it is this moralising of normative modes of being as good grounds the exclusion or "healing" of neurodiverse people.

> Confinement, that massive phenomena, the signs of which are found all across eighteenth-century, is a "police" matter. […] For the first time, madness was perceived through a condemnation of idleness and in a social imminence guaranteed by the

community of labour. This community acquired an ethical power of segregation, which permitted it to eject, as into another world, all forms of social uselessness. (Foucault 2020, 128-136)

Confinement must be read here as a psycho-physical process, expressed in literal institutions that exclude free movement, as well as diagnostic practices that confine a person into a subject. The policing of non-normative people occurs then within a broad self-creating education, in which they are channelled into fulfilling the needs of the "developing" society at hand. Autism as a diagnosis of dis-ability is an example for the wider violent intervention into bodies that are defined by their perceived dis/ability to determine themselves in line with their allocated lot. This categorisation and employment of specialised education is then justified by being framed in a rhetoric of care, insofar it works to draw out the desirable mode of becoming an abled mature being that avoids the undesirable mode of useless childish disability that holds back the entire project of personal and societal freedom. Paradoxically, it is then the age of self-determination which tried to bring harmony to the self as creator, which gives rise to the most minute forms of violent subjectification and epistemic marginalisation that exclude most people from meaningfully advancing freedom of thought. This is done to enforce the economic interest of the day by demarcating a class of in-human bodies that can justifiably be confined into cheap exploitative labour.

Having uncovered the foundational myth through which the violent creation of autistic subjects is justified, it becomes imperative to articulate current conceptions of normality that inform the research, diagnostic efforts and self-regulation we come to find in our everyday lives of becoming silenced by being good under late stage capitalism.

NORMALISING FOR PLEASURE

What is most interesting in the contemporary conceptions of normality, is that they are no longer grounded in an obvious

metaphysical or political order, and instead merely are presented as self-evidently good based upon the imminent reality of pleasure we feel. The time of revolutionary thinking has seemingly passed, and we are left living out and debating the Enlightenment conceptions of a progressively freely rational humanity. When talking of contemporary conceptions of normality as goodness, we are then really talking about the two separate phenomena that arise from the interlinking of individual self-determination of the view and the supposed societal good for the many. First, we might think of normal as a regulative term that presents a mode of being and attempts to enforce it into every fibre of every being. On the other hand, we might be talking of normal as a judgmental term that equates a certain mode of being with a natural, or in other words good status of ourselves.

Both definitions echo past ideals of normality as a tool for progressive self-determination, yet it is in their overarching causation that we come to see a shift in our modals of confinement. While previously the place of the Other has been made invisible and acted as a shadowy back on which to build an empire, contemporary views on normality have a distinct sense of pleasure in the explicit hyper-visualisation of its opposite as displeasurable. The Other is then always readily accessible as an object of discomfort and a justification to cast away repulsive intangibility. We can see a sense of discomfort arise in professionals when this neat distinction of good and bad is challenged:

> Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) have become preferred labels for problems reaching the criteria for disability for a variety of reasons, including trends in what is considered chic and the increasingly common abandonment of prevention as a goal. We are also concerned that positive views of disability [including ASD] inadvertently undermine prevention. [...] If being born with a disability is not also seen as being undesirable – in fact, as a birth defect – then we fear there will be little reason to prevent such anomalies. (Kauffman and Badar in Botha 2021, 53)

While these thinkers attempt to talk about the supposed flaws of the Other, it becomes obvious that what they're really arguing for is the self-evident pleasure of that which they take to be normal. There is an almost audible calling to their readers to violently agree with their base aesthetic judgments that finds what is other to be bad due to the imminent displeasure it causes. Due to the distinct lack of a metaphysical system structuring the application of goodness, I argue that normality as we find it today can be articulated as a way to describe unto something the ability to be pleasurable, or at least to be a thing that is capable to be desired without any excessive need to change it. This procedure of regulation then does not only refer to the external regulation of the Other, but also to the sense of self that one accesses. Foucault articulates these two forms of organisations as:

> [T]echnologies of power, which determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination, an objectivising of the subject [...]
> [T]echnologies of the self, which permit individuals to effect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and selves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom perfection, or immortality. (Foucault 2020, 225)

We can then define the effect normal as invisible good to not just be an external regulative force that is applied unto us through institutions, but rather a self-regulating making of ourselves as capable to be desirable to ourselves and the world. What we see and are is therefore no longer in reference to our free self-determination, but rather a cutting apart of ourselves into potential avenues for self-designing imminent pleasure. Paul B. Preciado argues that this mode of organisation marks a shift towards a new form of confinement which does not justify the rejection of Othered beings by referring to a higher principle, but rather focuses only on the regulation and production of pleasurable subjects in accordance with patriarchal myths of normality and late stage global capitalism.

> Pharmacopornographic. The term refers to the processes of a
> biomolecular (pharmaco) and semiotic-technical (pornographic)
> government of sexual subjectivity. [...] There is nothing to
> discover in sex or sexual identity, there is no inside. The truth
> about sex is not disclosure, it is sexdesign. [...] The
> phamarcopornographic business is the invention of a subject
> and then its global reproduction. (Preciado 2008, 34-36)

While the examples he uses are that of sexual/gender identity,
the process of inventing a mode of subjectivity, diagnosing it and
perpetuating it for profit is equally applicable to the study of autism
within education. Under the contemporary pharmarcopornographic
bio-politics, the ideal of pedagogy that enables self-determination is
transformed into designing a person into a consumer/consumable
being that arouses/decreases certain desirable bodily affects in others
through medicine, food, sport, music, sex film, etc. The main function
of normality is therefore no longer just to regulate the body externally
into presupposed positions, but to propose a way to intake/extract
somatic-chemical devices that produce desirable outcomes for oneself
in line with the most profitable form of identity that can be consumed
by others. Lesbian love for example is normalised only in pornography,
the colonised body approached by a masturbatory white saviourism,
and performative trans* acceptance becomes a way to joyfully think
of oneself as progressive without any actual liberating political work.
In this process, we cannot think of the marginalised people to be
meaningfully self-determining, they are rather guided into being a
particular type of consumer that produces pleasurable outcomes in
the eyes of the wider phallus embracing public. In this, Preciado quite
succinctly summarises the stress of being given an identity that
intuitively does not align to his being, yet is nevertheless the only
option to avoid socio-medicinal destruction.

> My bio political option are as follows: either I declare myself to
> be transsexual, or I declare myself to be drugged and psychotic.
> Given the current state of things, it seems more prudent to me

> to label myself as transsexual and let the medical establishment
> believe that it can offer a satisfying cure for my "gender identity
> disorder." In that case I'll have to accept having been born in a
> biobody with which I don't identify [...] and claim that I detest
> my body [...] In other words, I'll have to declare myself mentally
> ill and conform to the criteria established by the DSM-IV.
> (Preciado 2008: 256-257)

This diagnostic horror that channels one's being into predetermined
categories aligned to disability ought to be familiar to many autistic
people, and not just because they are statistically likely to be queer.
When faced with the need to obtain a certificate to ensure that one is
treated respectfully in a professional and social context, one may be
forced to design one's answers in line with what is expected by the
DSM V. The gaze of the medical establishment therefore functions as
an external technology of power that gives rise to an internal
regulation of oneself in line with what will enable access to necessary
resources. And if one refuses to label oneself as mentally ill, then
the normalising hand simply moulds a form of Otherness that can be
exploited as an example of ridicule for those yet undecided. One can
effectively determine oneself freely to be exploited or destroyed.

The diagnosis and education of autistic people as dis-abled functions
as a visible example for the wider system of preparing pleasurable
subjects through diagnosis and education. There are in this example
two possibilities for obtaining pleasure out of this Other, either the
self-congratulating pleasure of having healed a failed person, or the
heart-warming effect of consuming stories of relatives dealing lovingly
with their "severely disabled" child. We find in these two forms of
pleasure the new justification for intervening and changing the
fundamental neurodiversity, referring only in passing to the assumed
societal progress towards freedom. The autistic subject is then good,
when it is normal, i.e. a "healed" adult, or a failure to care for with
masturbatory pleasure. And while I do not mean to negate the actual
help that is offered to autistic subjects, the performance of this help for

monetary/pleasurable gain is what disallows the formulation of oneself besides these confining stories. The clear parallels to other objectifying modes of representations such as homophobic pornography and racist exploitation through white saviourism are then no accident, as all of them are ways for a northern-European societies to "get off" by framing themselves as progressive saints that care enough to develop self-determination in their subjects. In order to get a better grasp on this external push for self-regulation towards normalised pleasure, let us take a closer look at art that engages with dis-ability from an autistic perspective.

REPRESENTING AUTISM FOR PLEASURE

The representation of autism in pop culture often does not occur by strictly referring to a diagnosis. Instead, characters employ tropes of social awkwardness mixed with a distinct level of genius at a particular task, or are used as hindrances to be accepted by a neurotypical public. This has a deep influence on the self-understanding of autistic people, which is why their exploration of dis/abilities refers back to stereotypes to make themselves understandable. We can then find a clear case study for the engagement with stereotypes through the juxtaposition of Donna Williams and A.M Briggs, who express the externalised pressure in vastly different ways to a distinct public response. Williams, as a successful artist that in her childhood had been seen as disturbed, presents her autism as a thing she needed to overcome in order to employ her skills usefully. In her autobiography she presents her youth as:

> The world still seemed like a battlefield or a stage, but I was forced to keep trying to "play the game," if no other reason than to survive. I would have been happy to "let go" and retreat into my own world were it not for my belief that my mother and older brother seemed to thrive on my strangeness and inability to cope. My hatred and my sense of injustice were my driving force to prove them wrong. (Williams 1992, 54)

There is a certain internalised fear of being seen as merely disturbed due to her neurodiversity, which drove her to reject her autistic tendencies and create herself anew for the world. This is celebrated by a general public, which approves the idea that her autism needed to be overcome so she can employ her skills in a productive way. In this we can see her to be categorised by the representational model of the "Supercrip," which expresses "the stereotypical disabled person who garners media attention for accomplishing some feat considered too difficult for disabled people" (Kafer 2013, 141). In the case of Williams, this stereotyping is expressed in her being an "autistic savant," referring to her social disabilities yet great artistic skills. This meaningfully allows her to frame herself as a normative life that can be celebrated because of her rejection of being visible autistic. The pleasure of engaging with this representation by a neurotypical public is found in following an underdog faced by the pit of failure, yet through hardship cathartically obtains the ability to determine her own life. Yet in this seemingly positive representation, there is an underlying case for the overwhelmingly positive value of internalised normalising structures and their expressing against disturbing neurodiversity. By speaking the language of her oppressors, she passively reinforces the "Supercrip" model of being disabled, which demonstrates that representational practice that, even in foregoing obviously negative stereotypes, frames "abnormal" bodies for the sake of fixating the essential status of the world and their difference further.

> In opposition to this, A.M Biggs attempts to speak of their autism in non- stereotypical ways by actively foregrounding the ableist assumption an audience may bring to their work. In the audio-visual art piece "In my own language" (2009), Biggs employs a silent engagement with her environment as a way to embrace aspects of her neurodiversity as an inherent strength that need not be framed as disturbing, but rather valid in its own way. They invite the viewer to view the world as a fluid interlinkage of the external and internal through co-creative intersubjective meaning making. This visual is

underpinned with computationally spoken text that presents a
thesis on her experience as externally framed as flawed:
People doubt that I am a thinking being and since their
definition of thought defines their definition of personhood so
ridiculously much, they doubt that I am a real person as well.
[…] I view "autistic" as a word for a part of how my brain works,
not for a narrow set of behaviours, and certainly not for a set of
boundaries of stereotype that I have to stay inside. (Briggs 2009)

In rejecting the inherent negativity of being autistic, Briggs differs
from Williams and reclaims her mode of perception as not inherently
negative. She asserts there is valuable knowledge that is produced
because of her neurodiversity, and not opposed to it. However, instead
of the wide embrace of Williams' way of determining her life, we find
the responses to Briggs's attempt of their reclaiming agency to
violently push back this self-affirmation of neurodiversity. There seems
to be a vast difference of violent normalisation when engaging with
Williams and Briggs, who despite both clearly defining themselves as
autistic creators, are not viewed as equally good due to the ways they
play with presupposed stereotypes.

Vakirtzi argues that autobiographical accounts of high-function
normalised people such as Williams are more widely acceptable
because of their adaptation to normalisation and rejection of
neurodiversity as valuable without struggling against it:

Because they are written from persons that have a high degree
of intelligence, which connotatively puts them in the field of
rationality and therefore in a degree of normality. In this
respect, their possible compulsive, obsessive, or idiosyncratic
behaviours are there in order to preserve the myth of the
"autistic savant." It is again about the humanistic rational,
transcendental self, born during the Enlightenment, which
offers a place into the "normal" world, to persons that might be
eccentric but nevertheless are intelligent. (Vakirtzi 2010, 104)

The acceptance of neurodiversity as a hindrance then brings with it the implicit argument that autistic people need to view themselves as disabled, and may only be used as inciting incidents that teach the abled public valuable life lessons within a pleasurable normativity.

This narrative forecloses the creation of representations that meaningfully relate the complicated relationships of social and embodied lived experience of dis-abled bodies without also enforcing the normalising structures of confinement. Any expression of self-determined autistic people, be it through seemingly positive "Supercrips" or self-affirmation, necessarily speaks through already existing violent stereotypes that inevitably are seen as self-evidently true and without alternative. The hermeneutic circle may never shift the audience's way of seeing and only enforce the limited meanings they can already access through their desiring eyes that yearn for normalised pleasure. The core function of these representational practices is thus not to offer new modes of being as valid, but to naturalise that a positive disabled existence is only that of the "Supercrip", or that of the failed being to care for. All those who do not obtain these accolades of greatness or can be framed as failures to be treated, are cast away into the shadow of the disturbed and unusable. The acclaimed presentation of successful transcension of disability, and the achievements of desirable maturity fixates difference and naturalises the rhetoric of care used to justify violent practices of re-education. However, in being given a different type of education, one that does not focus on developing forms of agency and instead is designed to create a lesser self-determination within normality, these thinkers are actually made into what their diagnosis describes them to be. The process of intervening into a being by defining them as dis-abled then becomes infantilising, insofar it forecloses self-determination by making these agents incapable of positing themselves besides violent stereotypes. Special educational actively disables dis-abled bodies in their ability to frame themselves and their experience in their own language. An external demarcation shaping the internal perception in its own violent image, spiralling endlessly

in the production of pleasure for an ableist audience that wants to be affirmed in their belief that they are amazingly progressive.

CONCLUSION

This text has argued that autism as a diagnosis can be considered a structural demarcation of epistemic dis-ability. It functions as an intervention that supplies monetarily valuable enabling practices to a currently disabled body. In this project, violence occurs in the form of simplifying subjection to stereotypes by both institutions and representational practices. This violence is wholly justified by a rhetoric of care that frames the self-determination they are educated towards as naturally desirable. Due to the representational practices that frame the transcension of disability in celebratory ways, disagreement with these goals is not read as legitimate voicing of disapproval, but rather as a further intellectual dysfunction in need of correction. All of which supplies a naturalised interpretation regarding the needs, wants, and being of Othered subjects in line with that which draws out the most financially enriching and pleasure creating infantilised stereotypes. We are therefore left with nothing but violence on our hands, as each mention of a characteristic enforces or enriches the stereotyping of a variety of deeply nuanced beings.

Yet, despite the fact that all violence is unavoidable, it does not follow that all of its forms are naturally confining. The paradox of pieces such as Botha and my own are proof of that, insofar as we are (queer) autistic people that have been educated in an academic context, yet employ the violence we witnessed productively to displace the naturalised truth value of psycho-social presuppositions of what autism is. Re-education has certainly disabled me to engage with my lived experience outside an ableist framework, but it has also allowed me to articulate this piece.
One simply cannot speak of education without having been educated. The target this work can thus claim to have is not violent educational practices in themselves, but the attempt to fixate a simplifying

meaning through claims to nature, common sense and stereotypes. This is because they end the types of discourse we can have, reading every bit of noise and silence as a justification of itself. Leaving us unable to ask if the dream of a free self-determined society justifies the violent means it attempts to realise itself through. And what if this story is never finished, and we are left with nothing but violence, monetary surplus and a masturbatory discourse that "gets off" on helping no one but their own desires. Are we doomed to repeat stories eternally? I answer with a strict no, as we may rest assured that the world and the beings in it are always more than we try to subjugate them into, and that we will liberate ourselves from being told what to be by being tired of the effort. And in this, the autistic subject is even more able in their social dis-/ability than any neurotypical to stare back at their oppressor and state "I know you think this is normal and good for me/you, but why do you think I should care to be like you?" I leave my reader with this question, asking both neurodiverse and neurotypicals, to respond to this discourse that they hopefully begun to realise will never be over, and is ready to hear how they may contribute to the creation of our shared reality of endless potentiality.

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