

melanie yergeau

AUTHORING **autism**

/ on rhetoric and neurological queerness



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

Melanie Yergeau

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Duke University Press Durham and London 2018

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Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞

Text designed by Courtney Leigh Baker

Typeset in Whitman and Myriad Pro by Westchester
Publishing Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Yergeau, Melanie, [date] author.

Title: Authoring autism : on rhetoric and neurological
queerness / Melanie Yergeau.

Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2017. |

Series: Thought in the act | Includes bibliographical
references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017022894 (print)

LCCN 2017044088 (ebook)

ISBN 9780822372189 (ebook)

ISBN 9780822370116 (hardcover : alk. paper)

ISBN 9780822370208 (pbk. : alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Autism. | Disability studies. | Autistic
people. Classification: LCC RC553.A88 (ebook) | LCC

RC553.A88 Y474 2017 (print) | DDC 616.85/882—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2017022894>

Cover art: Dan Miller, *Untitled* (DM 294), 2017. Acrylic
and ink on paper. Courtesy of Creative Growth Art Center.

Duke University Press gratefully acknowledges the support
of the University of Michigan Office of Research, Institute
for the Humanities, and College of Literature, Science, and
Arts, all of which provided funds toward the publication of
this book.

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/ acknowledgments

I would like to begin my acknowledgments section by thanking the Electric Light Orchestra. They don't know who I am, but I know who they are, and without them, there would be no perseverance and hence no book.

Equally seriously, if not more so, I have many people to whom I am deeply grateful. I didn't consider myself a disability studies anything, much less a disability studies scholar, until I began graduate school. My many mentors at DePaul University—Carolyn Goffman, Liz Coughlin, Darsie Bowden, Anne Bartlett, Craig Sirles, Jan Hickey, and Pete Vandenberg—gave me the time, space, and guidance to think about my place in the world as a scholar-activist.

This is the book I've long wanted to write, and it represents well over a decade of thinking and labor. At Ohio State, my dissertation committee modeled for me generosity, incisiveness, patience, and the underresearched yet necessary role of candy in the writing process. Cindy Selfe and Brenda Brueggemann, my cochairs, offered invaluable commentary on my work, including this book (which is not my dissertation—Cindy and Brenda read a lot). Likewise, I want to thank so many people at Ohio State—in English, disability studies, disability services, and the Nisonger Center—for letting me return, every summer, to tinker and dwell among the many cool ideas and projects happening in Columbus. Scott DeWitt and Amy Spears generously hosted me at the annual Digital Media and Composition Institute (DMAC)—for seven years in a row—as I worked on this project and others, and they continue to help me think through the digitality of autistic worlds. My other mentors at Ohio State have continued to spark so many ideas, kindly dedicating their time at DMAC, at conferences, and via Skype: Louie Ulman, Susan Delagrange, Beverly Moss, Kay Halasek, Kathleen Griffin, Dickie Selfe, Scott Lissner, Enjie Hall, Jonathan Buehl, and Nan Johnson. Our dissertation reading/writing group breathed such energy and passion

into all things rhetoric: Genevieve Critel, Paige Banaji, and Lauren Obermark. Elizabeth Brewer, Kate Comer, Katie DeLuca, Deb Kuzawa, and Erika Strandjord read portions of this book, provided instrumental feedback, and/or smiled and nodded whenever I entered rant mode (sometimes these things happened all at once). So many thanks to Jen Herman, Annie Mendenhall, Julia Voss, Jen Michaels, Krista Bryson, Nick Hetrick, Heather Thompson-Gillis, Silas Hansen, Mike Bierschenk, Vera Dukaj, Anne Langendorfer, Christina LaRose, Tiffany Anderson, and Tim Jensen—for attending protests, for helping me as I worked through different ideas, for encouraging me to eat doughnuts.

While at University of Michigan, I have received incredible support at all stages of the writing process, including a subvention in support of permissions and copyediting. This book was also in part supported by a fellowship through UM's Institute for the Humanities. I benefited immensely from a wonderfully interdisciplinary group of colleagues at the institute, who read and commented on many drafts of my work: Sid Smith, Doretha Coval, Patrick Tonks, Sara Ahbel-Rappe, Maria Cotera, David Green, Holly Hughes, Alison Joersz, Elizabeth Keslacy, Nancy Linthicum, Sarah Linwick, Pascal Massinon, Rostom Mesli, Rachel Neis, Asaf Peres, Christian Sandvig, Tobin Siebers, Bonnie Washick, and Wang Zheng.

I also could not have moved forward on this book were it not for the manuscript workshop hosted by my department, which was organized by Terri Tinkle and coordinated by a reading committee, Anne Curzan and David Gold. Alison Kafer and Cindy Lewiecki-Wilson provided vital feedback on the scope and direction of the project, and they graciously read subsequent material, postworkshop. The readers at the workshop turned an event I had nervously dreaded into an engrossing conversation that energized me for months—for this I am ever thankful to Aliyah Khan, Madhumita Lahiri, John Whittier-Ferguson, Alison Adlaf, and Kris Harrison.

My department has been incredibly supportive. The administrative staff—Jane Johnson, Karly Mitchell, Jane Sullivan, Amy Argersinger, Karena Huff, Senia Vasquez, Jennifer Catey, and Denise Looker—have routinely helped me figure out how things work. Lucy Hartley frequently offered advice, wisdom, and encouragement as I moved through a number of stressful moments. As well, numerous colleagues have taken time to ask provocative questions, engage my work, and offer welcome commiseration about the weather, stale doughnuts, and literal and metaphorical potholes that the universe seems to have purposefully organized: Anne Gere, June Howard, Tung-Hui Hu, Petra Kupperts, Scott Lyons, Victor Mendoza, Josh Miller, David Porter, Alisse Portnoy, Michael Schoenfeldt, Tobin Siebers, Megan Sweeney, Ruby Tapia, and

Gillian White. To my colleagues in Sweetland, disability studies, and digital studies—your tireless efforts have sustained my resolve: Lisa Nakamura, Jane Berliss-Vincent, Anna Schnitzer, Patricia Anderson, Lloyd Shelton, Anna Kirkland, Robert Adams, and Naomi Silver.

Lorelei Blackburn and Andrea Riley Mukavetz have helped me survive Ann Arbor, which, I have learned, is not Columbus, Ohio. So too have local disability studies people helped me feel more at home: D. L. Adams, Liat Ben-Moshe, Kim Nielsen, Jim Ferris, Beth Currans.

Throughout the life span of this book, I've been privileged to attend conferences and spend time with many, many remarkable colleagues. Thank you, Angela Haas and Janice Walker, for all that you do in service of the Graduate Research Network at Computers and Writing. To Gail Hawisher, Patrick Berry, Tim Lockridge, and my fellow editors at Computers and Composition Digital Press, your work continues to inspire me. I have had amazing and, at many junctures, mind-blowing conversations (mental image: if autism could hold a leaf blower) with Jonathan Alexander, Kristin Arola, Garrett Avila-Nichols, Cheryl Ball, Kris Blair, Casey Boyle, Hugh Burns, Matt Cox, Doug Eyman, Bill Hart-Davidson, Debra Journet, Claire Lauer, Tony O'Keefe, Liza Potts, Malea Powell, Jackie Rhodes, Donnie Sackey, Jentery Sayers, and Barbi Smyser-Fauble.

The Society for Disability Studies as well as the Disability Studies Standing Group at the Conference on College Composition and Communication have been amazingly supportive, and I've learned from many people, including Dev Bose, Sushil Oswal, Michael Salvo, Franny Howes, Maren Linett, Stephanie Wheeler, Casie Cobos, Catherine Prendergast, Jason Palmeri, Janine Butler, Allison Hitt, Craig Meyer, Patricia Dunn, Chad Iwertz, Ruth Osorio, Jordynn Jack, Shannon Walters, Aimi Hamraie, Bre Garrett, George Williams, Christina Cedillo, Corbett OToole, Carol Gill, Carrie Sandahl, Phil Smith, Sami Schalk, Emily Nusbaum, Nirmala Erevelles, Bernice Olivas, and Amanda Booher. Margaret Price has long served as my mentor, and I am most appreciative of the years of socks (years. of. socks.). (This is in no way sarcastic, for socks are serious business. But also: I am honored to have you in my life.) Stephanie Kerschbaum's accountability checks, encouragement, and academic valentines enabled me to get through, one page at a time. Jay Dolmage has read and reassured me through multiple panic attacks. Amy Vidali and Tara Wood provided critical feedback on talks I delivered, which later were absorbed into the book.

At Duke University Press, Elizabeth Ault and Ken Wissoker devoted incredible time and offered encouragement at every step of the process. Erin Manning and the anonymous readers provided so much in the way of commentary and energy, and this book is a better project for it. I would also like to thank Liz

Smith and Karen Fisher for managing and copyediting this project as it moved into its final stages, as well as Paula Durbin-Westby for indexing.

To my autistic blogging and activist communities: I am humbled by your kindness and your willingness to put yourselves out there, for your continued perseverance and your courage. I am grateful to Ibby Grace, Bridget Allen, Athena Lynn Michaels-Dillon, Nick Walker, N. I. Nicholson, Alyssa Hillary, Lydia Brown, Paula Durbin-Westby, Ari Ne'eman, Scott Robertson, Meg Evans, Julia Bascom, Katie Miller, Emily Titon, Kerima Çevik, Ariane Zurcher, Beth Ryan, Emma Zurcher-Long, Judy Endow, Elesia Ashkenazy, Alex Kimmel, Anne Carpenter, Amy Sequenzia, Finn Gardiner, Moreniké Onaiwu, Sam Harvey, Dani Ryskamp, Corina Becker, Savannah Logsdon-Breakstone, Rachel Cohen-Rottenberg, Sparrow R. Jones, Kassiane Sibley, Dora Raymaker, Lei Wiley-Mydske, Emily Baillou, Lauri Swann Hunt, Brenda Rothman, Michelle Sutton, Deanne Shoyer, C. J. Shiloh, Jonas Blauer, Jean Kearns Miller, Corbin Kramer, Justin Rooney, Stephanie Ballam, Jeffrey Strasser, Rachel Klippenstein, Elizabeth Beu, Benzion Chinn, and so many others that I am sure to be forgetting. Any and all omissions are my own error.

Thank you to Meredith K Ultra, whose artwork appears in chapter 2. Your work is amazing. Many thanks, as well, to Ai Binh Ho, Molly Parsons, Pam Saunders, and Bonnie Tucker, all of whom read, researched, and contributed so very much to this project.

Ralph Savarese, John Duffy, Paul Heilker, Chris Foss, Julia Miele Rodas, Bev Harp, Morton Gernsbacher, Pam Block, Michele Friedner, Bryce Huebner, and Shelley Tremain: you routinely encouraged me, often in moments when I was experiencing great personal distress.

Finally, thank you to my family, who promised not to make fun of my flowery language. I am holding you to this.

Parts of the introduction appeared in an earlier form in "Occupying Autism: Rhetoric, Involuntarity, and the Meaning of Autistic Lives," in *Occupying Disability: Critical Approaches to Community, Justice, and Decolonizing Disability* (Springer, 2015).

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 Dornier 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 problemated. 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 non-autistic? 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 Ibbey 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 nar-

ratives that bemoan their autistic kindergarteners wearing diapers, I am visited with a sense of surreality, as though my own privacy, my own unwilling 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 agential 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 narrative 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 non-rhetorical.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 *mind-blindness*, 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, rhetoricood, 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 al-

ways 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, scientifically, 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 automaton. 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 perspectively 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 pooppy 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 1.1. 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 unwilling, 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 “in-

commensurabilities 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