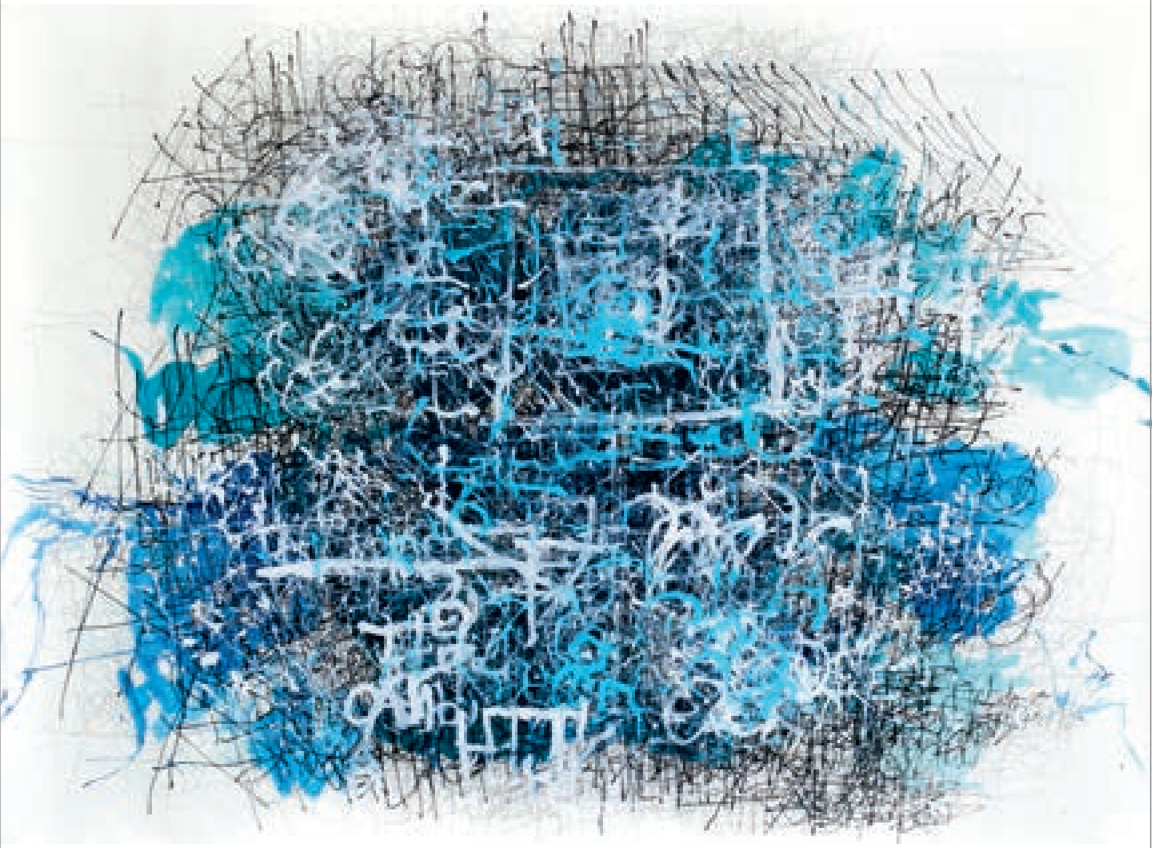
melanie yergeau

AUTHORING autism

/ on rhetoric and neurological queerness



AUTHORING **autism**

thought in the act *a series edited by* ERIN MANNING AND BRIAN MASSUMI

Melanie Yergeau

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/ *on rhetoric and neurological queerness*

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INTRODUCTION. **involution**

My mother has a set of stories, narratives she wields depending on her mood. One such story involves an infant me, lying in my crib on Saturday mornings. In the first telling, I am a well-behaved child. "You never cried," she remarks, sipping her coffee. "You'd let me sleep until noon. You were such a quiet baby." Her words emit a sense of nostalgia as my younger brother tears through the room and bodychecks a friend on the living room floor.

Other days, the narrative starkly changes. "I'd come to your crib on Saturday mornings," she shudders, "and I'd find you with poop up to your neck." She pauses for dramatic effect. "*Up to your neck*." Sometimes, she recounts how I'd grab my feces and lob them at the wall, or smear them on my face, or rub them against the bars of the crib. The story then diverges into toddlerhood, my first forays into kindergarten—how I'd wet myself at school, how I didn't have friends, how I spent hours in my room memorizing road maps from AAA. There is a solemnity about this story, an absent acknowledgment that there was something about me, something about me that they should have known back then. If only.

Years later, as a young adult, I was diagnosed with autism.

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.

As John Duffy and Rebecca Dorner relate, autism is a narrative condition. In particular, they note that "diagnoses of autism are essentially storytelling in character."[1] Here they emphasize the identities and languages that any claim to autism might afford, on the part of both autistic and nonautistic people. Through diagnosis, autistics are storied into autism, our bodyminds made determinable and knowable through the criteria of neurodevelopmental disability.[2] Through diagnosis, nonautistic stakeholders become authorized as autism somethings—as autism parents, as autism researchers, as autism therapists and specialists and mentors and advocates. Even when autism is depicted as a condition that resists the narratable (which, as I discuss later, is an unfortunately typical move), the narrating impulse remains entrenched in the act of diagnosing unto itself: Traits and check boxes tell a story. In turn, those who have been so storied likewise respond, albeit in sometimes unexpected ways. Autistic stories might culminate in angry blog posts, video narratives, comics, memoirs, or extended middle fingers. Autistic stories often bristle against the well-meaning intentions of what autistic blogger Kassiane Sibley terms "helper personalities" or nonautistic people whose so-called charity is self-serving.[3] Autistic stories might take shape as screaming in a supermarket, or as banging one's head against the hard edges of a radiator, or as jumping joyously in a mud puddle. Often, autistic stories aren't beheld as stories at all, but rather as symptoms as jaw-dropping as poop throwing. These stories, in all of their heterogeneity, promote radically different (non)meanings and affective responses. Here it is important to note the political difference that autism-as-modifier and autistic-as-modifier make. The former relates to broader discourse on autism that is typically authored by nonautistic people, whereas the latter imparts that which is autistically created.

Are you, dear reader, autistic or nonautistic? Can there ever really be any in-between?

Following the above, what's important for our purposes is Duffy and Dorner's claim that autism is typically characterized as that which contrasts—as that which contrasts with language, humanness, empathy, self-knowledge, understanding, and rhetoricity.[4] And, indeed, this particular claim about autism as contrast orders clinical literature on the condition. Contrariness, antithesis, enigma—these are not autism tropes, but arguably autism's essence. Or, put alternatively, autism has been essentialized and thereby made (un)known as a condition of opposing fields, as a condition that, in toto, defies. If we listen for these stories, we encounter them everywhere. *Assessment of Autism Spectrum Disorders*, a reference guide for physicians, represents autism as a "most perplexing condition" due to its "unusual combination of behavioral weaknesses and a lack of biological models."[5] Media accounts of autistic people communicate the sensationalism of savant-beings who are at once so extraordinary yet so epistemically distant and critically impaired. We are bombarded with anecdotes of children who refuse to hug their parents, of children whose worlds are supposedly so impoverished that they spend their days spinning in circles, or flapping their hands, or screaming or self-injuring or resisting—ardently and fixatedly resisting.

Were we to return to toddler me, we might have a case in point. Shit smearing, as one parent contends in Chloe Silverman's *Understanding Autism*, stands among the more lurid narratives that configure parental experiences of autism: "If you hang around [autism] parents enough, all we talk about is poop."[6] Poop talk exemplifies the pathos-driven genres upon which Duffy and Dorner primarily focus, and yet, as they note, these narratives are typically nonautistic, canonized by individuals who have (presumably) never smeared their own shit (or spent their days spinning in circles, or self-injuring, or ardently and fixatedly resisting). We can access autism poop talk across many rhetorical domains, including clinical literature on scatolia and pica (smearing and eating, respectively) as well as guidebooks for caregivers on autistic misbehavior, such as Autism Speaks's "Challenging Behaviors Tool Kit" or resource sites from developmental disability agencies.[7] Parental poop talk is perhaps the most affectively loaded of all poop talk, in large part because it relates smearing, eating, and rectal digging in graphically humanizing terms. Someone has to clean it up. Someone has to act, to intervene. The humanization in autism poop talk, of course, is rarely about the human whose poop has been thrust into the spotlight. And, especially in the case of parent blogs and other digitally born life writing, poop talk is often divulged without the full and informed consent of the autistic person being depicted. This isn't to deny the dangers or stresses associated with a loved one's ingestion of harmful bacteria, or the distress involved in attending to the spread of literal shit, or the community and support a parent might garner from sharing intimate stories online. My point, rather, is that these narratives are shittier than the shit they claim to represent. These are shitty narratives—rhetorical commonplaces that author autistic people as victim-captives of a faulty neurology, as rhetorically degraded and rhetorically suspect. In these constructions, our shit holds more rhetorical power than we do.

While this book is not about literal shit, it is about the figurative shit that contemporary autism discourse has flung upon autistic bodies. These shitty narratives persist, I argue, because their rhetorical power derives from the figure of the autistic as unknowable, as utterly abject and isolated and tragic, as a figure whose actions are construed less like actions and more like neuronally willed middle fingers.[8] At root, these shitty narratives are rhetorical projects: they apprehend neuroqueerness as interlocking series of socially complex impairments, impairments that impact the domains of relatedness, intent, feeling, sexuality, gender identity, and sensation—indeed, all of that which might be used to call oneself properly a person. Joel Smith, blogger at *Evil Autie*, relates shitty stories as stories that work to "shock and outdo."[9] In particular, Smith observes that poop talk is emblematic of the "need to do anything, no matter what the risk, to cure us."[10] It is this need to do anything to stop autism—this critical exigence—that positions autism as a rhetorical problem and autistics as rhetorically problemed. Earlier, I related the example of the child who refuses to hug, which is a common exemplar of autism's queerly asocial and thereby heartrending symptoms. But the figure of the hug-avoidant autistic child is a remarkably acontextualized figure, a figure with whom a receiving audience is not supposed to identify. (The parent—or the person who isn't being hugged—is, without fail, represented as the empathetic character.) Framing a child's bodily comportment as refusal resorts to deficit-laden and negativistic terminology; it likewise, especially in the case of autistics whose languages aren't spoken or voiced, attributes (non)intentions in the face of scant rhetorical evidence. When nonautistic publics mourn and inquire about the why—why would a child refuse a hug?—the why recedes from the rhetorical and moves into the neurological (or, as Jordynn Jack terms it, the neurorhetorical). The hug-avoidant autistic child is reduced to terms of neuronal motion, of synaptic plasticity and mindblindness and sensory disintegration and gut flora. There is something contrary here, something neurologically askew.

If there is one takeaway from what I here write, it is this: what we do not know, and what we often purposively ignore, are autistic narrations of such rhetorical events, the interbodily potentials, desires, and moments that structure an autistic life, or any life. To whom do we listen? The autistic or the nonautistic? Can there ever really be an in-between? What of my shit? What of my unhuggable body? What of me? What of *autos*, the self that so consumes the presumably autistic? Where the fuck are we?

Despite autistic people's increased visibility and, indeed, increased participation in public policy and political advocacy, autistic stories are not the autism stories that circulate, dominate, or permeate. One could make the argument that this sentiment is becoming less true, that terms like *neurodiversity* are welcomed with broader social currency, that the proliferation of autism books signals some optimism, that autistic-run nonprofits are changing public discourse on autism research and support, that Temple Grandin has replaced Rain Man as the autist du jour and thus the world is a happier place for autistic people. I, however, do not approach *Authoring Autism* with that same kind of optimism, nor do I necessarily take the above items as cumulative wins for autistic people.

Three autistics on a federal committee who are routinely berated by their nonautistic cohort, as is the case with the U.S. IACC, is not sufficient evidence of policy inclusion.[11] Wonderful autism books continue to be written by wonderful nonautistic people, but this does not of necessity make the world more welcoming of autistics and autistic modes of communicating. The exclusion of autistic people of color from the broadest reaches of both nonautistic and autistic-led advocacy does not and should not translate to "the world is happier." And, as a white autistic who has attained considerable education—I am a professor who can, even if only infrequently, access reliable speech—I write this book with great trepidation, and resignation, that autism politics routinely reward those who are multiply privileged. The logics of ableism are intertwined with the logics of racism, classism, and heterosexism. And while autism unto itself reduces my ethos as an interlocutor, whiteness, class, and speech configure my claims to personhood very differently than those who occupy more marginal positions. Following the above, Temple Grandin's routine proclamations that autism teachers should emulate the social practices of the 1950s is not a socially just nor revolutionary approach to neuroqueer sociality, but a demonstrably racialized orientation toward the world. Such autism awareness is better termed perilous than it is positive or gainful.

As I discuss momentarily, I do believe in autistic futures, in autistic people's cunning expertise in rhetorical landscapes that would otherwise render us inhuman. I believe in the potentialities of autistic stories and gestures, of neuroqueering what we've come to understand as language and being. I believe that autistic rhetorics complicate what we traditionally hold dear across a plurality of fields. But whatever progress we might attribute to our present moment, it is impossible to deny that the arguments structuring public knowledges, understandings, and felt senses of autism are grossly ableist, powerfully violent, and unremarkably nonautistic.[12] And because these knowledge warrants, to channel Ibby Grace, saturate almost every discipline and discourse community, the rhetorical beings and doings of autistic people have been figured as anything but rhetorical.[13]

With no small irony, I write this book in equal parts as a rhetorician and autistic activist, roles that have inevitably shaped the ways in which I apprehend this thing we call autism. My dual positionality is no small irony because I have, at many junctures, been told that autism precludes me from being rhetorical, much less a rhetorician. I have been told these things by a range of persons, including colleagues and therapists. Those who come to this book from fields beyond rhetorical studies might genuinely wonder why this is a bad thing—to be nonrhetorical, to lack or have diminished capacity for rhetorical exchange. In everyday parlance, most people who discuss "other people's rhetoric" use rhetoric as a stand-in for "fucked-up language and trickery." And while fucked-up language and trickery are indeed part of rhetoric proper, I am invoking a deeper lineage here, a more contested set of meanings. I am invoking ethics, philosophy, cognition, and politics. I am invoking not only the ways in which autism has been figured as lacking in these domains, but also the ways in which autistic people seek to queer those domains, to fuck up that which is already fucked up.

It is not uncommon, for example, for rhetoricians to claim that rhetoric is what makes one human. This is a belief that persists in spite of rhetorical studies' various turns toward things, ecologies, affect, and complex vitalisms: if one is arhetorical, then one is not fully human.[14] Rhetoric's function as a precondition for humanness or personhood is typically and deeply connected to how we conceive sociality, or our modes of relating and relatedness with our (neurotypically human) surrounds. In this way, rhetoric is, as Craig Smith makes clear, "involved in the most important decisions of our lives, it is *ontological*; that is, it concerns the why we exist and how we exist. Rhetoric's making-known function is epistemological because it helps us obtain knowledge. Thus, rhetoric touches on the two most important branches of our lives: how we learn things and how we live."[15] To repeat: Rhetoric comprises how we learn things and how we live. Autism, by contrast, signals the dissolution of such learning. This dissolution is sometimes presented as all-encompassing and at other times is claimed as a matter of degree or severity. We, the autistic, are that which contrasts. If clinical discourse on autism is, as Duffy and Dorner declare, storied around rhetorics of "scientific sadness," then autistic rhetorics, in all of their contrastive resonances, queer the motifs, structures, modes, and commonplaces of what nonautistics have come to narrate and thereby know about autism. To author autistically is to author queerly and contrarily.

Voluntary Rhetorics

I very clearly remember the long process of being toilet trained. These memories starkly diverge from the ways in which other people typically narrate their own experiences with learning to use the bathroom—which is to say, other people typically don't. By contrast, I do not remember learning to read. Decoding symbols felt less effortful, even as a toddler, but decoding my body—decoding sensations, recognizing which tightness meant which function, rehearsing the order of bodily motions required to use a toilet—these things long eluded me, and even still do not always remain in the past tense. When I read parent narratives that bemoan their autistic kindergarteners wearing diapers, I am visited with a sense of surreality, as though my own privacy, my own unwilled body, has been breached. Am I hungry? How do I make my fingers grasp a utensil? At what stage in the process do I flush the toilet? Toward what or whom does my bodymind intend?

In our work together, Paul Heilker and I have made arguments about autism's rhetorical potentials—that autism is a profoundly rhetorical phenomenon, that autism is begging for rhetorical scrutiny.[16] It's important to highlight the radicalness of these statements—that autism embodies the narrativistic, that autism embodies the rhetorical, that autism is or has potential—because they represent a major departure from what scholarly literature, across cognitive studies disciplines, often suggests about autism. Many scholars have argued, for instance, that autism precludes the ability to both compose and enjoy stories. Over the past decade, numerous articles in the *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, one of the flagship autism journals, have characterized autistic autobiography as lacking narrative structure and coherence, as lacking rhetorical facility and audience awareness, and as lacking self-reflection.[17] Autistic language has been variously cataloged as a "rigid pre-symbolic mode of representation," as "egocentric," and as work that "should not be overrated."[18] In all things discursive, autism represents decided lack. These are the stories through which we know autism, even as these same stories claim that autism remains unknowable, unnarratable.

In many respects, this medicalized storying of lack is the crux of this book—or, rather, subverting this medicalized storying is the crux of this book. For autism is medically construed as a series of involuntarities—of thought, mode, action, and being. As this book narrates throughout, involuntarity dominates much of the discourse on autism, underlying clinical understandings of affect, intention, and socially appropriate response. And, as I'll discuss shortly, because involuntarity stretches across clinical and popular domains, it is often used in service of denying the narrative capabilities—and the narrative value—of autistic people.

We, the autistic, are merely the residues of rhetoricity.

When neurodivergence enters the fold, involuntarity can signal myriad concepts. In many instances, the discourse(s) of involuntarity governs autism as a condition. Most obviously, 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 campaign, in which autism prevalence is compared to car crash fatalities, hypothermia, kidnapping, and pediatric cancer.[19] (All of these things, despite autism being a nonfatal 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), autism is frequently conceived as essentialized involuntarity. But beyond the illusion of choice, autism's essence, if you will, has been clinically identified as a disorder that prevents individuals from exercising free will and precludes them from accessing self-knowledge and knowledge of human others. Its subjects are not subjects in the agentive sense of the word, but are rather passively subject to the motions of brains and dermis gone awry. Deborah Barnbaum's *The Ethics of Autism* is one such account.[20] A philosophical treatise, the book promotes a portrait 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.[21] And, later, "Autism cuts people off from people."[22] What Barnbaum and others 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.

Of course, framing autism as neurological involuntarity is a false construct. After all, does anyone really choose their neurology?[23] And yet, even though neurotypicality is as much an involuntarity as is mental disability or neurodivergence, the construct of involuntarity is culturally inscribed into autism as a condition.[24] Autistics wrench and scream and rock their bodies, and they have no choice; they have no agency; they project little to no rhetorical or narrativistic purpose.

Within this passivity-centric framework, involuntarity might encompass shit smearing or body rocking; it likewise encompasses any act of communication, or what white-coat types might otherwise reduce to inappropriate behaviors; it encompasses embodiment; it encompasses how one dwells in the world. It signifies a lack of purpose, a lack of audience awareness, a lack of control over one's own person—and under the banner 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?

In many ways, I am over-narrating this involuntary narrative, this story that autistic people are lacking in all things selfhood. We could call my storying hyperbole, or we could call it an autistic symptom. (My neurology supposedly primes me, after all, to be oversensitive, black-and-white, and hypertruthful about the world around me.) At many junctures in this book, I defer to the hyperbolic, and the narratives I create around medical stories relate keenly sense-felt experiences of dehumanization. To be clear, what I am here calling hyperbole is not my hyperbole, for hyperbole assumes a shared, and often neurotypical, referentiality. It is one of those rhetorical tropes that I suspect was created by a rhetorician whose blood possessed the mystical properties of benzodiazepines, or maybe Quaaludes. What disabled subjects might experience as the mundane and everyday, nondisabled subjects might experience as hyperbole, and vice versa. These are rhetorical negotiations as much as they are sensory or perceptual negotiations: In contending that popular autism narratives represent autistics as involuntary, I am drawing upon long-standing histories and motifs that have come to dictate the whatness of autism. Mass institutionalization. Refrigerator mothers. Anti-vaxxers. Puzzle pieces. All of these figures, and more, create their exigencies through stories about autism's tragedy and victims, through stories about lack of choice. These stories are also animated beyond the domain of academic research: What Simon Baron-Cohen says in a neuroimaging journal is read, interpreted, and ultimately applied by practitioners on the ground. These translations and clinical applications of theory are stories unto themselves, stories that wield the harshest of material effects. But, more than this, I am also relating the stories that autistic people tell about these stories—meta-stories, of sorts. Who, then, is to be believed? If autism has taken over our brains, are we to be trusted? Does the condition of being nonautistic provide more agency, or rhetoricity, or voluntariness, even if only incrementally so?

Of course, involuntarity, I am arguing, is not an inherent part of autism as a condition. It is a story that structures and mediates autistic people's experiences of the world, but it is not an essential property in the way that clinicians or fundraisers might relate it. Rather, involuntarity's stories are those of abuse, of disbelief, of suffering and non-agency and pain. Involuntarity is forcibly imposed onto autistic bodies, onto neurodivergent bodies writ large, often to violent effect. Involuntary logics are the logics that delivered me to the psychiatric ward of the local hospital; they are the logics that forcibly absented me from a high school education; they are the logics of overmedication, eugenic futures, institutionalization; they are the logics that narrate shit smearing as brain gone awry. Involuntarity wreaks violence, even when violence is wrought voluntarily.

Throughout this book, I am thinking through the logics of involuntarity across two domains. First is the domain of autism itself, or autism's supposed propensity to impede or reduce the intentionality, will, volition, and/or goal direction of those affected. This is the domain on which I've primarily lingered thus far. The second, and closely related, is the creed of compliance and coercion that attend autism intervention services, most especially those that are behaviorist in form. In these therapies, autism is not so much an ecology of neuroqueer experience but rather an ecology of joint and forcible prosthesis, an ecology in which the autistic is physically made to comply with the therapeutic and social demands of nonautistic publics. In other words, if involuntarity isn't ascribed to autistics on a genetic or neurological level, it is most certainly inscribed in the treatment enterprises that structure an autistic child's life. Following Luckett, Bundy, and Roberts, we might ask, "to what extent could [autistic people's] choices be said to be voluntary rather than conditioned responses?"[25] Is an autistic rhetoric a rhetoric of operant conditioning and reinforced response? And, if so, can we even call this a rhetoric?

A number of disability studies scholars have commented upon the ways in which neurodivergent interlocutors have been rendered effectually nonrhetorical.[26] Taken together, their central arguments revolve around residual characterizations of neurodivergence (in particular, mental illness) across clinical and popular texts. When I invoke the term *residual*, I mean to suggest that mental disability always leaves something behind. And, in leaving something behind, mental disability takes over. When one is schizophrenic, for example, her rhetorical actions are rendered less as symbolic actions and more as biological motions: schizophrenia causes the person to act. The schizophrenic person, in these constructions, has no volition—or whatever volition she has is tempered by the schizophrenia. In this regard, it's important to note that whatever the placeholder—whether schizophrenia, autism, depression, cerebral palsy, ADHD, bipolar—mental disability signals a kind of rhetorical involuntariness. Mental disability wields more agency than mentally disabled people.

Involuntarity is a project of dehumanization.

This, then, is how the neurodivergent are often storied into (non)rhetoricity. We are conditioned to believe that our selves are not really selves, for they are eternally mitigated by disability, in all of its fluctuations. Autism is, in many respects, an apt and kairotic case study in rhetoric's in/voluntary violences. Most any text or tract about autism comes adorned in numbers, alarming figures crafted to inspire exigency and fear. Six hundred percent increases in diagnosis. One in sixty-eight children. Three million dollars in lifetime care. But beyond the numbers, which remain situated in rhetorics of crisis and doom, autism is frequently storied as an epic of asociality, of nonintention. It represents the edges and boundaries of humanity, a queerly crip kind of isolationism. We, the autistic, are a peopleless people. We embody not a counter-rhetoric but an anti-rhetoric, a kind of being and moving that exists tragically at the folds of involuntary automation. Our bodyminds rotely go through the motions, cluelessly la dee da. As rhetorician Todd Oakley once described, "rhetorical practices must . . . pose some form of an intentional agent to be coherent, and there is no better evidence to that effect than studies of autistic people, beings who lack the human rhetorical potential."[27]

Nowhere is the syllogism clearer:

—One must be human in order to be rhetorical.
—Autistic people are not rhetorical.
—Autistic people are not human.

Ignore, for a moment, that an autistic person derived the above syllogism. The irony might cause a headache. Also ignore that an autistic person might know what irony is. Ignore too that rhetoricians have written about the ways in which nonhuman animals are rhetorical, or even the ways in which objects are rhetorical.[28] Furniture may bear rhetoricity, but autistic people lack the Socratic gusto of futons.

Although I question rhetoric's human-centeredness in subsequent chapters, the following remains my chief concern: the ways in which non-rhetoricity denies autistic people not only agency, but their very humanity.

Autism is, of course, looming in the public consciousness. At a time when we know more about autism than we've ever known, what we know is very little, and what we know is decidedly nonautistic. There have been numerous attempts at god theories, or theories that purport to explain the many reasons why autistic people are nonpeople. These god theories transpose facets of autistic personhood into sterile symptom clusters, pathologizing character traits such as "intense and fulfilling interests" with clinically ornate buzzwords such as "perseveration of autistic psychopathy." But among the most prominent of such god theories, I'd argue, are theories about theory of mind (ToM) and theories about autistic behavior (in particular, that of applied behavior analysis, ABA). Whereas ToM stories autism in terms of internal states and cognitive processes, behavior analysis stories the autistic through observation, bodily comportment, and external behavior. Taken together, ToM and ABA construe the autistic as involuntarily willed and involuntarily drafted—beholden not only to neuronal desires but to the desires of therapists and caregivers and social norms.

In examining these god theories, *Authoring Autism* questions and rejects their canonicity in clinical research and practice, as well as the indictments these theories make about rhetorical action. Like any god theory, these theories are nuanced and complex, arguably disciplines unto themselves. But what they share in common is a persistent disbelief in the capacities of autistic people to be volitional, to be social, and to be selves. Given autism's classification as a disorder of social communication, these (dis)beliefs about autism are themselves theories of rhetoric, theories that privilege restrictive notions of what it means to interact and interrelate.

In chapters 1 and 2, I deconstruct as I story these god theories, both of which have radically shaped how clinicians and families understand autistic people. But here I want to linger on one god theory in particular, ToM, because this god theory has been hugely influential in the trajectory and staying power of autism research, grant funding, and clinical approaches to treatment. Theory of mind is a cognitive mechanism that autistic people are claimed to lack, or in which they are grievously impaired. In short, ToM is the ability to understand that other people have their own unique mental states, feelings, beliefs, and desires. It is the ability not only to recognize intentional stances, but to apprehend that intentional stances exist to begin with. Yet contemporary theories about ToM also invoke and assert other cognitive phenomena—including, but not limited to, mentalizing, metacognition, self-awareness, imaginative play, and expressing empathy.[29] In other words, to lack a theory of mind is not simply to lack a theory of others' minds—it is also to lack an awareness of one's own mind.[30]

Simon Baron-Cohen is perhaps the scholar most readily associated with ToM research and is particularly well known for having coined the term *mindblindness*, the notion that autistic people are pathologically impaired in recognizing and attributing mental states. Mindblindness, then, functions as a rhetorical foil that renders the autistic non-rhetorical at worst, and residually rhetorical at best. As R. Peter Hobson quips of the mindblind, "their difficulty in shifting among person-centred perspectives undermines both their grasp of what it means to hold a perspective and, beyond this, what it means to claim that any given perspective is true of that which transcends individuals' perspectives, namely reality."[31]

Reality is beyond the autist's grasp. Autism is that which contrasts. In Hobson's commentary I am reminded of Kenneth Burke's work on god theories, in which he claims that "in any term we can posit a world."[32] What, then, is an autistic world, if such a world bears no credible claim to a credible reality?

Under such logics, I have written this book, presumably unaware of my reader and my (non)self. The involuntary actions, thoughts, writings, and behaviors of my autistic body negate my claims to writerhood, rhetorichood, and narrativehood. Instead, this book might be better understood as a cluster of symptoms.

Achoo.

You're welcome.

Autistic Machines

Symptoms only take us so far—and the landing point is generally a sterile one. When I describe my bodily comportment in terms of symptoms, I reduce how I move through physical space to a mere check box on a patient intake form. My body is more than this reduction. I have stimmy hands, hands that wave, and flap, and tussle rubber bands—hands that create and transform space as much as they occupy it. My hands story and proclaim, denounce and congratulate. My hands say both *fuck you* and *thank you*. Sometimes I am the only person who knows what my hands are meaning. Sometimes even I don't know what my hands mean—but why must I always cherish or privilege meaning? Description cannot contain my hands. And yet, my former neuropsychologist described my movement as autistic stereotypy. My therapist described my movement as self-stimulatory gesticulation. In all of their describing, I find that little about me is described. Instead, my body is reduced. Erased. Medicated.

And so, symptoms only take us so far. My own capacious reimagining of symptomatology, of both autism and rhetoric, invokes what Victor Vitanza, in a nod to Deleuze, calls the "involution" of rhetorical spaces.[33] Involution calls into question ideas about rhetoric's supposed human-centeredness (what of a "hands-on" rhetoric?), as well as the ways in which traditional conceptions of intentionality dehumanize neurodivergent interlocutors. Vitanza positions *involuting* as mashup of *involuntary* and *revolution*, imagining rhetorical domains in which involuntarity reconfigures our felt sense of rhetoric's very project. Because what, after all, is this thing we call rhetoric?

Traditionally, rhetoric has been conceived as the art of persuasion. But the centrality of argument to rhetorical traditions has long been questioned, most especially by feminist rhetorical theorists. James Berlin has described rhetoric as the thing which mediates reality by means of discourse.[34] But if we return again to questions of belief, voluntariness, and hyperbole, it is hard to construct an autism rhetoric—or, indeed, an autistic rhetoric—when the mediators, realities, and discourses have been storied as so fantastically different. Bruno Bettelheim, one of autism's earliest and most notorious figures, famously called autistics prisoners of the fortress, comparing autism to concentration camps. Importantly, Bettelheim storied his own experiences as a survivor of Buchenwald and Dachau, employing his narrative to signify how autistic people have it far worse—because autism is a living death.[35] These stories position autism as a mechanistic entelechy, a life force that is ironically typified by death. So too does the trope of the alien order autism discourse, with even autistic-authored cultural texts and web forums bearing titles such as Wrong Planet or Resident Alien. We might turn again to Kenneth Burke and the argument that rhetoric's identifications are its divisions, that one can only identify with another if some kind of mediating difference organizes their encounter: for it is in this clashing, this coming together, that persuasion arises. But how to be a persuading body when one's body has been storied as unpersuasive, as inhuman and deadly? From where in the ether can an autistic rhetoric hail?

As I relate in chapter 1, rhetoric's modes and stories—and rhetoric's privileges—are incredibly wide-ranging and diffuse. But with autism, what at once seems so sprawling and profound a construct as rhetoric becomes incredibly narrow. The clinicalization of autism requires a clinicalization of rhetoric, because how else to measure that which the autistic lacks? Speech, as in words audibly escaping the contours of human mouths; writing, as in words that are arranged to be read and meaningfully understood by humans; intent, as in actions that not only bear a kind of purpose or deliberate meaning, but actions that likewise work to infer or deduce purposes and deliberations from human others, all presumably accomplished with neurotypical magical superpowers; emotion, and imagination, and socialization—I could keep going. Each of these items is a construct that rhetoric prizes and privileges. Each of these items is a construct that autistics are claimed to lack.

Take, for instance, my narrative approach thus far. It strikes me that I might be read as incredibly self-absorbed, if only because I have diagnostic papers that affirm this very sentiment. I am storying autism academically and rhetorically, yes, but I am also storying an autistic version of me—as though I am living out, on the page, the paradoxical autos of autism in all of its glory. I am simultaneously selfless and self-centered, and these things are mutually sustaining. If I had a fully developed sense of self, then I would have a more fully developed sense of others, and vice versa. What autism presents, then, is an opportunity for readers to diagnose the very form of this book, as though this book were an invitation for symptomatological scrutiny.[36]

I am autistic. I live and dwell and will forever remain among the lacking.

To be honest, it is only in recent years that I think about my shit so often, and so rhetorically. My shit never really stained any walls. My family was always moving, hopping from one location to the next, desperate as my parents searched for work, as my parents searched for a school system that didn't object to students who crapped themselves during math class. But I am not thinking about my shit as a symptom, as a sign of how I lack empathy or perspective for others' feelings (or others' desires to wash cribs and walls and hands). Rather, I am thinking about the narrativity of my shit. A weird thing, I realize—and perhaps that I am even sharing this with a public audience further signals how impaired my ToM really is. (I kid.)

The connection between shit smearing and ToM might appear tenuous at first glance. But in many respects, I'd posit, they occupy an interlocking, mutually constitutive narrative about autistic selfhood: Autistics are considered residually rhetorical because their symbolic actions, in the words of Burke, have been reduced, scientistically, to nonsymbolic motion.[37] That is, autistic motion is the domain of neurobiological behavior, which is the domain of the nonsymbolic and automatic, or the automatonic. We see this narrative all the time, most often in behaviorist writings that proclaim autistic speech acts and gestures as behaviors lacking in meaning, purpose, or social value.[38] Francesca Happé echoes this line of thought when she describes autism as a world bereft of inference and intent: "Without mentalizing ability, the transparency of intentions that allows humans to use language in a truly flexible way is not open to autistic communicators."[39] To be clear, this is a story that structures how nonautistic others come to know autism, and thereby autistics, in the present day. We can see this story alive and well in clinical scholarship, just as we can locate this story in the social skills curricula that dominate special education programs. Michelle Garcia Winner's Social Thinking and Carol Gray's Social Stories are but two exemplars of the ways in which the biomotion of ToM theories structures the logics of autism intervention and response.[40] Each intervention presumes something has gone awry in the neurosocial circuitry of autistic brains, and each intervention endeavors to teach autistics the utterly unteachable: to understand that humans exist in more than a fleshy, body-occupies-a-space kind of way. Humans exist perspectivally and intentionally, and without this knowledge, autistics are absented from the larger project of being human.

In the stories we tell and encounter about biological motion, autistics and humans unfortunately operate as a clinical binary. Autistics are *robots-en-organisme*, mindblindly spewing and spreading our shit because full communicability is beyond our reach. Autistics are not Burke's "symbol-using animals," at least not in a consistent or socially appropriate sense. What communicability autistics do possess is merely residual. Or, put alternatively, autism is an entity much like nonautism, or *allism*, is an entity.[41] Whereas autism is represented as compulsions toward the self (autos), allism is fashioned as a turning-toward the other (*allos*). These entities—the neuro-orientational impulse toward self or other—both reside and recede, reside and recede. And, importantly, in invoking allism throughout this book, my intent is not to reify the notion that nonautistics are empathetic social butterflies or that autistics are mindblind egocentrists. Rather, what allism signifies is the absurdities of these constructions, as well as the ways in which cultural understandings of what it means to be nonsocial are deeply entrenched in values of human worth.

Following the above, what might autistic shit signify? What is so symbolic and compelling and kairotic about my shit? Shit only signifies if the autist intends it to signify, and, as scholars have asserted repeatedly, if one is a true autist, then signification lies beyond one's grasp. When autistry recedes, intended signification may be a goal, may be a dim reality: For the purported high-functioning, perhaps shit on the wall does hold meaning. And yet, the rub: Autism always bears residue. One can never wholly escape its grasp. Even stories of so-called recovery, even the most optimistic high-falutin'-functioning narratives posited by behaviorist demigod Ole Ivar Lovaas himself, proclaim that autism always inheres.[42] Its ephemera trail, never fully dissociable from the being upon which it once latched. To be autistic is to live and to lie in a between space. The autistic symbolic is always a reduction, a motion rather than a rhetorical repertoire. It is mechanistic, rigid, routinized, reducible. Consequently, its significations are never more than quasi-significations. Autism's significations are the significations of impairment, of symptoms, of disorder, of crippling residual effects.

The answer, then, to my shit smearing is that I didn't (don't) know what shit is. Shit means nothing. It is neither figurative nor literal: It exists, but it doesn't project. Otherwise, why would an autistic person (read: machine) cake it on walls? In what reality can I dwell when I cannot reliably conjure or imagine the mental states of others, including poopy others?

In scholarly texts, autism's wills and misfires are variously framed. But as it is commonly represented, autism is not ingrained in, nor is it part of, human will. Autism is instead conceived as ancillary to—and parasitic of—an allistic will. Whatever intent an autistic possesses begins with her presumed prior or core self, the allistic self. When autism is diagnosed, it is thought to reside, to push out the normalcy and invade, body-snatcher style. As in, autism made toddler me throw and smear and lick my own shit. As in, autism is making me write this book, and you, dear reader, should be skeptical at all turns. This changeling narrative is potent, rearing its head in texts ranging from Jenny

FIGURE I.1. A smiling poop emoji is positioned above a caption that reads, “Ceci n’est pas un caca.” The image is an (autistic) homage to René Magritte’s *The Treachery of Images* and Foucault’s *Ceci n’est pas une pipe*. Image created by Phantom Open Emoji, used via Wikimedia Commons, Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported License.

McCarthy’s parenting memoirs to Google’s genomic database of autism tissue samples. Autism—autism is what’s moving and breathing.

And so, autism does have a will, but its will is one of nonsymbolic motion, not symbolic action. It follows, then, that in being nonactors, autistic people’s wills are merely the wills of neurobiology, of distilled movements and motions and mechanisms whose remnants and residences occupy higher priority than rhetorical, symbolic intent.

Even autistic people themselves have narrated a similar kind of story. Autistic life writer Wenn Lawson, for example, famously titled one of his books *Autism: Taking Over*.[43] In *Songs of the Gorilla Nation*, Dawn Prince described autism as living behind glass, wherein all motions, commotions, and symbolic exchanges happen always at a remove, cognitively filtered and distorted.[44] But, in many respects, this story is an old autistic story. It is an early and emergent narrative script, a script that autistic people have since diverted, evolved, repeated, rebuked, and queered. I could claim that autism’s wills were shitty wills—shitty in that autism took me hostage and shitty in that autism plays with actual shit. But I instead suggest that my autistic motions are better read as mediators and preconditions of autistic actions, actions that cloud the lines of sociality and asociality. Must shit smearing have an audience in order to be a rhetorical act? What if childhood shit smearing were read as autistic communication instead of autistic behavior? And might we think of shit—the actual, organic object—as a coagent unto itself? Manning and Massumi suggest that “from the autistic, we hear neither a rejection of the human, nor a turning away from relation.”[45] What, then, are autistic objects, and in what ways do they rhetorically mediate? Rhetoric has long storied intent as a kind of distribution, one whose affects, effects, and motions obscure how we think of bodies, environments, machines, nonhuman animals, and things.[46] Why, then, does autism so pathologically diverge from these stories?

As I suggest throughout *Authoring Autism*, autistic stories are, at root, queer stories. Here I borrow my deployment of *queer* from José Esteban Muñoz to suggest queer as a kind of verbing, as an always-futurity. Muñoz begins *Cruising Utopia* with the pithy claim that "queerness is not yet here."[47] In this construction, Muñoz positions queerness as an ideal, as a rejection of arrival and a rhetoric of potentiality. Importantly, Muñoz's focus on hope and potentiality is a critical assessment of the antirelational turn within queer studies, which, he maintains, "moves to imagine an escape or denouncement of relationality as first and foremost a distancing of queerness from what some theorists seem to think of as the contamination of race, gender, or other particularities that taint the purity of sexuality as a singular trope of difference."[48] As I discuss in subsequent chapters, *arelationality* and *asociality* are terms of work that position the autistic as deadly or death-wishing, collapsing the autistic into all that is alarmingly inhuman. In fact, these terms of work are often used interchangeably with *autism* itself. And these terms of work, as Muñoz writes of antirelational queer theories, likewise result in the whitening and masculinizing of autistic people: if an autistic future is bleak, it is racistly and transmisogynistically represented as bleaker—"contaminated"—when its subjects are persons of color, women or genderqueer, poor, and/or nonspeaking. Drawing upon Muñoz, Jonathan Alexander describes queerness's "motion of futurity" as "a working through impossibility."[49] The queer motion toward the "not yet here" is what propels Alexander to assess the field of composition and rhetoric as an inherently straightening enterprise—and, I would add, a thereby inherently ableist enterprise.[50] He suggests that there can be no queer pedagogy, no queer composition, because pedagogy and composition are, at root, social(izing) and norming projects (and, in this vein, composition pedagogy unfurls as a white, straight, masculine project). To compose is to comply; to teach is to inculcate compliance. Conversely, queering, Alexander maintains, "confronts all of us with the incommensurabilities of desires and identities and socialities."[51]

The above reveals much that is relevant to autism. We might, for instance, consider autism as a kind of neurologically queer motioning. To be autistic is to be neuroqueer, and to be neuroqueer is to be idealizing, desiring, sidling. But rather than story such motioning as parasitically unwilled, or as a grope toward mindblindness, I'd instead suggest that autism is a neurologically queer motioning that is asocially perverse, a lurching toward a future that imagines "incommensurabilities of desires and identities and socialities," a ticcing toward rhetorical residues. This asociality, while often represented by clinicians as a nonsociality, is inherently relational in that it defies, reclaims, and embraces the expansiveness that countersocialities can potentially embody. Jay Dolmage has offered a similar vision of disability rhetorics, construing dis-rhetoricity as a way to move that is cunning, sideways, and creeping toward disabled futures.[52]

Autistic machinations, however, are rarely portrayed so idealistically. Autism research operates on the hope that there will be no autistic future. As Alison Kafer laments, the "presence of disability signals . . . a future that bears too many traces of the ills of the present to be desirable."[53] Such are the rhetorical shapings of neuroqueer subjects. Because autism resides, even futures that predict improvement or mitigation of symptoms still bear traces—traces of mindblind, involuntary motion. Theories about ToM often function as a metanarrative for this antifuturistic logic. Autism might be better termed an autpocalypse.

Theories about ToM arguably constitute their own interdisciplinary enterprise. We might even term this enterprise ToM studies. There are a variety of theories about how and in whom ToM operates, such as whether ToM is an innate capacity, a developmental milestone, or a processual ability that emerges through experience, simulation, and/or projecting one's concept of self onto another. My intent (oh, wait—my motion) is not to provide an overhaul of theories about ToM here. Nor is my intent to suggest which theory is best or most humane, because—and this is important—I believe all incarnations of ToM to be decidedly inhumane. Instead, I am interested in the ways in which ToM stories autistic people, as well as the effects it has on how we come to know and understand autistic people. These effects, I suggest, are lingering and often violent. Among the many terms of work employed by ToM studies is *modularity*. It is not uncommon for cognition to be represented as computeristic, regardless of whether autism is the focal point of conversation.[54] Although hotly debated, ToM is often posited as a cognitive module—or even a series of cognitive modules—mechanisms in which brains (dis)engage.[55] The general idea is that there is a mechanism(s) in the human brain that bears responsibility for ToM, and we know this to be true because autistic people seem not to have such a module. This logic is, of course, circuitous and questionable. The state of our knowledge is that a ToM module exists because one core group of people seems to lack it organically.

Modularity is, of course, its own kind of metaphorization of the brain. When modularity is invoked in ToM discourse, it is often in reference to the theory that ToM abilities occupy their own distinct, domain-specific cognitive module (or modules, plural, that work in tandem to coordinate all of ToM's many functions). But I would argue that ToM doesn't modularize the human brain so much as it modularizes autistic people. Theory of mind defines and dissects autistic people in and as discrete components. Remember that ToM begs at more than mere intention—it crafts an involuntary landscape that traverses self-knowledge, sociality, empathy, recognition of mental states, and even imagination. These are some of the many domains in which autism resides, in which we can sport and spot autistic traces.

Importantly, Muñoz maintains that queerness is constitutive of motion and ephemera, of traversals and traces. Autism, I am claiming, is always residual and is always fluctuating, ticcing, trembling. Its ephemera are marked and marketed in ToM scholarship, and if I were so inclined, I might pull out a copy of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (*DSM*) and locate autism's traces and motions, its histories and presences, across bullet points and checklists and clinical catalogs and modularistic models. I have so far, in this introduction, resisted this common *DSM* impulse—for isn't every statement on autism a statement about its diagnostic criteria?

But my autism resides far beyond diagnosis, much like my pansexuality resides far beyond coming out. Disclosure bears its own kind of residual effects. My neuroqueer disclosures inflect and infect—they suggest an interpretive lens through which others feel an impulse to story my life, to story my being. Is autism responsible for my paragraph structure? Did a neuroqueer neuron operationalize my word choice? To what extent do we need—or want—a rhetorical theory of modularity?

Vitanza's involution project figures the tic, the stim, the vocalization, and the unconscious gesture as the fabric upon which, in the words of Thomas Rickert, rhetoric has capacity to emerge.[56] In other words, without ticcing, without involuntary motion, there is no rhetorical action. My shit, as perverse as it may seem, is a precondition for rhetoricity. It is rhetoricity. And while I cannot speak to the in/voluntariness of my feces-smearing child self, I can speak to the ways in which my bodymind writes and is written into autism's non-rhetoricity. My facial tics and complex hand movements involute social fabrics. Chorus of tics, emerge.

Autistext

While autism is certainly a disability, it is, as I have suggested, a constellation of stories—stories about embodiment and intention, stories about humanity and hierarchy, stories about diagnosis and detection and prevention. This constellation, as Phil Bratta and Malea Powell describe, is an assertion about normalcy as much as it is a question of what and why something comes to be configured as normal or dominant.[57]

But autism is also a story about communication more generally, about enriching our ideas of rhetoricity and eye contact and the beauty of shiny objects. It's a story about disability culture. It's a story about stories, and what or who is determined to be storyable. It's a story about empathy and expression and reclamation. In my adult years, as I've struggled to locate a sense of identity, the idea of storying brings both comfort and distress. Autism is core to my very being. It's how I sense, interact with others, and process information. Autism is my rhetoric. But what's at risk here is who tells my story and, more broadly, who tells the story of my people. What's of concern is who gets to author our individual and collective identities, who gets to determine whether we are, in fact, narrative creatures, whether we are living beings in rhetorical bodies, whether we are even allowed to call ourselves human.

Many autistics have told their stories—or nonstories, if you will. Arguably, the first published autie-biography was David Eastham's 1985 *Understand: Fifty Memowriter Poems*, a small chapbook that was scarcely circulated. Importantly, 1985 is the same year that Simon Baron-Cohen, Alan Leslie, and Uta Frith published "Does the Autistic Child Have a Theory of Mind?," the first such article to suggest lack of ToM as a causal explanation for autism.[58] In quick succession, and with broader public reach, came a number of published autie-biographies, most famously Temple Grandin's *Emergence: Labelled Autistic* (1986) and Donna Williams's *Nobody Nowhere* (1992). Other texts published at the turn of the 1990s included Sean and Judy Barron's *There's a Boy in Here* (1992), David Miedzianik's *My Autobiography* (1993), and Thomas McKean's *Soon Will Come the Light* (1994).

The stories of Grandin and Williams—and with them the barrage of autistic stories that soon followed—forced clinicians, parents, educators, and lay publics alike to reassess their archly held views of autism, to reconsider theories about the autistic's capacity for thought. But after the shock of autistic literacy began to wane, clinicians sought new and inventive theories—something, anything, to maintain order over disorder.[59] For example, Bernard Rimland, founder of the Autism Society of America, was quick to suggest that Grandin and Williams had both recovered from their autism—because how could an autistic have an inner life, much less narrate one?[60] In like manner, Francesca Happé suggested that autie-biographers were exceptional occurrences, so-called able-disabled people who, while still autistic, brought little of worth to discussions of autism. Asked Happé at the time, "What can we point to in their writing that deserves the label 'autistic'?"[61]

And so opened the floodgates. Following Grandin and Williams, cognitive studies researchers seeded autism journals with articles on autie-biography and autistic life writers, elaborating any conceivable problem, error, or rhetorical faux pas they could find. And find these things, they did. As I discuss in chapter 3, such accounts have often focused on what the autistic writer has left unsaid, importing the logics of ToM to purport that the writer lacks, in varying degrees, capacity for self-awareness and/or audience awareness. Happé's 1991 analysis of Grandin's work has become somewhat iconic in its rhetorical approach to autism: "These autistic writers," she notes, "may not be interested in, or capable of writing on those subjects which we [allistics] should most like to hear their views."[62] Some twenty years later, the sentiment remains. Studies tell us that autistic writers supposedly employ fewer mental state terms, or terms that signal an awareness of others' intentions, beliefs, feelings, desires, and even existence.[63] So too are autistics claimed to relate fewer personal experiences in spontaneous conversational narratives.[64] Autistic people are likewise claimed to have a "lesser propensity to adjust to alternative perspectives" and are theorized to possess not only ToM impairments but broader impairments in role-taking as well.[65] Helen Tager-Flusberg relates such narrative failures thusly: "These errors reflect difficulties in conceptualizing notions of self and other, as they are embedded in shifting discourse roles."[66] The refrain is clear: Autistics don't tell us what we want to hear, nor do they tell it to us in the manner in which we wish to hear it.

While studies on autistic narrative competence vary in their results and foci, taken together, these studies convey a scalar portrait of the autist as suspended in perpetual non-rhetoricity, no matter how far ze proceeds along the scale. Incrementally, autistics can make gains in rhetorical or narrative competence. But on the whole, one would not be designated with the label *autistic* if ze weren't a queerly (non)rhetorical creature. If we autistics use so-called internal states language in our writing or speaking, it's still possible that we might shift the topic of discourse too quickly or too routinely. If we are able to maintain a topical stance, we might reverse our pronouns or use only proper names. If we finally master normative pronominal conventions, we might still yet rely on the literality of language rather than discern the intentionality or figurative meanings of another interlocutor. If we grok metaphor, we still lack intention and sociality in other ways: We fail to share in the enjoyment of others; we might not speak, at all, ever; we flat out refuse to adjust our narratives in accordance with new or contextually relevant information. (Have I mentioned yet that my favorite band is the Electric Light Orchestra?)

In this way, our discursive partiality becomes metonymic for our human partiality. Autistic people do not tell allistics what they want to know; and because autistic people do not tell allistics what they want to know, autistics are presumed to hold variable impairments in those cognitive and neurological domains that control or mitigate social-intentional function. In other words: Unlike allistic rhetors, our narrative practices cannot be read outside neurology, for without neurology we cannot map or filter autism onto our narratives. Ours are neuroqueer brains whose synapses routinely fire blanks, and something as banal as our pronoun (mis)use supposedly evidences our distinctiveness from all other persons. Autism's rhetorical function—in genetics, neurology, psychology, philosophy, and more—is to contrast those who are otherwise presumed to be cognitively and thereby humanly whole.

Yet, in spite of the pessimism that slithers throughout this chapter and (spoiler) others, autistic people have continued to write, publish, agitate, advocate. We continue to tell allistics what they don't want to hear. Catalogs teem with autistic-authored books, many of which are oriented toward autistic audiences and together culminate to suggest the breadth and heterogeneity of autistic publics. Autistics.org, for instance, hosts a list of autistic-authored books that numbers well over a hundred, and Lindsay at the blog *Autist's Corner* maintains an extensive "autiebibliography." Autistic culture, as a movement, boasts at least three decades of activism, much of it digitally born. Self-published and transmedia collections such as the *NeuroQueer* group blog, *Loud Hands: Autistics, Speaking*, *All the Weight of Our Dreams: On Living Racialized Autism*, and *Typed Words, Loud Voices* emerged from digital communities of autistic and other neurodivergent people. While new media scholars bemoan the death of the blog, the autistic blogosphere thrives. Autism Acceptance Month (April), Autistic Pride Day (June 18), Autistics Speaking Day (November 1)—these campaigns, and more, are some of the many virtual gatherings in which autistic people multimodally narrate their lives, communities, cultures, and ways of being in the world. And while it is beyond the scope of this book to count pronouns or internal states language in these texts (although that would be a fun Sunday), my broader contention is that these items do not disqualify people from rhetoricity. Rather, autistic conventions can be more capaciously read as a neuroqueer mode of engaging, resisting, claiming, and contrasting the interstices of sociality.

Autistic narrative persists. It persists in the face of discourses that would render us arhetorical and tragically inhuman. It persists across genre and mode, much of it ephemeral and embodied in form. Autistic people persist and insist in the narrativity of their tics, their stims, their echoed words and phrases, their relations with objects and environs. We persist in involuting, in politicizing the supposedly involuntary. We can't help it, after all.

Autie-ethnography/Autistethnography

Storying is my method throughout this book, a method I've engaged for myriad reasons, including and especially my inability not to be self-absorbed.[67] First, I believe that autistic stories, both my own and those of others, resist the cultural inscriptions that autism as a diagnosis suggests. As Irene Rose contends in her work on autistic life writing, such "narratives work at a connective emotional level to resist the pathologisation of difference."[68] Rose explores, in particular, the resonances of terming autistic life writing autie-ethnography rather than autie-biography. Among other items, Rose considers the power in testimony and witnessing, as well as the activist strands that often travel through autist texts, or what I might term *autistexts*. Ultimately, Rose contends that autistexts transcend the solitary construction of autos—in both autism and the autobiographical—and work intertextually to narrate and protest oppression. Rotating between *autie-ethnographic* and *testimonio* as terms of work, Rose writes, "the primary concern of *testimonio* is sincerity of intention, not the text's literariness, an intention that in autistic autobiography is supported by editorial decisions that have allowed distinctly non-rational ontological experience to be included—and therefore validated—in some autistics' texts."[69] Intention is but one domain, then, in which autistexts queer the contours of a diagnosis, as well as the rhetorical traditions that attend such diagnosis. Autistic stories are interrelational, even if that interrelationality does not extend toward allistics, or even humans more generally.

Second, I believe that autistic stories reconfigure what it means to be self-focused and without self, in all of the paradoxicality of that simultaneity. These stories are queerings in that they narrate a confluence of excess and lack; or, put another way, the rhetoricisms of autistic storying defy rhetoricism. As such, these stories are theoretical texts unto themselves, worthy of the page weight accorded to the prominent autism scholars I've cited in this book. Ibby Grace, an autistic educational philosopher, offers one such perspective in her own storying of coming to an autistic identity.[70] Grace expands Rose's focus on intertextuality and life writing to suggest that all autistic storying—regardless of genre, mode, or delivery—functions as a kind of autistethnography. In this way, the flap of a hand or the fluttering of a wrist becomes a rhetorical act that exceeds the mereness of needing to be studied. More importantly, Grace makes the concerted shift from the *autie* to the *autist* prefix, noting that the former has taken on an increasingly diminutive quality over the past decade. When allistics speak of auties and aspies, she warns, they not only appropriate community terms but frequently attempt a cutening and thereby a rhetorical lessening of autistic subjects. For Grace's part, her autistethnography makes little mention of autism, while simultaneously queering the genre of typical autism ethnographies and clinical case studies. She begins her essay by observing, for instance, "It is a surprise that in our society it is not more disabling to live your whole life unaware that folding the symbolic kissing cherry blossoms together just so creates a regular pentagonal dodecahedron. But I am glad people can live fulfilling lives that way, because does anybody wish ill to people who are without that inner visual ability to properly spin things?"[71] Were a ToM scholar to analyze Grace's work (or mine, for that matter), I can only imagine (pun) where they might begin in their analysis, in their attempts to locate rhetorical pathology. Grace's refrain throughout her autistethnography is "maybe the reader can make inferences," a none-too-subtle appeal to those capacities in which autistics are figured as lacking.[72] But more, this demicommand—"maybe the reader can make inferences"—makes no such assumption that readers can, or will be able to, understand or share in the beauty or absence of visualization abilities. Grace's autistethnography, rather complexly, defends her rhetoricity while concomitantly telling it to fuck off.

Storying, then, holds potentiality. These "cultures of one," as Dawn Prince famously described autistics, culminate to form a kind of counter-rhetoric in all of their anti-rhetoricity.[73] We might behold autistic storying—and the unearthing of nonautistic stories about autism—as methods for queering futures, for projecting autistic desires and autistic ideals. The story of my shit, the story of my stims, the story of my diagnosis and involuntary entrance into this communing, incommunicable community. In authoring autism throughout this book, I am relating my own autistic narrative while also drawing upon the narratives of other autistics, even to the point of excess. As I mentioned previously, I engage the narrativistic—as a theoretical rather than a literary or analytic function—because ours is a condition that summons disbelief. Sometimes this disbelief is leveled at the disability itself ("but you can't be autistic"), and sometimes this disbelief is leveled at the scholarship we produce ("you are too autistic to write unbiasedly about autism"). In many regards, I am playing with a complicated autistic topos, that of the overshare, and talking about shit and queerness and self-injury more generally as a means to unsettle, digress, and, ultimately, center those who have traditionally been decentered.

These, of course, are rhetorical risks. Narrative methodologies have long been held suspect within academe, often viewed as a kind of nonresearch and/or rhetorical self-absorption. Such is the challenge, then, of positing autistethnography as a method and a genre worthy of scholarly attention. Disability studies, much like other cultural studies fields, has not been immune from such critique. Disabled people's autobiographical musings are typically cast as "narcissistic," as pathological compositions produced by otherwise scholarly incapable bodyminds.[74] Yet, despite such characterizations, disability studies persists as a highly narrativistic field, one that seeks to foreground individual narratives within larger sociopolitical and often rights-based discourses.

In ticcing toward the autie-ethnographic, *Authoring Autism* provides a(n) (alternative) (neuroqueer) narrative of autism's history and rhetorical meaning(s). This project, at root, aims to deconstruct cognitive studies scholarship that reifies the inhumanity and neurological passivity of autistics, while also claiming that autistic people queer the lines of rhetoric, humanity, and agency. Importantly, the rhetorical narrative in this project is interconnected with queerness in competing ways—as action, analytic, identity, and movement. First, I argue that, in its past and present clinical formations, autism is contextually situated within societal responses to and of gay panic. We can locate queerness in nineteenth-century fears about the feeble-minded and sexual deviance; we can locate queerness in the mainstreaming of ABA, which is used to eliminate "feminine sex-typed behaviors" and "cross-gender identification" in gender-variant children and to make autistics "indistinguishable from their peers";[75] we can locate queerness in theories about ToM, which are premised on the idea that autistics, regardless of gender identity, have an extreme male brain;[76] and we can locate queerness in the self-identifications of autistic people, who, anecdotally, have a far higher preponderance of queer identifications than do non-autistic populations. Often, discourse on the queer takes shape with regard to autistic people's identifications, but it also takes form as a verbing of that which supposedly makes autistic people antisocial and non-rhetorical creatures.

The autistic subject, queer in motion and action and being, has been clinically crafted as a subject in need of disciplining and normalization. What autism provides is a backdoor pathologization of queerness, one in which clinicians and lay publics alike seek out deviant behaviors and affectations and attempt to straighten them, to recover whatever neurotypical residuals might lie within the brain, to surface the logics and rhetorics of normalcy by means of early intensive behavioral intervention (EIBI).[77] Queer bodies and autistic bodies betray rhetoricity in gesture, relationality, emotion, and intent. How better, then, to refute—or to exceptionalize—the life writing of autistic people, who are so often presumed to be both cognitively challenged and cognitively queer/ed?

But, more than the above examples, which call upon queerness as identity (often in the LGBTQA sense of identity), autism is figured as a kind of neurological queering: Autistics are not only actively antisocial, defying the bounds of multiple social fabrics, but we are the ultimate asocial beings, forwarding self over others, humanizing objects and objectifying humans, rigid in our gaze and our gait and our affect.[78] The neurologically queer, contends Micki McGee, "is a site of panicked—indeed, epidemic—contestation."[79] The ToM discourse that governs empirical study of autism premises itself on cultural panics about what might be termed prosocial behaviors. Autistic bodies, mindblind bodies—these are bodies that not only defy social order, but fail to acknowledge social order's very existence. Autism, then, poses a kind of neuroqueer threat to normalcy, to society's very essence.

The term *neuroqueer* is itself a relatively new and web-based invention, at least in its current iteration, having evolved through the collaborative work of autistic bloggers Ibby Grace, Athena Lynn Michaels-Dillon, Nick Walker, and myself. As Walker in particular relates, *neuroqueer* resists a definition, even in its uptake within identitarian discourses. Instead, he maintains, neuroqueer identities are those in which subjects perform the perversity of their neurotypes, noting rather circumlocutiously, "A neuroqueer individual is an individual whose identity has in some way been shaped by their engagement in practices of neuroqueering. Or, to put it more concisely (but perhaps more confusingly): you're neuroqueer if you neuroqueer."[80] In these constructions, neuroqueer subjects are verbed forms, more accurately and radically conceived as cunning movements, not neuronal states or prefigured genetic codes. Given autism's particular threats to social orders, autism's queerity is often storied by means of disorientation: Autistics are so rhetorically impaired that they remain unoriented toward all that is normative and proper, whether empathy or eros or gender (performance and concept unto itself).

Autism treatment enterprises, many of which share origin stories with gay conversion therapies, enact a rehabilitative response as a means of de-queering the autist. In the vein of crip-queer studies scholars Robert McRuer and Abby Wilkerson, Jay Dolmage has described such clinical impulses as a kind of "compulsory sociality."[81] Affirming the work of disability rights activists who model their work on queer liberation, Dolmage claims that "resistance to compulsory sociality can be recognized as a possible disability rhetoric, even in a world in which the individuating and isolating construction of disability can be used against people with disabilities."[82] In support of this claim, Dolmage draws upon Julia Miele Rodas—in particular, her argument that autistic resistance to sociality is a condition of autistic survivance. Writes Rodas, "Resistance to the encroaching world, and to tyrannical expectations of compulsory sociality, is necessary to autistic survival and self-determination."[83] In other words, that which supposedly makes autistics non-rhetorical is what makes them queer/ed, and is also what enables them to survive, to tic into autistic futures.

Narrating Neuroqueer Histories

As a clinical marker, autism is relatively nascent. Its emergence in psychiatric literature dates to the 1920s, but the earliest sustained case studies didn't transpire until World War II and the immediate postwar years, with studies led by Leo Kanner, Hans Asperger, Bruno Bettelheim, and others. As important as these studies are to constructions of autistic neuroqueerness, eugenicist histories and their focus on eliminating disabled and racialized people predate autism by a number of decades.[84] Even though the constellation of symptoms and traits we now know as autism was not named autism until the 1930s, autism is haunted by broader narratives of so-called racial betterment, as well as narratives concerned with eradicating intellectual and psychiatric disability.

Importantly, physicians at the time contended that masturbation and sexual deviance were the direct cause of mental disability.[85] In our contemporary moment, one that swells abuzz with the activity of neuroscientific rigor and fMRI machines, the autism-queer connection suggests autism as a neurophysiological trigger for queerness (all postulated around hormonal imbalances, white matter discrepancies, and impaired ToM modules). Conversely, through the early twentieth century, a moralistic approach to sexuality claimed the reverse—that aberrant sexual activity was the root cause of cognitive difference. (And so, the age-old question for autistic queers: Which came first—the autism or the gay?) In the United States, Samuel Gridley Howe represented one such theorist; John Harvey Kellogg represented another (and, among other things, codeveloped Corn Flakes as a cure-all for masturbation in the asylum, and also mutilated the genitalia of his child patients).[86]

I here want to fast-forward several decades, to 1974. In the interim time period, autism was born and blamed on the coldness of so-called refrigerator mothers. But as studies on autistic-imbued queerness were just beginning to ramp up, studies on nonautistic, gender-nonconforming children were already well under way, under the heading of ABA.

What is in 2014 considered the "gold standard autism therapy" (see the Autism Speaks website) was the predominant therapy used to train out the queer in children perceived to be trans, effeminate, and/or homosexual in the 1960s and 1970s.[87] To put it briefly, ABA represents a suite of therapeutic modalities whose end goal involves behavioral shaping toward the normative, toward the prosocial, toward compliance. It is, in combination with aversion therapy, one of the primary methodological forerunners of what might now be termed reparative therapy. Paradoxically, it remains the contemporary autism therapy of choice, endorsed by numerous medical authorities, including the U.S. Surgeon General. With regard to queer histories of ABA, some readers may recall the 1974 study by George Rekers and Ole Ivar Lovaas, which featured a four-year-old boy named Kraig who cross-dressed and displayed "pronounced feminine mannerisms, gestures, and gait, as well as exaggerated feminine inflection and feminine content of speech."[88] Rekers, now a prominent gay conversion advocate, chronicled the process by which Kraig's effeminate behaviors were punished—variously by abuse from his father and silent treatment from his mother—and his masculine behaviors were rewarded (with praise and toys). In our present-day moment, we now know Kraig to be Kirk Murphy, who committed suicide at the age of thirty-eight.

In later years, Lovaas distanced himself from his sex-role deviance research while Rekers based his entire career on it. Notably, Rekers and Lovaas's project—known as the UCLA Feminine Boy Project—was not only a federally funded program, but the largest program in U.S. history designed to intervene in the lives of so-called "sissy boys" and prevent "transvestism, transsexualism, [and] some forms of homosexuality."[89] As Phyllis Burke notes of the Feminine Boy Project in *Gender Shock*, "$218,945 went to UCLA from the NIMH with Dr. Lovaas as Principal Investigator (PI) in this project. For the early 1970s, this was an extraordinary amount of money for such a research grant, and because he was the PI, Dr. Lovaas was also the kingpin, the one whose reputation secured the grant, and the one who determined how the money would be allocated."[90] And yet—when autism enters the mix, ABA as queer cure-all resumes, posed as a methodology that recoups normalcy for the abnormally brained. Most states, for instance, recommend an average of forty hours per week of intensive ABA for autistic children. In the autistic community there has emerged a distinctive ex-ABA movement, one led by traumatized autistics and parents alike. Survivors of ABA speak of hours-long sessions spent on inculcating compliance, assent, and normalized gender roles, hours spent on social stories that reinforce stereotypical and cis/heteronormative behaviors.

As I discuss in chapter 2, these moments that attend autism and behavioral shaping stand among many such horrific moments in neuroqueer histories. But these moments remain iconic, for they reify heterocentric conceptions of gender and sexuality, while concurrently assuming that autistics are fundamentally, deviantly, and neurologically queer. These moments are also historically pervasive, feeding both accepted medical practice and pseudo-scientific approaches toward recovery and cure. Today's common practices include forced medication, ranging from sterilization to heavy sedation. For instance, one of the antidepressants I took for years, mirtazapine, has been studied in autistic populations only for its potential to curb masturbation and fetishism.[91] Another drug, Lupron, a chemical castration agent, has been used to control the aggression and sexual expression of autistic teens.[92]

Of course, these rhetorical webs of autism and queerness are not just notable for their horrors. They invoke all of the tough, meaty questions that any kind of intersectionality demands. How do we account for where queerness begins and disability ends? It may well be that I am queer only because my neurological disability predisposes me to queerness. But does that matter? What are the consequences of saying that I'm queer because I'm autistic—or, conversely, that I'm autistic because I'm queer?

Or, to step back even further: How do we theorize the neurologically queer? Even though my focus here is on autism, in many respects, this isn't a book on autism at all. Madness and mental disability are inextricable from queer histories. In what ways are categories such as OCD or bipolar disorder shaped and controlled by the heterocentric residue of the psychiatric establishment? What ethical lapses surface when we take on the task of teasing out the multiply identified, when we assert causality, when we find new and inventive ways of remarginalizing the marginalized, all in the name of scholarly pursuit?

The often violent ephemera of neuroqueer histories leave indelible traces on our presents and futures. I write this book, in part, because I don't know what to do with this stuff anymore. What to do when a rhetorician describes ToM as a "perfect phrase"?[93] What to do when a philosopher in one breath claims ToM 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"?[94] 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"?[95] What to do when a rhetorician claims that autistic people are "masked by a cloud of social solitude"?[96] What to do when a journalist maintains that autistic writing is "transmitted on suspect equipment"?[97] What to do with scholarship that denies autistic rhetoricity, 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 and involuntary body. Reason, topoi, tropes, narrative arcs, diplomacy—these will only ever be attempts, or, as Happé calls them, "hacks" toward a normative embodiment, hacks toward a normative rhetoric.[98] 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 symptomatology, the only arguably reliable story I've offered in this introduction comes from my presumably nonautistic mother, her competing narratives of my autistic selfhood. Her words about autistic identity and shit smearing carry far more weight than my own. In many respects, this is how I feel about the world of rhetoric—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? Theory of whose mind?

I ask these questions somewhat desperately. There is an exigency here. How can we—in the classroom, in the clinic, in the pages of our scholarly annals—how can we transform social spaces in ways that enable those distant Others to speak back? How might we reinvent discourse on rhetoricity and intentionality and in/voluntarity and abjection in ways that are critically savvy and conscious of disabled embodiment?

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 ToM against the wall.

Overview of Chapters

If my want of a lobbing rhetoric brings to mind the image of movement, then I have succeeded in offering a metaphorical trajectory for this book. The chapters herein are circuitous and unfolding in their design, each one serving as a queering of the chapter preceding it. Chapter 1, "Intention," calls into question the centrality of intentionality and purpose within the rhetorical tradition. Not only do I call into question theories that deny autistic people's capacity for free will and intent, but I also argue that rhetoricity itself should not remain contingent on a rhetor's intent, or, more pointedly, on the perceptions of a rhetor's intent. Clinical rhetorics, regardless of their disciplinary home, craft the actually autistic as rhetorically residual subjects, as rhetors who are not quite rhetors, as demi-rhetors. The autistic person's supposed incapacities for intentionally acting are intricately bound in scholarly approaches to autistic (non)rhetoric.

Demi-rhetoricity, I posit, is a horrifically useful strategy for denying the agency, rhetorical being, and personhood of autistic people. As a construct, demi-rhetoricity enables clinicians to claim the best of both worlds when they respond to autistic disclosures: (1) they can argue that autistic people are not autistic enough to make claims about autism; and (2) they can likewise argue that autistic people are too autistic to make claims about autism. This chapter weaves scholarship from queer theory on ephemera and residuality as well as classical rhetorical exegeses on halving and motion (Zeno's paradoxes) to suggest that demi-rhetoricity is the major topos from which clinicians draw when they wish to refute the desires or claims to identity of those whom they study. But here I also suggest that autism's queer potentials—or entelechies—lie in their defiance and reclamation of the residually rhetorical.

Chapter 2, "Intervention," rhetorically examines—and rhetorically demolishes—what it means to intervene in the residual motions and actions of autistic people. In particular, I turn my attention to ABA, a suite of behavioral methodologies that is arguably the most popular, most funded, and most recommended of clinical interventions available in autism markets.

I contend that ABA maintains its distinction as a gold standard autism therapy because it pathologizes neuroqueer commonplaces (including, but not limited to, gesture, orientation, invention, and style).[99] In service of this argument, I examine ABA's clinical history as a therapy used to dequeer young children beginning in the 1960s at UCLA, therapeutic practices that remained in effect through the 1980s under the branding of ABA and continue in the present under the banner of reparative therapy. One of the main contributions of this chapter is the comparative analysis of ABA dequeering research against ABA scholarship on autism, particularly that undertaken by ABA forebear Ole Ivar Lovaas. In engaging these comparatives, I argue that ABA's queer(less) histories coterminously emerged as a therapy for autistic children because autism, since its clinical inception, has been implicated in discourses in/around queer panic and eugenics. Practitioners of ABA, I maintain, deny the rhetoricity of neuroqueer subjects while concurrently admitting that ABA overwrites its subjects' rhetoricity with compliance. In this construction, queerness and autism are at best liminal cases, and at worst are constituted outside the bounds of rhetoric. Practice is only practice when it is able, straightened, and compliant.

The third chapter, "Invitation," dissects and interrogates the ways in which personal disclosures about autism diagnosis culturally function as invitational, residual, and demi-rhetorical. Autism disclosure is often agonistic, expectant of allistic refutation. The ability to say, "I have autism," for example, is often viewed as evidence that one does not have autism—or, at least, not real or severe autism. In this vein, I contend that spectra might be termed, in the words of Burke, a master trope for disability. Spectra enable nondisabled others to position a disabled person's claim to disability as elliptic: it is never the whole story. Examining what I term elliptic rhetoric, I argue that nonautistic interlocutors interpret autistic utterances as inherently partial. Following this logic, a claim to autism is read as incomplete and in need of nonautistic correction, clarification, or rehabilitation. In this chapter, then, I examine autistethnographic texts, including blogs and memoirs, and the ways in which autistic rhetors incite and invite refutation in their personal disclosures. Autistic people have long theorized invitational rhetoric in autistic cultural spaces, often surfacing what Judy Endow and Brenda Smith Myles have termed the "hidden curriculum" to unearth ableist practices that frame autistic ethos as partial or nonexistent.[100]

Earlier, in chapters 1 and 2, I focus on the ways in which clinicians incrementally halve autistic rhetoricity. Chapter 4, "Invention," builds upon this line of inquiry by suggesting that halving is but one employ of demi-rhetoricity. Drawing upon queer theory's figures of demisexuality and demigenderness, I suggest that demi-rhetoricity holds potential as a reclamatory strategy for those who publicly disclose an autistic identity. Rather than conceptualize identity or rhetoricity as points along a linear spectrum, deminess might instead be queerly viewed and queerly practiced as a kind of neuroqueer orientation. It might be regarded as a way of thinking not about "how much rhetoric or how much autism can my brain hold," but rather about rhetorical attraction or rhetorical desire, and what it means to roll, crip-queerly, outside the bounds of rhetoric.

As well, chapter 4 argues that autistic rhetorics are not sites for intervention but rather sites of invention. Partiality, residuality, and deminess are inventional resources from which autistic people may draw—sometimes rhetorically, sometimes involuntarily, sometimes queerly. In support of these claims, I analyze blogs and vlogs created by activists who identify as autistic and/or queer (including blogs such as Julia Bascom's *Just Stimming*, Amy Sequenzia's *Non-Speaking Autistic Speaking*, Ido Kedar's *Ido in Autismland*, and Cynthia Kim's *Musings of an Aspie*).

If autism is a rhetoric unto itself, I argue, then researchers must confront the idea that being autistic confers ways of being, thinking, and making meaning that are not in and of themselves lesser—and may at times be advantageous. Not only is autism a world (a la Sue Rubin), but autism is a nondiscursive world. And, while at times these nondiscursive worlds may be idiosyncratic or mutually unintelligible, these worlds hold value and meaning, as much as they might bristle at value and meaning. They are inventional sites, which, much like sign languages have already done in the fields of linguistics and rhetoric, promise to (make us) question long-held notions about language itself. This chapter identifies numerous such inventional sites, including perseveration (rigidity, obsession, and routinization), echolalia (repetition of words and phrases), and self-stimulation.

Finally, in the epilogue of this book, I revisit questions of what it means to interrelate when one's bodymind has been deemed pathologically asocial, or residually rhetorical. Among an encyclopedic list of impairments, autistics are said to lack metarepresentational and empathic abilities, a lack that is supposedly evidenced by our misuse of pronouns—swapping first and third person, privileging proper nouns over pronouns, and engaging other such usage errors. What is sociality without a *you* or a *me*? As a means of closing, I posit a queering of autistic pronouns, a queering of relational indexes. An asocial present is often rendered by clinicians as a nonexistent future, an autpocalypse: More people are becoming autistic; therefore, more people are becoming nonpeople.

/ *notes*

INTRODUCTION

1 John Duffy and Rebecca Dorner, "The Pathos of 'Mindblindness': Autism, Science, and Sadness in 'Theory of Mind' Narratives," *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies* 5, no. 2 (2011): 201.

2 Margaret Price, *Mad at School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 240.

3 Kassiane Sibley, "The Helper Personality Scares Me," *Radical Neurodivergence Speaking* (blog), July 16, 2013, http://timetolisten.blogspot.com/2013/07/the-helper-personality-scares-me.html. Presumably nonautistic, helper personalities are those whose raison d'être is to help disabled people and yet, in the harshest of ironies, instead actively harm disabled people, often refusing to listen to the very people they claim to help. As Sibley notes, "Some people who are helpers? Their chosen method of helping actively hurts people. And they cannot process this—they are Good People and Help Others, they can't possibly be doing damage."

4 Duffy and Dorner, "The Pathos of 'Mindblindness,' " 202.

5 Sam Goldstein and Sally Ozonoff, "Historical Perspective and Overview," in *Assessment of Autism Spectrum Disorders*, ed. Sam Goldstein, Jack A. Naglieri, and Sally Ozonoff (New York: Guilford, 2009), 5.

6 Chloe Silverman, *Understanding Autism: Parents, Doctors, and the History of a Disorder* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 373.

7 On scatolia, see, for example, Jessica Case and Mary Konstantareas, "Brief Report: Interventions for Inappropriate Handling of Feces in Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorders," *Journal on Developmental Disabilities* 17, no. 2 (2011): 73–78; Autism Speaks, "Challenging Behaviors Tool Kit," 2012, https://www.autismspeaks.org/family-services/tool-kits/challenging-behaviors-tool-kit.

8 A potent example of this hails from Alabama's Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation. In a handout authored by Richard E. Powers, fecal smearing is represented as "manipulative behavior, attention-seeking behavior or delirium" (p. 1). Powers returns to the first item—manipulation—multiple times

in the three-page document, maintaining variously that "fecal 'flinging' by mildly retarded persons suggests manipulative behavior" and "fecal smearing in a borderline IQ or mildly retarded in [*sic*] strongly suggestive of manipulative behavior." Richard E. Powers, "Medical and Psychiatric Management of Fecal Smearing in Adult Persons with Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (MR/DD)," Alabama Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation, 2005, 2–3, http://www.ddmed.org/pdfs/26.pdf.

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10 Smith, "Smearing of Feces."

11 The IACC, or the Interagency Autism Coordinating Committee, is a federally appointed body of researchers, parents, and autistic people that advises the U.S. government on issues relating to legislation and policy concerns specific to autism research and family support.

12 This, of course, doesn't stop people from denying it. See, for example, Autism Speaks's blog, especially the "In Their Words" column.

13 Elizabeth Grace, "Autistethnography," in *Both Sides of the Table: Autoethnographies of Educators Learning and Teaching with/in [Dis]ability*, ed. Phil Smith (New York: Peter Lang, 2013), 89–102.

14 Indeed, a number of rhetoric scholars have bemoaned this fact—that rhetoric remains pointedly human focused, despite bodies of work that argue otherwise. For critiques of rhetoric's nonhuman elisions, see Casey Boyle and Nathaniel A. Rivers, "A Version of Access," *Technical Communication Quarterly* 25, no. 1 (January 2, 2016): 29–47; Debra Hawhee, *Bodily Arts: Rhetoric and Athletics in Ancient Greece* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005); Byron Hawk, *A Counter-history of Composition: Toward Methodologies of Complexity* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007); Thomas Rickert, *Ambient Rhetoric: The Attunements of Rhetorical Being* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013).

15 Craig R. Smith, *Rhetoric and Human Consciousness: A History*, 4th ed. (Long Grove, IL: Waveland, 2013), 5.

16 Paul Heilker and Melanie Yergeau, "Autism and Rhetoric," *College English* 73, no. 5 (2011): 485–97.

17 Heather M. Brown and Perry D. Klein, "Writing, Asperger Syndrome and Theory of Mind," *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 41 (2011): 1464–74; Benjamin T. Brown et al., "Brief Report: Making Experience Personal: Internal States Language in the Memory Narratives of Children with and without Asperger's Disorder," *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 42 (2012): 441–46; Sylvie Goldman, "Brief Report: Narratives of Personal Events in Children with Autism and Developmental Language Disorders," *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 38 (2008): 1982–88; Molly Losh and Peter C. Gordon, "Quantifying Narrative Ability in Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Computational Linguistic Analysis of Narrative Coherence," *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 44, no. 12 (2014): 2016–3025.

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20 Deborah R. Barnbaum, *The Ethics of Autism: Among Them, but Not of Them* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2008).

21 Barnbaum, *The Ethics of Autism*, 154.

22 Barnbaum, *The Ethics of Autism*, 174.

23 This is likewise a loaded question, dependent in part on how one conceives the terms *choice* or *neurology*. As Davi Johnson Thornton, *Brain Culture: Neuroscience and Popular Media* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011) and Victoria Pitts-Taylor, "The Plastic Brain: Neoliberalism and the Neuronal Self," *Health* 14, no. 6 (2010): 635–52, have compellingly argued, we are currently living in a culture of the brain, a sociopolitical moment in which humans are reduced to "cerebral subjects" (Francisco Ortega, "The Cerebral Subject and the Challenge of Neurodiversity," *BioSocieties* 4 [2009]: 425–45). In chapter 2, I consider the ways in which this cerebral subjectivity is implicated in neuroscientific rhetoric on brain plasticity, especially in the context of behavioral interventions. With the rhetoric of the plastic brain comes the idea that our brains are forever trainable, malleable, changeable. As Christine Skolnik ("Rhetoric and the Plastic Brain," unpublished manuscript, 2012) notes, our every action impels change in our neurostructures. Whether we take medication, engage in cognitive-behavioral therapy, read self-help books, or even open a window and smell a neighbor's pie, we are arguably changing our brains. Does this mean, then, that one can choose one's neurology? While plastic rhetorics suggest this might be true, it also signals a perverse opposition: Cerebral subjectivity compels us to remediate our presumed pathologies, creating a rhetorical involuntarity of compulsory rehabilitation and coerced treatment. What choice is choice when there is no choice?

24 In this chapter, I use *mental disability* and *neurodivergence* somewhat interchangeably. In disability studies scholarship, *mental disability* has become the primary term of work to signify enminded, enbrained difference. Conversely, *neurodivergence*, coined by Kassiane Sibley, circulates primarily in activist spaces and is my

preferred mode of reference. While neurodivergence is often associated with the formerly autism-specific leanings of the neurodiversity movement, Sibley and others invoke it to incorporate anyone who identifies against neuronormativity. I follow Sibley's lead in my use of the term.

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27 Todd V. Oakley, "The Human Rhetorical Potential," *Written Communication* 16, no. 1 (1999): 102.

28 George A. Kennedy, "A Hoot in the Dark: The Evolution of General Rhetoric," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 25, no. 1 (1992): 1–21; Alex Reid, "Composing Objects: Prospects for a Digital Rhetoric," *Enculturation* 14 (2012), http://enculturation.net/composing-objects.

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30 Peter Carruthers, "Autism as Mind-Blindness: An Elaboration and Partial Defence," in *Theories of Theories of Mind*, ed. Peter Carruthers and Peter K. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 257–73; Victoria McGeer, "Autistic Self-Awareness," *Philosophy, Psychiatry, and Psychology* 11, no. 3 (2004): 235–51; Charlotte Montgomery et al., "Do Adults with High Functioning Autism or Asperger Syndrome Differ in Empathy and Emotion Recognition?," *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 46, no. 6 (2016): 1931–40.

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33 Victor Vitanza, "Writing the Tic," *Kairos* 12, no. 3 (2008), http://kairos.technorhetoric.net/12.3/topoi/gallery/index.html.

34 James Berlin, *Rhetoric and Reality: Writing Instruction in American Colleges, 1900–1985* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), 16–17.

35 Bruno Bettelheim, *The Empty Fortress: Infantile Autism and the Birth of the Self* (New York: Free Press, 1967), 7–8, 66–78, 90.

36 For a more extended account of this phenomenon, see chapter 3.

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38 Marc J. Lanovaz and Ingrid E. Sladeczek, "Vocal Stereotypy in Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders: A Review of Behavioral Interventions," *Behavior Modification* 36, no. 2 (2012): 146–64; Schuler, "Beyond Echoplaylia."

39 Francesca Happé, "Understanding Minds and Metaphors: Insights from the Study of Figurative Language in Autism," *Metaphor and Symbolic Activity* 10, no. 4 (1995): 282.

40 Michelle Garcia Winner, "What Is Social Thinking?," video presentation, *Social Thinking*, 2016, https://www.socialthinking.com/LandingPages/Mission; Carol A. Gray and Joy D. Garand, "Social Stories: Improving Responses of Students with Autism with Accurate Social Information," *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities* 8, no. 1 (1993): 1–10; Carol Gray, *The New Social Story Book* (Arlington, TX: Future Horizons, 2015).

41 *Allism* is a community term often preferred to *nonautistic* or *neurotypical*. As I discuss in chapter 4, *allism* arose out of a desire to mark the nonautistic and to theorize able-bodied defaults more robustly than the mere absence of autism. As well, while *neurotypical* originally did the work of connoting nonautism, it has grown more capacious and less autism specific as a term: One can be neurodivergent and be allistic, for example. But so too does *allism* grow out of community consciousness of the nonspecificity of able-centric terms. Indeed, as Robert McRuer notes, "if it's hard to deny that something called normalcy exists, it's even harder to pinpoint what that something is." Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 7. That is to say: While *allism* as a term might seem to cement the stereotype that autistic people are self-centered and nonautistic people are not, its usage by autistics tends to be a wry commentary on the absurdity of this very binary.

42 O. Ivar Lovaas, *Teaching Developmentally Disabled Children: The ME Book* (Baltimore, MD: University Park Press, 1981).

43 Wendy [Wenn] Lawson, *Autism: Taking Over* (Saarbrucken, Germany: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2011).

44 Dawn Prince-Hughes, *Songs of the Gorilla Nation: My Journey through Autism* (New York: Harmony, 2005), 4–5.

45 Erin Manning and Brian Massumi, *Thought in the Act: Passages in the Ecology of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 4.

46 Hawhee, *Bodily Arts*; Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Rickert, *Ambient Rhetoric*; Malea Powell, "Stories Take Place: A Performance in One Act (2012 CCCC Chair's Address)," *College Composition and Communication* 64, no. 2 (2012): 383–406; Lois Agnew et al., "Octalog III: The Politics of Historiography in 2010," *Rhetoric Review* 30, no. 2 (2011): 109–34.

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48 Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 11.

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51 Alexander, "Queer Composition Redux."

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53 Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 2.

54 Autism does, however, have a long history of being represented mechanically and mechanistically. We can trace these histories back to Bruno Bettelheim's March 1959 *Scientific American* article, "Joey: A 'Mechanical' Boy," much like we can observe computeristic metaphors in the structuring logics of texts such as Grandin's *Thinking in Pictures* or characters like Abed Nadir in the TV show *Community*.

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56 Rickert, *Ambient Rhetoric*, 159.

57 Phil Bratta and Malea Powell, "Introduction to the Special Issue: Entering the Cultural Rhetorics Conversations," *Enculturation* 21 (2016), http://enculturation.net/entering-the-cultural-rhetorics-conversations.

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62 Happé, "The Autobiographical Writings of Three Asperger Syndrome Adults," 212.

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67 I will let readers decide if I am here being sarcastic. There are many diagnostic tools on narrative competence that might assist you in this matter. For instance, if I am being sarcastic, is my sarcasm effective? Am I accurately predicting, inferring, or mentalizing your potential reactions to this statement? If I were to hand you a Likert Scale, how and where would you rate my (non)sarcasm?

68 Irene Rose, "Autistic Autobiography or Autistic Life Narrative?," *Journal of Literary Disability* 2, no. 1 (2008): 46.

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70 Grace, "Autistethnography."

71 Grace, "Autistethnography," 89.

72 Grace, "Autistethnography," 89, 100.

73 Prince-Hughes, *Songs of the Gorilla Nation*, 7.

74 Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008).

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87 In a display of profound violence, Lovaas, Rekers, and colleagues routinely misgendered their child subjects. The mere title Feminine Boy Project, after all, adopts a changeling premise not unlike autism's stories, wherein a child's presumed core self is "cis boy" and transness and gender nonconformity somehow cover—obscure, threaten, imprison—the child's inner and real boyness.

88 Rekers and Lovaas, "Behavioral Treatment of Deviant Sex-Role Behaviors in a Male Child," 174.

89 Rekers and Lovaas, "Behavioral Treatment of Deviant Sex-Role Behaviors in a Male Child," 173; Richard Green, *The Sissy Boy Syndrome: The Development of Homosexuality* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987).

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94 Barnbaum, *The Ethics of Autism*, 154.

95 Uta Frith and Francesca Happé, "Theory of Mind and Self-Consciousness: What Is It Like to Be Autistic?," *Mind and Language* 14, no. 1 (1999): 18.

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97 Newnham, “News from Nowhere?”

98 Francesca Happé, *Autism: An Introduction to Psychological Theory* (New York: Psychology Press, 1994), 68.

99 Craig Snyder and Peter Bell, “To Petition the Government for a Redress of Grievances,” in *Autism Spectrum Disorders*, ed. David Amaral, Daniel Geschwind, and Geraldine Dawson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 1369–76; Lea Winerman, “Autism Diagnoses Bring Slew of Costs for Families,” *PBS News Hour*, April 13, 2011, http://www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/health-jan-june11-autismcosts_04-13/.

100 Judy Endow, *Learning the Hidden Curriculum: The Odyssey of One Autistic Adult* (Shawnee Mission, KS: Autism Asperger, 2012); Brenda Smith Myles and Richard L. Simpson, “Understanding the Hidden Curriculum: An Essential Social Skill for Children and Youth with Asperger Syndrome,” *Intervention in School and Clinic* 36, no. 5 (2001).

ONE. INTENTION

1 In using the term *psychodynamic*, I am here referring to the idea that autism is understood, theoretically, as an internal state or psychological force. Psychodynamic approaches to autism include but are not limited to psychoanalysis. Although psychodynamism is still alive and well in the realm of autism treatment and research, such methodologies have largely been displaced by behavioral approaches to autism, as I discuss in chapter 2.

2 Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 75.

3 Quoted in Kate Barrows, *Autism in Childhood and Autistic Features in Adults: A Psychoanalytic Perspective* (London: Karnac, 2008), 33.

4 Frances Tustin, *Autistic Barriers in Neurotic Patients* (London: Karnac, 1986), 305.

5 Judy Holiday, “In[ter]vention: Locating Rhetoric’s Ethos,” *Rhetoric Review* 28, no. 4 (2009): 390.

6 Holiday, “In[ter]vention.”

7 Bruno Bara et al., “Intentional Minds: A Philosophical Analysis of Intention Tested through fMRI Experiments Involving People with Schizophrenia, People with Autism, and Healthy Individuals,” *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* 5 (2011): 7, doi:10.3389/fnhum.2011.00007.

8 Bara et al., “Intentional Minds,” 2.

9 Mikhail Kissine, *From Utterances to Speech Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 143.

10 José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 65.

11 Lydia Brown, “The Politics of Coming Out,” *Autistic Hoya* (blog), October 11, 2012, http://www.autistichoya.com/2012/10/the-politics-of-coming-out.html.