

Minding Otherwise:
Autism, Disability Aesthetics, and the Performance of Neurological Difference

by

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents

Marc Hilton and Judith Aronson

and to the memory of José Muñoz,

cartographer of the otherwise

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This study began under the direction and mentorship of José Muñoz, who was the first person to see how the inchoate ideas about disability aesthetics and the politics of neurological difference that I described to him during my final year of graduate coursework could become a dissertation. In writing it, I have tried to follow the grooves of José's visionary commitment to cultivating and writing about minoritarian world-making as a strategy for survival. The project was written for him, and to him, and is dedicated to his memory.

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation considers how autism and neurological disability have been persistently unsettled and unruly conceptual categories that have troubled the ways in which the human sensorium is governed, regulated, represented, theorized, and imagined. Concentrating on the postwar period to the present, the study focuses on how the historically unsettled category of autism has been shaped by the broader historical, conceptual, and aesthetic contours of what I describe as the *politics of neurological difference*. Using the critically capacious lens of performance and the methodological resources of performance studies, the project tracks shifts in scientific expertise, social policy, and cultural representations of autism, mental disability, and the nature of the mind and the brain. The project assesses how emerging concepts such as neurodiversity and neurological difference might become significant critical terms for studying disability, performance, and aesthetics. Case studies include discussions of the films and cartographic drawings created by the radical psychologist and educator Fernand Deligny in collaboration with autistic adolescents in the 1960s and 1970s; collaborations between the experimental theater director Robert Wilson and the autistic poet, artist, and performer Christopher Knowles, with a particular emphasis on Knowles's contributions to the influential 1976 experimental opera *Einstein on the Beach*; contemporary video and performance art by autistic activist Amanda Baggs and multidisciplinary artist Wu Tsang; and the case of Avonte Oquendo, a 14-year-old nonverbal autistic middle-school student whose disappearance from his New York school prompted one of the most extensive urban search efforts of the past decade. The dissertation uses these cases to develop an account of neurodiversity as a *minoritarian sensory formation* that calls for the cultivation of other modes of perceiving, recognizing, and accommodating the different shapes that personhood can take.

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INTRODUCTION

Minding Otherwise:

Neurodiversity, Disability Aesthetics, Performance



Figure 1. Stills from *Snack and Drink* (dir. Bob Sabiston and Tommy Palotta, 1998)

Snack and Drink is a 4-minute long, animated documentary short created in 1998 by the filmmakers Bob Sabiston and Tommy Palotta. The film follows Ryan Power, an autistic teenager who lives with his mother and siblings in Austin, Texas, on a trip to a local convenience store. It was made using an innovative animation technique called “rotoscoping,” with software developed by Sabiston, in which filmmakers can manually “draw” or trace directly over frames of video to transform live-action footage into playful and surprising animated sequences. The process allows the filmmakers to create highly original visual effects that expressionistically respond to the live-action scenes that they capture. (This technique was most widely seen in

Richard Linklater's 2001 feature film *Waking Life*). In *Snack and Drink*, the sounds and images of Ryan's trip to the 7-11, and his running commentary in response to the filmmaker's questions about his likes and dislikes, are complemented by extraordinary sequences of rotoscoped illustrations in which Ryan's face, hands, and the environment in which he finds himself are rendered into a jumpy, constantly transforming visual mosaic.

About midway through the film, Ryan's face appears in profile, and his hands are shown holding a large cardboard beverage container in front of the convenience store's soda machine; as he explains that he "usually mixes them all," the film shows him filling the cup with spurts of liquid from each of the soda machine's options: Coke, Diet Coke, Mountain Dew, Grape Soda (see **Figure 1**). As Ryan presses the soda machine's buttons for each beverage selection, the animated overlays flip in rapid succession through a series of cartoon-like renderings of the scene: first, the image is overlaid with what seem to be manual scrawls and scribbles depicting the contours of Ryan's thumb on the soda machine's buttons; this is quickly replaced by an overlay that renders the shapes in the brilliant colors and stark lines of a graffiti painting; suddenly, the individual soda dispensers sprout squiggly cartoon arms and googly eyes; this image is in turn swiftly replaced by an outline of Ryan's body in front of the machine rendered in soft purples and vibrant yellows, with harsh black outlines delineating his hair and the stripes on his shirt. Finally, for a few seconds, the animated rendering strips out the color from the frame entirely, rendering Ryan's body as a floating, black-and-white silhouette. The animation technique retains the jumpy sense of handmade animation, as if a great series of formally contiguous paintings of the event had been strung together to create the impression of moving through a loosely organized narrative progression. The stop-motion effect of the animation is in turn reflected and amplified by the jerky movements of the handheld camera, such that the

formal progression of the cinematic framing and the rapidly shifting shapes, colors, and lines that compose the film's images fold back into one another to create a kind of hyperkinetic filmic language of color, sequence, and form.

If the film's animation technique renders the ordinary visual world of Ryan's trip to the 7-11 into a brilliantly rendered whirl of flashing colors and fantastical shapes, the everyday sounds of the convenience store and the particular sonic qualities of Ryan's vocal narration anchor the film in a quotidian documentary verisimilitude. The manner in which image and sound operate in almost dialectical counterpoint to one another lends the film its particular aesthetic vibrancy. The filmmakers draw attention to the relationship between sound and image in the work when they note:

The dreamlike and fractured nature of our images match the subject matter of his dialog very well. Ryan is a remarkable and engaging kid—we feel fortunate to have met and been able to film him. His mother initially invited us to do the interview—she told us that her son was autistic and obsessed with cartoon animation. It was her feeling that seeing himself animated would have a profound effect on him. One afternoon in December 1998 we went to Ryan's house to meet and film him. At first he would not consent to being interviewed. Two strangers with a camera probably made him nervous. He disappeared into the back of the house for a while, and we chatted with his mother and sister. Eventually he reappeared and announced that he was going to 7-11, a convenience store around the corner from his house. We asked if we could accompany him, and he said ok.

The whole incident was spontaneous—yet the situation perfectly suited our needs and seemed to relax Ryan enough to talk to us at length.¹

In this description of the process of making *Snack and Drink*, Ryan’s autism emerges as a kind of enabling constraint that the film addresses through a series of formal aesthetic strategies. Reluctant to engage in the protocols of a sit-down interview, Ryan’s consent to being accompanied on a spontaneous trip to the convenience store in turn allows him to describe his interests in cartoons, his idiosyncratic beverage preferences, his taste in music and movies. In turn, the animation responds to Ryan’s mode of navigating through the world: his corporeal rhythms and gestures, the emphatic inflections of his speech patterns, his magnetizing presence in an everyday environment that is nonetheless saturated with all manner of rapidly cycling forms of sensory stimulation are rendered via the rotoscoping technique into a forcefully expressive and destabilizing visual form.

The aesthetic strategies employed by *Snack and Drink* reflect a sea-change in cultural and scientific understandings of autism and neurological disability. Since the late 1990s an increasingly active community of autistic self-advocates has contributed to the emergent concept of neurodiversity: a powerful, if controversial, critique of the normative terms in which autism and other disorders of the mind are managed, understood, and represented. Neurodiversity proponents argue, instead, for an affirmative understanding of autism and other forms of neurological difference as integral manifestations of human variation—and not as a pathology that needs to be eradicated or cured. Like other social movements, neurodiversity advocates strive to make alternative forms of neurological experience visible to a wider public; they seek to

¹ Bob Sabiston, “Snack and Drink,” *Ars Electronica: PrixArs* (1999): http://90.146.8.18/en/archives/prix_archive/prix_projekt.asp?iProjectID=2160 (accessed 6 June 2013)

counter damaging and stigmatizing depictions of autistics in the media and in the culture more generally; and they laud and promote those representations that provide a fuller and more complex vision of the range of autistic experience. The neurodiversity movement also emphasizes the centrality and difficulties of self-advocacy, particularly when this involves conforming to the dominant communicational norms of the “neurotypical” public sphere.

Yet neurodiversity proponents have also sought to develop accounts of autism and neurological difference as alternative, subterranean, and even culturally insurgent sensory-perceptual orientations that involve distinct ways of processing and experiencing the porous border between the self and the world. In this sense, the neurodiversity movement might be understood as a *minoritarian* political formation shaped by a shared experience of marginality from the historical process, political techniques, and social norms contributing to the regulation and organization of the human sensorium into a *sensus communis*—a Kantian formulation that might be rendered as “a community of (shared) sense.”² Here, I draw from a definition of the “minoritarian” developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, who insist on the importance of distinguishing between “the majoritarian as a constant and homogenous system; minorities as subsystems; and the minoritarian as a potential, creative and created, becoming.” Rather than assent to a strictly numerical or demographic mode of representing the way a group, collective, or population is divided into categories of classification, here the minoritarian is meant to indicate something more theoretically complex and potentially disruptive: “Minorities, of course” they continue, “are objectively definable states, states of language, ethnicity, or sex with their own ghetto territorializations, but they must also be thought of as seeds, crystals of

² Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. W. S. Pluhar (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1987), § 20.

becoming whose value is to trigger uncontrollable movements and deterritorializations of the mean or majority.”³ Neurodiversity might be thought of as minoritarian in just such terms, containing the potential to upend, destabilize, and radically reconfigure dominant, majoritarian modes of organizing the *sensus communis*. As such, understanding neurodiversity as a minoritarian sensory formation necessitates the cultivation of different modes of perception, relationality, and care.

As it follows its autistic protagonist on his otherwise quotidian way, *Snack and Drink* reflects the possibility of seeing, and sensing, the world in dramatically different ways. Through vividly realized formal techniques, the film offers an aesthetic complement to the acutely “sensory” accounts of autistic experience that have been central to the emergence of neurodiversity over the past several decades. At the same time, the film implicitly raises important questions about the ethical hazards of disability representation—and, in particular, of efforts to aesthetically represent the experience of persons with disabilities, such as autism, that ostensibly involve the impairment of normatively delimited social, behavioral, and communicative “functions.” Created by non-autistic, neurotypical artists, *Snack and Drink* is documentary-making with a difference. It registers the ethical gap between subject and filmmaker as a form of what literary critic Ato Quayson calls “aesthetic nervousness”—a formal disruption or short-circuiting that the presence of disability can provoke within the standard operational conventions of aesthetic representation. As such, Quayson suggests, the aesthetic nervousness sparked by disability often “automatically restores an *ethical core* to the literary-aesthetic domain while also evoking the boundary between the real and the metaphysical or

³ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 105–106.

otherworldly.”⁴ Transmuting Ryan’s preoccupations with cartoons into a formal aesthetic device, *Snack and Drink* evokes the sensory contours of a particularly contested and fraught category of minoritarian subjectivity in ways that anchor it in a broader, external world—one that is extensively structured by specific techniques and procedures governing the political management of disability and social difference more broadly. Following one of the seemingly routine, quotidian pathways that make up Ryan’s life-world, *Snack and Drink* touches on the broader social and political conditions within which ideas about autism and neurological disability have become scientifically, culturally, and politically intelligible categories of difference.

For these reasons, *Snack and Drink* condenses many of the central questions addressed in “Minding Otherwise: Autism, Disability Aesthetics, and the Performance of Neurological Difference.” This dissertation considers how autism and neurological disability have been unsettled and unruly conceptual categories that have troubled the ways in which the human sensorium is governed, regulated, researched, theorized, and imagined. Concentrating on the postwar period to the present, the study focuses on how the historically unsettled understanding of autism reflects the broader historical, conceptual, and aesthetic contours of what I will describe as the *politics of neurological difference*. Using the critically capacious lens of performance and the methodological resources of performance studies, the project tracks shifts in scientific expertise, social policy, and cultural representations of autism, mental disability, and the nature of the mind and the brain. It examines this emergent politics of neurological difference in relation to concurrent transformations within the political and social management of human life during the same period—especially those having to do with disability, race, gender, and

⁴ Ato Quayson, *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 22.

sexuality. Finally, the project assesses how emerging concepts such as *neurodiversity* and *neurodivergence* might become significant critical terms for studying disability, performance, and aesthetics.⁵

The dissertation is organized into four chapters, each of which focuses on a different set of case studies. These include discussions of the films and cartographic drawings created by the radical psychologist and educator Fernand Deligny alongside autistic children and adolescents; theatrical performances, poems, and visual artworks created by the autistic poet and artist Christopher Knowles in collaborations with the director Robert Wilson; recent works of digital media by autistic activist Amanda Baggs and queer visual artist Wu Tsang; and the role of visual surveillance media within political and legislative responses to the problem of autistic “wandering” prompted by the 2013 disappearance and death of Avonte Oquendo, a 14-year-old autistic middle-school student enrolled in the New York City Public School System.

A number of key research questions thread through these examples, tying the separate case studies together. These questions might be schematized along three intersecting axes. The first axis could be characterized as *aesthetic*. This project is principally organized around a series of close readings of particular objects, including artworks, performances, films, digital videos, cartographic drawings, photographic surveillance stills, and other media and textual sources.

Informed by, and seeking to expand upon, recent scholarship on what disability theorist Tobin

⁵ “Neurodiversity” continues to be a term in active circulation within autism self-advocacy, disability, and mental health communities, even as the term “neurodivergence,” attributed to disability activist Kassiane Sibley, has more recently come to prominence, especially in online discussions. The latter term has tended to be used to indicate a wider range of conditions, experiences, and diagnostic taxonomies than neurodiversity, which originated within discussions of autism and other spectrum disorders. It also offers a preferable adjective, neurodivergent, to use in contrast to the term “neurotypical.” See Kassiane Sibley, “Radical Neurodivergence Speaking,” <http://timetolisten.blogspot.com/>.

Siebers termed “disability aesthetics,” these readings are largely determined by an attention to their formal properties, procedures, and effects.⁶ Yet my readings of these works address not just *how* autism and neurological difference have been represented in various aesthetic genres and works, but also the ways in which the politics of neurological difference has involved contestations over the very meaning, function, and regulation of “sensation”—as well as over the practical arrangement of what is perceivable and sayable within a given set of social and political circumstances. The second axis is a *historical* one: it situates shifting ideas about autism, mental disability, and the politics of neurological difference within the history of a modern formation that Michel Foucault termed *psychiatric power*. Since the early nineteenth century, the exercise of psychiatric power has involved the development of disciplinary institutions, techniques of control, and regimes of governmentality that are defined according to what Foucault called “a positive technique of intervention and transformation.”⁷ The study endeavors to follow a particular line within the much broader genealogy of *normalization* pursued by Foucault and subsequent scholars working in his wake.

The third axis operates at a more abstract and theoretical level of the political. This aspect of the project examines the ways in which autism, and neurological disability more broadly construed, have been persistently problematic categories within the dominant theoretical frameworks used to conceptualize the place of “difference” within modern liberal thought, discourse, and modes of governance. In so doing, the project considers how emergent contestations about autism and neurological difference have powerfully reformulated prevailing,

⁶ See Tobin Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010).

⁷ Michel Foucault, *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1974–75*, eds. Valerio Marchetti and Antonella Salomoni, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2003), 53.

“neurotypical” models of personhood, autonomy, and the ethical dimensions of intersubjective relationality, collectivity, and community.

Autism, Neurodiversity, and the Politics of Neurological Difference

“The name ‘autism’ ... is undoubtedly one of the great linguistic and conceptual creations in medical nomenclature.”⁸

—Hans Asperger

Autism and Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASDs) are currently classified by the American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* as pervasive developmental disorders characterized by impairments in social interaction, deficits in social communication, and restrictive, repetitive patterns of behavior, activities, or interests.⁹ Yet this definition, as will become clear throughout the course of this study, sits perched atop a “surface of emergence” that conceals an enormously complex—and ongoing—series of contestations within and across a wide range of communities, organizations, disciplines, and fields of knowledge.¹⁰ Scholars from a variety of disciplinary perspectives, including the history and sociology of science and medicine, have extensively demonstrated the ways in which contestations over the “meaning” of autism have played out within an equally complex and wide-ranging set of historical processes, cultural contexts, and ideological coordinates.¹¹ These have included dramatic transformations in

⁸ Quoted in Patrick McDunough, “Autism and Modernism,” in *Autism and Representation*, ed. Mark Osteen (New York: Routledge, 2008), 103.

⁹ American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition* (Washington, DC: Author, 2013).

¹⁰ “Surface of emergence” is a concept from Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon, 1982).

¹¹ On the historical emergence of autism as distinct clinical category, I have found the following sources especially thorough and illuminating: Gil Eyal *The Autism Matrix* (London: Polity,

scientific protocols and paradigms within the “sciences of the mind”—including psychiatry, psychology, cognitive science, and neurobiology—from the early nineteenth century through the present; shifts in public policy, legal codes, and clinical practice concerning the care and treatment of persons with mental disabilities, mental illness, and those determined to be mentally “deficient” (a term still in use until late in the twentieth century); the emergence of well-organized and informed groups made up of parents and others with autistic family members who advocated for further research, different treatment options, and improvements in care protocols; and, finally, the growth and expansion of a diverse range of mobilizations for disability rights and disability justice organized around explicitly political, social, and cultural models of disability. All of these overlapping historical processes, forces, and trajectories have continued to shape the way “autism” appears as an “object of concern” that can be studied, measured, quantified, and indeed embodied, experienced, and lived. At the same time, autism has also been the source of a persistent sense of mystery, fascination, and anxiety. Since the 1990s, when rates in diagnosis of autism began to rapidly rise and accelerate in both the United States and internationally, the condition has come increasingly to the forefront of public consciousness, as evidenced in social phenomena ranging from the ongoing controversies over anti-vaccination sentiments among parents to the growing pop-culture captivation with the “spectrum” in representations of tech geeks, musical prodigies, and other social “oddballs.”

This project does not attempt to discuss every aspect of this endlessly multifaceted subject, which, as anthropologist Olga Solomon notes, more than any other clinical category of

2011); Chloe Silverman, *Understanding Autism: Parents, Doctors, and the History of a Disorder* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013); Majia Holmer Nadesan, *Constructing Autism: Unravelling the “Truth” and Understanding the Social* (New York: Routledge, 2005); and Ian Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

the postwar period has come to figure “prominently in ongoing social science and humanities debates about intersubjectivity, intentionality, empathy, and the social construction of disability.”¹² Still, it will be helpful for the purposes of the broader discussions throughout this study to briefly describe several of the major stages through which the “medical model” of autism has progressed over the past century. The earliest clinical use of the word “autism” occurred in 1911, in an article by the pioneering Swiss psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler. Also known as one of the founders of the Eugenics movement, Bleuler created many psychiatric terms that are still in use, including schizophrenia. Bleuler used the word autism to describe children who have no more contact with the outside world live in a world of their own. They have encased themselves with their desires and wishes [...]; they have cut themselves off as much as possible from any contact with the external world. This detachment from reality with the relative and absolute predominance of the inner life, we term autism.¹³

For Bleuler and other psychological theorists in the early part of the twentieth century, autism was a term to describe neurotic symptoms of a more general character, an evocative neologism from the Greek work *Autos*, for “self.” It was not until the pioneering child psychiatrist Leo Kanner’s studies at his clinic at Johns Hopkins University in the early 1940s that autism was first proposed as a distinctive psychiatric disorder, which Kanner defined as an “*inability to relate*” to others, or to the world, “in the ordinary way.”¹⁴ Kanner was an Austrian-born physician who had immigrated to the United States from Vienna to escape Nazi persecution before the Second World War and essentially founded the field of child psychology. Through a series of clinical

¹² Olga Solomon, “Sense and the Senses: Anthropology and the Study of Autism,” *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 39 (2010): 242.

¹³ Eugen Bleuler, “Dementia Praecox oder Gruppe der Schizophrenien,” *Handbuch der Psychiatrie* (Zurich: Deuticke: 1911).

¹⁴ Leo Kanner, “Autistic Disturbances of Affective Contact.” *Nervous Child* 2 (1943): 242.

studies of a relatively small group of children at his clinic in Baltimore in the 1940s, 50s, and 60s, he identified the primary “phenomenological” hallmarks of autism as “obsessive aloneness and an anxiously obsessive desire for the preservation of sameness.”¹⁵

Kanner’s early research was agnostic about whether the symptoms he grouped together under the broad diagnostic category of “early infantile autism” were the result of (“emotional”) psychological disturbance or (“organic”) neurological pathology. For Kanner, as medical sociologist Gil Eyal notes, autism “represented a problematization of the distinction between mental retardation and mental illness.”¹⁶ The social, juridical, and institutional implications of the distinction between mental illness and mental retardation during the decades following World War II were profoundly consequential: the former was understood to be temporary and rectifiable through treatment, while the latter was thought to be a fixed and immutable condition requiring lifelong custodianship. In essentially inventing a new diagnostic category, Kanner’s work on infantile autism challenged this bifurcated model by bringing a newly modern understanding of the multiple and heterogeneous potentialities that existed within the previously homogenous category of “feble-mindedness.”¹⁷ The genealogical development of autism can thus be traced from its initial designation of a cluster of behavioral tendencies—of profound aloneness, incommunicability, and radical self-enclosure—to its gradual solidification into a clinical or medical subject, pathologically bound to such tendencies.

A number of scholars have described the convoluted, contentious, and ongoing historical processes that have contributed to dramatic transformations in the definition of autism. The

¹⁵ Leo Kanner, “Irrelevant and Metaphorical Language in Early Infantile Autism,” *American Journal of Psychiatry* 103 (1946): 242.

¹⁶ Gil Eyal, “For a Sociology of Expertise: The Social Origins of the Autism Epidemic,” *American Journal of Sociology* 118, no. 4 (January 2013): 868.

¹⁷ See Eyal, *The Autism Matrix*, 76–82.

category was initially understood as a rarely occurring form of “emotional psychosis”—until the early 1970s, “autism” was often used interchangeably with “childhood schizophrenia”—though is now considered a “neurodevelopmental” disorder rooted in the biology of the brain. Joseph Straus’s essay “Autism as Culture” provides an excellent schematic overview of the changing medical, scientific, and psychiatric paradigms through which the disorder has been understood in the span of its relatively young life as a distinct diagnosis.¹⁸ Straus notes that during the several decades after the end of World War II, autism was principally located by psychiatric researchers and clinicians in the “psyche” as first proposed by Freud and modulated by the subsequent establishment and growth of psychoanalytically informed psychotherapeutic models. During this period, researchers like Kanner and, more notoriously, the controversial child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim used a modified Freudian paradigm to postulate that autism resulted from insufficiently developed capacities for the ego to differentiate itself from its surroundings. Autism was compared to “an empty fortress,” the title of Bettelheim’s infamous 1967 bestselling book about the condition and his controversial treatment methods developed at the Orthogenic School at the University of Chicago. This phrase, and Bettelheim’s account of the condition, quickly became associated in wider cultural contexts with tropes of pathological solipsism, aloneness, and isolation.¹⁹ In the 1950s and 60s, autism was also frequently described as a symptomatic condition of the technology saturated, increasingly depersonalized and automated modern age, as when Betty Friedan postulated in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) that the rise in “atypical” or “autistic” children might have been attributable to a “progressive dehumanization”

¹⁸ Joseph N. Straus, “Autism as Culture,” in *The Disability Studies Reader, Fourth Edition*, ed. Lennard J. Davis (New York: Routledge, 2013), 460-484.

¹⁹ See Bruno Bettelheim, *The Empty Fortress: Infantile Autism and the Birth of the Self* (New York: Free Press, 1967).

that also limited women's opportunities to pursue careers and interests beyond the domestic sphere.²⁰

By the early 1970s, as psychoanalytic models fell out of favor within the psychological sciences with the rapid ascent of cognitive science, new frameworks for understanding autism emerged that reflected the cognitivist paradigm's understanding of the mind as a kind of "modular" machine made up of discrete components assigned to specific mental tasks. Cognitive psychology relied on the metaphoric trope of the computer in its emerging accounts of mental processes. As Maija Holmer Nadesan writes, "the cognitive metaphor of the mind as computer disseminated throughout popular culture, and now frames popular dialogue and policy debates in a wide range of areas, particularly with respect to issues affecting children and their 'cognitive development.'"²¹ This metaphor of the mind as computer was employed with particularly intensity around the question of autism, as mental illness and cognitive disability were accordingly reconceived as breakdowns in the normal functioning of various cognitive systems.

As Straus summarizes, cognitive psychological approaches generated three hypotheses about the structure and function of autism: weak central coherence, which posited that the symptoms of autism resulted from the mind's inability to generalize and make broader connections on the basis of local details; Theory of Mind (or, in the case of autism, Lack of Theory of Mind), which postulated that autistic minds lacked the specific modular architecture responsible for the capacity to attribute thoughts, intentions, and emotions to others: this is the origin of the widely popularized belief that autistics are "mindblind" and lack the ability to

²⁰ See Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Norton, 2010 [1963]), 413-16.

²¹ Majia Holmer Nadesan, *Constructing Autism*, 109.

empathize with others.²² A final cognitive hypothesis proposed that the symptoms of autism resulted from deficits in “executive function,” a term used to designate the mental capacity to direct mental focus and attention in consequentially ordered, functional ways.

By the early 1990s, cognitive psychological models began to be supplemented, and in some cases challenged, by rapid advances in both neurobiology and genetics research. Still, biological research into the neuroscience and genetics of autism has been notoriously controversial, fraught, and inconclusive, with few substantial breakthroughs to point to with any degree of clarity. In recent years, many of the most promising neuroscientific studies have sought to shift emphasis away from the cognitivist focus on modular “deficits,” and toward an attention to the neurobiology of the senses. Disability studies scholar Ralph James Savarese summarizes recent research findings on this account, citing in particular the work of Canadian neuroscientist Laurent Mottron:

In general, autistics evince comparatively more activity in the temporal, occipital, and parietal regions and less activity in the frontal cortex than nonautistics. As a recent meta-analysis by Mottron’s team reports, “A stronger engagement of sensory processing mechanisms . . . may facilitate an atypically prominent role for perceptual mechanisms in supporting cognition” [...] Autistics, in other words, disproportionately recruit lower-order regions for higher-order tasks—Temple Grandin has famously called this tendency “thinking in pictures.” In Mottron’s model of “enhanced perceptual functioning,” autism “is more accurately described as an entirely different processing system, rather than as a

²² “Mindblindness,” a term that has been extensively criticized and rejected outright by many autistic self-advocates, continues to circulate within wider public discussions of the condition. The theory was most influentially developed in the cognitive psychologist Simon Baron-Cohen’s book *Mindblindness: An Essay on Autism and Theory of Mind* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997).

collection of negative cascade effects resulting from one or many major impairments (excesses or deficits).²³

The relatively recent emphasis on sensory processing in autism has led to a number of provocative new hypotheses about the condition, including several studies that have offered a new account of autism as “Intense World Syndrome”: “a unifying hypothesis where the core pathology of the autistic brain is hyper-reactivity and hyper-plasticity of local neuronal circuits.”²⁴ The emerging emphasis upon the sensory differences associated with autistic neurotypes has progressively revealed that many of the behavioral hallmarks that were long believed to indicate cognitive, intellectual, or affective deficits might be better described simply as *differences* in the brain’s sensory processing mechanisms.²⁵

As this cursory overview of psychiatric and biomedical models would suggest, autism has been exceptionally difficult to define with any lasting degree of precision. The longstanding inability of medical and psychiatric science to isolate a single, identifiable pathogenic “cause” has led some to suggest that autism is an entirely conditional and overly generalized construction, a holdover from an earlier era of medical science and diagnostic protocols that is inadequate to the range of conditions it attempts to subsume under a single label (or, with the emergence of the concept of the “autism spectrum” in the 1980s, at the height of the influence of

²³ Ralph James Savarese and Lisa Zunshine. “The Critic as Neurocosmopolite; Or, What Cognitive Approaches to Literature Can Learn from Disability Studies,” *Narrative* 22, no. 1 (January 2014): 19.

²⁴ Henry Markram, Tania Rinaldi, and Kamila Markram, “The Intense World Syndrome – an Alternative Hypothesis for Autism,” *Frontiers in Neuroscience* 1, no. 1 (2007): 77.

²⁵ See Laurent Mottron, M. Dawson, and I. Soulières, “Enhanced Perception in Savant Syndrome: Patterns, Structure, and Creativity,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B* 364.1522 (2009): 1385-91.

cognitive psychology, a large and capacious diagnostic “umbrella.”)²⁶ Here, I am not claiming that the range of different “neurotypes” currently and historically associated with autism and ASDs do not “exist,” or that they lack biological correlates that might someday be located in the body or brain. Rather, I wish to indicate the provisional, contingent, and highly speculative ground on which biomedical and psychiatric claims about autism have historically based their claims. In turn, this context provides crucial background for my attention, throughout this study, to what might be called the emergence of a politics of neurological difference.

“Don’t Mourn For Us”: Neurodiversity and the Politics of Difference

The first use of the word “neurodiversity” has been attributed to the Australian autistic self-advocate Judy Singer, who first used it in an Internet exchange forum in 1997 and elaborated on the concept in an essay published in 1999.²⁷ The word is also used in an article in *The Atlantic* by Harvey Blume published in 1998 (the same year that *Snack and Drink* was made), though without crediting Singer.²⁸ Nonetheless, it is clear that some aspects of the *concept* of neurodiversity had existed some time before the word itself was coined in the late 1990s. Since the early days of the Internet, self-identified autistic and neurodivergent individuals had begun to formulate alternative political and cultural accounts of the condition, often in ways that were

²⁶ Straus suggests that “due to its lack of secure biological basis, autism might eventually follow the path of neurasthenia and hysteria into quaintness and irrelevance” (465).

²⁷ Judy Singer, “‘Why Can’t You Be Normal for Once in Your Life?’ From A ‘Problem with No Name’ to the Emergence of A New Category of Difference,” in *Disability Discourse*, ed. Mairian Corker, 59–67. in *Disability Discourse*, ed. Mairian Corker (Open University Press, 1999).

²⁸ Harvey Blume, “Neurodiversity,” *The Atlantic* (September 1998). See also Emily Thornton Savarese and Ralph James Savarese, “The Superior Half of Speaking,” *Disability Studies Quarterly* 30, 1 (2010). See also Pier Jaarsma and Stellan Welin, “Autism as a Natural Human Variation: Reflections on the Claims of the Neurodiversity Movement,” *Health Care Analysis* 02/2011; 20(1):20-30. DOI:10.1007/s10728-011-0169-9.

critical of dominant cultural and medical narratives through which it had been represented. In the early 1990s, largely facilitated over online message boards, a number of loosely organized networks and groups of autistic self-advocates and neurodiversity proponents began to form, including Autism Network International (ANI) and the Autistic Self-Advocacy Network (ASAN). In 1993, Jim Sinclair, one of the pioneers of autistic self-advocacy, wrote a manifesto for the newsletter of ANI titled “Don’t Mourn For Us.” Still one of the most powerfully articulated documents of neurodiversity, Sinclair’s text was addressed directly—in sometimes aggressive tone—to parents of autistic children who, as Sinclair suggests, frequently relate toward their children as if in mourning for the non-autistic child they did not have. In the course of making its argument about the value of autistic personhood in its own right, “Don’t Mourn For Us” also offers provocative and radical articulations about the meaning of autism, which Sinclair writes is not a disease or illness that can be cured, but rather a “way of being”:

Autism isn't something a person *has*, or a “shell” that a person is trapped inside. There's no normal child hidden behind the autism. Autism is a way of being. It is *pervasive*; it colors every experience, every sensation, perception, thought, emotion, and encounter, every aspect of existence. It is not possible to separate the autism from the person--and if it were possible, the person you'd have left would not be the same person you started with. This is important, so take a moment to consider it: Autism is a way of being. It is not possible to separate the person from the autism.²⁹

The shift that neurodiversity rhetoric performs—from an understanding of autism and other forms of neurological disability that is primarily shaped by the authority scientific-medical-

²⁹ Jim Sinclair, “Don’t Mourn For Us.” Originally published in the newsletter of Autism Network International (ANI), *Our Voice* 1, No. 3 (1993). Available at www.autreat.com/dont_mourn.html

psychiatric expertise to one that is defined instead in explicitly *social* and *political* terms—has been anything but free from controversy, as I will describe in the pages that follow.

Neurodiversity has become an especially contentious site within the contemporary politics of scientific and medical knowledge—one that is defined by a frequently antagonistic relation between expert investigators, care-workers, and family members and the subjects of their concern.

Liberalism, Disability, and the Language of Autism

The extent to which mental disability can be adequately described and accounted for within liberal humanist conceptions of political action has been an ongoing subject of debate within disability studies. The feminist critic Cora Kaplan notes that disability “continues to trouble the rhetoric of liberal individualism, testing both its ethics of tolerance and its fetishization of autonomy and agency as conditions of human status and civic participation.” Kaplan argues that disability’s unruly status within liberal discourse points to longstanding contradictions and unresolved ambiguities within the liberal tradition itself:

the continuing debate about the rights of citizens, and the price of increased agency for them, is itself a legacy of liberalism’s historically mixed messages about autonomy and social justice, an ongoing paradox that remains as radically unresolved in the liberalisms that characterize late-twentieth-century social democracies as it did in the “classic” liberalism of the nineteenth century.³⁰

Sociologist Micki McGee, drawing from the work of the feminist philosopher Eva Feder Kittay,

³⁰ Cora Kaplan, “Afterword: Liberalism, Feminism, and Defect,” in *“Defects”*: *Engendering the Modern Body*, eds. Helen Deutsch and Felicity Nussbaum, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 303–4.

suggests that neurological difference poses a test case that exposes the “limits of liberalism.” Noting that neurodiversity makes claims for the political and social enfranchisement of individuals who in earlier historical moments would have represented the very antithesis of reason—the “mad,” “insane,” “deficient,” “feeble-minded”—McGee writes that “the idea of neurodiversity necessarily strains the very notion of the rational, choosing subject that is at the heart of the liberal ideal[...] Predicating personhood on rationality has always been a dubious proposition, and advocating equal rights for the neurologically atypical and the cognitively-impaired tests and troubles this formation.”³¹ Yet these positions, too, reveal neurodiversity and disability rights discourses to be caught in the incongruous position of making claims for access and autonomy that ultimately rely upon a stable, binary opposition—between disabled and non-disabled, “neurotypical” and “neuro-atypical”—whose terms remained firmly prescribed by modern liberal formations of personhood, autonomy, and rationality.

In place of the historically contradictory ethical constraints built in to the liberal conception of autonomy—and what Kaplan calls its “fetishization of agency”—disability studies has put forth a range of alternative ethical models that rely upon less rigidly individualized conceptions of subjectivity. These have involved attending to the forms of mutual care, collectivity, and assistive facilitation that emerge in proximity to disability, so that sociality is no longer conceptualized as a discrete, atomized exchange between autonomous individuals and but rather as an entangled relational field that is always in process. Here, the contributions of feminist disability studies have been especially significant and wide ranging, offering new resources for understanding concepts such as dependency and care within the context of an

³¹ Micki McGee, “Neurodiversity,” *Contexts* 11, no. 12 (2012), 12–13.

analytic attuned to gender as well as bodily and cognitive forms of difference.³² Adopting such alternative ethical perspectives would not require abandoning the task of countering the dispossession and exploitation that liberalism seeks (and often fails) to guard against. Indeed, it would offer the possibility of developing fuller and more capacious accounts of the different forms that personhood takes, across the neurological spectrum.

Over the course of the dissertation I examine how the history of autism and the concept of neurodiversity trouble many of our existing critical frameworks for understanding the link between language and subjectivity. My case studies demonstrate that autism and other forms of neurological disability cannot be accounted for within political models that presume the capacity for verbal (self-)expression to be one of the defining attributes of modern liberal personhood. Christopher Knowles's typewriter compositions and performances, Amanda Baggs's *In My Language* YouTube video, and Fernand Deligny's maps of the wandering paths of autistic children each demand alternative models for conceptualizing the subject's relation to language and communication—often in ways that exceed even psychoanalytic or poststructuralist accounts of the unstable ontological status of language. Language and the capacity for verbal communication, self-expression, and self-representation have been among the core points of contention within the history of autism and politics of neurological difference. In his discussion of Temple Grandin's memoir *Emergence*—generally considered the first published autobiography written by an autistic author—Oliver Sacks writes of his astonishment and disbelief upon first reading Grandin's manuscript. He explains that at the time, it was believed that autistics were “incapable of self-understanding and understanding others and therefore of

³² See especially Eva Feder Kittay, “When Caring Is Just and Justice Is Caring: Justice and Mental Retardation,” in *The Subject of Care: Feminist Perspectives on Dependency*, eds. Eva Feder Kittay and Ellen K. Feder (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 257-276.

authentic introspection and retrospection. How *could* an autistic person write an autobiography? It seemed a contradiction in terms.”³³

Yet as Grandin and an increasing number of autistic writers and artists have attested—and as the concept of neurodiversity makes clear—autistic autobiography is no longer a contradictory concept. At the same time, the different relationship to language, expression, and verbal communication that many autistic and other neurodivergent individuals experience has often been a source of dispute and misunderstanding within the contemporary field of the politics of neurological difference. Representations of autism and neurological disability continue to be haunted by the figure of what the literary theorist James Berger has called “the dys-/disarticulate other,” who “must embody some radical, unaccountable alterity in relation to the social-symbolic order; must occupy some utopian, apocalyptic, purely negative position and detach itself from any practical political program.”³⁴ Though this has been a persistent trope within the representation of autism and other disabilities that involve differences or impairments of verbal expression and communication, I am more concerned with the ways in which the topic of language, voice, and speech in autism and neurological difference presses up against “the limits of liberalism,” or what communications theorist Amit Pinchevski has described, in relation to autism, as “the production of communication as a social value.” Pinchevski argues that autism and adjacent forms of neurological disability involving communicational impairment force us to confront “the indeterminate and indeterminable link between communication and sociality.”³⁵ Such arguments suggest how autism and neurological disability might represent a limiting case

³³ Oliver Sacks, *An Anthropologist on Mars* (New York: Knopf, 1995), 253.

³⁴ James Berger, *The Disarticulate: Language, Disability, and the Narratives of Modernity* (New York: NYU Press, 2014), 9.

³⁵ Amit Pinchevski, “Bartleby’s Autism: Wandering Along Incommunicability,” *Cultural Critique* 78 (Spring, 2011): 28.

for what Jürgen Habermas has influentially termed “communicative rationality”: those mutually recognized norms of discursive exchange between autonomous speaking subjects that enable the creation and reproduction of the public sphere as the site of deliberative democratic participation and exchange.³⁶ Can persons with autism and other forms of neurological disability only be included within the public sphere if they can be taught to “speak” in the normative terms of liberal communicative rationality?³⁷ What other modes of expression and forms of relationality might be flickering around the margins of a liberal social order that is constituted according to a rigidly compulsory able-bodiedness and, indeed, “able-mindedness”?³⁸

Difference, Diversity, and The Limits of “Inclusion”

Despite my attention to the “the limits of liberalism” in relationship to disability, it is not my claim that neurodiversity and other articulations of neurological difference are always necessarily oppositional or resistant formations that run counter to the liberal regulation and management of difference. Especially in the latter two chapters of the dissertation, which concentrate on more recent examples and cases, I am particularly interested in considering how neurodiversity and the politics of neurological difference are positioned within the historical parameters of “late liberalism”: a period, as Elizabeth Povinelli has suggested, that is defined by

³⁶ See Jürgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action, vol. 1: Reason and the Rationalization of Society* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1984); *Theory of Communicative Action, Vol. 2: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1988); *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987).

³⁷ Political theorists aligned with the liberal tradition have only recently begun to address the place of persons with intellectual, cognitive, and communicational disabilities within pluralistic democratic processes: see especially Martha Nassbaum, *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2006).

³⁸ See Robert McRuer, “Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and Queer/Disabled Existence,” in *The Disability Studies Reader, Second Edition*, ed. Lennard J. Davis (New York: Routledge), 301–308.

“the twinned formations of neoliberalism and liberal cultural recognition.”³⁹ This allows my argument to take account of the extent to which neurodiversity rhetoric and discourse has been—or might be—incorporated into the institutions, procedures, and techniques of liberal governance. In the final chapter, on the case of Avonte Oquendo and the introduction of Avonte’s Law, I argue that the legal and political recognition of autism and other mental disabilities on the grounds of expanding the apparatuses of surveillance and policing represents a troubling development that amplifies the history of surveillance as a technique of racialization, especially for individuals and groups identified as disabled or mentally ill. This example also reveals the fraught status of disability within an era defined by the paired forces of liberal cultural recognition and neoliberal privatization.

In his recent book *The Reorder of Things: The University and Its Pedagogies of Minority Difference*, Roderick Ferguson offers an account of the ways in which the radical political demands for recognition and inclusion made by activists involved in minoritarian social movements that emerged the 1960s and 70s have been gradually absorbed and transformed by the liberal institutions and techniques of knowledge-formation and capitalist production that heeded their calls—in ways that frequently invert the emancipatory and liberationist terms in which such demands were initially formulated. Ferguson concentrates on the example of African American student movement and the institutionalization, in ensuing decades, of university departments of African American Studies and the incorporation of diversity rhetorics and protocols within the bureaucratic functioning of the modern university. His argument attends to the “complex history of the ways in which technologies of power began to work with and

³⁹ Elizabeth Povinelli, “Defining Security in Late Liberalism,” in *Times of Security: Ethnographies of Fear, Protest, and the Future* (New York: Routledge, 2013): 20.

through difference in order to manage its insurgent possibilities.”⁴⁰ Ferguson’s account of the liberal management of the insurgent possibilities of difference is especially instructive in the case of neurodiversity, as I describe in the latter part the dissertation.

I have chosen to use the term “neurological difference” in order to situate this project in relationship to a longer critical tradition that has been invested in writing the history of difference more broadly construed. In her formative essay “The Evidence of Experience,” Joan W. Scott defines this in elegantly simple terms as a history of “the designation of ‘other,’ of the attribution of characteristics that distinguish categories of people from some presumed (and usually unstated) norm.”⁴¹ This project endeavors to bring some existing critical perspectives on the history of difference, as Scott describes it, to the study of emerging discourses of “neurodiversity” and “neurodivergence,” which have only begun to elicit critical attention. Yet as Scott indicates, the concept of “difference” as I use it here is inextricable from the idea of the “norm.” As such, it will be important to indicate how my attention to the politics of neurological difference can be positioned in relationship to the history—and the genealogy—of the modern emergence of the concept of the “norm” itself. In this project, my approach to this question has been especially shaped by Michel Foucault’s discussions of “psychiatric power” and the “techniques of normalization” through which it emerged, developed, and expanded over the course of the past two centuries.

⁴⁰ Rod Ferguson, *The Reorder of Things: The University and Its Pedagogies of Minority Difference* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 4.

⁴¹ Joan W. Scott, “The Evidence of Experience,” *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (Summer, 1991): 773-797, 773.

Techniques of Normalization: Foucault and the Critique of Psychiatric Power

The arguments and readings contained in this dissertation have been extensively informed by several fields of research whose epistemic, historical, and political contours have been influentially delimited using Foucault's influential work on the political regulation of "life itself." This project takes seriously Foucault's insistence upon the productive force of power; his arguments about the essential part played by disciplinary institutions—schools, prisons, hospitals, psychiatric asylums—within the historical emergence of liberal modes of governance, disciplinary regimes, and techniques of surveillance and security; and his attention to the multifarious and proliferating techniques of governance, surveillance, and social control within his development of the concepts of biopower and biopolitics.

On a more specific level, this project is especially informed by Foucault's career-spanning interest in the history of what he termed psychiatric power, and especially its role in generalizing concepts of normalization and "the normal." This dissertation draws from—and seeks to advance—recent scholarly discussions emphasizing the crucial, organizing role that the critique of psychiatric power plays within Foucault's broader project.⁴² Prompted by the publication and translation over the past fifteen years of the lectures Foucault delivered at the Collège de France from the early 1970s through his death in 1984, these discussions have brought renewed attention to the resources that Foucault's work and thought can offer critical projects seeking to account for the ongoing, and even intensifying, manifestations of *psy*-power

⁴² The most sustained discussions of psychiatric power are contained in the lectures from 1973–1975, the period during which Foucault was also engaged in writing *Discipline and Punish*. These lectures are collected in two volumes: Michel Foucault, *Psychiatric Power: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1973–1974*, ed. Jacques Lagrange, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2006) and Michel Foucault, *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1974–75*, ed. Valerio Marchetti and Antonella Salomoni, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2003).

within the political present. Even more extensively than his published monographs, Foucault's lectures develop a powerfully original account of the historical emergence of the psychiatric sciences since in the late eighteenth century, showing how disciplinary practices authorized by psychiatric expertise were formed in tandem with an emergent concept of "normalization" that was being concurrently developed within the life sciences. For Foucault, "The diffusion of psychiatric power takes place by way of this development of the concept of the normal."⁴³

It is notable that the growing intellectual engagement with Foucault's thought during this period tended to focus on the *body* as the primary site of historical inscription, while simultaneously minimizing, or assigning a secondary role, to the issues of psychiatric power, mental illness, and mental deficiency that are addressed extensively in the 1973–1975 lectures. It is worth pausing for a moment to consider why this is so. In her 2010 book *Mad for Foucault: Rethinking the Foundations of Queer Theory*, Lynne Huffer notes that for the first several decades of his scholarly reception in the United States critics tended to concentrate on only a few of the books that were published and translated during Foucault's lifetime (most notably *A History of Sexuality, Vol. 1* and *Discipline and Punish*, and, to a lesser extent, *The Archeology of Knowledge* and *The Order of Things*). For this reason, the wider context and full scope of Foucault's insights were frequently reduced and simplified, even as they became foundational for entirely new areas of critical research. Thus, Foucault's influence across the humanities and social sciences—while extensive and lasting—has been based upon a partial and incomplete view of his ideas.⁴⁴ Indeed, Huffer maintains that such limited and partial readings of Foucault have even led to outright misrepresentations of his positions—particularly regarding his

⁴³ Foucault, *Psychiatric Power*, 202.

⁴⁴ Lynn Huffer, *Mad for Foucault: Rethinking the Foundations of Queer Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

controversial arguments about the unpredictable and diffuse character of power; the historical contingency of modern taxonomies of sexual identity; and the bleak prospects for individual or collective political resistance that his work has seemed, for some, to represent.⁴⁵

The “norm”—a concept whose seemingly magnetic power to organize the political regulation of life constituted a core aspect of Foucault’s expansive line of inquiry—has been a central category of analysis and critical scrutiny within disability studies for several decades, not least due to Foucault’s influence upon the emergence of the field in the late 1980s. Significant examples here would include Lennard Davis’s influential accounts of the ways in which the modern category of disability emerged in the nineteenth century in tandem with the nascent statistical sciences⁴⁶; and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s crucial elaboration of the concept of the “normate,” the term she offers to describe the statistically determined and abstract standard of able-bodiedness and able-mindedness against which modern taxonomic classifications of disability have been defined—a “figure outlined by the array of deviant others, whose marked

⁴⁵ Jasbir Puar offers a related point regarding the separate and sometimes contradictory ways that Foucault’s work was taken up during the first decades of his posthumous reception. Puar notes that in their readings of *History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*, queer theorists focused on the critiques of psychoanalysis and the repressive hypothesis found in the book’s first half, while postcolonial and critical race scholars tended to draw from the account of biopower formulated in its latter pages to emphasize the racial and ethnic stratifications endemic to the biopolitical management of human life. Puar writes that we “can trace the genealogical engagements of *The History of Sexuality* as a splitting: scholars of race and postcoloniality taking up biopolitics, while queer scholars work with dismantling the repressive hypothesis.” (She adds: “These are tendencies, not absolutes.”) Arguably this schism is no longer as pervasive, due in part to the transnational turn within queer studies. See Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 34.

⁴⁶ See Lennard Davis, “Constructing Normalcy: The Bell Curve, the Novel, and the Invention of the Disabled Body in the Nineteenth Century,” in *The Disability Studies Reader, Second Edition*, ed. Lennard Davis (New York: Routledge, 2006), 3–16.

bodies shore up the normate's boundaries."⁴⁷ Yet these and other disability studies accounts of the history of normalization, norms, and the "normate" were largely formulated in relationship to "physical" disabilities and more immediately "visible" forms of disablement. Moreover, such accounts have frequently served to reinforce a certain skepticism and animosity toward medical science and the "helping professions" (social work, special education, etc.) that critical disability studies projects have inherited from their counterparts within disability social movements. In this dissertation, I seek to augment previous critical disability perspectives on the history of normalization by returning to Foucault's emphasis on psychiatric power and placing it in relationship to the specific case of autism and the politics of neurological difference that have emerged within its proximity. I hope to show how this argument requires a more complex and nuanced account of the relationship between scientific knowledge, the exercise of (psychiatric and biopolitical) power, and the possibilities of "acting politically" contained therein.

The shift in disciplinary power and surveillance traced by the chronological arrangement of the chapters in this study reflects another aspect of Foucault's work on psychiatric power, which concerns the relationship he elaborates between concepts of political sovereignty, the science of biology, and psychiatric techniques of "normalization." Foucault's discussion of this relationship bears the distinct influence of Georges Canguilhem, the prominent French philosopher of science who was also one of Foucault's most significant teachers. Canguilhem employed a Nietzschean approach to study the historical emergence of the biological sciences, seeking to reveal how modern scientific discourses concerning the "normal" functioning of biological organisms have been inseparable from the broader ideological contexts in which they

⁴⁷ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 8.

emerge. Canguilhem described how biological conceptualizations of “error” were transposed and assimilated within the emergence and transformation of certain moral and ethical norms, and the institutions dedicated to their regulation. In *The Normal and the Pathological* (a text expanded from his 1943 doctoral thesis in medicine), Canguilhem writes that “the introduction of the concept of error into pathology is a fact of great importance as much in terms of the change it reveals in what it brings to bear in man’s attitude toward disease, as in terms of the new status which is supposedly established in the relationship between knowledge and its object.”⁴⁸

In view of such assertions, it is perhaps not surprising that Foucault would refer to his mentor Canguilhem in the course of his own work on the techniques of normalization that have been central to the expansion and diffusion of psychiatric power since the early nineteenth century. Within the psychiatric sciences, as Foucault says in his 15 January 1975 lecture, “the norm is not simply and not even a principle of intelligibility; it is an element on the basis of which a certain exercise of power is founded and legitimized.” Foucault continues, “the norm brings with it a principle of both qualification and correction. The norm’s function is not to exclude and reject. Rather, it is always linked to a positive technique of intervention and transformation, to a sort of normative project.”⁴⁹ Foucault argues that the distinction between “normal” and “abnormal” psychological typologies formulated within the psychiatric sciences has at once depended upon, and generalized, the biopolitical logic that linked the discovery of scientific laws regulating the life of biological organisms to modern political practices developed

⁴⁸ Georges Canguilhem, *The Normal and the Pathological*, trans. Carolyn R. Fawcett (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 277.

⁴⁹ Foucault, *Abnormal*, 50.

to govern human populations in accordance with the establishment and regulation of norms.⁵⁰ Psychiatric power, in other words, appears in Foucault's lectures as one of the most potent vectors that sutures Western, liberal modernity's (political) techniques of discipline and social control to scientifically authorized principle of (biological) normalization.

Neuropolitics: Brains and *Bios*

Scholars including the sociologists Nikolas Rose and Joelle M. Abi-Rached, the political theorist William Connolly, and the philosopher Catherine Malabou have variously described the last half century as a "neurobiological era," one that has been defined by a series of interrelated developments through which the human brain and nervous system have become increasingly scrutinized objects of medical-scientific, political, and cultural concern.⁵¹ To be sure, the brain has been a perennial source of philosophical and political fascination, an organ that has been studied and represented in ways that are deeply shaped by broader historical and technological developments. Writing in the early twentieth century, the French philosopher Henri Bergson famously analogized the brain to the central telephone exchange: "Its office," Bergson writes in *Matter and Memory*, "is to allow communication or to delay it," and not to transform sensory information into new representations on its own accord.⁵² In their essay on the influence of cybernetics on the midcentury American psychologist Silvan Tomkins' theory of affects, Eve

⁵⁰ This point will become central to the account of biopower developed in *History of Sexuality Vol. 1*.

⁵¹ Nikolas Rose and Joelle M. Abi-Rached, *Neuro: The New Brain Sciences and the Management of the Mind* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013); William Connolly, *Neuropolitics: Thinking, Culture, Speed* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); Catherine Malabou, *What Should We Do With Our Brain?*, trans. Sebastian Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

⁵² Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. N.M. Paul and W.S. Palmer (Cambridge, MA: Zone Books, 1991), 30.

Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank note that systems theorists and computer engineers working in the immediate postwar period conceived of the brain as a homeostatic machine—an “undifferentiated by differentiable ecology” that mirrored the automated, self-regulating mechanics characteristic of Fordist modes of capitalist production.⁵³

In a 2004 essay, the Italian political theorist Maurizio Lazzarato proposed to supplement the Foucauldian concept of biopolitics with the rather inelegant term “noo-politics”—a neologism that draws equally upon the Aristotelian designation of the *noos*, or “intellect,” and the brand name of an Internet search engine—in order to describe the technological manipulation of the brain through interventions upon the neuro-cognitive dimensions of memory, attention, sensation, and emotion within the modes of production and techniques of governance of contemporary global capitalism.⁵⁴ For Lazzarato and the media theorist Tiziana Terranova, who expands upon his concept of noo-power in her own work on the political economy of information technology, the “neuro-cognitive” dimensions of contemporary capitalism are enabled and reinforced by rapid advances within communicational, neuro-imagining, and artificial intelligence technologies that have made it possible to generate representations of the brain (and its functions) at ever more precise and microscopic scales.⁵⁵ To mention a final, more recent example, the feminist sociologist of science Victoria Pitts-Taylor notes that the concept of *neuroplasticity* that has come to prominence within neuroscience research since the 1990s—the

⁵³ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank, “Shame in the Cybernetic Fold: Reading Silvan Tomkins,” in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 105.

⁵⁴ Maurizio Lazzarato, “The Concepts of Life and the Living in the Societies of Control,” in *Deleuze and the Social*, eds. Martin Fuglsang and Bent Meier Sorensen (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006).

⁵⁵ Tiziana Terranova, “Futurepublic: On Information Warfare, Bio-racism and Hegemony as Noopolitics,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 24, no. 3 (2007): 125–145.

now widely prevalent view that cerebral structures are constantly forming and reforming in dynamic interaction with external environments—closely resemble the decentralized, flexible, and networked nature of contemporary “informational” capitalism. As Pitts-Taylor suggests, “the popular discourse on plasticity firmly situates the subject in a normative, neoliberal ethic of personal self-care and responsibility linked to modifying the body.”⁵⁶

In spite of their methodological diversity and disciplinary range, these discussions share a grounding orientation in a theoretical-discursive field seeking to describe the ever more ingenious and complex (political) capture of (biological) life. The task for critical accounts of the so-called “neurological turn,” in other words, has been to develop a biopolitics of the brain. These scholars have shown how rapid technological advances in our ability to represent and interpret the *biological* functioning of the nerve and the synapse, at ever greater degrees of complexity and precision, must be understood in relationship to corresponding shifts within modern techniques of governance, modes of production, and regimes of subjectivity. This study hopes to approach some of rich debates on the increasing political and cultural prominence of the neurological outlined above from the specific perspective of critical disability studies. Indeed, for all of the critical attention that has been devoted to the role of the neurological in contemporary thought, there has been less direct consideration of the place of disability, and of autism in particular, within these debates.

⁵⁶ Victoria Pitts-Taylor, “The Plastic Brain: Neoliberalism and the Neuronal Self,” *Health* 14, no. 6 (2010): 639.

Sedgwickian Textures

An early moment in the genesis of this dissertation project occurred in the fall of 2012, when I participated in a weekly reading group at the CUNY graduate center devoted to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's posthumously published essay collection, *The Weather in Proust*. In the course of our reading, I was assigned to lead the discussion of Sedgwick's essay "Affect Theory, Theory of Mind,"⁵⁷ in which she offers a largely critical assessment of the recent vogue within academic literary studies for adapting insights from cognitive psychology and adjacent fields of scientific research in order to study the aesthetic and social functions of literature. In the first part of the essay, Sedgwick directs most of her critical ire on recent attempts to transfer the concept of "Theory of Mind" (or ToM) from its disciplinary origins within the fields of animal ethology and cognitive psychology into the domain of literary analysis, focusing in particular on Zunshine's 2006 monograph *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel*. Sedgwick finds Zunshine's use of ToM as an explanatory model to account for fiction's pleasurable "cognitive workouts" to be wholly unconvincing as literary analysis. She argues that the problems with Zunshine's reading are attributable to the limitations that are built-in to the concept of Theory of Mind itself. In its rigid, modular cognitivism, ToM has largely been understood according to a dualistic, Manichean structure of presence or absence, one that that is ill-equipped to account for literature's affective richness. Yet instead of resorting to a routinized anti-biologism that would immediately write off any attempt to apply cognitive science to literature, Sedgwick offers a reading of Proust's *La Prisonniere* that also demonstrates how the limits of a concept like ToM

⁵⁷ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Affect Theory and Theory of Mind," in *The Weather in Proust*, ed. Jonathan Goldberg (Duke University Press, 2011), 144–163.

can point to the inextricability of “cognitive” processes (like knowing, thinking, or judging) from “affective” ones (like wanting or feeling).

In its final pages, Sedgwick’s essay takes a surprising turn: there, she refers to a collectively authored paper by autistic self-advocates responding to the prevalence of ToM-based models for categorizing autism, and situates its claims in the context of what she calls the “loosely organized international movement” of neurodiversity. These accounts of ToM from an autistic perspective point the way toward a less normatively constrained possibility for thinking about relational intersubjectivity that might avoid some of the easy pitfalls of literary engagements with cognitive science and neurobiology. For Sedgwick—who evinced a deep interest in the affective-cognitive systems developed by the midcentury psychologist Silvan Tomkins—this meant that neurodiversity could be viewed as both “a rights movement for people disenfranchised by a certain range of particular mental diagnoses,” *and* as “the source of a kind of analysis whose limits of applicability would be very hard to circumscribe.”⁵⁸ In the case of Theory of Mind, the perspectives of autistic self-advocates serve as a corrective to the dominant assumptions of cognitive science and the modes of psychiatric expertise that draw upon its findings to justify the management of human difference. Sedgwick quotes from the paper “Theory of Mind: From an Autistic Perspective” to show how the implicit limitations of defining autism as a Lack of Theory of Mind. One of the contributors to this paper who Sedgwick quotes, Jared Blackburn, offers an explanation for “why Autistic people often seem to lack ‘Theory of Mind’ to normal people” by drawing from his personal experience: “I think my view of other people was/is unusually flexible because I lack a specific ‘people’ way of thinking (separate from objects), so I do not ‘see’ myself in others. Instead, it’s all processing abstract concepts and

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 156.

systems—much like computer programs or physical forces. However, I have been quite aware for a long time that others had (different) knowledge and motives.”⁵⁹

At the close of “Affect Theory, Theory of Mind,” Sedgwick offers a series of closing reflections in the form of a numbered list, concerning how an affect theory informed by neurodiverse perspectives, such as the ones offered by Blackburn and his co-authors, might reshape critical approaches for thinking about Theory of Mind:

1. Don’t work toward, or depend upon the model of, a single, normative outcome—with differences from that outcome analyzed in terms of deficiency or at best detour.
2. Instead, find ways of discerning and describing a variety of outcomes, qualitatively and phenomenologically distinct; not understood in terms of a preimagined evolutionary teleology, but instead in terms of a diversity of potentials.⁶⁰

The fourth point reads as follows:

4. Such qualitative differences may or may not be rooted in detectable, hard-wired, and/or immutable biological difference. Conceptually it doesn’t matter much—especially as thresholds of detectability are constantly changing. So too, importantly, are understandings of neural plasticity—with regard to genetics,

⁵⁹ Ibid., 157-158. Sedgwick is quoting from Jaren Blackburn, et. al., “A Discussion about Theory of Mind: from an Autistic Perspective,” in Proceedings of Autism Europe’s 6th International Congress, www.autistics.org/library/AE2000-ToM.html.

⁶⁰ Sedgwick, “Affect Theory and Theory of Mind,” 160.

prenatal environments, and the overall lifespan, and equally with regard to the temporary, nonce, and provisional.⁶¹

In the process of encountering this essay by preparing to lead a discussion of it for the reading group, I was immediately struck by Sedgwick's discussion of autism in the context of affect theory, and especially by her suggestion that neurodiversity could be considered both a rights-based social movement and a kind of hermeneutic provocation with potentially limitless applicability. For one, this line of reasoning seemed to follow a parallel path to the one that Sedgwick had traced in her previous work in queer theory—most pointedly, in her account of the tensions between “universalizing” and “minoritizing” accounts of sexual identity that were produced by what she termed the “crisis” within definitions of sexuality that accompanied the modern emergence of the hetero/homo divide.⁶² For Sedgwick, the relation between universalizing and minoritizing perspectives was not antagonistic, but rather convivial: this relation took on a “both/and” quality that simultaneously retained an awareness of the durability of identity and the particularity of difference, even as it sought avenues of generalization, diffusion, and dispersal. In turn, this move opened the possibility of bringing a queer hermeneutic perspective to a potentially boundless range of situations and contexts, even those that would seem to be absent of recognizably minoritarian sexual identities. Sedgwick's assertion of neurodiversity's potentially limitless applicability seemed to me to be both provocative and fraught—particularly in relationship to the contemporary politics of disability. To what extent could the semantic and hermeneutic promiscuity of a term like “queer” be transferred into the register of neurodiversity?

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 85.

When read in relation to the larger trajectory of her thought, as we did in the reading group, Sedgwick's essay gestures toward new trajectories for the de-routinized practices of reading and thinking that defined Sedgwick's work, pushing even further the "additive and accretive" approach to difference that she pioneered in her earlier contributions to queer theory, and that she continued to elaborate in her subsequent work on affect. In light my recent encounter with Knowles's work in the *Einstein* revival, I found Sedgwick's list to be highly suggestive for thinking about the politics and aesthetics of disability, performance, and neurological difference. Could *Einstein* be considered an example of disability or "neurodivergent" performance—in spite of the fact that disability is never directly represented, named, or thematized as such within the work itself? How might Sedgwick's searching pursuit of non-dualistic accounts of personhood and relationality—of acting, doing, being, and making *with* or *alongside*—be taken up within study of disability more generally, and the specific focus on neurodiversity that I pursue in this project?

In contemplating these questions, I have been especially interested in how Sedgwick's work on affect can contribute to the study of historical developments in scientific research on cognition, sensory perception, and communication. Yet for all of the influence that Sedgwick's "affective turn" has exerted upon subsequent developments within queer theory and cultural studies, there has been less attention granted to her engagement with a particular set of historically situated representational models developed to conceptualize the relation between intelligence and affect—thinking and feeling—in the decades following World War II. Tracing the shifting clinical and cultural meanings of autism can produce a particularly illuminating pathway through this larger history. Reading the history of autism alongside Sedgwick's work on affect—and, especially, her interest in cybernetic and systems-based models of the brain—offers

an especially instructive way of conceptualizing the position of scientific knowledge and expertise within what I am calling the politics of neurological difference.

Scholars have recently begun to investigate the way disability has shaped twentieth-century philosophical, scientific, and technological research on the sensory-perceptual dimensions of cognitive processes. For instance, Mara Mills's research has emphasized the centrality of Deafness to cybernetic developments in audio signal processing.⁶³ Yet there has been relatively little work within disability studies concerning the influence of cybernetics on the historical construction of mental disability at midcentury—even as historians of science and medicine have begun to focus on the postwar decades as a pivotal period in the evolution of biomedical, psychiatric, and popular understandings of disorders of the mind and the brain. In their influential, co-authored 1995 essay discussing the work of the midcentury American psychologist Silvan Tomkins, Sedgwick and Adam Frank propose the term “cybernetic fold” to describe the period, “roughly from the late 1940s to the mid-1960s,” during which “scientists’ understanding of the brain and other life processes is marked by the concept, the possibility, the imminence, of powerful computers, but the actual computational muscle of the new computers isn’t available.”⁶⁴ Cybernetics, in this context, refers not only to the nascent field of research given that name by the American mathematician Norbert Wiener in 1948, but to a more diffuse constellation of intellectual tendencies that emerged following the end of the Second World War, all animated by the tantalizing prospect that emerging technological innovations might soon allow a wide range of processes, previously thought to be incalculable, to be rendered

⁶³ Mara Mills, “Deaf Jam: From Inscription to Reproduction to Information” *Social Text* Vol. 28, No. 1 (2010), 35–58.

⁶⁴ Sedgwick and Frank, “Shame in the Cybernetic Fold,” 105.

quantifiable, measurable, and predictable.⁶⁵ Research into such questions as the role of feedback loops in telecommunications and robotics engineering—much of it undertaken as part of the expansion of military resources necessitated by the war—created a fruitful climate for thinking about the functional self-regulation of systems of all kinds. The “cybernetic fold” thus indicates a moment when the structuring presuppositions of cybernetics research, and systems theory more generally, spiraled outward to encompass a wide variety of disciplines, from biology and neuroscience, to linguistics, sociology, anthropology, and beyond.

In their essay on Tomkins, Sedgwick and Frank suggest that the explanatory models that emerged in the wide range of fields influenced by cybernetic thought came to share a number of characteristic features, above all what they call a “tropism toward the image of an undifferentiated but differentiable ecology.” Systems theory, they propose, “had as one of its great representational strengths an ability to discuss how things differentiate”: “how quantitative differences turn into qualitative ones, how digital and analog representations leapfrog or interleave with one another, what makes the unexpected fault lines between regions of the calculable and the incalculable [...], and so forth” (106). This tropism of the undifferentiated but differentiable ecology in which “digital” and “analog” processes dynamically interleave augured a new, and highly influential, manner of conceptualizing the workings of mental life—with lasting consequences for the subsequent elaboration of ideas about personhood, subjectivity, and intersubjective relationality more broadly. As Sedgwick and Frank note, the cybernetic “notion of the brain as a homogeneous, *differentiable* but originally undifferentiated system is a

⁶⁵ See Norbert Wiener, *Cybernetics: Or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1948).

characteristic and very fruitful emblem of many of the so far unrealized possibilities of [the] intellectual moment [of the cybernetic fold].”⁶⁶

In my research for this study, I have been persistently struck by the extent to which transformations in scientific and clinical research on autism—especially in the several decades following World War II—have displayed by many of the same representational and epistemological tendencies that Sedgwick and Frank identify in their discussion of cybernetics and systems theory. One revealing example of the way autism has been figured within the history of cognition occurs in the feminist science studies scholar Elizabeth A. Wilson’s 2010 book *Affect and Artificial Intelligence*. Informed in part by Sedgwick and Frank’s work on affect and cybernetics, Wilson briefly turns to Bruno Bettelheim’s case history of “Joey the Mechanical Boy,” which first appeared as an article in *Scientific American* in 1959 and was subsequently included in his notorious 1967 book *The Empty Fortress: Infantile Autism and the Birth of the Self*. The director of the Orthogenic School at the University of Chicago for several decades at midcentury, Bettelheim combined selective readings of Freudian psychoanalysis with his own, considerably more specious theories about childhood development to formulate his influential account of the pathogenesis of autism, which he proposed developed as a psychotic, defensive response to “emotional frigidity” in the child’s home environment—responsibility for which he placed squarely at the feet of the mother. Bettelheim’s theories and techniques have long been repudiated by the medical and psychiatric establishment. Yet his influence on the popular understanding of autism and childhood psychosis in the 1950s and 1960s was enormous. In his study of “Joey,” a 9-year-old autistic patient at the Orthogenic School, Bettelheim discusses childhood autism (which he uses interchangeably with the term “childhood schizophrenia”) in

⁶⁶ Sedgwick and Frank, 105.

relation to what he terms “emotional development in a machine age.”⁶⁷ Bettelheim proposes that Joey’s obsessions with automatic machinery, such as electric fans, were manifestations of the child’s own, internalized sense of being a machine. He goes on to suggest that Joey’s case illustrates the more widespread dangers that the rapidly expanding prominence of technological machinery in modern daily life poses to the “normal” development of mature emotional competency.

Wilson reads Bettelheim’s case study in terms of how it manifests an “anxiety about the chiasmatic, introjective pathways between machines and the psychic interior.”⁶⁸ She goes on to note that Joey’s case reveals how “robust transference alliances might be formed through a mechanically oriented imagination.” She continues: “By following Joey’s recovery we are able to document how the machinic might be a means through which the world can be brought inside, affects regulated, and one’s sense of self and agency expanded.”⁶⁹ While Wilson’s brief discussion of Joey offers a provocative historical example for her study’s broader attention to the largely obscured role of affect and emotion within the history of artificial intelligence, her reading does not engage with the deeply troubled legacy that Bettelheim’s work continues to exert upon cultural narratives surrounding the condition. Instead, for Wilson (as, indeed, for Bettelheim himself) Joey’s autism functions as a “narrative prosthesis”⁷⁰ that supports a broader account of the ways in which the introjective traffic between machinic and psychic structures has come to define subjectivity within the era of rapid technological advancement, that is often

⁶⁷ Bruno Bettelheim, “Joey, A ‘Mechanical Boy,’” *Scientific American* 200, 3 (1959), 116–120.

⁶⁸ Elizabeth A. Wilson, *Affect and Artificial Intelligence* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2010), 30.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ See David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001).

characterized as pathologically “depersonalizing.” Autism, here, here becomes a *symptom* of technological modernity’s more general tendencies toward social alienation, solipsism, depersonalization, and automation. In this study, I seek to avoid the temptation to transform autism into a metaphorical figure for more general historical or social conditions, but also to examine how such metaphorical and figurative transformations contribute to the emergence and articulation of autism and neurological difference as socially determined categories. This is precisely the temptation that Sedgwick hopes to ward off in her list of pointers for critical projects that wish to be attuned to the phenomenological range of neurodiverse experiences, orientations, and “ways of being.”

Disability Aesthetics, Disability Politics, and Performance

Throughout this study, “performance” is meant to signal an engagement with specific performances, performance theory, and concepts of the performative and performativity. In its responsiveness to questions of gesture, movement, behavior, and social practice, performance studies offers powerful analytical resources for understanding efforts to contain and control inscrutable, unaccountable, or undetectable forms of expression, communication, behavior, and movement. This is due, in large part, to the field’s interdisciplinary attention to what performance theorist Dwight Conquergood calls “the whole realm of complex, finely nuanced meaning that is embodied, intoned, gestured, improvised, coexperienced, covert—and all the more deeply meaningful because of its refusal to be spelled out.”⁷¹

⁷¹ Dwight Conquergood, “Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research” *TDR: The Drama Review* 46, no 2 T174 (2002): 146.

Methodologically, this project is situated at the intersection of performance studies and disability studies, two relatively recent scholarly formations that are themselves both deeply interdisciplinary. In different but frequently contiguous ways, each of these fields occupies a juncture between aesthetics and politics, in the broadest and most capacious meaning of these terms. In contemplating the many ways that this particular conjunction has been represented, I have found it useful to turn to Jacques Rancière’s influential arguments concerning the extent to which politics and aesthetics are always linked insofar as they jointly contribute to the “distribution of the sensible”—the arrangement, organization, and partitioning of what is included (and excluded) from common life according to the capacity to be perceived by the senses. Rancière identifies a “primary” aesthetics as “the system of a priori forms determining what presents itself to sense experience.” In this case, aesthetics for Rancière involves “a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience. Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time.”⁷² He proposes that the function of art and artistic practice is to “intervene in the general distribution of ways of doing and making,” and to forge new modes of sensory configuration within existing regimes of political order.

Though it is clear that disability does not appear as a significant critical term within Rancière’s formulation of aesthetics as the distribution of the sensible, his account offers a useful preliminary entry point for situating this project’s attention to the role of sensation within the

⁷² Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004), 13.

politics and aesthetics of autism and neurological difference. If *Snack and Drink*'s vibrantly kinetic animations are designed to register the sensory contours of its protagonist's specific mode of being and acting in the world, the other examples and cases that I examine in the chapters that follow address the presence of autism and neurological difference in distinctive but equally *sensory* terms. Moreover, Rancière's concept of the distribution of the sensible attains a new and different resonance—one that perhaps moves in certain ways against the grain of Rancière's own use of the concept—when considered alongside the emerging discourses of neurodiversity, as well as certain strands of recent scientific research into the neurobiology of autism that has increasingly turned their attention to the sensory processing of autistics.

The field of disability studies has tended to engage questions of aesthetics through the framework of *representation*. Scholars have addressed depictions of the disabled subject in the history of art, performance, and popular culture; described how various kinds of cognitive and morphological disablement have shaped representational conventions, techniques, and practices; and attended to the ways in which disability itself challenges aesthetic ideals of wholeness and beauty.⁷³ Tobin Siebers, for instance, proposes a concept of “disability aesthetics” that would “emphasize the presence of disability in the tradition of aesthetic representation”; he argues that disability should be thought of an “aesthetic value” in itself, since it “requires us to revise traditional conceptions of aesthetic production and appreciation.”⁷⁴ Critical work on autism and aesthetics has largely proceeded along similar lines—studying the ways that autistic

⁷³ See especially Rosemarie Garland Thompson, *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (New York: NYU Press, 1999); Rosemarie Garland-Thompson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Lennard J. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (New York: Verso, 1995).

⁷⁴ Tobin Siebers, “Disability Aesthetics,” *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* Vol. 7 No. 2 (Spring/Summer 2006), 64.

individuals are portrayed in art and literature, and asking how autistic modes of experience relate to, or perhaps challenge, the conventions of figural, mimetic, or narrative representation. The art critic Marion Glastonbury, for instance, describes an “autistic dynamic” in art, which she identifies in works that are “monologic,” “devoid of intersubjective richness,” and “that may be said to be *about* barrenness, reflecting and projecting a single stance, an unremitting mood: the minimalist sigh of an attenuated self.”⁷⁵ Stuart Murray offers the concept of “autistic presence” in his study of the multiple and frequently conflicting ways that autistic figures and characters have been depicted in the history of cultural representations of the disorder.⁷⁶ To take a more recent example, the literary scholar Lisa Zunshine uses the idea of Theory of Mind to argue that mechanisms of social cognition are central to the structure and efficacy of literary form.⁷⁷ As these examples indicate, even accounts that profess allegiance with the tenets of disability studies have tended to invoke autism as a kind of cipher for emotional, social, and perceptual vacuity in ways that pervasively represent the autistic individual as being inaccessibly “locked in her own world”—a figure whose pathological foreclosure from the terms of social identity represents, as one critic writes, “a scandal in a culture where the subject in search of self is virtually equated with being human.”⁷⁸

A small but growing line of inquiry, however, has begun to expand the parameters for thinking about autism and aesthetics. Drawing its critical energy from first-person accounts of

⁷⁵ Marion Glastonbury, “The Cultural Presence of Autistic Lives,” *Raritan* 17 (Summer 1997), 39.

⁷⁶ Stuart Murray, *Representing Autism: Culture, Narrative, Fascination* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), 32.

⁷⁷ Lisa Zunshine, *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2006).

⁷⁸ James T. Fisher, “No Search, No Subject? Autism and the American Conversion Narrative,” in *Autism and Representation*, ed. Mark Osteen (New York: Routledge, 2008), 51.

autistic experience (as opposed to external, often clinical, *interpretations* of such experience), this recent work tries to show that many of our existing critical protocols for thinking about aesthetic experience fail to hold up when confronted with atypical modes of cognition. Further, it proposes that the experiential range of human neurodiversity might require new ways of thinking about communication, sensation, and phenomenological perception. Literary and disability scholar Ralph James Savarese, for instance, discusses the autistic painter Larry Bissonnette's tactile and intuitively sensory art practice as a procession of encounters with blocks of sensation. Savarese argues that we might understand Bissonnette's work as part of what he calls an "autistic tradition" within the history of aesthetics: "a kind of painterly heritage and perhaps even a perseverative school, one with intense sensory processing and a need to pattern at its core."⁷⁹

In accounts such as these, we can see how the notion of aesthetics as the "distribution of the sensible" might gain additional critical purchase when considered in conjunction with this study's focus on disability aesthetics and the politics of neurological difference. The case studies that make up the following chapters are defined by a searching engagement with the sensory, embodied experience of disability and neurological difference—in ways that are impossible to separate from the force of their political claims. These works point us toward those registers of thinking, feeling, and being that hover around, and perhaps beyond, the edges of communicative rationality and gesture toward its typically unseen exclusions. Rancière uses the term *Dissensus* in order to describe the disruptive potential of the aesthetic. He writes that dissensus is

an organization of the sensible where there is neither a reality concealed behind appearances nor a single regime of presentation and interpretation of the given imposing

⁷⁹ Ralph James Savarese, "Gobs and Gobs of Metaphor," *Inflexions* 5, "Simondon: Milieu, Techniques, Aesthetics" (March 2012), 186.

its obviousness on all. It means that every situation can be cracked open from the inside, reconfigured in a different regime of perception and signification.⁸⁰

I am drawn to reading Rancière against the grain for what his insights might offer to this study's attention to neurodiversity as a minoritarian sensory formation, one that can involve the necessity of "cracking open from the inside" a given situation, and inaugurating or attuning to "different regimes of perception and signification."

Gesture, Wander, Trace: A Note on Method

Like the two primary intellectual formations within which it is situated, this study is citationally inter- and cross-disciplinary. At various points, it seeks to draw connections between performance theory and the history of science and medicine; theater history and ethics; dance studies and political theory; media art and biopolitics. In attempting to thread these disparate areas of inquiry into a cohesive critical idiom, I have partly emulated the idiosyncratic methodological approach developed by the subject of the first chapter, Fernand Deligny. A visionary but marginalized figure often associated with the alternative and anti-psychiatry movements that emerged in the decades after World War II. Beginning in the 1950s, Deligny created a series of collectively run residential programs for children with autism and other disabilities who would have otherwise spent their lives institutionalized in state-run psychiatric asylums. Anticipating, by several decades, some of the central tenets of the neurodiversity and autistic self-advocacy movements, Deligny rejected the view that autism and cognitive disability were pathological deviations from a pre-existing norm, and did not try to force the mostly non-

⁸⁰ Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliot (London: Verso, 2009), 48-49.

speaking autistics who came to live with his group to conform to standards of speech. Deligny and his collaborators, he wrote, were instead “in search of a mode of being that allowed them to exist even if that meant changing our own mode.”⁸¹

Deligny frequently invoked the image of a spider weaving its web as a metaphor for his vigorously anti-pathologizing views on autism as a distinctive “mode of being.” He described his methods as “Arachnean”—a term he coined in order to evoke a different mode of social organization, and an entirely new political *ethos*, that would no longer be structured around the assumption of universal access to language and speech. For Deligny, the Arachnean mode is always provisional, perpetually in danger of falling apart or, alternatively, rigidifying into an institution. Like the industrious arthropod from whom it takes its name, the Arachnean mode traces provisional threads of connection and association that link diffuse outcroppings of thought to one another, allowing new singularities to emerge like the shimmering outline of a spider’s web. Eschewing the dominant modern hermeneutics of suspicion and symptomatic interpretation, with their implicit faith in depth-based methods of analysis, Deligny’s Arachnean is defined instead by a quietly attentive, patient, and slow practice of cartographically “tracing” the trajectories of the autistics alongside whom he and his collaborators lived for several decades, in relative isolation and obscurity. In this regard, the web that this dissertation weaves—linking together disparate methodological protocols, disciplinary formations, aesthetic practices, performance examples, and sites of analysis—can perhaps best be understood as an attempt to emulate Deligny’s Arachnean approach—weaving, tracing, and mapping the lines and forms that begin to emerge, if you are patient enough to watch for them.

⁸¹ Fernand Deligny, *The Arachnean and Other Texts*, trans. Drew Burk and Catherine Porter (Minneapolis: Univocal Publishing, 2015), 79.

Chapter Overview

Chapter One. “The Slightest Gesture”: Fernand Deligny’s Traces

The first chapter of the dissertation is devoted to the life and work of Fernand Deligny, a visionary but marginalized figure often associated with the alternative and anti-psychiatry movements that emerged in the decades after World War II in France. Deligny developed innovative methods for living and working creatively alongside autistic children and adolescents that involved mapping their movements and gestures. I explore how Deligny’s singularly anti-pathologizing, anti-institutional understanding of autism was reflected in his interest in embodied aesthetic practice (drawing, cinema) as well as his broader commitment to experimenting with the arrangement and organization of collective, sensory experience. I argue that aesthetic practices were central to the development of Deligny’s ideas, and to the alternative forms of collective living he sought to bring into being. The chapter discusses Deligny’s interest in cinema as a “pedagogical tool” and examines his relationship with François Truffaut before offering a reading of Deligny’s fragmentary, never completed film *Le moindre geste* (*The Slightest Gesture*). I also situate Deligny’s ideas about autism, language, and the human in relationship to his intellectual contemporaries, including Deleuze and Guattari, Bazin, and Lacan. I conclude with a consideration of the concepts of the *ligne d’erre* (wander line) and cartographic transparencies that I viewed while conducting research in Deligny’s archives.

Chapter Two. “Would It Get Some Wind for the Sailboat”: Christopher Knowles, Robert Wilson, and the Performance of Neurological Difference. The following chapter examines a series of collaborations between the experimental theater director Robert Wilson and the poet, visual artist, and performer Christopher Knowles. In the early 1970s, Wilson began

working with Knowles, an adolescent diagnosed with autism who, at the time of their meeting in 1972, was living in an institution for disabled children in upstate New York. Knowles's tape recordings, typographical experimentations, and poetry became an important component many of Wilson's early performance pieces, including *Deafman Glance*, *A Letter to Queen Victoria*, and the 1976 opera *Einstein On the Beach*, widely considered one of the most significant and influential theatrical works of the twentieth century. The chapter discusses the role of disability in the early theatrical performances Wilson created while working with the Byrd Hoffman School of Byrds, the experimental theater collective that he founded in New York in 1968. Drawing from recent critical work on the subject of disability and neurodivergent aesthetics, I suggest that Knowles's contribution to *Einstein* is a crucial element of the work's formal exploration of the dimensions of human cognition. The chapter concludes with a discussion Knowles's 2013 solo performance piece, *The Sundance Kid is Beautiful*, a career-spanning theatrical solo which revisits material first created around the time of *Einstein*'s development in the mid-1970s.

Chapter Three. "Shaping the Right Statement": Voice, Function, and the Texture of Difference. This chapter is centered around two works of digital media: Amanda Baggs's 2007 YouTube video *In My Language*, and Wu Tsang's 2008 video work *The Shape of the Right Statement*, in which Tsang re-performs excerpts from Baggs's video using a method that the artist calls "full body quotation." I examine these videos in relationship to ongoing debates within the politics of neurological difference over the diagnostic distinction between Low Functioning Autism (LFA) and High-Functioning Autism (HFA), which is largely adjudicated on the basis of an individual's perceived or assessed capacity for verbal communication. I suggest that Baggs's and Tsang's videos point toward ways of reframing its terms by focusing

specifically on how these works navigate the relation between *voice* and *touch*. Baggs and Tsang both draw attention to the gaps, elisions, and misrecognitions that are inevitably produced when the capacity for verbal language is no longer determined to be the primary criteria for personhood. I also explore the way recent efforts to consider autism in relationship to gender and sexuality have been marked by preoccupations and anxieties having to do with touch, tactility, and bodily pressure. In the chapter's final section, I situate my readings of the Baggs and Tsang videos in relation to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's reflections of touch and texture, suggesting that her work can provide new vocabularies for disability aesthetics and the politics of neurological difference.

Chapter Four. "Avonte's Law": Surveillance, Schematization, and the Wandering Line. The study's final chapter is organized around an extended theoretical reflection on the disappearance and death of Avonte Oquendo, a 14-year-old African-American middle-school student with autism whose escape from the Riverview Public School in Queens in October of 2013 prompted one of the most extensive and widely publicized urban search efforts in recent memory. Oquendo's disappearance and death led to the introduction of "Avonte's Law," an article of federal legislation that would provide funding for "voluntary" tracking devices to be worn by autistic students enrolled in public schools. The chapter elaborates an alternative response to the "wandering characteristics" rendered visible in surveillance images released to the media of Oquendo running out of his school. I examine how "security"—understood broadly as late liberalism's exemplary mode of governmentality—operates by way of the visual surveillance of difference, with particular attention to the complex intersections of autism and neurological disability with blackness and racial difference as raised in the case of Oquendo. I draw on recent discussions of the politics of movement and the social mobilization of bodies

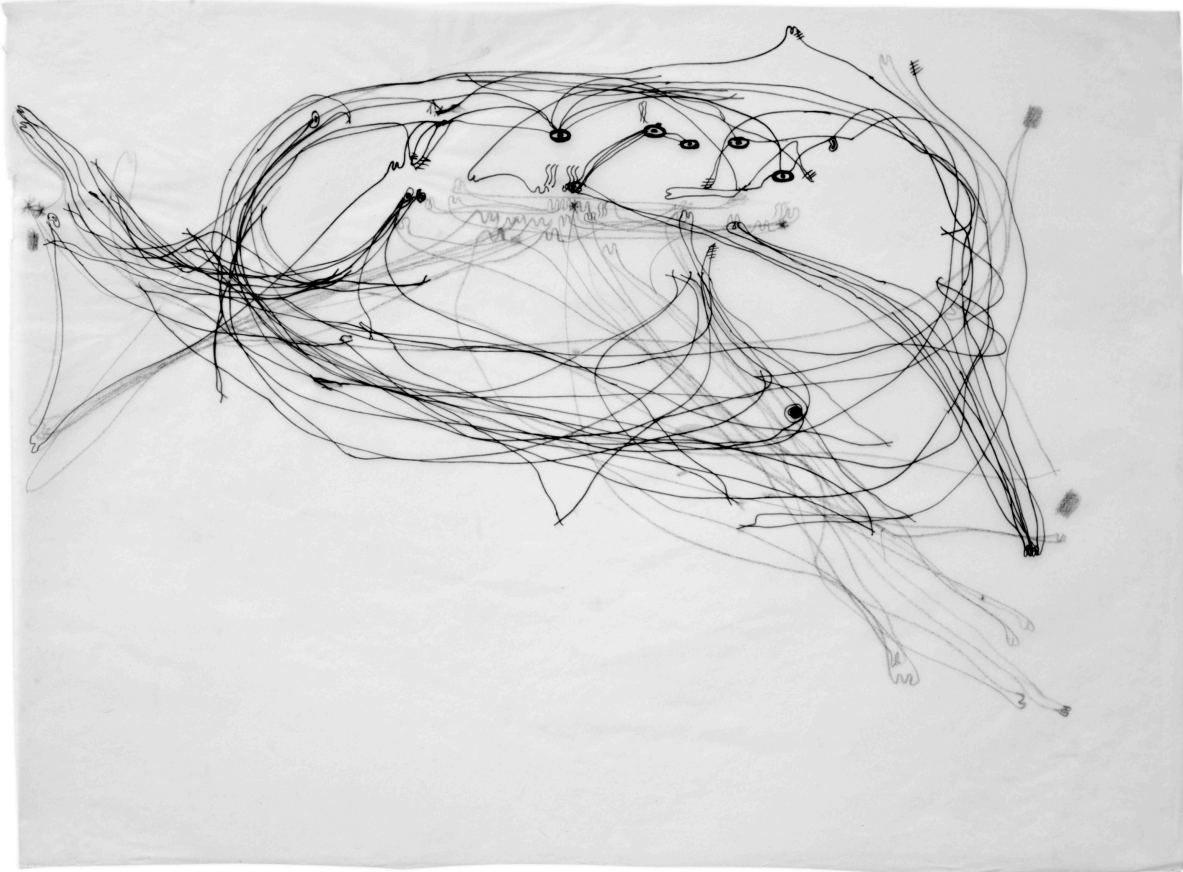
developed within performance theory and critical dance studies, theorizations of the concepts of wandering and *fugitivity* within black studies and critical race theory, as well as the evocative, deeply *sensory* terms in which autistic subjects have described experiences of navigating through space. The chapter concludes with a Coda on what I identify as a “counter-cartographic” impulse in the work of visual and performance artist William Pope.L. I suggest that Pope.L’s inventive and disruptive manipulations of cartographic imagery, viewed in relationship to his interest in developing an aesthetic ethos of blackness through abjection and marginality, offer the grounds for reconceptualizing the visual, spatial, and embodied intersections of race and disability on the basis of errant bodily movement.

Conclusion. “We Do Not Yet Know What the Human Is”: *Cartographies of the Otherwise.* The conclusion draws together the study’s principal concerns by focusing on the thematics of cartography and sensation that arise throughout the individual chapters. Returning to my proposal in the Introduction the neurodiversity can be considered a minoritarian sensory formation that deforms and unsettles the normative, neurotypical organization of the senses and the sensorium, I conclude by suggesting that many of the examples I discuss in the dissertation’s chapters pursue errant cartographic trajectories through the politics and aesthetics of disability and neurological difference.

CHAPTER ONE

“The Slightest Gesture”:

Fernand Deligny’s Traces



**Figure 2. Map of wander lines traced by Fernand Deligny, Monoblet, 1976.
(Archives Jacques Allaire and Marie-Dominique Guibal
Reproduction: Anaïs Masson)**

On January 8, 1800, residents of the small village of Saint-Sernin-sur-Rance, located in the Department of Aveyron in southern France, caught sight of a mysterious figure emerging from the surrounding woodlands: naked, caked in mud, and covered with scars, he appeared to be about 12 years old and was unable to speak. First brought to the attention of local church authorities who were unable to locate any family members in the region, he was soon transported

to the National Institute for Deaf-Mutes in Paris and entrusted to the supervision of Jean Marc Gaspard Itard, then a young medical student enrolled the institute, who christened him Victor—apparently since he seemed to respond to the long “o” phoneme contained in the second syllable of that name. Itard kept a scrupulous record of his quest to work toward Victor’s “physical and moral development,” a process that he describes in his journals as a civilizing educational mission.¹ Reflecting Enlightenment-era philosophical preoccupations with the conditions of “natural,” primitive man and the role of culture and civilization in the constitution of the human as distinct from other animals, exemplified in the work of Rousseau and Voltaire and the novels of Swift and Defoe, Victor became a test case, a real-world specimen that could allow researchers to experiment and further scientific debates concerning the concept of *sauvagerie*—a word that, conveniently for the purposes of Victor’s case, derives from the Old French expression to describe that which emerges “from the woods.” As more recent critical assessments of Victor’s legacy have noted, the popular and scientific fascination with “wild” or “feral” children that took hold of the European cultural imagination in the nineteenth century can be understood as part of the ideological context of European colonialism—especially with regard to the scientific discourses of racial differentiation that developed in tandem with its contemporaneous imperial ventures across the globe. Indeed, the association of feral children and the “uncivilized” peoples that Europeans encountered on their colonial ventures would be a persistent one throughout the nineteenth century, and arguably remains embedded even within contemporary psychiatric theory.²

¹ Jean-Marc Itard, *An Historical Account of the Discovery and Education of a Savage Man* (London: Richard Philips, 1802), 10.

² See Murray K. Simpson, “From Savage to Citizen: Education, Colonialism and Idiocy,” *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 28, no. 5 (September 2007): 561-574

The primary question that motivated Itard, and the other experts studied Victor in the ensuing decades, including Roch-Ambroise Cucurron Sicard, the renowned instructor of deaf children, was whether he could be taught to speak. For Itard, Sicard, and the others who examined him, Victor's ability to acquire speech constituted a moral Rubicon: they believed that if they could coax him to learn how to use and respond to spoken language Victor might then also be able to experience "higher," more advanced values like justice, sympathy, and even love. Yet according to Itard's journals, Victor remained stubbornly resistant to efforts to teach him to speak. While Itard was able to train Victor in the basics of domestic behavior, like setting the table for a meal using utensils, he only managed to learn to use a few rudimentary words and phrases. Victor eventually moved in with Itard's housekeeper, and continued to live in relative isolation until his death in 1828, when he was estimated to be forty years old.

Over the two centuries since his capture, Victor's example has generated a number of significant literary and aesthetic responses: in addition to contemporaneous works, such as Wordsworth's poem "The Idiot Boy," Victor's story has been told repeatedly in a modern works of nonfiction, adapted into several novels, and depicted in films—most notably *L'enfant sauvage*, François Truffaut's 1969 feature-length dramatization based directly on Itard's journals.³ For the most part, these works have shared Itard's preoccupation with Victor's failure to learn how to speak. In so doing, they have also, perhaps unwittingly, called attention to an impasse that is at the core of Itard's failed encounter with Victor: namely, the extent to which Victor's status as an "*enfant sauvage*" was entirely a product of Itard's own scientific—and

³ See Jill Dawson, *Wild Boy* (New Rochelle, NY: Scepter, 2004); T. C. Boyle, *Wild Child and Other Stories* (New York: Penguin, 2011); Mordicai Gerstein, *Victor: A Novel Based in the Life of the Savage of Aveyron* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998).

moral—agenda, which was itself wholly consistent with the historical milieu in which he so vigorously pursued his research. Itard’s experiments proceeded from a set of historically delimited assumptions concerning an allegedly oppositional relation between *sauvagerie* and human language. The taxonomic classification of Victor’s “savage” wildness took shape precisely through his inadequate adherence to his instructors’ standards and expectations by failing to learn how to speak. As disability theorists David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder have noted, “the story of the wild boy is the story of Itard’s personal and professional failure to bridge a gap that Victor refuses to cross.”⁴

The implications of this epistemological impasse—which might be situated within what Mitchell and Snyder call “the considerable distance between Victor’s desires and those of the diagnostic institution”⁵—come more clearly into view if Victor’s story is understood in relation to its historical position at the origins of the scientific surveillance of modern childhood. This process began to take shape in the eighteenth century, and would in turn influence the development of the techniques, apparatuses, and institutions of what Michel Foucault calls psychiatric power.⁶ Foucault argues that over the course of the nineteenth century, psychiatric power emerged as a scientific discourse that took on a double function as “power over madness and power over abnormality.”⁷ He further demonstrates that, borrowing from contemporaneous developments in the biological sciences concerning the “normal” and “pathological” functioning

⁴ David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, “Compulsory Feral-ization: Institutionalizing Disability Studies,” *PMLA* 120, no. 2 (March 2005): 629.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 630.

⁶ The genealogical origins of the modern scientific surveillance of childhood are expeditiously recounted throughout Foucault’s 1973/74 lectures on psychiatric power. The lecture dated 16 January 1974 contains a particularly illuminating discussion of Itard. See Michel Foucault, *Psychiatric Power: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1973–1974*, eds. Jacques Lagrange and Arnold I. Davidson, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2006). 202–231.

⁷ Foucault, *Psychiatric Power*, 223.

of organisms, psychiatric power underwent a process of “generalization” and “diffusion” that amounted to what he calls the “psychiatrization of childhood”—a process that would form the core of the modern concept of “normalization” as such. The Foucauldian genealogy of psychiatric power reveals the extent to which such dynamics were already operative, in germinal form, within Itard’s original encounter with Victor, who “not only was being trained in the manners and customs of the moderns but also was being taught his savagery—a barbarism that he had not recognized before his ingestion in the classification of feral.”⁸ For Itard, the ability to acquire and use verbal language served as a kind of taxonomic clearing-house—it was an empirically, indeed naturally, grounded standard that would soon come to be cast, within psychiatric discourse, in terms of a biological norm. Insofar as modern psychiatry continues to make recourse to biological and, increasingly, neurobiological, concepts in its determinations of psychological normality and pathology, Victor and Itard are with us still.

Scholars working within a range of disciplinary formations have demonstrated that autism emerges as a distinct clinical category precisely at the institutional, discursive, and epistemological conjunctions that Foucault describes in his work on psychiatric power.⁹ In this regard it is perhaps not surprising that Victor and other wild or feral children, such as Kasper Hauser, have functioned as spectral figures haunting not just the representation but also the psychiatric treatment, of autism. Ivar Lovaas, the controversial child psychiatrist who developed Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) for the treatment of autism in the 1970s, traced the origins of his methods to Itard’s descriptions of his work with Victor.¹⁰ More recently, the cognitive psychologist Uta Frith, one of the most prominent scientific researchers on autism since the

⁸ Mitchell and Snyder, “Compulsory Feralization,” 631.

⁹ See especially Gil Eyal, *The Autism Matrix* (London: Polity, 2011).

¹⁰ Eyal, *Autism Matrix*, 151.

1980s, has suggested that Victor was autistic before the advent of the diagnostic category.¹¹ In a less prescriptive register, the journalist Paul Collins, the father of an autistic child, revisits the story of Victor in order to uncover a “lost” prehistory of the condition that would not be named until the 1940s.¹²

If Victor has become an enduring cultural trope within modern cultural and psycho-scientific discussions of autism, the epistemological impasse that shaped him into a paradigmatic figure of savagery and wildness with remarkable staying power. Indeed, it is possible to read the entire psychiatric-clinical history of autism, from Kanner’s and others’ research on the condition in the decades following WWII through the contemporary contestations surrounding its diagnostic criteria within the *DSM*, as an elaboration of the problem that Itard encountered but could not recognize: that the very *condition* of the “feral” from which he sought to rescue Victor was one whose very existence and meaning was a product of the same empirical procedures and techniques that were used to “discover” it.¹³ Following insights from the history, philosophy, and sociology of science and medicine, we might read the story of Itard and Victor as indicative of the ways emergent scientific concepts at once shape, and are shaped by, the wider social, cultural, and ideological contexts from which they emerge. With this caveat in mind, we might view Victor’s case differently. Might it be possible to work through, or around, the kinds of epistemological impasses that Itard confronted in his work with Victor, arising from within the gap or distance between the desires of Victor and those of the “diagnostic institution”?

¹¹ Uta Frith, *Autism: Explaining the Enigma* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2003), 35.

¹² Paul Collins, *Not Even Wrong: A Father's Journey into the Lost History of Autism* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2005).

¹³ This is also one way of reading Ian Hacking’s discussion of autism as an “interactive kind” of classification, a category whose “looping effects” have the ability to “change the ways in which individuals experience themselves.” See Ian Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 311.

It is with this question in mind that I turn to the work of Fernand Deligny (1913–1996). Deligny found many ways of describing himself: primordial communist, non-violent guerrilla, weaver of networks, cartographer of wandering lines. A visionary but marginalized figure often associated with the alternative and anti-psychiatry movements that emerged in the decades after World War II, Deligny remains difficult to categorize—an enigmatic sage. Beginning in the 1950s, Deligny conducted a series of itinerant, collectively run residential programs—he called them “attempts” (or *tentatives*, in French)—for children and adolescents with autism and other cognitive disabilities, all of whom would have otherwise spent their lives institutionalized in state-run psychiatric asylums. Eventually settling in the late 1960s in southern France outside the town of Monoblet in the shadow of the Cevennes Mountains, Deligny and his small band of collaborators developed novel methods for living and working alongside young people who had been determined to be “outside of speech” (*hors de parole*).

Militantly opposed to “institutions” of nearly every kind—he occasionally referred to his small group as living like a band of non-violent guerillas—Deligny deeply resisted the dominant currents of psychoanalysis, cognitive psychology, and positivist pedagogical systems that viewed conditions like autism, social delinquency, and cognitive disability as pathological deviations from a pre-existing norm. Rather than trying to force the mostly non-speaking autistics who came to live with them to learn to speak, Deligny and his collaborators were instead “in search of a mode of being that allowed them to exist even if that meant changing our own mode.”¹⁴

¹⁴ Fernand Deligny, *The Arachnean and Other Texts*, trans. Drew Burk and Catherine Porter (Minneapolis: Univocal Publishing, 2015), 79. In this chapter, I have drawn from both Burk and Porter’s newly published translation, as well as original French texts published in Deligny’s *Oeuvres*, ed. Sandra Alvarez de Toldedo (Paris: Éditions L’Arachnéen, 2007) and *L’Arachnéen*

Deligny's interest in working with children and adolescents who living "outside of speech" also allowed him to develop powerful critiques of the link between language and subjectivity embedded within concepts like the symbolic order and ideological interpellation. Deligny's thought is particularly notable for its radical departure from the terms of the debates about language, subjectivity, and ideology that so preoccupied European intellectuals in the 1960s and 1970s, exemplified by the work of figures like Jacques Lacan, Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari. Against these and other thinkers' elaborate theoretical systems for accounting for the emergence of human subjectivity Deligny followed an often wayward or "errant" trajectory. He and his small group of collaborators hoped to foster new forms of collective life that would not be organized around the primacy of verbal expression and linguistic communication and sought to develop "a practice that would exclude from the outset interpretations referring to some code."¹⁵ Rejecting psychoanalysis and its reliance upon depth-based psychic models, Deligny turned instead to discourses like animal ethology and the anthropological study of ritual in order to tune in to the lower frequencies made available by a life lived on the margins.

In calling attention to the correlation between *spatial* practices of institutionalization—above all confinement and surveillance—and *categorical* and even *existential* designations of mental pathology and deficiency, Deligny anticipated many of the ways in which disability activists and scholars of disability would come to think about the social construction of disability

et autres textes (Paris: Éditions L'Arachnéen, 2009). I have also incorporated unpublished material, including typed and handwritten manuscripts and personal correspondence, that I read in Deligny's archives, which are housed at L'Institut Mémoires de l'édition contemporaine (IMEC) in France. Translations from original French sources are my own.

¹⁵ Deligny, *The Arachnean and Other Texts* (trans. Burke and Porter), 79.

in ensuing decades.¹⁶ As the philosopher Bertrand Ogilvie argues—in a striking echo of Mitchell and Snyder’s reading of Victor’s encounter with Itard—for Deligny “it is not on the side of autism that one finds wildness [*sauvagerie*], but rather in civilization and in its most characteristic gestures.”¹⁷ Yet in spite of his prolific career, Deligny’s contributions have been largely overlooked in recent decades. This is due in part to his ambivalence about participating in the conventional channels of intellectual production and dissemination. The 2007 publication in France of his selected *Oeuvres* has brought new interest to the relevance of Deligny’s ideas for a variety of disciplines ranging from special education and psychology to philosophy, aesthetics, literature, and cinema. However, sustained engagement with his work and influence has been almost entirely absent from English-language scholarship. This chapter is an attempt to bring Deligny’s work into conversation with disability studies, and this study’s concern with disability aesthetics and neurological difference.

Deligny’s work offers a significant pathway into ongoing debates about the relationship between mental disability and linguistic expression—what Cynthia Lewieki-Wilson has described as questions about how “people who have psychiatric and cognitive disabilities that interfere with communication” can “exercise rhetorical agency.”¹⁸ In recent decades, such questions have been taken up in a broad range of scholarly and practical contexts, from philosophy to bioethics; as I argue throughout this study, it also remains one of the animating, unresolved issues within the emerging concept of neurodiversity. In the pages that follow I

¹⁶ See especially Simi Linton, *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity*. New York: NYU Press, 1998, and Tom Shakespeare, “The Social Model of Disability,” in *The Disability Studies Reader, Second Edition*, edited by Lennard J. Davis (New York: Routledge, 2006), 197–204.

¹⁷ Bertrand Ogilvie, “Living Between the Lines,” in Fernand Deligny, *The Arachnean and Other Texts*, trans. Drew Burke and Catherine Porter, (Minneapolis: Univocal Publishing, 2015), 16.

¹⁸ Cynthia Lewieki-Wilson, “Rethinking Rhetoric through Mental Disabilities,” *Rhetoric Review* 22, no. 2 (2003): 157.

explore how Deligny's singular approach to these questions was reflected in his life-long interest in embodied aesthetic practice—by which I mean to indicate both specific aesthetic modalities employed in his group's work (drawing, painting, cinema) as well as his broader commitment to experimenting with the arrangement and organization of collective, sensory experience. I argue that aesthetic practices were central to the development of Deligny's ideas, and to the alternative forms of collective living he sought to bring into being.

A Life Drifting Toward the Margins

Born to a middle-class military family in the northern French town of Bergues in 1913, Deligny was educated in psychology and philosophy at the University of Lille before securing a position as a special education teacher at the psychiatric hospital in Armentieres in 1938.¹⁹ During the war, he joined the French resistance movement, and during the Occupation he continued to work with mentally disabled children while stationed in the city of Lilles. Following the war, Deligny continued to pursue his work with both socially “delinquent” and mentally disabled youth as a regional director of “*Travail et Culture*,” (Work and Culture), an organization that had been founded by former members of the French Resistance in 1945 in order to bring cultural activities to working-class students and factory workers throughout the country. Aligned with the French Communist Party, *Travail et Culture* quickly became a kind of intellectual and cultural incubator for the postwar French Left. While there, Deligny soon befriended the film critic Andre Bazin and filmmaker Chris Marker, who jointly headed *Travail et Culture*'s active and influential film bureau, and encouraged Deligny to pursue his burgeoning interest in how cinema might be used

¹⁹ This biographical summary is drawn in part from the detailed chronology published in Deligny's *Oeuvres*, ed. Sandra Alvarez de Toledo, 1821–31.

as a pedagogical and therapeutic aid for working with disabled, delinquent, and socially marginal populations.

With the financial assistance of prominent educational theorist Henri Wallon, with whom he had studied while at university, Deligny founded “La Grande Cordée” (The Great Cord) in 1948, an organization that François Dosse describes as “the first experiment in outpatient treatment designed to keep adolescent delinquents out of psychiatric hospitals.”²⁰ La Grande Cordée was a collectively run, loosely assembled group made up of professional educators and psychiatrists who had become disenchanted by the bureaucratic, underfunded, and frequently abusive state-run psychiatric and juvenile delinquent system. Its first location was an abandoned Parisian theater, which Deligny turned into a kind of drop-in center for marginalized youth. From an initial focus on students who had been designated socially delinquent by the state owing to their failure to conform to the behavioral demands of the normal educational system, the group increasingly came to focus its efforts on mentally disabled children and adolescents, especially those with language difficulties who had been labeled autistic. Beginning in the 1950s and continuing through the remainder of his life, Deligny published books and articles in Leftist educational reviews related to his projects with the Grande Cordée and beyond. He also published collections of short stories (*Les Enfants ont des oreilles*, 1949) and a novel (*Adrien Lomme*, 1948) inspired by their work.

In 1953, La Grande Cordée lost its state financing. Deligny was forced to give up his center in Montmartre and moved his operations to a series of temporary encampments in the French countryside. Still, the project continued in “nomadic” form (indeed, by some accounts,

²⁰ François Dosse, *Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari: Intersecting Lives*, trans. Deborah Glassman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 72.

the Deleuze/Guattari concept of the “nomad” is drawn, in part, from Deligny’s example); pursuing a series of what he called “attempts” (*tentatives*) at collective living with and alongside individuals who had been excluded and marginalized from mainstream educational institutions. In 1962, along with Grande Cordée members including Josée Manenti, Guy Aubert, and Any Durand, Deligny’s group started to film their activities and collect footage that would eventually be edited into the film *Le moindre geste* (The Slightest Gesture), which I will discuss below.

By the mid-1960s, Deligny’s group found themselves in increasingly precarious financial straits. In 1965, Deligny and several of his collaborators were invited to live and work at La Borde, a radical psychiatric clinic run by the communist psychiatrist Jean Oury. Félix Guattari was also on staff at the clinic. Located in the Cour-Cheverny region in central France, La Borde was a sprawling residential complex for psychiatric patients that, largely due to Guattari’s presence, also served as a refuge for student activists of the French Left. While living and working at La Borde, Deligny wrote articles and soaked up the heady atmosphere that prevailed at the clinic. He also attended some of the seminars of Jacques Lacan, whose call for a systematic “return to Freud” was then the primary theoretical and political influence on La Borde’s radical innovations in what came to be called “institutional psychotherapy.”²¹

Despite finding points of sympathy with institutional psychiatry practiced by the partisans at La Borde, Deligny soon realized how drastically his own ideas diverged from those of Oury, Lacan, and Guattari, who were each in their own ways committed to a certain psychoanalytic tradition. “For me, psychoanalysis is a curiously foreign language,” Deligny wrote, and it was impossible to square with his own commitment to cultivating models of

²¹ On the history of La Borde and the concept of “institutional psychotherapy,” see Jean Oury and Danielle Roulot, *Dialogues à La Borde: Psychopathologie et structure institutionnelle* (Paris: Hermann Éditeurs, 2008).

personhood and collective life untethered from the bedrock of language.²² He rejected both Lacan's baroque elaborations on the linguistic dimensions of the unconscious, as well as Guattari's schizo-analysis, with its incessant theorizations about the machinic unconscious and its semiotic desires. Deligny writes of the disorienting experience of encountering the concept of the "real" in psychoanalytic discourse:

The real: it seems to me that I have come across this word in texts written in the French language, no doubt about that, but owing to the fact that that language is double and at the very least has double meanings, goes in two directions, it swept the words away from under my nose, and then, now you see them now you don't, who knows what became of them in that waltz whose music I don't perceive.

It is completely discouraging to hold a word in sight, and see it spin around, pair with others, join a constellation, like a string of beads; in fact it escapes you like a ball on a playground; others play with it cheerfully, but what are they playing at, what's their game? It's a mystery.²³

In 1967, following a dispute with Guattari, Deligny and his colleagues began a new "attempt" at creating a network for living and working alongside autistics. Though he would maintain contact with the group at La Borde, Deligny's work from this moment forward would follow its own, considerably more marginal, path. Beyond the walls of the psychiatric asylum, could there be a way to pursue "the network as a mode of being"?²⁴

For a brief period in 1968, Deligny and his group stayed at a large house owned by Guattari in Gourgas, a rural area just outside the town of Monoblet. While there, they pursued

²² Deligny, *The Arachnean*, 171.

²³ *Ibid.*, 172.

²⁴ Deligny, *The Arachnean*, 47.

their creative therapeutic work with autistic children and adolescents. Located near the Cevennes mountain range in the southern Languedoc-Roussillon region, Guattari's house had also become a gathering place for students and other activists involved in the youth movement. Deligny was uneasy with how frequently various political groups would arrive and depart disrupting his efforts. Deligny's presence in the house created tension with the political partisans. In his biography of Deleuze and Guattari, Dosse mentions an instance when "the Trotskyite Youth Alliance for Socialism came [to the house in Gourgas] for some political training and decided to leave precipitously because its leaders could not stand being in the same place as mentally ill patients."²⁵ Even as they sought new places to continue their work, Deligny's network of collaborators stayed in the same region, establishing communes of collective living in several other rural locations in the Cevennes.

Deligny's poetic and fragmentary writings on education, language, and alternative modes of collectivity and what he called the "common" continued to be published by small presses and in literary revues in France, and his name occasionally surfaced in wider cultural discussions of education, psychiatry, and disability. In 1971, an edited version of *Le moindre geste* was screened out of competition at the Cannes Film Festival, where it attracted considerable interest from critics and filmgoers. In 1976 a television documentary about Deligny and the Grande Cordée, *Projet N*, filmed by the young director Renaud Victor, inspired a series of articles in the French press. Throughout the 1980s, Deligny continued to publish and his work received periodic wider attention: a collection of the wander line maps were included in a 1980 exhibition at the Centre national d'art et de culture Georges Pompidou, and several television documentaries about his work in the Cevennes were filmed and shown on national French

²⁵ Dosse, *Intersecting Lives*, 74.

television in the late 1980s. Increasingly in ill health, Deligny nonetheless continued to produce voluminous writings and reflections on his life's work, much of which remains unpublished and in handwritten manuscript form. Though Deligny died in 1996, his longtime collaborators Gisele Durand and Jacques Lin continue to live in the commune at Graniers alongside a group of autistic adults, some of who have lived in the network since its first years of existence.

Spider, Horse, Child: Ethological Gestures, Performance, and the Problem of Behavior

Nonhuman animals are a recurring feature in Deligny's writing: the spider, the horse, the elephant, the goat each make appearances. This might be indicative of Deligny's experiences as an educator of young children, one who was fully conversant in the imaginative and fantastical vocabularies of animal fables. The spider was a particular object of conceptual fascination and poetic reflection for Deligny—along with what he called “the Arachnean,” a neologism he coined and which serves as the title of one of his essays from the 1970s. “The Arachnean” uses the image of a spider weaving its web as a contrapuntal metaphor to consider the fragile series of networks (*reseau*, in French) that emerged from the original ambitions of *La Grande Cordée* in ensuing decades. Likening himself to a spider, Deligny writes, “from my earliest years I have always had some network to weave,” before going on to ask: “But can we say that the spider's project is to weave its web? I don't think so. We might as well say the web's project is to be woven.”

This sort of gentle blurring of will between weaver and web is characteristic of Deligny's way of thinking. Like a spider's web, a network is always in formation, built and maintained in compositional responsiveness to its environment. It is a precarious enterprise in perpetual danger

of either falling apart or, alternatively, rigidifying into an institution. In “The Arachnean,” Deligny writes:

And so the human appears as the tattered remains of the spider traversed by this blind meteorite that is consciousness.²⁶

This fragment offers a remarkably evocative image of human subjectivity. What is the alternative image of the human the Deligny evokes? It is not systematized or as elaborated as the models of subjectivity found in the work of Deligny’s contemporaries and occasional interlocutors on the French intellectual scene of the 60s and 70s; it departs from both the Marxist account of the subject of ideological interpellation famously developed by Louis Althusser and the psychoanalytic and linguistic interpretations of subjectivity formulated by Jacques Lacan and his acolytes. Nor is it entirely clear that Deligny is offering a new or alternative model of subjectivity to which his readers should aspire. Deligny’s rhetoric remains poetic, elusive, incomplete, yet nonetheless precise: the human, he tells us, “appears as being that which remains” (*Apparaît comme étant ce qui reste*), a little bit tattered (*quelque peu en lambeaux*), like the spider’s thread. What would it mean to conceive of the “human” as the tattered remnants of the spider’s silken thread traversed by consciousness?

Deligny aligns his observations with contemporaneous developments in anthropological thought concerning the ways in which geographic territories are inhabited and given meaning through ritual actions. Deligny’s preoccupation with animality and the methods of animal ethology, as well as anthropological studies of the place of ritual within “primitive” human

²⁶ Fernand Deligny, *L’arachnéen et autres textes*, 185. The original text reads as follows: “*Et l’humain alors apparaît comme étant ce qui reste, quelque peu en lambeaux, de l’arachnéen traversé par cette espèce de météorite aveugle qu’est la conscience.*”

societies, are particularly notable in light of his career-long interest in shifting away from psychoanalytic, structuralist, or Marxist interpretations of human action in favor of less hermeneutically driven modes of observing social behavior. Deligny's activities from the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s might be placed in the context of the acute interest during this period, spanning developments in the social sciences, science and technology, and aesthetics, in how cultural practices could be understood according to such "behavioral" rubrics as system, feedback, ritual, and "performance." The art historian Judith Rodenbeck has characterized a distinct current of interest within postwar intellectual and aesthetic movements in what she calls "the problem of behavior"—a tendency exemplified, in the American context, as much by the emergent sociology of social interaction of Erving Goffman and the psychological "behaviorism" of B.F. Skinner as by the Happenings of Allan Kaprow and the systematic interrogation of the mechanisms of social behavior undertaken by performance art pioneers including Vito Acconci and Adrian Piper.²⁷ The social scientific *and* the aesthetic preoccupations with social behavior of this moment shaped the emergent field of performance studies as it was then being formulated at the juncture of theater, ritual, and anthropology by figures like Goffman, Richard Schechner, and Victor Turner.²⁸ Indeed, Deligny read Turner's work from the late 1960s when preparing to write *Cahiers d'immuable* (Notebooks of the Immutable). His handwritten notes contain quotations from Turner's anthropological writings. At one point he quotes Turner's assertion that "symbolic gestures that correspond to certain movements of the

²⁷ Judith Rodenbeck, *Radical Prototypes*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 160.

²⁸ See Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction, 1995), originally published in 1969.

body are adaptations from the point of view of selection. The meaning of these movements varies considerably from one culture to another.”²⁹

Deligny’s handwritten quotations from Turner’s observations on the culturally variable meanings that can be assigned to different gestures and bodily movements are indicative of his interest in moving away from inherited models of human subjectivity that pivot around the capacity to create meaning through language and other processes of symbolization. Instead, Deligny focuses on gestures, bodily trajectories, and provisional arrangements of acting and living alongside those deemed to be living “in the infinitive mode.” In an unpublished manuscript from 1984, dedicated to his teacher Henri Wallon, Deligny writes:

There remains that which the transcribed trajectory tracings reveal, to know that a good number of them seem to us as being without an aim: the reiterated trajectory of a young girl goes here, each day and several times a day, and from day to day; even here, always stubbornly the same: the stubborn girl “who attaches herself with energy and with a durable manner to a way [or manner] of acting.”³⁰

²⁹ Fonds Deligny, IMEC, “Cahiers d’immuable,” DGN 30, handwritten notes. The original French reads as follows:

les gestes symbolique qui correspondent a certaines mouvements du corps sont adaptables du point de vue de la selection. La signification de ces mouvements varie beaucoup d’une culture a l’autre

³⁰ Fonds Deligny, IMEC, DGN 6: Fernand Deligny, “A comme asile” (1984), unpublished typed manuscript, 102-103. The original text reads as follows:

Reste ce que révèlent les traces transcrites des trajets, à savoir que bon nombre d’entr’eux nous apparaissent comme étant sans projet ; le trajet réitéré d’une gamine va là, chaque jour et plusieurs fois par jour, et de jour en jour ; même là, toujours le même avec obstination ; obstinée, la gamine, « qui s’attache avec énergie et d’une manière durable à une manière d’agire. »

In this passage, Deligny offers a striking account of his project, emphasizing concepts of *tracing* and *transcription*, quotidian *reiteration*, and modes of *acting* (“*agir*”). Each of these were central to Deligny’s engagements with the aesthetic practices and techniques of cinema and cartography, which I examine in greater detail in the following several sections of this chapter.

Wild Cinema

Deligny’s interest in the pedagogical promises of cinema can be dated to the earliest period of his intellectual formation. In the years immediately following the Liberation, Deligny found employment first as a kind of extra-curricular teacher and eventually as a regional director of *Travail et Culture* (Work and Culture), an organization affiliated with the French Communist Party whose mission was to offer educational and cultural activities for proletarian factory-workers and their children throughout the country. Deligny routinely incorporated film screenings into the group’s activities. His emerging convictions about the pedagogical possibilities afforded by cinema can be traced to his early friendship with Bazin and Marker, who were then in charge of Travail et Culture’s film bureau. Bazin and the generation of filmmakers and critics he mentored as the editor of the *Cahiers du Cinema* were convinced that filmmaking had entered a new phase of expressive possibility. This new period in film history, coinciding with the end of World War Two, was signaled by the advent of *auteurist* cinema. In an influential 1948 essay, the young film critic Alexandre Astruc argued that the rise of auteur cinema demonstrated that film has “gradually become a language... a form in which and by which an artist can express his thoughts, however abstract they may be, or translate his

obsessions exactly as he does in the contemporary essay or novel.”³¹ Indeed, the idea of cinema as a distinct “language” became perhaps the signal theoretical contribution of that defined the generation of critics and filmmakers that came to be known as the French New Wave.

Yet Deligny’s conviction that the tools of filmmaking could be put to use in his work with both socially delinquent and mentally disabled children reflected his more general interest in accessing a “mode of being” that could exist outside, or perhaps beyond, the strictures of either verbal or written language—an interest that he shared with Bazin. If auteurist cinema had shown that film could function “like” a language, it did so in ways that were *non-linguistic*, but still subjectively expressive. Bazin and Deligny would each pursue the implications of this insight along different paths: Bazin, through his critical writing and editorial work at the *Cahiers*; Deligny, for his part, would focus his efforts on working with children and adolescents who, of necessity, forged ways of being that were not anchored in the *sensus communis* that spoken language both forms and mediates.

It is worth lingering for a moment on the specific ways in which Bazin and Deligny came to view cinema as an aesthetic medium that was uniquely able to access the pre- or extra-linguistic dimensions of experience. Noting the confluence of Deligny and Bazin’s ideas, the film historian Dudley Andrew notes that Deligny

Shared Bazin’s fascination with children and with animals, a fascination at once moral and philosophical. For both men language, which names everything it touches, may let us forget that human beings act and react in a world that is only partly human. The child’s

³¹ See Alexandre Astruc, “The Birth of the New Avant-Garde: La Caméra-Stylo,” in *Film and Literature, An Introduction and Reader*, ed. Timothy Corrigan (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1998), 158.

gestures, hesitations, instincts, and screams are there to be comprehended; and cinema is an instrument of both expression and comprehension.³²

Andrew situates Deligny and Bazin's reflections of cinema in the context of wider intellectual discussions of the immediate postwar period in France. He suggests that it was likely that Bazin and Deligny's ideas were both informed by, and influential upon, Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological reflections upon the "active and embodied" qualities of aesthetic experience that the film camera alone could capture.³³ Moreover, in their shared interest in the gestural, temporally dynamic, and *phenomenological* dimensions of aesthetic experience, Bazin, Deligny, and Merleau-Ponty were deeply influenced by the avant-garde dramatist Antonin Artaud, who had committed suicide in a psychiatric clinic in 1948. Indeed, Deligny and Bazin's dual interest in developing a phenomenologically grounded, subjectively expressive cinematic practice built around the non-linguistic gestures of children and animals might be understood as a kind of cinematic transposition of Artaud's call for a "theater of cruelty." Their account of such a cinema echoes Artaud's dream of eliminating the rift between embodied performance and written dramatic text—to "heal the split between language and flesh," as Susan Sontag puts it in her discussion of Artaud's theater.³⁴

The subtitle of Alexandre Astruc's influential essay, "La Caméra-Stylo" ("The Camera-stylus [or pen]"), finds a resonant echo in a short text that Deligny published in 1955, titled "The

³² Dudley Andrew, "Malraux, Bazin, and the Gesture of Picasso," in *Opening Bazin: Postwar Film Theory and its Afterlife*, eds. Herve Joubert-Laurencin and Dudley Andrew (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 162.

³³ See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Cezanne's Doubt," in *Sense and Non-sense*, trans. Patricia Allen Dreyfus (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 9-25.

³⁴ Susan Sontag, "Artaud" in Antonin Artaud, *Antonin Artaud: Selected Writings* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1976), xxxv-vi.

Camera: A Pedagogical Tool” (*Camera, outil pédagogique*).³⁵ In it, Deligny elaborates upon his conviction that providing intellectually and rhetorically impaired children and adolescents with the technological tools of filmmaking could lead to powerful, pedagogically liberating modes of creative expression that would be otherwise foreclosed by the conservative educational establishment. He opens the essay with a direct reference to the idea that cinema is a language, and goes on to assert that this fact alone makes it an important resource for educators working with students grappling with difficulties with spoken or written language. Yet if Astruc had used the writing stylus as a productive analogy for the camera (and consequently film as an analogy for literary text), Deligny’s article offers an intriguing account of the film camera as a *prosthetic* for the instruments of writing. In an unpublished, typed manuscript revision of this essay sent to Guattari in the mid-1970s, Deligny notes:

Imagine someone who is slightly tormented by the desire to write. This is, of course, quite common: anyone might feel that they need, and have the right, to express themselves; and to view those who manage to publish a book as the most privileged. Yet some who would like to achieve this privilege feel maimed and disabled, either by spelling or grammar. The [writing] instrument fails them, yet the camera reassures them through the internal clockwork thanks to which film alone is made. This is the bargain.

The camera used as a *prosthetic for uncertain (or shaky) writing* is its strongest current usage.³⁶

³⁵ See Astruc, “The Birth of the New Avant-Garde: La Caméra-Stylo.”

³⁶ Fernand Deligny, “Camera, outil pédagogique,” unpublished typed manuscript, Fonds Guattari (IMEC), GTR 71.37, page 3 (emphasis added). The original text reads as follows:

Imaginons quelqu’un qui serait quelque peu tenaillé par le désir d’écrire, ce qui est assez fréquent, chacun pouvant ressentir le besoin et le droit de s’exprimer ; apparaissent comme des privilégiés ceux qui en arrivent au livre édité. Parmi ceux-là qui voudraient

Here, the notion of the film camera as “prosthesis” is one example of the pervasive evocation of what is never quite called “disability” in Deligny, Bazin, and their contemporaries’ discussions of language, gesture, and cinematic expression during this period. Artaud’s madness—including the arresting series of drawings he produced while confined to a psychiatric hospital in the final years of his life—serves as an exemplary instance of what Merleau-Ponty calls the “voices of silence” that phenomenological inquiry attempts to hear,³⁷ as well as what Deligny describes as the “language other than speech” that the camera/prosthesis facilitates among the autistic children alongside whom he worked and lived.

In these accounts, it is arguably disability—understood as some largely mysterious, seemingly internal or intrinsic, disorder that alienates the human subject from his capacity for rational, linguistic self-expression—that serves as a kind of impenetrable limit to aesthetic representation, one that can disrupt what the art critic Craig Owens called Western modernity’s “entrenched theatrical representationalism” precisely by closing the gap “between language and flesh” (as Sontag would have it).³⁸ Deligny, Bazin, and Merleau-Ponty seemed to share the belief that the non-linguistic, gestural repertoires that characterized Artaud’s “madness” as well as the “autism” of Deligny’s young collaborators could provide access to some extra-representational, materially immutable, and objectively “real” ontological ground—a ground, in turn, which seems

obtenir ce privilège, certains se sentent mutilés, handicapés, soit à l’orthographe, soit à la grammaire : l’instrument leur fait défaut, alors que la caméra les rassure par son horlogerie incorporée grâce à laquelle le film se fait pour ainsi dire tout seul. C’est l’aubaine. La caméra utilisée comme une prothèse à un écrire bancal est d’usage fort courant.

³⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,” in *Signs*, trans. Richard C. McCleary (Northwestern University Press, 1964): 39-83.

³⁸ Sontag, “Artaud,” xxxvi.

to both precede and condition the emergence of self-consciously rational human subjects marked by language.

Deligny's interest in the "camera as a pedagogical tool" provides a generative example to examine in relation to this study's broader interest in the ethical and political dimensions of disability aesthetics and the politics of neurological difference. In this regard, Deligny's cinematic experiments can be considered in relationship to literary critic Ato Quayson's arguments concerning the extent to which disability challenges and disrupts the formal conventions of aesthetic representation. For instance, Quayson argues that when it appears in a literary text, disability "automatically restores an *ethical core* to the literary-aesthetic domain while also evoking the boundary between the real and the metaphysical or otherworldly."³⁹ His discussion of the "ethical core" of disability builds upon and, in some respects, departs from David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder's influential argument that within literature (and other narrative aesthetic forms, including film and theater) disability has typically functioned *metaphorically*, as a "narrative prosthesis" that relies on "the potency of disability as a symbolic figure" even as it obscures the material experiences of disabled people.⁴⁰ Quayson is more interested in how the figural potency of disability can at once *demarcate* the field of aesthetic representation as distinct from an objective reality external to its terms and, simultaneously, *disrupt* or *undermine* the viability of such a distinction. Quayson goes on to elaborate his argument in the following terms:

³⁹ Ato Quayson, *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 22.

⁴⁰ David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 2000), p. 16.

It is disability's rapid oscillation between a pure process of abstraction and a set of material conditions that ensures that the ethical core of its representation is never allowed to be completely assimilated to the literary-aesthetic domain as such. Disability serves then to *close the gap between representation and ethics*, making visible the aesthetic field's relationship to the social situation of persons with disability in the real world. [...] The intervention of the literary representation is an intervention into a world that already situates disability within insistent framings and interpretations. The literary domain rather helps us understand the complex *processes* of such framings and the ethical implications that derive from such processes.⁴¹

Quayson's assertion that disability closes "the gap between representation and ethics" seems to echo Deligny's interest in the *political* possibilities built in to the unique formal and technical capacities of cinema, particularly when it came to filming the behavior of non-human animals or documenting the behaviors of pre-modern societies.

Quayson's proposal that disability is a category that oscillates between abstraction and the material, "lived" dimensions of social existence, is especially resonant when considering the relationship that developed between Deligny and the New-Wave auteur François Truffaut. Introduced to Truffaut through Bazin, Deligny's work and writing served as an inspiration for Truffaut's treatment of the themes of education, vagabondage, and delinquency in his early films, especially the famous 1959 debut film, *Les 400 coups* (*The 400 Blows*), generally thought to be the first film of the French *nouvelle vague*. In 1948, Bazin hired the then 16-year old Truffaut as an assistant at Travail et Culture, and eventually adopted him as a foster child after he was arrested for stealing money from his mother and stepfather (an incident that is recreated in

⁴¹ Quayson, *Aesthetic Nervousness*, 24.

The 400 Blows). Just as Bazin consulted with Deligny when determining how best to help Truffaut as a troubled adolescent, so too did Truffaut seek out Deligny's help in the course of making his first feature-length film.

According to their written correspondence, Deligny was especially influential on Truffaut's construction of the film's ending, which would go on to become one of the most iconic sequences in the history of cinema. In the film's final moments, the troubled adolescent protagonist Antoine Doinel (played by 14-year old Jean-Pierre L aud), having escaped the institutions of confinement that have made up the majority of the narrative's environment, arrives on the shore of a beach and runs unabashedly into the rolling waves of the ocean. Running through the landscape toward the beach, with the camera in tracking pursuit, Doinel careens into an aesthetically "vague" environment along the sandy shore. In its closing sequence, the film loosens itself from the shackles of fictional narrative representation and approaches something closer to both documentary record and imagistic painting. As Doinel runs into the ocean, the waves splashing on his legs, he turns around for one last glance toward the shore. The final shot of the film is in fact a freeze frame; Doinel's gaze directly meets the camera's and the frame zooms in upon his face in inscrutable expression and freezes into a static shot as the words *fin* ("end") appear on screen.

Summarizing the critical consensus that has developed around the film's closing moments, Tom Conley notes, "The sequence was taken to mark a moment of liberation from the worlds of confinement, incarceration, punishment, and surveillance in which the child had been living."⁴² This final image has typically been interpreted as a formal invocation of the aesthetic conventions of the "case study" genre of documentary film. Shifting registers from narrative

⁴² Tom Conley, *Cartographic Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 150.

fiction to something like cinéma vérité, the film's viewers in this instant are confronted by a presentational directness that frames Doinel's body in order to present it as an object of scrutiny: the final image offers viewers a constrained image of juvenile delinquency for sober reflection. In this sense, this moment can be understood as one of Brechtian alienation that disrupts, or at least places us at a remove from, the protocols of identification in narrative film. At the same time, the final image is ambiguous: it is also possible to interpret the shot as an indication of Doinel's eventual recapture, by means of the freeze frame, and so may ultimately signal the futility of his attempting to escape.

In 1968, nearly a decade after his initial correspondence with Deligny, Truffaut again sought the advice of the anarchic educator as he was in the midst of writing the screenplay for the film that would become *L'Enfant sauvage* (*The Wild Child*) (1969). In 1968, Deligny had written a letter to Truffaut seeking support for his own cinematic projects. He included in the letter a vivid description of Janmarie, an autistic boy who had recently joined Deligny's group in the Cevennes after having been institutionalized for several years beforehand:

A kid 12 years old who hasn't said a word his whole life. He is neither deaf nor dumb, agile as a chimpanzee. One thing makes him shiver and vibrate: that's running water whether from a well, fountain, or tap... By instinct, he refuses to talk. From the cretin that he was constantly swaying, throwing himself on the ground, knocking his head against the wall, he has become a nice little guy [*bête*] who sets the table, gets water, washes the dishes; he doesn't leave us wherever we go, having adapted himself to our savage life [*la vie sauvage*]. ... Here [in the Cevenne] he goes naked when he can in the

sun [...] He dances in front of the fire...he sniffs for a long time what he eats. He's beautiful, except when he scowls, just like a young orangutan.⁴³

Truffaut was immediately struck by the degree to which Deligny's descriptions of Janmarie's behavior corresponded with the descriptions of Victor found in Itard's diaries, which he had been reading in preparation for filming *L'Enfant Sauvage*. In response to Deligny's letter, Truffaut wrote:

Your description of his behavior is so similar to what Itard described in his writings and to what we want to achieve in the film that I find it extremely disconcerting. In any case, I think your boy should serve as our model in selecting the boy who will actually play the part and should inspire us for his style of bodily comportment.”⁴⁴

Truffaut's frequent collaborator Suzanne Schiffman visited Deligny's encampment in the Cevennes, obtaining footage that Truffaut would use as a reference point for the filming of *L'Enfant Sauvage* later that year, and particularly when directing Jean-Pierre Cagnol, the non-disabled child actor who would play Victor in Truffaut's film. In response to Truffaut's interest in using Janmarie as the basis for the performance of the actor playing Victor in his film, Deligny wrote the following letter:

⁴³ Dudley Andrew, "Every Teacher Needs a Truant: Bazin and *L'Enfant Sauvage*" in *A Companion to François Truffaut*, eds. Dudley Andrew and Anne Gillain (Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2013), 231.

⁴⁴ Cited in Antoine de Baecque and Serge Toubiana, *Truffaut*, trans. Catherine Temerson (New York: Knopf, 1999), 261. The full text of Deligny's correspondence with Truffaut can be found in *1895: Revue de l'association française de recherche sur l'histoire du cinéma* 24 (2004): 77-110, and is also available at <http://1895.revues.org/281>. The original passage reads as follows: "Je crois, en tous cas, que votre garçon devrait nous servir de modèle à la fois pour choisir le garçon qui jouera effectivement le rôle et pour nous inspirer un style de comportement corporel."

I have read and reread Itard's memoirs (and all sorts of writing concerning wolf-children and others) and it's precisely this that has left me perplexed for a year. [...] Speech is for [Janmarie] what algebra was for me in high school. Can he be filmed? It all depends on the mode of filming.⁴⁵

Truffaut's notion that the "style of bodily comportment" of one of the autistic residents of Deligny's Cevenne encampment should be the model for the performance of the actor playing Victor in his film, and Deligny's response that filming Janmarie "all depends on the mode of filming," are significant in light of this study's consideration of the political and ethical dimensions of the representation of mental disability and neurological difference as they emerge in relationship to disability aesthetics and performance.

Perhaps even more directly than literature, cinema (as Deligny recognized) operates by way of what Quayson terms the "complex *processes* of such framings" of disability, and immediately invokes the ethical repercussions of such representations in the world beyond. Thus we could say that the mode of "acting"—the style of behavior—that Truffaut seeks to reproduce based upon the documentary footage of Janmarie, introduces an aesthetic "nervousness" that the rest of the finished film *L'enfant sauvage*, proceeds to solve, both narratively and formally. In this sense, the film itself takes on the role first played by Itard, who attempts but ultimately fails "to bridge a gap that Victor refuses to cross."⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Fernand Deligny, letter to François Truffaut, 16 November 1968. The original reads: *J'ai relu et relu les mémoires d'Itard (et toutes sortes d'écrits à propos des enfants-loups et autres) et c'est là justement ce qui me rend perplexe depuis un an. [...] la parole est pour lui ce que l'algèbre était pour moi au lycée. Peut-il tourner ? Tout dépend du mode de tournage.*

⁴⁶ Mitchell and Synder, "Compulsory Feral-ization," 629.

In his informative account of Truffaut's exchanges with Deligny, the film historian Dudley Andrew makes an important observation about the ultimately incommensurate positions held by these two figures regarding the aesthetic treatment of the "wild child."⁴⁷ Andrew notes that Deligny at one point sought Truffaut's support and advice in his desire to edit and release *Le moindre geste* as a complete feature-length film. Yet Truffaut was apparently "baffled" when he saw the footage that Deligny and his group had recorded over several years in the early 1960s, and encouraged him to edit the footage into a coherent narrative and to include voiceover narration so that the audience might follow the story the film attempted to tell. Deligny, however, strongly rejected Truffaut's suggestion and it is not surprising that he would do so, considering the rest of his work. As Andrew writes, Deligny "would never let any *voice*, be it authoritative or childlike, limit *images*, such was his animus when it came to language."⁴⁸ Truffaut's bafflement can also be read as a refusal or inability of the increasingly establishment filmmaker to recognize Deligny's position as a viable one.

Truffaut's films and Deligny's considerably more radical cinematic experiments could thus be said to follow opposite aesthetic (and also political) trajectories. *L'Enfant sauvage* (*The Wild Child*) depicts the methodically ordered domestication of Victor's wildness through the pedagogical training and civilizational discipline that Itard embodies. The film is studiously "classical" in both its narrative construction and formal composition, exemplified in its use of black and white film stock and the excerpts of Vivaldi's violin concertos that make up its soundtrack. *L'Enfant Sauvage* operates by way of a kind of formal and narrative *containment* of the wild child's haptic embodiment: the unruly and unpredictable gestures that don't seem to

⁴⁷ Andrew, "Every Teacher Needs a Truant, 221.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 230.

“mean” anything, that cannot be read. The film treats Victor’s *sauvagerie* as the primary aesthetic *disturbance* at the heart of both its narrative and visual aesthetic construction. The film can thus also be read as an allegory for Truffaut’s own experience of having been de-facto adopted and “civilized” by Bazin as a socially delinquent adolescent, an interpretation supported by the fact that Truffaut himself chose to play the part of Itard. In this regard, Truffaut’s film serves as a pointed rejection of the “savage cinema” (*cinema sauvage*) that developed in French and international avant-garde cinema in the 1960s, most influentially in the increasingly fragmented and politically radical work of Truffaut’s New Wave frenemy, Jean-Luc Godard. Expressing the unblinking commitment to the Enlightenment’s enduring values that the film itself expresses, one critic wrote in his review of the film’s 1969 premiere, “one emerges from *L’Enfant Sauvage* feeling proud of knowing how to read.”⁴⁹ By contrast, as I will describe in the following section, Deligny’s approach to filming the autistic collaborators alongside whom he lived rejected the “civilizing,” pedagogical mandates that Itard represented, and which were in turn adopted and embodied by Truffaut in his direction of the film and his performance as the Enlightenment-era doctor-pedagogue.

The Slightest Gesture

Le moindre geste, the only film that was publicly screened during Deligny’s lifetime, exists in fragmentary form. His failure to realize other cinematic projects was largely due to his group’s perpetual lack of funding. The frustrated desire to make a film also opens up Deligny’s practice as a productive site of failure, which can be read historically as an index of the majoritarian impositions that prevented him from realizing his aims. *Le moindre geste* and the techniques

⁴⁹ Cited in Andrew, “Every Teacher Needs a Truant,” 237.

Deligny developed to create it, constitute a rejection, and perhaps an antithesis, of auteurist cinema—which New Wave critics and directors famously identified as the use of cinema as a “language.”⁵⁰ Narratively disjointed and aesthetically fragmented, *Le moindre geste* reflects the extended and never fully completed process of its creation. Deligny and his companion Josée Manenti began collecting footage for the film in 1962, and continued to do so, with frequent interruptions, until 1965. The footage languished in storage, however, until around 1970, when at the encouragement of Chris Marker, the young filmmaker Jean-Pierre Daniel began to edit the footage and construct its extraordinary non-diegetic soundtrack, which serves, in the “completed” version of the film screened at Cannes in 1971 (and released on DVD in France in 2009), as a kind of aural thread that weaves its elliptical narrative structure together.

Despite the fragmentary and haphazard process of its creation, the film in its “final” form traces the outlines of a more or less cohesive story: Yves (portrayed by Yves Guignard, an autistic resident of Deligny’s network who at the time of the filming was in his early 20s), escapes from the rural psychiatric clinic where he resides into the rocky Cévennes countryside. Along the banks of a shallow stream, he soon encounters Richard, a 13-year-old boy who also seems to have absconded from his school in a village nearby. Together, they wander through the stream and across a series of deserted landscapes. These scenes are periodically intercut with several long shots of a black-caped figure in a policeman’s hat speeding along a country road on motorbike, presumably in pursuit of the runaways. Climbing to the top of a steeply craggy hill, the pair soon comes across an active quarry: we see its workers drilling into the mountainside

⁵⁰ See Astruc, “The Birth of the New Avant-Garde: La Caméra-Stylo,” the influential 1948 essay that first defined auteurist cinema as having “gradually become a language...a form in which and by which an artist can express his thoughts, however abstract they may be, or translate his obsessions exactly as he does in the contemporary essay or novel” (158).

and using large bulldozers to move around the crushed-up piles of rock. Spotted by one of the workers, Yves and Richard continue their trajectory, passing through another small mountain village before coming across the sun-drenched, crumbling ruins of a large stone structure. Richard briefly tries to trap Yves inside by closing a dilapidated wooden door, but Yves escapes by sliding underneath it. Climbing among the ruins, Richard discovers the entrance to an underground cistern, and climbs inside to hide. Here, the narrative thread becomes more difficult to follow. The film next cuts briefly to a domestic scene in what seems to be a nearby house—a young woman (played by Any Durand, another young participant in Deligny's network) is asleep in bed; an older man enters her room, then leaves, and next is seen lathering his face for a shave. An inter-title explains that they are a laborer at the quarry and his daughter. The woman leaves the house, calling for her father. Yves hides from her but not before pulling down a length of rope tied to a tree in their yard.

Having lost sight of Richard, Yves ventures further into the wilderness: he is shown wandering alongside a pair of railroad tracks stretching into the mountainous distance; then kneeling beside a creek and sipping water from the cups of his hands; and finally seated in front of a wall of piled stones while trying, and repeatedly failing, to tie two ends of rope together (perhaps in order to pull Richard from the cistern, though this is never fully clear). These scenes of Yves are intercut with brief scenes of the quarry—including several sequences depicting heavy machinery breaking down rock into gravel, and a shot in which the quarry worker's daughter runs up a high stony ridge to deliver something to her father. Soon the quarry worker's daughter catches sight of Yves in the nearby hillside; yet he avoids her company: standing on a hilly ridge, he emphatically motions her away; after she's gone, he sits alone in the grass, the sunlight striking his face. The film then cuts back to the yard of the laborer's house, where we

see the father molding a clay sculpture of his daughter's head while she sits in front of him, modeling.

Again we return to sequences of Yves in the Cévennes wilderness: navigating his way through tangled thickets of tall desert grass; using a stone to pound on the thin metal bars protruding from the walls of the abandoned stony structure; beginning to reconstruct a fence from some wooden slats he finds abandoned in a grassy patch nearby. Next we see Yves come upon the edge of the quarry itself—seemingly absorbed by the dramatic site of bulldozers moving around large piles of rock, a wrecking ball smashing into the quarry's walls, and dump trucks depositing the debris into a stone-crushing machine to make gravel.



Figure 3. Still from *Le Moindre geste* (dir. Fernand Deligny, 1971).

Leaving the quarry behind, Yves wanders back toward the hillside. On a road nearer to town signaled by the presence of a more inhabited looking building, he encounters a middle-aged woman carrying two suitcases, who looks at him warily before running off when he stomps on the ground in her direction. He continues along his path, coming across another large tangle of

rope, which he again attempts to unfurl and drag behind him—perhaps again in the direction of Richard in the cistern.

Eventually he encounters Any again, and follows her along the road that leads back toward the village. Haltingly, he follows her into a seemingly deserted town and then back into the countryside along an unpaved road, eventually taking him by the arm. In the closing minutes of the film, Any leaves him in front of the entrance to the clinic from which he had originally escaped; an attendant comes to fetch him and brings him inside a classroom with maps of the world posted on its walls. The final shots show Yves hunched over a schoolroom desk, painting the outlines of a rudimentary human figure.

Visually, *Le moindre geste* is dominated by the austere natural grandeur of the Cévennes. Made using 16mm black and white stock, the film's many long, static exterior shots capture the region's primordial vastness and elemental severity. The wind-battered structures through which Yves and Richard wander are filmed in a series of static long takes of almost Beckettian desolation; lingering on a crumbling wall, one shot transforms the entire plane of the screen into a bright stone surface pocked with holes and crevices. Sequences depicting the industrialized activity at the quarry—the inhuman scale and exertions of force that are involved in its operation—further intensify the harshness of the film's visual rendering of the environment.

Yet closer in and lower down, *Le moindre geste*'s images bristle with life—in artful counterpoint to the hard shots of sunlight-on-stone. There are, for instance, three brief but notable close-ups of animals that occur over the course of the film: two rabbits surround a small bowl of water, viewed through the gaps in the wire fence that encloses them. A single, tiny black ant crawls its way along a segment of rope, traversing the frame in a gentle horizontal curve. A lizard tied by its neck to a stick implanted in the ground twitches and jerks in response to the

grasping motions of Yves' hand. Above all the film seems most visually preoccupied by the behavioral repertoires of its protagonist. These are the "slightest" or "least" gestures that give the film its title. Like the rabbits and the lizard, the horizon of Yves's world has been unnaturally curtailed: his life is defined by the physical and psychological constrictions imposed by the institution in which he resides. Escaping from the asylum into the limitless and often brutal environment that exists beyond its walls, Yves's gestures attain a new kind of resonance.

The film's sonic dimensions are present an equal challenge to interpretation. The soundtrack that Jean-Pierre Daniel assembled several years after the main part of the filming was completed is radically spare: whole stretches of the film take place with almost no sound at all. Images of Yves and Richard wandering through the countryside are sometimes accompanied by the sound of a softly bubbling of a creek, the rustling of dry desert grass, and the slow, rhythmic *thwap* of rocks thrown against a hard surface. These are punctuated by an occasional sonic assault: the buzzing whir of the policeman's motorbike signals his pursuit of Yves even before coming into view, and the montaged shots of the quarry's machine in operation are matched with the suitably assaultive sounds of drills, motors, and industrial-grade stone cutting.

Perhaps the most elusive and unsettling aspect of the film's sonic composition is the use it makes of human voices. *Le moindre geste* contains almost no dialogue in the sense of the language that characters use to converse with one another. With several notable exceptions, the voices that we hear are extra-diegetic: they do not appear to be emanating from the figures depicted onscreen. Rather, they seem overlaid, collage-like, onto the scenes. Mostly we hear the voice of Yves himself: gravelly and low, his speech is effortful, frequently perseverative, and only sporadically intelligible. In the early part of the film, when Yves and Richard are wandering around together, we also hear Richard's voice—speedy, chipper, and much more high-pitched.

Yet Yves's distinctive voice on the soundtrack provides a kind of sonic undercurrent that lends the entire film an intensely perceptible, almost "guttural" sense of bodily materiality. At certain moments, when Yves's voice crescendos into a shout, the sound evokes Antonin Artaud's legendary vocalizations on his radio plays of the 1930s. Deligny had long been interested in Artaud, having included an imaginary exchange between the dramatist of cruelty and Vincent Van Gogh in his 1948 book *Les vagabonds efficaces*.⁵¹ The vocalizations heard on the film's soundtrack recall an Artaudian conception of theater that would turn away from its reliance on spoken dialogue and toward "a communication represented as a vibrational exchange among bodies, and away from the word toward the gesture."⁵² This aspect of Artaud's thought, coupled with his forceful critiques of institutional psychiatry, makes him a particularly important antecedent for Deligny's writings and films.

If the machines required to make a movie—above all the camera and the microphone—are technological apparatuses that mimic the perceptual faculties of human consciousness by recording the sensory data that a particular (camera/subject) encounters as it moves through the world, then the principal aesthetic achievement of the *Le moindre geste* perhaps lies in the alternative model of cinematic subjectivity that it proposes. To support this assertion, I would like to consider two brief segments of the film in greater depth. The first occurs at roughly the midpoint of the 90-minute film. The sequence begins with a series of static, exterior shots depicting the crumbling walls of an abandoned stone edifice. The images center on the building's ancient doorways and window frames; the occasional bony branch of a tree sprouts from the

⁵¹ Andrew, "Malraux, Bazin, and the Gesture of Picasso," 162. See also Fernand Deligny, *Oeuvres*, 213.

⁵² Douglas Kahn, *Noise Water Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 348.

fissures in its walls. There's a close-up of a curiously round gap in a pitted stone surface that opens into an unseen, darkened interior; another shot shows a ruined doorway in front of which a few bony tree branches tremble in the wind. The soundtrack during this sequence is rough and seems only obliquely related to the images: there's a gritty, almost rhythmic sound, as if someone were digging a hole, or pounding on the ground, or pulling at the crumbling exterior walls of the structures that appear onscreen. Perhaps we are meant to imagine that it is Richard who is making these noises—still hiding (or maybe trapped) deep inside the cistern.

These static shots are followed by a medium-shot image of Yves sitting in an open, sunny field, a scrabble of overgrown grass visible in soft focus in the background. There is then a close-up: Yves's head and collar fills up much of the left side of the screen as he brings the side of one hand to his mouth and gently waves his index finger in front of his nose. His eyes are half closed against the brightness of the sun falling on his face, and he blinks a bit erratically. Next there is a cut and then Yves's face is again shown in close-up lying still, his head now resting in the shadow created by his folded forearms.

In this three-minute sequence the images of the decaying building are directly counterposed with close-up shots of Yves's face and body, creating a halting yet unmistakable cinematic relation between them. The manner and rhythm of the editing produces a connection—via a sort of line of sensation—linking the pocked surfaces of the building's walls with the figure of Yves himself. In so doing, this sequence calls attention to the porous boundary between exterior and interior that exists in both the ruination of the building's physical exterior *and* our voyeuristic encounter with the human figure onscreen. Yet this cinematic association is not, I would suggest, an instance of “narrative prosthesis”: it does not seem to be the case that the crumbling building and desolate landscape “materialize the metaphor” of Yves's own crumbling cognition or

desolate subjectivity.⁵³ Rather, by linking the gestural movements of Yves's body with the textured boundary separating the building's exterior surface and from its hidden depths, the film stages a refusal of the traditional, psychological conventions of cinematic identification—what the philosopher Robert B. Pippin has described as “the problem in general of the cinematic representation of the relation between what is traditionally thought of as a psychological interior and outer bodily movement and other forms of expression in the exercise of agency and subjectivity.”⁵⁴ It involves a rejection of what Deleuze termed the “archeological conception of psychoanalysis,” with its reliance on the interior, hidden depth of the unconscious.⁵⁵

Cinema Against the Institution

In an unpublished interview with the psychologist Emile Copferman, Deligny defines his group's “attempts” (“*tentatives*”) as the opposite of an institution: “An *attempt* is for me to make a common cause with: kids, teens, the others with whom we live. An attempt can also be said to be that which is intolerable in an institution. [...] There is an allergy between the institution and what I would call an attempt.”⁵⁶ In the evocative metaphor of the intolerable “allergy” that exists between an institution and an attempt, Deligny provides a deeply visceral description that suggests the everyday, materially embodied character of his work. In an institutional context, the modes of living *with* that he was seeking would indeed be “intolerable.” If such spaces of

⁵³ Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*.

⁵⁴ Robert Pippin, “Psychology Degree Zero? The Representation of Action in the Films of the Dardenne Brothers,” *Critical Inquiry*, 41, no. 4 (Summer 2015): 764.

⁵⁵ Gilles Deleuze, “What Children Say,” in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 63.

⁵⁶ Fernand Deligny, « *L'Autre Cote de la parole* » unpublished typed manuscript, Fonds Deligny, IMEC, DGN 5, M.S. page 1. The original reads as follows:

Une tentative c'est pour moi : faire cause commune avec : des gosses, les autres, des gamins, avec qui nous vivons. Une tentative peut se dire aussi : ce qui est intolérable dans une institution. [...] Il y a une allergie entre l'institution et ce que j'appellerais une tentative.

institutional confinement were constructed physically, and regulated temporally, in accordance with the rationally organized grids and diagrams characteristic of disciplinary power, Deligny's projects—including his cinematic efforts—continuously sought to cultivate errant, wandering, and drifting trajectories in order to escape the subject-producing grid of disciplinary power.

In view of Deligny's antagonism to the institution, we might ask where *Le moindre geste* can be situated in relationship to the category of "minor cinema," a term that Félix Guattari used to describe a number of films made in the 1960s and 70s, many of them documentaries, that reflected the alternative and anti-psychiatric movements associated with figures like David Cooper and R. D. Laing in the UK and Franco Basaglia in Italy.⁵⁷ Guattari was particularly interested in how films like Frederick Wiseman's *Titticut Follies* (1967) and Peter Robinson's *Asylum* (1972) used the tools of filmmaking to create powerful cinematic critiques of mainstream psychiatric practices and institutions by representing "madness" on its own terms. Guattari also saw a connection between these films and contemporaneous developments within militant Third World cinema, particularly in Latin America, which sought to foster the creation of a revolutionary cinematic idiom by providing filmmaking equipment directly to proletarian workers.⁵⁸ The idea, in the words of Third Cinema proponents Octavio Getino and Fernando Solanas, was to "have the worker film *his way of looking at the world just as if he were writing it.*"⁵⁹

Guattari's and Getino and Solanas's formulations of Third Cinema and minor cinemas are resonant with certain aspects of *Le moindre geste* and Deligny's efforts to radically

⁵⁷ See Félix Guattari, "Le Cinéma: un art mineur," in *La révolution moléculaire*, (Paris: Recherches, 1977), 203–238.

⁵⁸ Gary Genosko, *Félix Guattari: A Critical Introduction* (London: Pluto Press, 2009), 135.

⁵⁹ Octavio Getino and Fernando Solanas, "Towards a Third Cinema," in *Film Theory: an Anthology*, eds. Toby Miller and Robert Stam (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 275.

reformulate what a filmmaker is or might be. Yet in a number of crucial respects, *Le moindre geste* also resists easy alignment with these movements. For one, Guattari's conviction that the minor cinema of anti-psychiatry had managed to represent the experience of "madness" is especially difficult to square with Deligny's views. Deligny was careful to distinguish his own mode of thinking about autism from the long philosophical tradition that viewed madness as the opposite of reason, a tradition that had been recently reassessed in Michel Foucault's *History of Madness* (first published in 1962). It is also clear that *Le moindre geste* is not a work of militant or revolutionary cinema of the kind advocated by Getino and Solanas. Indeed, the film, like Deligny himself, resists being identified with any single political group, party, or position. Just as he had fled from the group of Trotskyite activists who descended on Guattari's house in Gourgas after the May '68 protests, Deligny continuously sought ways of eluding demands to align his projects with a pre-given political program. Bertrand Ogilvie describes Deligny's political program by way of a question posed in the work of Georges Bataille, who asked how it would be possible pursue a "project" of exiting from all projects.⁶⁰ Or, as Deligny himself asks in a still un-translated essay, how to imagine a mode of relation that would be "outside of function"—one that would not bear the traces of a desire to make autistics and others who live outside, or on the margins, of language conform to the shape of the "thought-out-project," the neurotypical subject, the human-that-we-are?

⁶⁰ Ogilvie, "Living Between the Lines," 15. See also Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927-1939*, trans. Allan Stoekl, Carl R. Lovitt, and Donald M. Leslie, Jr. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985).

To Err, To Drift: Deligny's Wander Lines

Deligny began to experiment with cartographic tracings in the mid-1960s in collaboration with a young militant filmmaker, Jacques Lin, who came to live with the group in the Cévennes.

Deligny, Lin, and their collaborators began to follow their autistic counterparts as they made their way through the Cévennes's rocky terrain, making rudimentary line drawings to indicate their direction of movement across the rural encampment and into surrounding wilderness. The tracings soon became a central aspect of the group's activities, and the maps grew steadily more detailed and elaborate. They developed visual systems for designating the various sounds and gestures encountered along their pathways, and started to use transparent wax paper to trace the children's daily routes. No attempt was made to interfere with their movements, or to explain or interpret them. The focus remained on the process of tracing itself. Over time, distinct patterns began to emerge: certain trajectories tended to be repeated from one day to the next, and the group noted that some of the lines seem to correspond to the conduits of underground waterways.

Both the 2007 French publication of *L'Arachnean*, a collection of Deligny's essays from the late 1970s, and its 2015 English translation, include a dozen black-and-white reproductions of a selection of the wander-line maps, dating from the same period. A few of the reproductions include detailed captions describing the meanings of the various symbols and lines—one, from 1976, indicates not only the trajectory of a particular child, Ann, and an adult, Jean Lin, who traced her movements, but also shows the places where they encountered a flock of sheep (and heard the ringing of sheep bells) and stopped to cut wood for the encampment. Other maps are less detailed but more graphically arresting: the lines loop and tangle to form distinctive shapes, hinting at habits of movement and direction that become visible over days, weeks, and months of tracing.

Deligny termed the trajectories of the autistics in his encampment *lignes d'erre*, a phrase that might be translated as “wander lines,” “errant lines,” or “lines of drift.” The concept of the *lignes d'erre* is arguably the most significant and original formulation in Deligny’s thought: it condenses, in a single stroke, his distinctive determination to disrupt traditional ways of conceptualizing the relationship between language, human subjectivity, and political community. Yet his writing on this aspect of his work is elliptical, fragmentary, and often mystifying. Especially in his later essays, Deligny exhibits a sly distrust of language, frequently playing upon the hidden resonances between the different sounds, senses, and etymological valences of the terms he employs. This is a fitting rhetorical approach for someone so determined to unsettle the authority of speech, to contest the privileged role that language has been granted in accounting for the human subject’s commerce with the world. He writes, “Inevitably words become charged with meaning and begin to slide into the formulation of the attempt [*tentative*] and elaborate their own premature micro-ideology.” Pressing up against the ideological slide of language, Deligny looks for ways to “disgorge these meanings.”⁶¹

The particular manner in which Deligny breaks down language into its constituent phonetic components can make his peculiar prose difficult to follow, especially when encountered in translation. But the cumulative effect of this semantic playfulness also makes for a mesmerizing read, as if he were using the “blockiness” of language against itself in order to chip away at the ideological sedimentation that has accrued around verbal concepts usually taken for granted—above all, that of the “human” itself. “The human-that-we-are is the product of a long process of domestication,” he writes.⁶² Working with children and adolescents without easy

⁶¹ Deligny, *The Arachnean*, 86.

⁶² *Ibid*, 76.

or transparent access to verbal speech requires the momentary suspension of interpretation, so that something else — the flicker of a gesture, “the remainder, resistant to any comprehension” — can begin to come in to focus.

Turning to the dictionary, as Deligny often describes himself doing in his essays, one might follow an etymological pathway leading from the French *erre* to the Latin word *errare*, meaning “to wander,” “to go astray,” to cognate English words like *errant*, *errancy*, and *error*. Yet Deligny is careful to distinguish his use of “*erre*” from morally inflected connotations regarding the act of deviating from a predetermined code of action or system of norms. He distinguishes between the act of *tracing* (or perhaps *describing*, as one might “describe” the arc of a line or curve) the movement of a body through space, and the act of interpreting, analyzing, or diagnostically evaluating that movement, that body. “We did not take the children’s ways of being as scrambled, coded messages addressed to us.” The maps, he writes, were created “in order to make something other than a sign.”⁶³ They emerged within the liminal zone between drawing and writing, resisting the categorical distinctions that language imposes on the world.⁶⁴ Before phrases, words, and letters can form, there must first be lines. Tracing the pathways of their autistic cohabitants, Deligny and his collaborators thus also seem to have been seeking to evoke the primeval origins of writing, before it had become codified or standardized, and when it still resembled the outlines of things encountered in moving through the world.

Deligny’s writings on the *lignes d’erre* persistently associated the concept with an attenuation of conscious intentionality and subjective will. In his descriptions of the lines

⁶³ Deligny, *The Arachnean*, 149.

⁶⁴ According to Saussure, “Without language, thought is a vague uncharted nebula. There are no pre-existing ideas, and nothing is distinct before the appearance of language.” Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin (New York, Philosophical Library, 1959), 112.

Deligny often uses the verb *vaguer* (typically translated as “to drift”), a word that also shares a root with the French noun for “wave” (*vague*). Like *vaguer*, *drift* carries with it some residual sense of the movement of bodies of water, as one *drifts* down a river, a figuration that also recalls Deligny’s occasional comparison of his attempts at anti-institutional collective living with “rafts.”⁶⁵ In an intriguing passage in his 1976 essay “The Arachnean,” Deligny writes, “*Que vaguer n’ait pas d’objet défini à l’avance peut faire penser que le sujet, alors, est dans le vague.*”⁶⁶ In their recent English translation of this essay, published in 2015, Drew Burke and Catherine Porter render this line as follows: “The fact that drifting has no predefined object can make one think that the subject, then, is adrift.”⁶⁷ Yet *dans le vague* could also be rendered as “in the wave,” evoking a state of suspended agency and aimlessness in thrall to the movement of larger, nonhuman forces. Deligny insists that the wandering, drifting, errant trajectories he and his colleagues sought to trace should not be mistaken for a representation of a “drifting” or “errant” mode of subjectivity. In place of depth-based models of the speaking human subject, Deligny offers cartographic surfaces and the hand-drawn lines.

Deligny’s *lignes d’erre* are directionally and temporally much hazier than Deleuze and Guattari’s more familiar concept of the *ligne de fuite*. Typically rendered as “line of flight,” this by-now idiomatic expression possesses a hint of the avian that is absent from the original French, and diminishes the sense of rapid escape (“fleeing”) so important to its philosophical conceptualization. Yet in *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari include a discussion of Deligny’s *lignes d’erre* as one example of a “line of flight”:

⁶⁵ Deligny, *The Arachnean*, 86.

⁶⁶ Deligny, *L’Arachnéen et autres textes* (Paris: Éditions L’Arachnéen, 2009), 31.

⁶⁷ Deligny, *The Arachnean*, 52.

Fernand Deligny transcribes the lines and paths of autistic children by means of *maps*: he carefully distinguishes “lines of drift” [*lignes d’erre*] and “customary lines” [*lignes coutumière*]. This does not only apply to walking; he also makes maps of perceptions and maps of gestures (cooking or collecting wood) showing customary gestures and gestures of drift [*gestes d’erre*]. The same goes for language, if it is present. Deligny opened his lines of writing to life lines. The lines are constantly crossing, intersecting for a moment, following one another. A line of drift intersects a customary line, and at that point the child does something not quite belonging to either one: he or she finds something he or she lost—what happened?—or jumps and claps his or her hands, a slight and rapid movement—and that gesture in turn emits several lines. In short, *there is a line of flight, which is already complex since it has singularities, and there [is] a customary or molar line with segments; and between the two, there is a molecular line with quanta that cause it to tip to one side or the other.*⁶⁸

In her recent work on Deligny, Erin Manning builds upon Deleuze and Guattari’s account, proposing that his maps reveal the way language emerges by way of “the drifting of its coming-to-expression.” She writes that the tracings are “a drawing-with of emergent spacetimes of recomposition” that “allow the territory to ‘become seen’” by mapping “into it its resonance as more-than a pre-existent territorial enclosure.”⁶⁹ Yet Manning, like Deleuze and Guattari, is perhaps too quick to align Deligny’s work with other pre-given theoretical models, glossing over

⁶⁸ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 202–203; emphasis in original.

⁶⁹ Erin Manning, “The Shape of Enthusiasm,” *Parallax* 17, no. 2 (2011): 87–88.

the extent to which Deligny constantly sought to escape programmatic interpretations of his projects.

Cartographies of the Ephemeral

My own approach to Deligny's work has been substantially shaped by my experience conducting research in his archive, housed at L'Institut Mémoires de l'édition contemporaine (IMEC) in Saint-Germain-la-Blanche-Herbe, just outside of Caen. In August 2014 I spent a week examining the extensive collection of materials housed at IMEC, comprising 38 boxes of manuscripts, notebooks, interviews, and ephemeral material. In the archive it became increasingly apparent that Deligny approached the practice of writing with the same spirit of open-ended, improvisatory experimentation that characterized his efforts to forge new forms of anti-institutional communal life. I was confronted by intimidating stacks of butcher paper covered with Deligny's tiny, barely legible pencil scrawls—almost all of it unpublished and probably still unread.

At IMEC, I was also able to view a small selection of the maps that Deligny and his group produced in the late 1970s. The photographic reproductions of the maps that have been included in Deligny's published works are, in fact, made up of many individual sheets of transparent wax paper layered on top of one another, producing composite images that condense weeks, months, and perhaps years of tracing. Shuffling through the transparent pages, their edges turning brown with age, the tracings felt as fragile and precarious as a spider's web. Lines of pencil, ink, and charcoal registered the variable degrees of haptic pressure exerted by the hands that had traced them, decades before. I began to view the maps not simply as two-dimensional

images, but as ephemeral objects—material repositories that somehow preserved residual traces of the bodily force with which the pages had been marked.

I would like to conclude this chapter by suggesting that Deligny’s cartographies can perhaps best be understood as ephemeral remainders of the acts of drifting, wandering, erring, dwelling, and tracing alongside which they were created. José Muñoz writes that the material ephemeral left behind in the wake of an event long past can offer “a kind of evidence of what has transpired but certainly not the thing itself.” Unlike more conventional forms of documentation—be they written, photographed, recorded, or filmed—the study of ephemera “does not rest on epistemological foundations but is instead interested in following traces, glimmers, residues, and specks of things.”⁷⁰ As ephemera, they resist being contained within “dominant systems of aesthetic and institutional classification.”⁷¹ The maps—created “in order to make something other than a sign”⁷²—do not offer a method for interpreting the behaviors or actions of the autistic individuals whose movements they record. Nor do they involve an ethical-aesthetic evocation of autism or disability that seeks to close “the gap between representation and ethics,” in order to render visible what Quayson describes as “the aesthetic field’s relationship to the social situation of persons with disability in the real world.”⁷³ If for Deligny, “The human is a gesture, and a form, before it is a being of language,”⁷⁴ the act of tracing the *lignes d’erre* involves a “becoming visible of form”⁷⁵ that offers a different way of understanding what the

⁷⁰ José Esteban Muñoz, “Ephemera As Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts,” *Women and Performance* 8, no. 2 (1996), 10.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Deligny, *The Arachnean*, 149.

⁷³ Quayson, 24.

⁷⁴ Ogilvie, 16.

⁷⁵ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Pleasure of Drawing*, trans. Philip Armstrong (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 92

human itself might be. “The maps,” as Deligny writes, “do not say much, except that we do not at all know what the *human* is, nor the *common*.”⁷⁶ As Doina Petrescu suggests, “The autistic space and its tracing” that Deligny sought to bring into being “push to the limit the question of indeterminacy within the common experience of space and representation, a limit that challenges conventional notions of space and community.”⁷⁷ Amit Pinchevski similarly suggests that Deligny’s work prefigures recent philosophical efforts to “rethink community in terms of difference (rather than sameness) and away from essence, telos, and logos.” For Deligny, the notion of the common:

is not about fusion, not a collective reiteration of a common foundation or common goal; nor is it a project to be built or achieved collectively. What founds community is rather a shared experience of finitude: the limits of life, language, and time. Community is what takes place between finite beings, mutually exposed to each others’ mortality; it is where differences meet without merging, it is the difference that unites.⁷⁸

“The *common* I speak of, resistant to the intrusion of language, neither communes nor communicates,” he writes. Yet the new sense of the common that takes shape in Deligny’s work is also as old as the Arachnean itself: “If our particular network, so flimsy and precarious, had a vocation,” he writes, “it would be to weave at least some aspects of a primordial communism.”⁷⁹ Deligny’s resolute commitment to forging new senses of the human and of the

⁷⁶ Fernand Deligny, *L’Arachnéen*, 138. The original reads as follows:

Les cartes, à vrai dire, ne disent pas grand-chose, sinon que l’humain, on ne sait pas du tout ce que c’est, et le commun non plus.

⁷⁷ Doina Petrescu, “The Indeterminate Mapping of the Common,” *Field: A Free Journal for Architecture*. 1, no. 1 (2007): 96.

⁷⁸ Amit Pinchevski, “Bartleby’s Autism: Wandering Along Incommunicability,” *Cultural Critique* 78 (Spring 2011): 52-53.

⁷⁹ Deligny, *The Arachnean*, 89.

common—beyond the reach of disciplinary institutions, regimes of psychiatric normalization, or pre-given political programs—is perhaps his most significant contribution to this dissertation’s wider considerations of disability aesthetics and the politics of neurological difference. His example continues to resonate as a new generation of readers begins to discover in his work a cartographic provocation to imagine other trajectories and modes of being in common with and alongside difference, beyond the language-that-we-speak and the humans-that-we-are.

CHAPTER TWO

“Would It Get Some Wind for the Sailboat”:

**Christopher Knowles, Robert Wilson,
and the Performance of Neurological Difference**



Figure 4. Sheryl Sutton and Lucinda Childs in the opening scene of *Einstein on the Beach* (Brooklyn Academy of Music, 1984, photo by Tom Caravaglia)

The two women are already onstage as we enter the theater, framed by a stark white square of light at the far right edge of the proscenium stage. They sit beside each other, rigidly posed behind two small wooden desks. Clad in identical grey slacks, white button-up shirts, and dark suspenders, they gaze out serenely into the dark auditorium. The woman on the right, who is black, occasionally flicks the pointed fingers of her left hand above the desk in front of her, as if working an unseen circuit board. Though it's a little hard to hear above the din of the audience members still settling into their seats, it gradually becomes clear that she is intermittently reciting

a series of numerical figures: “Seventy-five. Sixty-four. Four hundred and one. Three.” The woman on the left, who is white, holds her arms slightly outstretched in front of her, sporadically moving her fingers as if tapping the keys of typewriter. She too seems to speak, though her words are harder to decipher. Odd fragments of poetic phrases, patiently enunciated single words, leave her mouth at the rate of a leaking faucet:

The sailboat and
It could be
Would it get
The railroad for these workers and
Will it get some wind
Fresh and clean
The gear-shift
All these are the days my friends
These are
Th th th days

The nearly static tableau that makes up the first scene of Robert Wilson and Philip Glass’s four-and-a-half-hour experimental opera *Einstein on the Beach* lasts a long time: over thirty minutes by the clock. The effect of the scene in the theater is immediately hypnotic, as if time itself were being elastically distended through the scrupulously slow coordination of the two women’s words and gestures.

The words themselves, it soon becomes clear, are neither random nor arbitrary. Separately and together, the two women will return to these words, in various permutations, over the course of the ensuing performance. They are drawn from a series of poems by Christopher

Knowles, who at the time of their composition was in his early adolescence. Born in Brooklyn in 1950 and diagnosed as autistic in early infancy, Knowles spent much of his childhood in a psychiatric institution for developmentally disabled youth in upstate New York.¹ A chance meeting with Robert Wilson in 1973 led Knowles (with the consent of his family) to join with the Byrd Hoffman School of Byrds, an ad hoc experimental theater collective that Wilson was running out his loft in New York's SoHo neighborhood. Wilson soon embarked on a series of theatrical collaborations with Knowles, a process that would culminate with Knowles's contributing most of the spoken text in *Einstein on the Beach*.² Often described as one of the most significant artistic accomplishments of the past century, *Einstein* is a highly stylized, formally rigorous, and epically conceived work. The opera was developed by Wilson and Glass in New York in the mid-1970s, and received its premiere in 1976 at the Avignon Festival in France. Lacking discernible characters or plot, *Einstein* achieves its spellbinding effects through the complex interweaving of Wilson's enigmatic stage images, Lucinda Childs's intricately patterned dance sequences, Glass's hypnotic minimalist musical score, and Knowles's poetic

¹ Knowles's diagnostic status has varied over the course of his lifetime. The small amount of critical literature on Knowles's literary and artistic practice has been vague about this aspect of his biography; most sources refer to him as autistic, others as mentally disabled or "brain damaged." In this regard, Knowles's experience mirrors the historically unsettled definition of "autism" itself.

² After playing in several additional European cities following the Avignon performances, *Einstein on the Beach* received its American premiere at the Metropolitan Opera House in November 1976, after Wilson managed to rent the Met auditorium for two successive Sundays when the opera company had no scheduled performances. It was revived at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in 1984 and reconstructed for a limited international tour in 1992. A 2012 production—overseen by Glass, Wilson, and Lucinda Childs, one of the work's original performers who created new choreography for the 1984 performances—was the most significant and widely seen tour of the opera to date. Beginning with performances at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in September 2012, the tour included stops in London, Toronto, Amsterdam, Mexico City, Hong Kong, Paris, and Berlin, playing over 50 performances for nearly 100,000 audience members. It is likely to be the last revival to be undertaken while all three of its original creators are still alive.

texts. A 12-member chorus—clad in identical grey slacks, white shirts, and suspenders, imitating the clothes the historical Einstein wears in a photograph of the scientist in his office at Princeton that Wilson found while researching the work—performs the furiously difficult vocal lines of Glass’s spiraling motifs and arpeggios. The music, which has been performed in each mounting of the piece by the six-member Philip Glass Ensemble, is scored for organs, synthesizers, woodwinds, and a solo violin player dressed as Albert Einstein—complete with wrinkle lines, fright wig, and bushy eyebrows. Wilson’s designs are based around the recurring scenic motifs of a train, a courtroom, and an open field, which are presented in various ordered permutations over the work’s four acts. Rather than treating its titular eponymous figure as a dramatic character, the work’s fleeting and abstract invocations of the historical personage of Albert Einstein function more like ciphers pointing us toward the work’s true concerns: time, cognition, sensory-perception.

In an essay written in response to *Einstein*’s 1976 premiere, the art critic Craig Owens wrote of Wilson’s “ambition to stage a semblance of the unanalyzed, amorphous continuum of sensory data which is subsequently segmented by the formative action of language.”³ Indeed, *Einstein on the Beach* explores how time is experienced before it becomes representable within language. Consequently, the role of verbal language in *Einstein* is perhaps the opera’s most fascinating yet elusive formal element. The text-settings sung by the chorus consist principally of numerical figures corresponding to the music’s rhythmic structure (“one” “two” “three”) and solfeggio syllables (“do,” “rei,” “mi”) referring to the melodic lines they follow. The opera’s two principal speaking performers (played in the original production by Lucinda Childs and Sheryl

³ Craig Owens, “*Einstein on the Beach*: The Primacy of Metaphor,” *October* 4 (Autumn 1977): 25.

Sutton, and in the 2012 revival by Kate Moran and Helga Davis) speak Knowles's texts at key moments over the course of the opera. Ostensibly abstract and non-referential, upon repeated listening it becomes clear that Knowles's texts are organized according to a rigorous structural logic that echoes the patterned ordering of Wilson's stage imagery, Glass's score, and Childs's dances. In *Einstein* (as in other theatrical works that Wilson created with Knowles leading up to making the longer opera), spoken language performs an almost physical or material function, rather than a semantic or narrative one. Wilson, who has often described his own approach to directing as "architectural," explains, "Chris constructs as he speaks. It's as though he sees the words before him in space. He uses language as much for its geometric structure as for its meaning."⁴ One poem in particular recurs, in fugue-like counterpoint or as a haunting refrain, at key points of the opera:

Would
Would it
Would it get
Would it get some
Would it get some wind
Would it get some wind for
Would it get some wind for the
Would it get some wind for the sailboat

The typed lines conjuring the very shape of the sailboat that the poem invokes; when spoken, the words carve out a shapely of sonic space in the mind of the listener, roomy enough for the wind

⁴ Wilson quoted in Laurence Shyer, *Robert Wilson and His Collaborators* (New York: Theater Communications Group, 1993), 80.

to whistle through.

A review in the French newspaper *L'Aurore* of the 1976 premiere of *Einstein on the Beach* at the Avignon Festival praised the work as “fantastically imaginative” but also noted its “obsessive stuttering and eternal repetition,” which the reviewer suggested made the performance resemble “a lesson for the re-education of the mentally disabled, a therapy for depression, a cure for insomniacs or a psycho-motor nightmare.”⁵ While *Einstein*’s reception in France was mostly positive and in some cases bordered on rapturous, the *Aurore* reviewer’s anxieties about the seeming affinity of *Einstein*’s style with the perseverations and obsessions characteristic of mental pathology would continue to shadow critical discussions of the opera and, indeed, Wilson’s wider theatrical oeuvre. In a 1977 interview with the editors of *Performing Arts Journal*, for instance, Susan Sontag is asked if she feels that modern art’s preoccupations with the dimensions of human consciousness is, in some sense, a troubling or even dangerous tradition. “It seems to me,” Sontag responds, “that its biggest limitation is the value placed on consciousness conceived of as a wholly private activity.” She continues:

It’s hardly surprising that so many modernist artists have been fascinated by the diseases of consciousness—that an art committed to solipsism would re-capitulate the gestures of the pathology of solipsism. If you start from an asocial notion of perception or consciousness, you must inevitably end up with the poetry of mental illness and mental deficiency. With autistic silence. With the autistic’s use of language: compulsive repetition and variation. With an obsession with circles.

With an abstract or distended notion of time.

The interviewer, Bonnie Marranca, then asks Sontag, “Are you thinking of the work of Robert

⁵ Quoted in Maria Shevtsova, *Robert Wilson* (London: Routledge, 2007), 83.

Wilson?” Sontag responds in the affirmative, before going on to connect Wilson’s theater with “the long faux-naïf tradition in modernist art, one of whose great figures is Gertrude Stein.”⁶ What links these critical accounts of Wilson’s work is a subtly expressed anxiety about the problematic relationship between aesthetic production and what the authors variously refer to as “autism,” “the mentally disabled,” and “the pathology of solipsism” found in it. Not only do these critics find the preoccupation with “diseases of consciousness” disturbing, even frightening; they also seem to presume mental pathology to be oppositional to the proper function of aesthetic activity.

In his pioneering work on disability aesthetics, Tobin Siebers writes of the widespread view within aesthetic discourse that “mental disability represents an absolute rupture with the work of art.”⁷ This is, however, an axiom that recent efforts to reassess the terms of aesthetic production and reception from the perspective of disability studies would seek to dispute. That an artist diagnosed with autism played a central part in the creation of such a significant and widely influential work of twentieth-century performance has been largely overlooked, even as performance studies scholars have increasingly recognized disability as a crucial category for performance analysis.

In this chapter, I offer an account of the role of disability in Wilson’s theatrical collaborations with Knowles, with a particular emphasis on Knowles’s contributions to *Einstein on the Beach*. Disability in these collaborations is not the locus of sentimental fascination or moral sympathy, nor is it an abstract metaphor for modernist (or postmodernist) crises of meaning. Rather, I argue that it is a structuring condition of these works’ formal and thematic

⁶ Susan Sontag, Bonnie Marranca, and Gautam Dasgupta, “Art and Consciousness,” *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 80, Vol. 27, No. 2 (May 2005): 6.

⁷ Tobin Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 15.

explorations of the boundaries of cognition itself. In so doing, I offer a corrective to Sontag's implicit assumption that "autistic language" is equivalent to "an asocial notion of perception or consciousness"—what the autism researcher Douglas Biklen has termed "the myth of the person alone" that pervades cultural representations of autism and adjacent conditions.⁸ Informed by recent work in disability studies as well as the emerging conceptual framework of neurodiversity, I understand autism and neurological disability to be historically contingent categories reflecting the complex variability of sensory, cognitive, and perceptual functions within the human neurotype—what the philosopher of science Ian Hacking terms "interactive kinds" of human classification, categories whose "looping effects" have the ability to "change the ways in which individuals experience themselves."⁹ Far from denying the material reality of impairment or the considerable challenges such conditions often involve, neurodiversity critiques the pervasively normative terms in which neurological difference is socially managed, understood, and represented. By calling attention to the disenfranchisement of autistics and other neurologically atypical subjects, the disability scholars Ralph James Savarese and Emily Thornton Savarese write, "a concept of neurodiversity can help us to remain attentive to a different sensibility—indeed a different way of being in, and perceiving, the world—while at the same time reminding us of the need to construct the category of the human in the most capacious manner possible."¹⁰ Neurodiversity can thus be understood as both a specific set of claims about the shortcomings of prevailing models of human personhood, and (more speculatively) as an occasion to rethink and

⁸ Douglas Biklen, *Autism and the Myth of the Person Alone* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

⁹ Ian Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 311. Hacking singles out autism specifically as an example of an interactive kind of classification.

¹⁰ Ralph James Savarese and Emily Thornton Savarese, "The Superior Half of Speaking," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 30, no. 1 (2010): <http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/1062/1230>

re-theorize the terms in which we understand communication, relationality, and the human sensorium.

That Wilson would be drawn to Knowles's texts in constructing an operatic work about the relationship between time and consciousness is especially significant in light of the director's experiences working with untrained, amateur, and often disabled performers, particularly in the early stages of his career. Yet from the perspective of disability studies, which has sought to call attention to the ways in which aesthetic representations of disability frequently reiterate norms of embodiment and cognition that materially constrain the lives of disabled people, Wilson's work with Knowles and other disabled performers is both ethically and politically fraught.¹¹

Consequently, my discussion also draws from and seeks to advance recent discussions about the ethical and political dimensions of disability aesthetics and performance. Mindful of the ethical complexities of Wilson's collaborations with Knowles, I also suggest that an attention to neurological difference requires new frameworks for conceptualizing the relationship between aesthetics, ethics, and politics in the modern theater. What other criteria might become possible for evaluating cross-ability artistic collaboration when a more gradated range of cognitive and sensory styles is taken into account—when, that is, the presumption of a stable and enduring ethical divide separating disabled artists from non-disabled ones is replaced by a more localized attention to the forms of sociality and aesthetic collaboration that emerge in, through, and across difference?

¹¹ See, e.g., David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001).

Disability in Wilson's Early Theater

Though long acknowledged as perhaps the most important American avant-garde director of the postwar period, Robert Wilson has been largely overlooked by scholars working in disability studies, despite the important role that disabled performers and collaborators have played in the development of his theatrical style. This is no doubt due to the fact that disability is not treated as a narrative theme or motif in Wilson's work, but is more subtly integrated into the highly formalized presentational style that defines his productions. Wilson's work has also consistently attempted to use theater and performance as a forum for exploring atypical modes of cognition and embodiment in ways that go beyond the biomedical terms of pathology and individual suffering.

Born in Waco, Texas in 1941, Wilson has said that he was extremely shy and socially withdrawn throughout his childhood and adolescence, and that he also struggled with persistent problems with auditory processing and spoke with a stutter. Wilson's speech impediment, along with an early awareness of his homosexuality, contributed to his deep sense of social alienation from the conservative Texas milieu of the 1950s. Wilson has attributed his earliest and most significant creative influence to Byrd Hoffman, an elderly dance teacher he encountered in high school. Hoffman encouraged Wilson to slow down his speech and taught him simple movement exercises, which allowed him to eventually overcome both his difficulty speaking and his shyness. Wilson would go on to use techniques he learned from Hoffman in his work as a theater teacher for middle and high school students while enrolled as a business student at the University of Texas in Austin.¹²

¹² Accounts of Wilson's early life and experiences with Hoffman are presented in Stefan Brecht's *Robert Wilson: The Theater of Visions* (London: Methuen, 1994) and in the

Upon moving to New York to study architecture at Brooklyn's Pratt Institute in the early 1960s, Wilson earned money working with "brain damaged children" and hospitalized adult patients in Harlem and the Bronx as an employee of the New York State Department of Welfare and as an instructor with Head Start. Wilson's work with physically disabled and cognitively impaired children and adults informed his budding interest in how experimenting with the speed and direction of the body's movements could alter perception. Some of these same questions were simultaneously being explored in the artistic milieu of the New York downtown art scene. Influenced by the work of John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Robert Rauschenberg, and Jasper Johns, younger artists associated with movements including Fluxus and the Judson Dance Theatre were beginning to explore non-expressive, presentational, and process-based modes of performance and art-making. These tendencies resonated with Wilson's interest in working with non-professional and often socially marginalized people in his performances. When Wilson founded his own performance group in a SoHo loft that he purchased in 1968, he named it after his early dance teacher. Similar to other artistic collectives that emerged from the counterculture in the mid to late 1960s, the Byrd Hoffman School of Byrds was a motley and continually evolving collection of students, professional artists, and others Wilson met in his workshops, on the street, or in his travels, whom he would invite to join the group. Wilson and his collaborators, many of whom lived together in the loft at various points, created experimental performances in found spaces—parking lots, alleyways, waterfronts—throughout the city. Downtown fixtures such as Jack Smith, Meredith Monk, and Stefan Brecht were each involved in these early performances, which would often last until the early hours of the morning.

documentary film *Absolute Wilson* (dir. Katharina Otto-Bernstein, Film Manufacturers Inc., 2007).

In 1967, while running a summer theater program for high school students in New Jersey, Wilson met and eventually became the legal guardian of Raymond Andrews, a 13-year old African American boy who was both Deaf and nonverbal. Andrews would become one of the early pivotal influences in the development of Wilson's theatrical style. Wilson explains the circumstances of their meeting as follows:

I was walking down a street in Summit, New Jersey, and I saw a policeman about to hit a child over the head with a club. It was a 13-year-old African American boy. And I said to the policeman, "Why are you going to hit this child?" He said, "It's none of your business." I said, "It is. I'm a responsible citizen. Why are you going to hit this boy?" Anyway, eventually I left with the policeman and went to a police station with the boy and recognized the sound coming from the boy as being that of a deaf person. To make a long story short, the boy's name was Raymond Andrews and he eventually came to live with me. I actually adopted him. He had never been to school and he knew no words. He was going to be institutionalized, he was going to be locked up; he was thought to be uneducable. I had never heard that word. My early works were very much influenced by this deaf boy and his way of hearing.¹³

Wilson created a performance, *Deafman Gance*, largely in response to the effect that Andrews's presence had when he came to live with Wilson and the Byrds. Wilson became fascinated by the unusual modes of communicating and perceiving that Andrews had developed, and was particularly intrigued by Andrews's imaginative drawings. *Deafman Gance* premiered at the University of Iowa in 1970 and was subsequently performed at the Brooklyn Academy of Music;

¹³ Wilson in Robert Wilson and Fred Newman, "A Dialogue on Politics and Therapy, Stillness and Vaudeville," *TDR: The Drama Review* 47, no. 3 (Autumn 2003): 116.

the piece then toured to Europe, where its rapturous reception launched Wilson's international career. In each location where it was performed, the work changed form; in the spirit of the atmosphere at the Byrd Hoffman School, Wilson often invited locals he came across at each location to join the cast in various small roles. The length of each performance also varied considerably, ranging from three to over twelve hours.

Deafman Glance begins with a precisely choreographed, highly formal, and extremely slow (nearly 45-minute) scene of a woman (played by Sheryl Sutton) clad in a long black Victorian gown who first offers a glass of milk to a small child before gently and methodically stabbing him with a hunting knife, as another, older child (played in most of the performances by Andrews) looks on and, upon witnessing the murder, screams. The scenes that follow the Prologue unfold according to a dreamlike associative logic, as the older boy enters a surrealist, sylvan landscape featuring large, papier-mâché animal puppets. Performers dressed as angels with pink wings appear, as do figures dressed as Marie Antoinette and George Washington. The performance takes place largely in silence, punctuated periodically by Andrews's screams and short bursts of recorded music (including Fauré's *Requiem* and Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*).

Deafman's stage images are geometrically composed, and the performers' movements are stylized and almost architectural in their spatial precision: gesture, bodily position, and the speed and direction of movement in relation to the stage and lighting scheme takes precedence over subjective expression or narrative coherence. Of the potentially disturbing scene of infanticide depicted in the work's first scene, Sheryl Sutton has explained, "No emotion was implied. No anguish. No suffering. It was more subliminal. I thought of it as a ritual, like a mass.

Raising and lowering the knife was like raising a lowering a chalice.”¹⁴ Eschewing the naturalistic protocols of dramatic plot and characterization, *Deafman Glances* was organized as a poetic progression of images. Stefan Brecht, who performed in the work, writes that the onstage world of *Deafman Glance* was characterized by “fragmentation, incongruity, amorphousness, uncenteredness, aimlessness, inconsistent plurality of mode.”¹⁵ Upon seeing the production in Paris, the Surrealist artist Louis Aragon described it as a “deaf opera” worthy of taking up the aesthetic project inaugurated by the Surrealist movement that largely set the agenda for the European avant-garde between the wars. Wilson has said that *Deafman*’s presentational style was drawn from his interactions with Andrews: “he made drawings to communicate with me, and I realized he thought in images. This experience proved to me how much the mind depends on visual thinking.”¹⁶ Indeed, disability studies scholar Kanta Kochhar-Lindgren has suggested that *Deafman Glances* involves an “aestheticization of the sensory experience of deafness” by conjuring a mysterious aesthetic world through a meticulously composed procession of stage images.¹⁷

In 1973, a former professor of Wilson’s from Pratt passed along to the director an audio recording that the son of one of his colleagues, a 13-year-old boy named Christopher Knowles, had made while a patient at the O.D. Heck School in Schenectady, New York. With its logically ordered, repetitively modulated constructions of words, phrases, and phonemes, Knowles’s tape intrigued Wilson, who invited Knowles and his parents to attend a performance of a new work

¹⁴ Sutton quoted in Arthur Holmberg, *The Theater of Robert Wilson* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 7.

¹⁵ Stefan Brecht, *The Theater of Visions: Robert Wilson* (London: Methuen, 1982), 88.

¹⁶ Wilson quoted in Holmberg, *The Theater of Robert Wilson*, 79.

¹⁷ Kanta Kochhar-Lindgren, *Hearing Difference: The Third Ear in Experimental, Deaf, and Multicultural Theater* (Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 2006), 89.

for the Byrds, *The Life and Times of Sigmund Freud*, at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Upon their arrival at the theatre, Wilson asked if Knowles would perform some of his poems from the recording as part of that evening's performance. Knowles's parents agreed to let him participate; when they saw how much he enjoyed the experience they allowed him to do so again the following night, and then for the remaining the run of the production. Soon after, Knowles's parents (in consultation with his doctors at the Heck School) agreed to allow him to move in to the Spring Street loft with Wilson and the Byrds, where Knowles quickly became the center of attention for the fledgling company. Wilson remained particularly fascinated by the adolescent's peculiar yet highly structured use of language, explaining, "There's always a sense of organization in his tapes and writings, it's not an arbitrary arrangement of words and sounds. Everything he does makes sense but not in the way we're accustomed to."¹⁸

Company members describe exercises in which Wilson instructed the Byrds to imitate Knowles's movement and speech patterns, creating a kind of "echolalia" that was itself reminiscent of Knowles's own techniques in composing poems on a typewriter. In an exhaustive and idiosyncratic account of his time as a member of the Byrd Hoffman School, Brecht recalls that in bringing Knowles to create work for the Byrds, Wilson hoped that "We would learn to relate, — communicate, — vocally without relying on or without concern for the meaning of what we said or of what was said to us. It would help impart to the conversation an ineffable formality, the same air of *ritual*, perhaps, that in previous pieces had attached to social motion" (271). In his works created via typewriter, Knowles manipulated the graphic qualities of words and individual letters to create striking images through the repetition and subtle modulation of key-strokes and hard returns. Similarly, in his voice recordings—primarily created using a reel-

¹⁸ Wilson quoted in Shyer, *Robert Wilson and His Collaborators*, 79.

to-reel tape recorder—Knowles repeats and then gradually transforms delimited sets words and phonemes, creating intricate sound-worlds that hover at the edges of semantic coherence. The cumulative sonic effect can be at once lulling and surprising. As Robyn Brentano, another member of the Byrd School during this period, explains, “Chris has a particular brilliance for perceiving structure. He is able to carry a lot of information in his head and reveal a relationship between things in a way other people can’t and I think that’s what Bob was influenced by, this perception Chris has of language, space, and graphic detail.”¹⁹ The art historian Lauren DiGiulio offers a more recent assessment of Knowles’s typed poems, suggesting that

Within these typings, language behaves in an unexpected manner. Words arrange themselves in unconventional syntactical patterns. Articles and prepositions propagate in excess. Single words, groups of words, and larger blocks of phrasing repeat, proliferating to a point at which the implied meaning of the language begins to unravel. This disintegration allows us to focus on the text’s material qualities—the sound and rhythm of the phrasing, the shape and color of the words on the page—rather than on its implied meaning or content. As readers, we begin to relate to the language in sensory terms, engaging aurally, visually, and tactilely with the words themselves.²⁰

Both Knowles’s typed poems and the recordings in which he recites his compositions reveal a highly precise approach to language as both a sonic *and* visual element, treating the constitutive components of speech and writing like pliant building blocks that can be organized in space just as they can be spoken in time, a quality that would be crucial to the unusual treatment of spoken

¹⁹ Brentano quoted in Shyer, 80.

²⁰ Lauren DiGiulio, “Christopher Knowles and the Structured Logic of Play,” Barbican Center Publications, 2012, n.p.

language as a theatrical element in *Einstein on the Beach*.

Wilson's next two major theatrical works for the Byrds were created based on texts that Knowles composed and that he further refined in conversation with other members of the company; both pieces also featured the teenager as a principal performer. In *A Letter for Queen Victoria* (which premiered in 1974 in Spoleto, Italy), and *The \$ Value of Man* (first performed in 1975 at BAM), Wilson not only used Knowles's poetry as the plays' spoken dialogue, but his typings became the basis for graphic elements incorporated into the scenic design. The effect can be seen in archival photographs from the performances. A particularly striking image from *Queen Victoria* shows Wilson, clad in a dark suit and straw fedora, walking in profile toward stage left in front of a white theatrical drop curtain printed with enlarged words and letters ("THERE," "BIRUP"), creating a grid-like pattern with capital letters behind him (see **figure 5**):



Figure 5. Robert Wilson performing in front of a drop curtain printed with text by Christopher Knowles, in *A Letter for Queen Victoria* (Photo by Philippe Gras, Brooklyn Academy of Music, 1974)

Queen Victoria featured a segment in which Knowles and Wilson performed a recitation of

Knowles's poem "The Sundance Kid is Beautiful." Each time the poem was performed it was slightly different, but a 2007 transcription of the script of *Queen Victoria* gives a sense of text:

THE SUNDANCE KID IS BEAUTIFUL
AND THE STORY IS ABOUT THE SUNDANCE KID
AND THE MOVIE IS ABOUT THE SUNDANCE KID
AND THE SUNDANCE KID IS BEAUTIFUL
BEAUTIFUL
YEAH THE SUNDANCE KID WAS BEAUTIFUL
YEAH THE SUNDANCE KID IS BEAUTIFUL
YEAH THE SUNDANCE KID IS VERY BEAUTIFUL
YEAH THE SUNDANCE KID CAN
DO THE DANCE

In this poem many of Knowles's stylistic and formal traits are on display: the repetition with modulation, as well as the references to popular culture (in his account of the development of the play, Brecht explains that the poem was generated in response to a conversation that arose in rehearsals about the recently released film *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*). In Knowles's work, linguistic signs (in both their visual and phonetic registers) are unmoored from their semantic anchoring in the semiotic system of language; they become abstract, formal elements in a newly constituted aesthetic or expressive system. In this way Knowles's work resembles the operations of concrete poetry. Working with Knowles's typed compositions and embodied presence as a performer allowed Wilson to develop a theatrical equivalent to concrete poetics, in which the expressive and communicative functions of language are subsumed by the visual and aural dimensions of words, letters, and phonemes. In atomizing the constituent sounds of speech,

the visual elements of written language, and the gestural repertoires of bodily comportment, Wilson attempted to create a theatrical vocabulary that approximated the singular perceptual contours of Knowles's consciousness—of, that is, his “different way of being in, and perceiving, the world.”²¹

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The role of disability in Wilson's early theater pieces—and particularly his work with Raymond Andrews and Christopher Knowles—raise a number of key questions about the ethics of collaboration in modern theatrical practice. The reception of Wilson's work has been somewhat polarized on this point: while many of Wilson's early collaborators and scholarly admirers have lauded his work with both Andrews and Knowles as progressive and enlightened, a number of critics have cast a more critical eye on the ethical implications of these performances. In a review of a 1977 performance of *Dialog/Curious George*, a smaller-scale work (based in part on the children's book monkey character created by Hans Augusto Rey and Margaret Rey) which featured just Knowles and Wilson onstage, *Village Voice* theater critic Erika Munk wrote of the “dreadful air of controlling Knowles” that permeated the work.²² Describing another Wilson/Knowles collaboration from the same period, performance theorist Richard Schechner similarly maintained that Knowles could not be considered an actor in the performance but was rather “*situated and displayed as if he were an actor inside Wilson's show.*” Schechner's argument depends upon the unstated supposition that “acting” requires a predetermined level of

²¹ Savarese and Savarese, “The Superior Half of Speaking.”

²² Erika Munk, “And Thereby Hangs a Tail,” *Village Voice*, May 1977

cognitive competence and reflexivity that (he presumes) Knowles lacks.²³ For Munk and Schechner, the mere fact of Knowles’s cognitive disability would seem to preclude him from the sphere of moral agency, and (by extension) to deprive him of right to be afforded the status of an “actor” at all.

Munk and Schechner’s critiques point to a more fundamental problem that Wilson’s work with Knowles poses for any critical project proceeding within the dominant political framework of liberal modernity. Indeed, Wilson’s collaborations with Andrews and Knowles surface a number of important and unresolved tensions within recent critical discourse about cognitive disability, ethics, and moral agency. These debates have concerned the extent to which mental disability involves the corresponding disablement of political autonomy—and, by extension, of moral agency as such. Indeed, the extent to which disability can be adequately integrated into the normative tenets of liberal humanism has been an ongoing source of contestation within disability studies. The feminist theorist Cora Kaplan notes that disability “continues to trouble the rhetoric of liberal individualism, testing both its ethics of tolerance and its fetishization of autonomy and agency as conditions of human status and civic participation.”²⁴ This issue, in various forms, has been at the heart of recent debates surrounding the challenges that cognitive and intellectual disability poses to the dominant political, ethical, and aesthetic values of liberal modernity. As disability theorist Nirmala Erevelles summarizes the question, “Are people who have been identified as cognitively disabled competent (or incompetent) to represent

²³ Richard Schechner, “Magnitudes of Performance,” in *By Means of Performance: Intercultural Studies of Theater and Ritual*, eds. Richard Schechner and Willa Appel, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 38, emphasis in original.

²⁴ Cora Kaplan, “Afterword: Liberalism, Feminism, and Defect,” in *“Defects”*: *Engendering the Modern Body*, Helen Deutsch and Felicity Nussbaum, eds. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 303–4.

themselves?”²⁵ While my intent is not to shield Wilson’s actions from ethical scrutiny or criticism, I would like to suggest that these performances necessitate a more complex and supple account of the relationship between aesthetics, politics, and ethics than accounts such as Munk’s and Schechner’s provide. In order to begin to develop such an account, in the following section I momentarily depart from the example of Wilson and Knowles’s theatrical collaborations and turn to a consideration of several more recent discussions of disability aesthetics: Stuart Murray’s concept of “autistic presence,” Michael Davidson’s discussion of “disability poetics,” and Ralph James Savarese’s call for a “neurocosmopolitan” aesthetics.

Stuart Murray offers the concept of “autistic presence” in his study of the multiple and frequently conflicting ways that autistic figures and characters have been depicted in the history of cultural representations of the disorder.²⁶ Murray focuses on mainstream genres such as films, novels, and memoirs, in which the presence of autistic characters are made intelligible using the protocols of narrative characterization. Murray argues that “It is the presence of the person with autism, in whatever form, that stops the condition being *only* subject to the workings of metaphor and fascination.” He continues by proposing that “autistic presence, in all its many forms,” is at “the core of all attempts to discuss agency and legitimacy in those subjects for whom autism is in some way part of their representational existence.”²⁷ He further observes that in fictional portrayals of autism or autistic-seeming characters in mainstream fictional film, “the autistic characters (especially the children) alternate between the twin poles of visual absence and

²⁵ Nirmala Erevelles, “Signs of Reason: Riviere, Facilitated Communication, and the Crisis of the Subject,” in *Foucault and the Government of Disability*, ed. Shelley Tremain, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 46.

²⁶ Stuart Murray, *Representing Autism: Culture, Narrative, Fascination* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), 32.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 16

presence, where the exceptionality that dominates certain narrative elements can suddenly become a passivity that appears to offer no narrative at all.”²⁸ For Murray, the concept of autistic presence serves as an ethical call to attend to the material conditions of the disabled subjects of representation: their presence, he suggests, provides a material anchor, a ballast against the abstractions and metaphors that have long surrounded both the condition itself and those diagnosed with it: “The material nature of such presence, the excess it creates when confronted with any idea of what ‘normal’ human activity or behavior might be, stubbornly refuses to be reduced to any narrative—medical, social, or cultural—that might seek to contain it without reference to its own terms.”²⁹ Offering a reading of a photograph of two young autistic girls taken at a school for children with learning disabilities in Surrey, England in 1966, Murray proposes that the “girls may well be oblivious to the photographer’s presence,” but that they “nevertheless can set the agenda for the interpretation of the photograph.”³⁰ Attending to the “presence of autistic figures and subjects in representational aesthetic genres” (he discusses photographs, fictional literary narratives, memoirs, documentaries, and mainstream fictional films such as *Rain Man* and *Punch-Drunk-Love*) is, for Murray, an ethical-political position that he argues can directly contribute to the remediation of the material disenfranchisement of autistic people.

Murray’s concept of autistic presence suggests an ethics of reading and viewing that is deeply informed by and responsive to the political orientation of disability studies. Still, in confining itself to the (complicated enough) question of “representation,” Murray’s study can only get us so far in thinking about aesthetic practices and operations that have sought to

²⁸ Ibid., 128

²⁹ Ibid., xviii.

³⁰ Ibid., xviii.

challenge, subvert, reformulate, or depart entirely from the conventions of narrative and mimetic realism—conventions that are themselves (as recent work in cognitive literary studies has sought to demonstrate) largely driven by what might now be characterized as neurotypical generic conventions. How might the notion of autistic presence be extended beyond the immediate terms elaborated by Murray in order to be useful to my discussion of Wilson and Knowles—whose work, of course, eschews the conventions of narrative coherence, theatrical characterization, and even clearly discernible semantic language? How would the relationship of disability aesthetics to ethics be shifted or transformed in the face of aesthetic works and practices in which the “presence” of autism or disability is just as operative but less immediately identifiable as such?

Michael Davidson discusses such a possibility in his critical writing on the midcentury American poet Larry Eigner. Loosely associated with both the Black Mountain and Language Schools, Eigner was confined to his Berkeley home for most of his adult life due to cerebral palsy contracted at birth, and composed his poetry through a painstaking process of letter-by-letter typing using the index finger of his sole mobile hand. In his discussion of Eigner’s work, Davidson asks how one might “avoid reducing the poem to an allegory of disability,” particularly when his body of work seems largely devoid of themes or motifs of bodily impairment.³¹ Rather, Davidson suggests that the hallmarks of Eigner’s compositional style—his unusual but precise positioning of letters and words on the page, and his “truncation or effacement of rhetorical connectives” such that “subjects and predicates occupy multiple positions”—are themselves textual indications of the determining, generative force of disability

³¹ Michael Davidson, *Concerto for the Left Hand: Disability and the Defamiliar Body* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 139.

in his poetry.³² Davidson writes that a disability analytic of postwar poetry should not simply be undertaken to “find disability references but to see the way Eigner’s work unseats normalizing discourses of embodiment.”³³ Davidson argues for the importance of what he calls a “poetics—as much as a politics—of disability” by suggesting that Eigner’s poetry “defamiliarizes not only language but the body normalized *within* language.”³⁴

Davidson’s concept of disability poetics orients our attention beyond the merely referential or allegorical invocation of impairment in aesthetic works, indicating how a work’s stylistic and formal qualities, and its embodied modes of composition, can be shaped by disability in ways that are more mimetically diffuse. At the same time, Davidson insists that the distinctive formal, aesthetic characteristics of Eigner’s poetry—and of disability poetics more generally—are indelibly linked to particular political and ethical claims that exceed, or perhaps puncture, the aesthetic enclosure of the poems themselves by disrupting what Davidson calls “normalizing discourses of embodiment.” This line of argument recalls literary theorist Ato Quayson’s argument, in *Aesthetic Nervousness*, that the presence of disability in aesthetic works effectively serves to “close the gap between representation and ethics, making visible the aesthetic field’s relationship to the social situation of persons with disability in the real world.”³⁵ For both Davidson and Quayson, in other words, it is precisely the *formal* characteristics produced by the presence of disability in a given aesthetic work—rather than any narrative or semantic “content”—that anchors it to a wider social context that exists beyond its frame.

I am drawn to Davidson’s reading of Eigner’s disability poetics for the purposes of my

³² Ibid., 121–22.

³³ Ibid., 121.

³⁴ Ibid., 118.

³⁵ Ato Quayson, *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 24.

discussion of Christopher Knowles since the two poets' bodies of work share a number of characteristics. Both took advantage of the graphic possibilities of the typewritten page; both developed idiosyncratic yet internally consistent ways of fragmenting language; for both, in Eigner's words, "Radio and TV have been audio-visual prosthesis."³⁶ And yet Davidson reads Eigner's disability poetics in specifically *physical* terms, noting, for instance, "how the material limits of the poet's physical act of writing govern the creation of rhythm."³⁷ In Knowles's poetry and typed compositions, by contrast, the formal arrangement of the words and letters on the page is a reflection of the ways in which Knowles's neurological disability has shaped his singular sensory-perceptual mode of encountering the world. To be sure, the distinction between physical or embodied and "mental"/neurological disability in the cases of Eigner and Knowles is a provisional one—it is clear that for each poet, writing involves cognitive and embodied processes that are deeply intertwined. Yet when considering the work of Knowles and other poets with cognitive disabilities, it might be necessary to augment Davidson's suggestion that disability poetics operates by unseating and defamiliarizing the way language is structured by normative forms of embodiment; indeed, as I will show in the remainder of this chapter, Knowles's work—including his collaborations with Wilson—reveals the normalizing force of dominant representational models used to conceptualize *cognition itself*. Modulating Davidson's argument, then, we might propose that Knowles's work defamiliarizes the *mind* normalized within language.

Yet such a proposal immediately raises further questions, in part concerning the way many of the critical concepts and vocabularies developed within disability studies were initially

³⁶ Quoted in Davidson, *Concerto for the Left Hand*, 130.

³⁷ Davidson, 128.

formulated in relation to the “physical,” “embodied” aspects of disability. As Ralph James Savarese has argued,

As it was developing, the field of disability studies did not know what to do with cognitive disability—largely because it did not seem to fit the model of social construction to which it was so committed. That model had proven tremendously effective in exposing the negative cultural meanings that had become attached to disability, but it seemed a good deal more credible when the disability involved a leg or an eye or an immune system than when it involved the very organ of thought. With respect to autism, the question becomes: how to attend to the history of damaging assumptions about the disorder while also acknowledging the actual neurological differences that underpin it? Such differences are themselves culturally shaped and interpreted, to be sure, but they cannot be neatly managed by a pure social-constructionist perspective.³⁸

For Savarese, it is important to consider the particular cognitive and sensory styles and modes of being that characterize the experience autism and other forms of neurological disability. In several places, Savarese characterizes this position as “neurocosmopolitan,” by which he means “not just an openness to neurological difference but, rather, a denaturalization, even a dethronement, of privileged neurotypicality.”³⁹ Drawing from postcolonial theories of alterity and difference, Savarese maintains that developing a critical attunement to the aesthetics of neurocosmopolitanism might—like Davidson’s account of Eigner’s disability poetics—disrupt

³⁸ Ralph James Savarese and Lisa Zunshine, “The Critic as Neurocosmopolite; Or, What Cognitive Approaches to Literature Can Learn from Disability Studies,” *Narrative* 22, 1 (January 2014), 26.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 20.

and upend the normative social hierarchies that separate neurotypical from neurodivergent forms of personhood. With the concept of neurocosmopolitanism Savarese “envisions the dynamic interaction of neurotypicals and autistics, each apprenticing themselves to the other’s way of life and system of sensory processing.”⁴⁰ He describes, for instance, the autistic painter Larry Bissonnette’s tactile and intuitively sensory artistic practice as a procession of encounters with blocks of sensation, arguing that we might understand Bissonnette’s work as part of what he calls an “autistic tradition” within the history of aesthetics: “a kind of painterly heritage and perhaps even a perseverative school, one with intense sensory processing and a need to pattern at its core.”⁴¹ Since aesthetics involves the arrangement, organization, and distribution of sensation, Savarese maintains that cultivating a neurocosmopolitan aesthetic sensibility can lead to important political and ethical consequences, allowing viewers and makers across the spectrum of neurological difference to become attuned to different sensory orientations, styles, and “ways of being.”⁴² These recent discussions of autistic presence, disability poetics, and neurocosmopolitan aesthetics offer useful critical resources for describing the collaborations between Wilson and Knowles. Expanding from these concepts, I would further like to situate Knowles’s work—and especially its place in *Einstein on the Beach*—in relationship to a specific series of shifts in scientific, cultural, and political understandings of the brain and concurrent developments in the spheres of aesthetics and performance in which Wilson and Knowles were involved.

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⁴⁰ Ralph James Savarese, “Neurocosmopolitan Melville,” *Leviathan* 15, no. 2 (June 2013): 8.

⁴¹ Ralph James Savarese, “Gobs and Gobs of Metaphor,” *Inflexions* 5, “Simondon: Milieu, Techniques, Aesthetics” (March 2012): 186.

⁴² Jim Sinclair, “Don’t Mourn for Us,” Autism Network International (ANI), *Our Voice* 1, no. 3 (1993).

In June 2014, I interviewed the actor, singer, and performance artist Helga Davis, who played the role identified in the libretto simply as “Player 1” in the 2012 revival of *Einstein* (a role originated in the 1976 production by Sheryl Sutton). In the course of a wide-ranging conversation, we talked in some depth about Davis’s efforts to develop an effective stage dynamic with Kate Moran, the actor cast as “Player 2” (the role first played by Lucinda Childs). As in the opening scene of the opera described at the beginning of this chapter, the two featured roles frequently perform parallel, or at least complementary, functions: in some scenes they appear next to one another executing the same sequence of choreography; at other moments one of them will repeat a phrase, bodily position, or series of movements that the other has performed earlier in the opera. In the final scene the two women simply sit next to one another, perfectly still, as a third performer (dressed as a bus-driver and seated behind the steering wheel of a cut-out bus set piece) recites, like a bed-time story, a simple tale of “two lovers seated on a park bench, bathed in the moonlight” (one of the two pieces of spoken text in the opera not written by Knowles; it was composed by Samuel Johnson, a member of the original *Einstein* cast). For all these reasons, it’s crucial that the performers in the two roles are able to form an efficient and palpable connection onstage. Yet Davis reported that she and Moran had, at first, struggled to forge a connection. Over the course of the long rehearsal process, however, Davis explained that they were eventually able to develop a close and almost intuitive rapport; this happened, Davis told me, because “Bob always said that we were two halves of the same brain.”⁴³

Davis’s remark immediately struck me as significant, recalling as it did a passage from the introduction to Stefan Brecht’s 1992 book on Wilson, *Theater of Visions*:

The brain is functionally asymmetric. What either half is good at is inferred either from

⁴³ Helga Davis, interview with the author, 4 June 2014, New York City.

the whole brain's functional deteriorations when that half is wounded, or from a half's capacities—or the other half's capacities—in individuals, e.g. epileptics, subjected to callosotomy [*sic*], i.e., when the two halves don't communicate. Since the right half specializes in left-hand, the left half in right-hand sensory and motor activities, their respective capacities can also be inferred, taking into account inter-activity competition, from segregative studies of these.⁴⁴

That both Davis and Brecht would mention the two hemispheres of the brain when describing Wilson's work seems more than coincidental. Indeed, it indicates something about the broader historical context out of which *Einstein* emerged, and to which it responded.

Perhaps *Einstein* most easily recognizable historical theme concerns the advent of the nuclear age with the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945—an event which the historical Albert Einstein famously expressed regret about helping to have brought about through his pivotal contributions to theoretical physics. The opera's final hour is dominated by the buildup to a nuclear blast, which arrives in the penultimate scene (“spaceship”): a frantic, visually dazzling and musically ecstatic sequence in which the chorus, arranged on gridded scaffolding studded with intricately patterned flashing light bulbs, while two glass elevator boxes, each with a performer inside, glide through the air along (respectively) vertical and diagonal stage axes and, downstage right, a dancer wearing a black body-suit and pale, vaguely devilish-looking face paint (a role performed, in the 1976 original production, by Wilson himself) performs a frantic solo while holding a flashbulb lantern in his left hand. The sequence lasts for around nine minutes and ends with a proscenium-spanning drop, painted with what appears to be a scientific diagram being lowered across the stage. Beyond the visual and

⁴⁴ Brecht, *Theater of Visions*, 9.

sonic references to a nuclear blast that recur over the course of the opera Wilson has acknowledged (most recently at a public discussion at UCLA with Glass and Childs held in conjunction with the Los Angeles Opera's presentation of the 2012 revival of *Einstein*) that the "On the Beach" half of the opera's title is a reference to the 1957 science-fiction novel of that title by the Australian writer Nevil Shute (subsequently adapted into a Hollywood film in 1959), which tells the story of the citizens of Melbourne who are anxiously awaiting the arrival of radiation poisoning from a nuclear war that has erupted in the Northern Hemisphere.

Scholars of the first decades of the nuclear age including Paul Boyer and Alan Nadel have demonstrated the extent to which the specter of nuclear destruction shaped postwar American literary and cultural production, and *Einstein* reflects and refracts the pervasive nuclear imagery and atomic anxieties that saturated the midcentury American culture in which Wilson, Knowles, Glass and Childs all grew up.⁴⁵ Yet this post-nuclear, Cold War context is additionally significant to scientific and cultural contestations surrounding the interpretation of human psychology and mental life during the same period. The historian of science Paul N. Edwards asserts that "cognitive theories and computing machines assisted in constructing the subjects who inhabited the electronic battlefields of global cold war."⁴⁶ Transformations in the medical and psychiatric sciences supported by Cold War-era defense policy brought the interests of medical science into close alignment with both the state and the military. Shifts in expertise regarding the origins of autism and other forms of mental "psychosis" were shaped by an

⁴⁵ Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); Alan Nadel *Containment Culture: American Narratives, Postmodernism, and the Atomic Age* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995).

⁴⁶ Paul N. Edwards, *The Closed World: Computers and the Politics of Discourse in Cold War America* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 172.

“increasing hostility between psychoanalysis and the cognitive sciences” that characterized the postwar decades, as the psychoanalytically influenced accounts developed in the 1940s and 1950s by child psychiatrists like Bruno Bettelheim and (to a lesser extent)⁴⁷ Leo Kanner were increasingly challenged by the emergence of cognitive psychology and its disciplinary correlates in cognitive science, cybernetics, and systems-theory. Autism increasingly came to be viewed as a problem of “cognition” in the context of the broader medicalization of American society that characterized the decades following WWII, a moment in which mental disability was transformed from a private moral failing into a matter of concern for the state and its increasingly extensive mechanisms of social surveillance and control, particularly regarding childhood and the family.⁴⁸

Scientific, clinical, and cultural contestations concerning autism and mental disability that arose during this period are relevant to the Wilson-Knowles collaborations for several reasons. First, the conflicts among psychiatric and biomedical experts about autism in the 1970s, coupled with the broader spirit of experimentation and interest in exploring alternative models of education and collective living that characterized that decade, might account for the willingness of Knowles’s doctors (and parents) to allow him to join Wilson’s company. A 1976 article published in a special issue of *TDR* devoted to the subject of theater and therapy, titled “Robert Wilson and Therapy,” contains extensive quotations from Knowles’s father, Ed, and a doctor from the O.D. Heck School, Dr. Hugh Lefave, who describe the beneficial effects the collaborations with Wilson had upon Knowles’s development. The article emphasizes that

⁴⁷ Elizabeth A. Wilson, *Affect and Artificial Intelligence* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2010), 25.

⁴⁸ Medical sociologist Gil Eyal notes that shifts in the clinical understanding and treatment of autism and other mental disorders “must be understood within an emerging project for the early monitoring and surveillance of childhood.” Eyal, *The Autism Matrix* (London: Polity, 2011), 30.

Wilson's techniques for working with Knowles dramatically departed from the therapeutic and educational methods both Knowles and Andrews were subject to while institutionalized, explaining that Wilson's "attempts to learn their languages and to meet them on their own terms—does not relate to the typical way therapists approach people with problems similar to theirs." Lefave even reports that "I've come to borrow some of the theses I've watched Bob do...And I find now that I know if I'm relating to people who have trouble with language, not to push that aspect in our first meetings."⁴⁹ Indeed, the willingness of Lefave—to say nothing of Wilson himself—to conceive of Knowles's disability beyond the standard terms of pathology, seems to anticipate many of the arguments and rhetorical strategies of the neurodiversity movement that began to emerge in the late 1990s.

The specific *terms* of these discussions of Knowles in relationship to the treatment of neurological difference can be placed within a broader intellectual genealogy of the ideas about the mind, and the brain, that emerged during this period. In this regard, it will be useful to turn to what Adam Frank and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick characterize as the "notion of the brain as a homogeneous, differentiable but originally undifferentiated system." Sedgwick and Frank demonstrate that this was one of the most significant conceptual innovations of cybernetics and systems theory in the several decades following the end of World War II—a period they characterize as the "cybernetic fold."⁵⁰ As Sedgwick and Frank explain, the cybernetic models of cognition that emerged during this period offered a new understanding of the brain as an interlocking set of self-regulating, homeostatic mechanistic systems. In cybernetic models of

⁴⁹ Bill Simmer, "Robert Wilson and Therapy," *TDR/The Drama Review*, Vol. 20, No. 1, "Theater and Therapy" (March 1976), 99-110, p. 110.

⁵⁰ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank, "Shame in the Cybernetic Fold: Reading Silvan Tomkins," in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 105.

cognition, the hallmark achievements of consciousness—such as the production of rational thought, language, and emotion—are attributed to a set of specifically delineated recursive processes whereby sensory “data” gets methodically incorporated, filtered, and refined through feedback. Drawing in part from Anthony Wilden’s 1970 essay “Analog and Digital Communication: On Negation, Signification, and Meaning,” Sedgwick and Frank are particularly interested in how cybernetic accounts of cognitive processes are marked by the “layering of digital (on/off) with analog (graduated and/or multiply differentiated) representational systems.”⁵¹ To illustrate the way this interleaving works within cybernetic and systems theory-based models of cognition, they turn to a passage from Silvan Tomkins’s theory of affect, which elaborates a causal relation between the “density of neural firing” (by which Tomkins means “the frequency of neural firing per unit of time”—an essentially “digital” form of measuring the rate at which neurons oscillate between being “on,” or actively stimulated, and “off,” or passively resting) and the production of analogically “quantified” affects—such as anger, fear, interest, and distress.⁵² According to Tomkins, the psychological experience of different affect states can be attributed to variations within the rate and density of neural firing over time.

It is especially instructive to consider the cybernetic models of the brain that Sedgwick and Frank describe in relationship to concurrent psychiatric and biomedical research on mental disorders. A 1973 article in the *Journal of Autism and Childhood Schizophrenia*, titled “A Cybernetic Approach to Childhood Psychosis,” offers a telling example of how scientific research on autism and neurological disability might be situated within the cybernetic fold. The

⁵¹ Ibid., 101.

⁵² Ibid., 103.

study proceeds from the assumption that neural activity operates as a feedback loop, wherein specific registrations of informational “signals” (or “stimuli”) are transformed into socially “meaningful” affective outputs.⁵³ The authors of the article, Roy M. Han and Michael A. Arbib, summarize the results of their study by noting, “Inadequacy of registration, feedback, or control of ongoing neural activity appeared present in infantile autism, so that responses appeared unconnected to stimuli, i.e., ‘without meaning.’” In autism, they conclude, “the feedback processes whereby digital experience and affect redefine each other were absent.”⁵⁴ Autism is thus cast as a disruption or breakdown in the normal functioning of neural systems that transmute “digital” stimuli from the external into “analogue” (“meaningful,” “affective”) behavior. “Just as the machine can be misprogrammed,” they contend, “so can the child.”⁵⁵ Drawing a direct parallel between the cybernetic model of artificial intelligence and human cognitive impairment, Han and Arbib’s article reflects an emerging consensus that the behavioral hallmarks of autism were caused by disruptions in the brain’s ability to process sensory information from the outside world and translate it back into socially intelligible behavior. As they write, “Early infantile autism may be the result of a failure to develop systems and processes for the refinement of experience. The infantile autistic child does not learn how to learn nor learn how to love.”⁵⁶ This article—published in the same year that Wilson began his artistic collaborations with Knowles—draws on many of the conceptual touchstones of cybernetic thought: feedback and signal, response and meaning. It proposes an understanding of autism as a form of “misprogramming,” one that disrupts the normal operations and procedures of the cognitive feedback loops that

⁵³ Roy M. Han and Michael A. Arbib, “A Cybernetic Approach to Childhood Psychosis,” *Journal of Autism and Children Schizophrenia* 3, no. 3 (1973): 270.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 270.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 271.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

enable children to “learn how to learn” and “learn how to love.”

Shifting scientific and psychiatric understandings of the cybernetic structure of mental processes that emerged in the postwar period also resonated with a number of concurrent developments within the spheres of art, music, literature, and performance in which Wilson and Knowles’s collaborations took place. Avant-garde aesthetic movements of the postwar period were uniquely attuned to advances in scientific and technological knowledge, particularly as they informed the burgeoning interest in incorporating the contours of cognition and sensory-perception into the ambit of the artwork itself. As art historian Johanna Burton argues, “The seemingly inherent bond—though perhaps really more a seductive analogy—between much art of the late 1960s and systemic inquiry corresponded to a shared desire to mark, and sometimes *make*, processes and contexts rather than discrete objects per se.” This tendency can be seen in the work of artists associated with Pop Art, Minimalism, Conceptualism, and Fluxus, in which the expressive subjectivity of the artist was subverted to the material processes involved in the creation and presentation of the artwork. Burnham suggests that in this period “the artist becomes a symptom of the schism between art and technics,” an epistemological shift that represented a decisive break from modernist suppositions about the autonomy of artist.⁵⁷ Wilson’s interest in using the formal properties of theatrical performance—lighting, sound, movement and gesture, duration—to explore the boundaries of human perception and consciousness arguably draws from the “cognitive” qualities that art objects themselves seemed to mimic. The art critic Leo Steinberg, discussing the powerfully magnetizing “presence” of paintings by Robert Rauschenberg from the late 1960s, writes that it “seemed at times that

⁵⁷ Johanna Burton, “Mystics Rather Than Rationalists” in *Open Systems: Rethinking Art c. 1970*, ed. Donna De Salvo (London: Tate Publishing, 2005), 166.

Rauschenberg's work surface stood for the mind itself—dump, reservoir, switching center, abundant with concrete references freely associated as in an internal monologue—the outward symbol of the mind as a running transformer of the external world, constantly ingesting incoming unprocessed data to be mapped in an overcharged field.”⁵⁸ Like the account of neural activity as a feedback loop offered in Han and Arbib's article, Steinberg's reading of Rauschenberg's paintings as a “running transformer of the external world” conceives of the mind as a kind of “black box” in which informational inputs are transformed into expressive outputs—a process that is itself displayed and presented within artistic works themselves.

A similar impulse can be identified in contemporaneous critical discussions about the role of American literature, and particularly poetics, in the early decades of the Cold War. In an illuminating essay on the intersections of science and poetry in midcentury America, the literary critic Peter Middleton calls attention to the way in which poets including Charles Olson, Muriel Rukeyser, and William Carlos Williams sought to harness the prestige of physics and quantum mechanics in nuclear age order to make a case for poetry as an activity that might contribute to the development of the American national character. Middleton focuses especially on Olson's influential 1950 essay (published in the literary journal *Poetry New York*) “Projective Verse,” which “relied heavily on extended tacit analogies between poetry and nuclear physics to argue that poems should arrange their elements to create a field of forces held together in a ‘high energy-construct,’ a construction that sounds similar in principle to those other high-energy structures of the time, the synchrocyclotron and the atom bomb.”⁵⁹ For Olson, who was deeply

⁵⁸ Steinberg quoted in Judith Rodenbeck, *Radical Prototypes* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 87.

⁵⁹ Peter Middleton, “Poetry, Physics, and the Scientific Attitude at Mid-Century,” *Modernism/modernity*, Vol. 21, no. 1, January 2014, pp. 147–68, p.

influenced by Wiener's work on cybernetics as an expansive discourse that could unite scientific and aesthetic pursuits, the notion of the poem as a an open "field" onto which the poet projected his verbal energy (and from which, in turn, the reader received the energy of the poem) became a kind of rallying cry for the creation of a new American poetry, which subsequent generations of poets continued to take up. Indeed, Olson's notion of the "composition by field" might be cited as a key precedent for Knowles's own, spatially and energetically driven compositional poetics.

If the layering and interleaving of digital and analogical systems describes the new model of the brain as site of systematically regulated cognitive processes that cybernetics made possible, it might also characterize the formal hallmarks and thematic concerns presented in *Einstein* itself. Brecht's evocation of the brain's asymmetric hemisphere's and Wilson's conceptualization of the opera's two principal performers as two halves of a single brain, closely resembles the cybernetic vision of the brain as a site of interlocking digital and analogical systems. I want to suggest that *Einstein on the Beach* implicitly evokes different modes of cognition through formal aesthetic strategies that are both rigorously non-pathologizing and, at the same time, avoid the temptation to romanticize cognitive "difference," or turn it into a metaphor for some broader state or condition. In order to further pursue this aspect of the opera, I now turn to consider in greater detail a specific scene from *Einstein on the Beach* that incorporates Knowles's texts. My contention is that Knowles's words function as an axis around which the opera's aesthetic procedures oscillate; in turn, I hope to develop a different way of understanding the politics and aesthetics of neurological difference in this touchstone work of twentieth-century performance.

I Feel The Earth Move



Figure 6. Still from Act III Scene 1 of *Einstein on the Beach* (2012 revival production)

Act III Scene I of *Einstein* involves an extended sequence in which one of the piece's two featured performers (originally played by Lucinda Childs) is seated facing the audience on a tall chair perched atop a boxlike black platform. Situated upstage left, the platform sits directly in front of a white cyclorama drop that is traversed by a low, horizontal band of bluish-white light. Running the full length of the stage, this band of light falls between the top edge of the platform and the performer's torso, so that it almost appears as if she is sitting directly *on* the light, which bathes the otherwise empty stage in a chilly, dark cerulean glow (see **Figure 3**). Dressed in a loose white dress, the performer proceeds to rapidly speak the words of a text that appears in the limited edition publication of Knowles's typographic pieces (published by Vehicle Editions in 1979) under the title "I Feel The Earth Move." As she does so, the sound of a solo saxophone playing one of Glass's undulating, arpeggio-like melodic phrases drifts up from the orchestra pit.

Though it is one of the most formally reserved, static, and presentational sequences in the opera, this scene is nonetheless dense with aesthetic information in ways that can at least in part be understood in relation to the performative presence of neurological difference. The performer's verbal recitation of text originally composed by Knowles using a manual typewriter, combined with Glass's recursively modulated music and Wilson's precisely calibrated, almost painterly arrangement of the stage décor and lighting, seems to be organized to reflect—and indeed, to almost experientially evoke—a particular set of cognitive, sensory, and perceptual attunements that might be described as “autistic.” Yet in making this assertion, I seek to depart from the way in which Sontag (for instance) situates Wilson's theatrical style in relation to what she describes as a modernist obsession with the “pathology of solipsism”—an obsession that she in turn equates with the evocation of “autistic” traits like “compulsive repetition and variation” within aesthetic works.⁶⁰ Rather, my reading of this scene seeks to extend the terms of Savarese's anti-pathologizing notion of an “autistic tradition” within aesthetics, one that is defined by “intense sensory processing and a need to pattern” as opposed to solipsistic withdrawal and pathological self-enclosure. More specifically, I suggest that Knowles's aesthetic manipulation of the constitutive components of language as a material substance with distinct visual and phonic qualities upends the normatively delineated contours of cognition.

In the libretto of the opera that is included in the liner-notes booklet prepared for the 1977 recording of *Einstein on the Beach*, the portion of Knowles's text that is spoken in this scene reads as follows:

I Feel the Earth Move

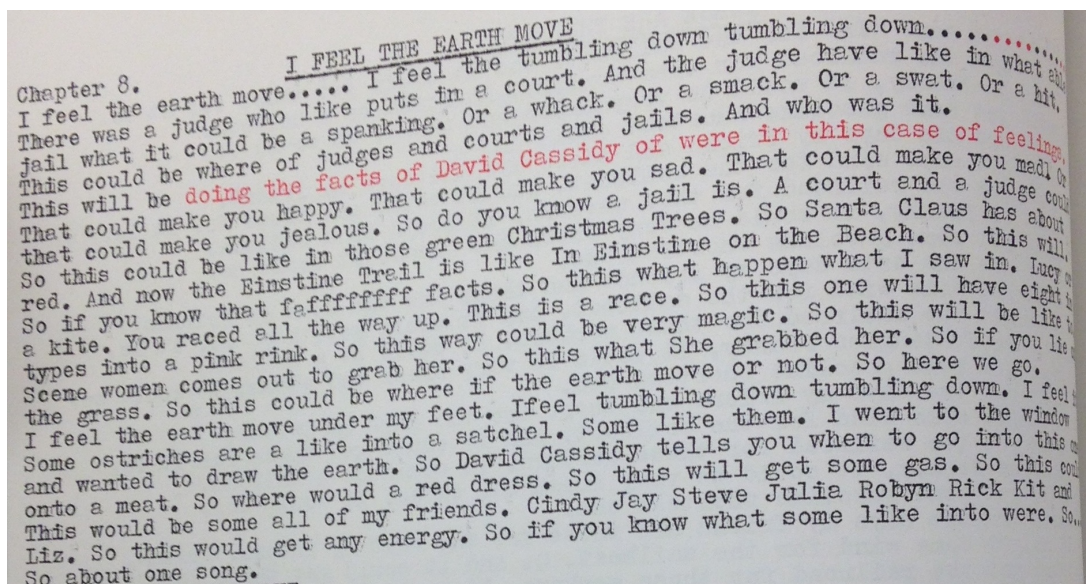
I feel the earth move ... I feel the tumbling down tumbling down..... There was a judge

⁶⁰ Sontag, “Art and Consciousness,” 6.

who like puts in a court. And the judge have like in what able jail what it could be a spanking. Or a whack. Or a smack. Or a swat. Or a hit. This could be where of judges and courts and jails. And who was it. This will be doing the facts of David Cassidy of were in this case feelings. That could make you happy. That could make you sad. That could make you mad. Or that could make you jealous. So do you know a jail is. A court and a judge could So this could be like in those green Christmas trees. So Santa Claus has about red. And now the Einstine Trail is like In Einstine on the Beach. So this will. So if you that faffffffff facts. So this what happen what I saw in. Lucy or a kite. You cared all the way up. This is a race. So this one will have eight in types into a pink rink. So this way could be very magic. So this will be like to. Scene women comes out to grab her. So if you lie on the grass. So this could be where if the earth move or not. So here we go. I feel the earth move under my feet. I feel tumbling down tumbling down.

This passage is typical of Knowles's work in that it filters an pre-existing source—in this case the Carole King song that Knowles would have heard on the radio at the time he was writing the text, in the mid-1970s—through a singularly graphic verbal sensibility, producing to a textual object that shimmers at the border between sound and sense. In “I Feel The Earth Move,” the phonetic progression of words is arranged according to a seemingly deliberate structure whose underlying logic remains obscure. The mention of a judge, a jail, and spanking in the third sentence is followed by a chain of percussively visceral words that conjure the sense of a blow struck to a body—as “whack” gives way to “smack,” and then to “swat” and “hit.” The text is also marked by the repetition and modulation of particular phrasal structures, especially ones that alternately lead off with “this” or “that,” as in the string of phrases that begins: “That could make you happy. That could make you sad. That could make you mad.” Finally, the splintered and

decidedly ungrammatical “visual” prose of “I Feel the Earth Move”—which is to say its arrangement of words, letters, and lines on the page—betrays its typographic origins at multiple points: for instance in its unconventional use of strings of period marks to form extended ellipses, or in the inclusion of typographic inventions (“faffffffff”). Such elements are formal reminders that remain embedded in the work of the process by which Knowles produced the text on a manual typewriter. “I Feel the Earth Move” is included, in slightly different form from the way in appears in the opera’s libretto, in the limited edition publication of Knowles’s typographic pieces published in the 1979 (see **Figure 7**).



**Figure 7. Detail from Christopher Knowles, *Typings, 1974–1977*
(Downtown Collection, Fales Library, New York University)**

As with the use of Knowles’s text “Would it get some wind for the sailboat” at the beginning of *Einstein* and at several subsequent moments over the span of the opera, “I Feel The Earth Move” is transformed in this scene from a static, visual-spatial “object” into a sonic-temporal “event.” Tasked with verbalizing Knowles’s notably non-grammatical typed composition, the performer finds phonetic equivalents for the text’s stylistic idiosyncrasies: she renders the typed word

“faffffffff,” for instance, as a breathily pulsed sequence of sounds: “fah-fah-fah-fah-fah.” The rapid pace of her speech, moreover, evokes both the original typed composition’s visual deluge of letters and words and the machine-gun sonority of the typewriter that Knowles used to produce it.

In his idiosyncratic account of this scene in his book’s chapter on *Einstein*, Stephen Brecht records his impressions based on his viewing of the original 1976 performance of the opera, featuring Childs as the performer speaking Knowles’s text. Brecht writes, “Childs with arguing head movements gives the piece as chitchat, very rapidly and smoothly, in a friendly, not too emphatic tone, and continuously as though she meant it.”⁶¹ Brecht calls Childs’s “compulsive flow” of speech a “tour de force.” He describes the scene as the image of “a child steeped in media time.”⁶² Indeed, for most critics, Wilson’s use of Knowles’s text places him firmly within “a faux naïf tradition in modernism with a long history that dates back well before Gertrude Stein to still earlier figures like Henri Rousseau and Paul Gauguin,” and indicates the extent to which Wilson’s theater continues to express the “symbolist-surrealist-Artaudian dream of liberating theater from the tyrannical dominion of language.”⁶³ In his discussion of the opera, theater critic Jonathan Kalb places *Einstein* within the longer tradition of the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* whose goal was to be become “an instrument to heal communal wounds arising from modernity and the Industrial Revolution,” and to recover “supposedly original, lost, organic unities.”⁶⁴ Similarly, in discussing the opera’s “recursive treatment of spoken texts,” Craig Owens’s 1976 essay on *Einstein* refers to Antonin Artaud’s “Letters on Language,” in which the French

⁶¹ Brecht, 351-52.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 352.

⁶³ Jonathan Kalb, *Great Lengths: Seven Works of Marathon Theater* (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2011), 97.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 119-120.

dramatist calls for a kind of theater that would “return to the active, plastic, respiratory sources of language.”⁶⁵ Artaud writes: “let words be joined again to the physical motions that gave them birth, and let the discursive, logical aspect of speech disappear beneath its affective, physical side, i.e., let words be heard in their sonority rather than be exclusively taken for what they mean grammatically.”⁶⁶ Owens also invokes the theatrical experiments undertaken by modernist poets such as Stéphane Mallarmé and T.S. Eliot, both turned to the stage in order to experiment with how the tools of theatrical performance could be used to enhance poetic discourse so as to “transform language into an entirely material event.”⁶⁷ Turning to these sources in his discussion of the use of language in Wilson and Glass’s opera enables Owens and Kalb to maintain that *Einstein on the Beach* was not a departure from modernist aesthetic concerns, but rather a contiguous extension of the paradigmatically modernist desire to puncture the artifice of language in order to gain access to a realm of unmediated, authentic experience.

Owens’ modernist reading is recalled in a more recent account of Knowles’s treatment of language, published in *Against Expression* (2011) an anthology of Conceptual writing, edited by Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith, that contains a selection of excerpts from Knowles’s *Typings*. In their prefatory remarks to Knowles’s poems, Dworkin and Goldsmith and refer to Knowles as “an autistic poet” who “gained wide public recognition as the librettist” for *Einstein on the Beach*. They continue:

Knowles’s work, with its slowly changing repetitions and musicality, came of age during the 1970s rediscovery of the writings of Gertrude Stein and fit perfectly with the era’s love of rational systems and mathematics. Just as important was Knowles’s ear for pop

⁶⁵ Owens, “The Primacy of Metaphor,” 29

⁶⁶ Quoted in Owens, 23.

⁶⁷ Owens, 23.

culture: much of the libretto for *Einstein* comes from listening to and writing through the New York City–based pop AM radio station WBAC. In this way, Knowles’s work was very much a pop-infused update to Steinian concerns.⁶⁸

Yet though they do not mention it explicitly, Dworkin and Goldsmith’s description of Knowles’s “update” of Stein also seems to involve a departure from the earlier poet’s modernist permutations of language and the embrace of what might be characterized as an eminently *post-modernist* concern with automated systems and computers. Dworkin and Goldsmith assert that Knowles’s “meticulous processing and parsing of language anticipate [...] computer-based engines of conceptual writing.”⁶⁹ For Goldsmith and Dworkin, Conceptualism is defined by the absence of the modernist authorial voice that has traditionally been interpreted as a semantic index of the writer’s internal desires and wishes. Rather, Conceptual writing treats language simply as informational material, signals emitted into a void. For them, conceptualism eschews modernist conceptions of poetic language as expressive, favoring approaches that treat language instead as a series of discrete nodes of information organized by systems and internally logical processes.

A potential hazard of Dworkin and Goldsmith’s description of Knowles’s poetry as exemplary of the non-expressive, non-human, automated hallmarks of Conceptualist poetics is that it would seem to equate Knowles’s neurocognitive disability with precisely these same characteristics. In a review of *Against Expression*, the poet Andrew Peart criticizes Dworkin and Goldsmith’s characterization of Knowles’s process: “Knowles’s work is undoubtedly marred by

⁶⁸ Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith, “Christopher Knowles,” in *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, eds. Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2011), 327.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 327.

the poetics of unoriginality and nonexpressivity imputed to it.” Peart continues, “Knowles’s conceptual procedures put the thought of a particular mind—his own—into form, and perhaps the humanist presumptions of the ‘expression’ are worth retaining if they help distinguish a mind like his from the kind of automated algorithmic processes that he bested with a radio and a typewriter.”⁷⁰ Peart here brings attention to some of the dangers with the critical tendency to characterize Knowles’s poems as “automated” or “unoriginal,” and in so doing also helps us to see the limitations of the accounts that have associated the use of language in *Einstein* with modernist preoccupations with childlike, “primitive” or “mad” speech that might heal the communal wounds brought about by industrial modernity (*pace* Artaud, Rousseau, and even Wagner).

I want to suggest that the accounts of disability and neurodivergent aesthetics I referred to above, when paired with the cybernetic context, can offer a more critically robust and conscientious perspective on Knowles’s contributions to *Einstein*.

Such a reading would offer a different way of understanding Susan Flakes’s suggestive formulation, in a review published in the December 1976 issue of *TDR*, that “it is the contradiction, the interplay, and the harmony of dreams and mathematics that form the central tension of this work.”⁷¹ It would perhaps allow us to situate the work instead within a “perseverative school” of neurodivergent aesthetics, “with intense sensory processing and a need to pattern at its core.”⁷² Rather than interpreting Knowles’s texts as simply “automated,”

⁷⁰ Andrew Peart, review of *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, *Chicago Review*, 206.

⁷¹ Susan Flakes, “Robert Wilson’s *Einstein on the Beach*,” *TDR/The Drama Review*, Vol. 20, No. 4 (December 1976): 69-82, 70.

⁷² Ralph James Savarese, “Gobs and Gobs of Metaphor,” *Inflexions* 5, “Simondon: Milieu, Techniques, Aesthetics” (March 2012): 186.

“unexpressive,” or “mathematical,” and hence reiterating cultural tropes of the autistic or otherwise neurodivergent mind as overly mechanical and therefore emotionally deficient, we might read the patterning of language according to the rubric of a performative poetics of neurological difference that is neither pathologizing nor metaphorical, but rather singularly responsive to the interleaving of sound and sense, word and image, meaning and sensation.

Sundance Kid Revisited

In November 2013, as part of the 13th Performa Biennial, Christopher Knowles performed *The Sundance Kid Is Beautiful* at the Whitebox Art Center in Manhattan’s Soho neighborhood, located just a few blocks away from the Spring Street loft where Knowles first arrived to live with Robert Wilson and the performers of the Byrd Hoffman School in 1973. Knowles and his collaborators, many of them associated with the Watermill Center—Wilson’s Long Island headquarters and work-center—transformed the cavernous Whitebox gallery space by plastering the high walls and floor with newspaper print and painting excerpts from Knowles’s poems in brightly colored letters on the walls. Several long rows of folding chairs were set up around two sides of the rectangular space, creating a large playing area for the performance. This makeshift stage was cluttered with objects: alarm clocks, folding chairs (also covered with newspaper), and two person-sized, cone-shaped cardboard sculptures, one crudely painted with a blue sky and green field landscape, the other with white and red stripes, resembling a barbershop pole. The overall effect that the stage, and the gallery, has been turned into a single installation, fostering a sense of cocoon-like intimacy. In August 2014, Knowles and his same collaborators had a one-week residency at the Performing Garage, also located in SoHo, where they presented a revised

version of the performance for a single evening performance. I attended both the Whitebox and the Performing Garage performances, and sat in on several hours of rehearsal during the August 2014 Performing Garage residency.



Figure 8. Christopher Knowles in rehearsal for *The Sundance Kid Is Beautiful*, Whitebox Art Center, New York City, November 2013 (Photo by Tom Kochie)

The audience enters the theater to find Knowles already seated onstage: now in his mid-50s, he is of medium build and height with salt-and-pepper hair; he's dressed in a light blue suit jacket and marching shorts, a red-and-blue plaid shirt, and a blue-and-white polka dot tie (see **Figure 8**). Motionless and staring straight ahead, he sits on a newsprint-covered folding chair facing stage

right. Brent Kretschmann's sound design, which plays an integral role in shaping the performance's flow and coherence, is already strikingly present before the performance properly begins, since as we enter the performance space we hear a cascading collage of multiple alarm clocks ticking asynchronously. John Torres's lighting bathes the stage in a soft cerulean glow that is made more luminous by the faint sheen of the newsprint lining the stage's high back wall and floor. Scrupulous viewers might notice a dozen antique alarm clocks (culled from Knowles's personal collection) scattered about the stage.

While there is no single narrative arc to the performance, the sequence of short, discrete scenes—most not lasting more than a few minutes—hints at small stories and scenarios that are suggested by abrupt changes in lighting and sound. Chirping birds, ringing alarm bells, snippets of music and brief sound clips from films and TV shows variously evoke a suburban backyard, a crowded movie theater, and childhood bedroom. Though Knowles is the sole performer who appears onstage in *The Sundance Kid Is Beautiful*, over the course of the hour-long work he is accompanied by the sounds of several other (recorded) voices—some of them of himself reciting his poems as an adolescent in the mid-1970s.

A loud and piercing alarm-clock ring signals the start of the performance proper. As the lights brighten and the jangling opening chords of Harry Nilson's country-rock anthem "Jump Into the Fire" fades up on the sound system, Knowles stands and turns, slowly but with deliberate precision, towards the audience and begins a jerky dance. Holding his arms out to his side, he begins to slowly spin in place as Nilson's song crescendos; he next skips in a circle around the largest paper cone, arms still outstretched, before arriving center stage. The music cuts out, the lights abruptly changes, and Knowles plants himself firmly in place facing the audience and begins to recite a poem:

this is chris is
this is chris is
this is chris is
is chris this is
is chris this is
chris this is his
this is chris is
chris is this his

As Knowles recites this first poem he develops a rhythmic pattern by stressing each monosyllabic word over several rounds of repetition and recombination, lending the four words approximately equal strophic weight and adding a brief pause for breath at the end of the line.

When he is finished reciting the “this is chris” poem, Chris turns to face upstage and the lights shift again, dimming on most of the stage but now sharply illuminating a rectangular wooden window frame—also coated in newsprint—suspended from the ceiling. We hear the sound of brief snippets of dialog from what sounds like a Hollywood film—gradually these become recognizable as belonging to Paddy Chayefsky and Sidney Lumet’s iconic 1976 film *Network*: specifically, we’re hearing the moment when the on-air exclamation of suicidally disgruntled news-anchor Howard Beale, as played by Peter Finch—“I’m mad as hell, and I’m not going to take it anymore!”—starts being repeated by at-home television viewers across New York City, creating a cacophonous echo of voices. The sonic reference to *Network* is undoubtedly a throwback to the era of Chris’s adolescence, recalling the heady, conspiracy-fueled period of Watergate, the Patty Hearst trial, and post-Vietnam malaise. It also functions as a subtle intertextual reference to Knowles’s personal and artistic history: *Network* was released

in 1976, the same year as *Einstein* had its premiere performances.

As the sound of the film clip dims the lighting again shifts: this time, the stage is bathed in a deep blue and sharp squares of white light illuminate five manual cassette players arranged in various locations on the floor. Chris walks over to one and presses play. These tapes are digitized cassette versions of recordings that Knowles made as an adolescent in the early 1970s, from the moment just before he met Robert Wilson and continuing through the composition of the libretto for *Einstein on the Beach* in 1976. The first sound we hear is an adolescent Chris repeating a series of numbers:

Number seven

Number seven

Number seven

Number seven

As this recording continues to play, Chris crosses the stage to a second cassette player, and leans down to again press the play button. Layered on top of the numbers, we hear a 13-year-old Chris reciting “Emily Likes the TV,” one of the earliest recordings he made while enrolled at the O.D. Heck School in Schenectady, New York:

Emily likes the TV

Because she watches the TV

Because she likes the TV

Because she watches the TV

Emily likes the TV

Because she watches the TV

Because she likes the TV

Because she watches the TV

A third time Chris crosses the stage to a different cassette player and presses play on yet another recording from his youth, this one a play on the syllables of the name “Scheherazade,” before retracing his steps and pausing the initial recording, of the numbers. This sequence repeats itself several times; the effect is of Chris essentially playing recordings of his adolescent voice like a Cagean instrument. The words emanating from the cassette players are fuzzy but generally decipherable, and the rhythmic, songlike quality of several of the recordings—“Emily Likes the TV” in particular—create an effect that is indeed quite musical. This segment of the performance (which I also observed in rehearsal) possesses further layers of temporal complexity: in explicitly thematizing Chris’s relationship to his younger self, the scene brings to the fore the sometimes uncomfortable paradoxes that mark the reception of his work as on the one hand precocious, uncanny, extraordinary and on the other infantile, “primitive,” naïve. In rehearsal, there was some discussion among the directors and the costume designer about finding a light-colored suit jacket that would not make him appear childlike.

At one point, Knowles donned blue-and-red lensed 3-D glasses and held a bag of popcorn, and seemed to be conjuring a spectator in a crowded movie theater making his way to an empty seat. At another point, about halfway through the nearly hour-long work, Knowles said the word “intermission,” opened a can of Diet Coke that had been placed beneath the chair in which he was sitting, and took several sips before announcing, “end of intermission.” The performance concludes with a directly presentational sequence: the intricate recorded soundscape fades and Knowles stands still, center stage, facing the audience, illuminated by a square of white light, his eyes obscured behind a large pair of sunglasses.

it could be a violin to be

chuck the hills
answer the telephone
do the dance
will it get some
let go of that
if you see those baggy pants
please
it was trees
Mr. Bojangles Mr. Bojangles Mr. Bojangles
I reach you

One of the challenges of writing about Knowles's performance style is that the typical ways in which one might describe it to those who haven't seen him perform—by dwelling, for instance, on the apparent lack of the traditional hallmarks of vocal expressivity, such as tonal variation or dynamic phrasing—seem inadequate to the task of conveying the intense precision, deliberateness, and rhythm that characterize both Knowles's gestural comportment and his sonic delivery in performance. It would be misleading to try to parse out the quality of his speech from the manner of his bodily presence: both seem to be operating along the same axis, with the vocal timbre, text, movement, and gesture forming inseparable components of a single mode of expression. Much of the effect comes from the finely calibrated speed at which it all unfolds: everything seems to happen few degrees slower than the pace of life as it's lived, almost as if the performance were taking place in a tank of liquid slightly more viscous than water.

While watching the rehearsals and performances of *Sundance Kid*, I wondered how the different kinds of slowness in *The Sundance Kid Is Beautiful* might be understood as a formal

strategy of disruption, a way of refusing to meet the world at the tempo it demands us to assume. I recalled the story that Robert Wilson has often recounted in discussing the origins of his distinctive theatrical style: that Byrd Hoffman, his elderly high school dance teacher, had suggested to the painfully shy teenaged Wilson that his stutter would disappear if learned to slow down his speech using simple, slow movement exercises. Wilson went on to cultivate a theatrical aesthetic that remains defined by deliberately slow movements and visual images (in ways that have occasionally alienated unsuspecting audience members). Indeed, the influence of Wilson's aesthetics of slowness was palpable in *Sundance Kid*, whose directors, designers, and principal author and performer are all closely associated with Wilson's Watermill Center.

It is possible to read this anecdote about the origins of Wilson's slow style as a narrative about disability. Rather than learning how to keep pace with the normal speed of discourse that surrounded him, Wilson was able to "overcome" his speech impediment by shifting into a different temporal register—one that, in turn, has become the basis for his subsequent elaboration of a distinctive theatrical style. In this regard, we might consider Knowles's and Wilson's slow aesthetics in light of attempts to theorize how particular forms of social difference have been defined according to their dissension from the regulated temporal schemas of capitalist production—what Elizabeth Freeman has termed chrononormativity, or "the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity."⁷³ Recent work in queer studies has attended to how temporality has been a crucial aspect within the emergence of

⁷³ Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 3.

modern formations of sexuality.⁷⁴ Expanding from these discussions of queer time, Alison Kafer has importantly called for an enhanced attention to temporality within disability studies, proposing a notion of “crip time” that “requires reimagining our notions of what can and should happen in time. [...] Rather than bend disabled bodies and minds to meet the clock, crip time bends the clock to meet disabled bodies and minds.”⁷⁵ Freeman, Kafer, and others attuned to the way time can be queered or crippled, have shown temporality to be among the most powerful registers through which regimes of normativity operate. They have further suggested how those who challenge or interrupt the smooth and efficient functioning of processes of production and social reproduction—including queers and people with disabilities—occupy marginal, frequently stigmatized, and sometimes insurgent temporal modes.

At both the White Box Art Center Gallery and at the Performing Garage in August 2014, the stage was littered with Knowles’s collection of antique alarm clocks, and the sound of a ticking clock was a prominent feature of the work’s sound design. This literal invocation of clockwork heightened the performance’s distinctly slow pace, providing a distinctive (if occasionally variable) sonic “grid” of rapid metronomic ticking against which the deliberately unhurried pacing of Knowles’s movements and speech was thrown into high relief. Yet the specific, formal “consistency” of the slowness that emerged in the rehearsals and performances of *Sundance Kid* was not exactly obdurate—it did not seem especially marked by resistance to or the refusal of a single temporal mode. It had, instead, an almost painterly or sculptural quality that echoed the collage-like layering of the sounds of the ticking alarm clocks that open the

⁷⁴ For a survey of work on queer time, see the Introduction and “Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion,” in the special issue “Queer Temporalities,” ed. Elizabeth Freeman, *GLQ* Vol.13, No. 2-3 (2007).

⁷⁵ Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 27.

piece. The play of the presence and absence of word soundings corresponds almost exactly to the play of bodily presence and absence in the theatrical space; all of it taking place at a scrupulously, at times ponderously slow tempo.

By way of concluding, I want to briefly discuss how viewing Christopher Knowles's more recent artistic activities, such as *The Sundance Kid Is Beautiful*, alongside his earlier collaborations with Wilson in the 1970s (including *Einstein on the Beach*) might illuminate the politics and aesthetics of neurological difference. I am especially interested in the degree to which Knowles's status as an artist specifically identified as disabled (or, indeed, autistic) has contributed to how his work has been presented, viewed, and interpreted over time. Since the 1970s, Knowles's autism has been invoked mostly indirectly in discussions of Wilson's theatrical style, which critics such as Owens and Sontag then firmly situate within a modernist aesthetic tradition preoccupied by solipsism, self-enclosure, and "pathologies of consciousness." In addition to obscuring Knowles's crucial contributions to performances attributed to Wilson alone, such accounts have tended to treat disability as a supplemental or, perhaps, "symptomatic" aspect of broader aesthetic trends or tendencies that have little to do with disability as a social reality. The small number of critical considerations of Knowles's poetry, such as the one offered by Dworkin and Goldsmith, have tended to reiterate this view, situating Knowles's mathematically ordered treatment of language in relation to modern and postmodern preoccupations with non-human, technological systems while falling short of grappling with disability or neurological difference on their own terms. Though these accounts reflect the culturally and scientifically unsettled status of ideas about mental disability and cognition in the postwar period, they fail to reckon with the emergence—in the decades following Knowles's early collaborations with Wilson—of a diverse range of social, political, and cultural movements

that have contested the social stigmatization of bodily and cognitive difference by foregrounding the perspectives and experiences of persons with disabilities.

Yet this is not simply a shortcoming of Knowles's critical reception. It is notable that Knowles, the art gallery that represents him (Gavin Brown), and the *Sundance Kid* production team have each largely avoided situating his work in relationship to the broader fields of disability arts and performance that have emerged as particularly vital cultural formations in recent years.⁷⁶ The 2013 Performa Biennial at which I first saw *The Sundance Kid Is Beautiful* also featured on its program the US premiere of *Disabled Theater*, a collaboration between the French choreographer Jérôme Bel and the actors of Theater HORA, a Zürich-based theater company comprised of performers with cognitive, intellectual, and learning disabilities. First performed at the 2012 Documenta Festival in Kassel, Germany, *Disabled Theater* has attracted considerable attention (and some controversy) within the fields of disability studies and contemporary performance.⁷⁷ Originated by a theater company whose founding and subsequent artistic achievements are directly attributable to the historical emergence of disability as a political category over the past several decades, *Disabled Theater*—as its title indicates—proceeds by way of a direct and explicit engagement with the contemporary politics of bodily and cognitive difference. *Disabled Theater* forcefully calls attention to the ways in which disabled bodies have historically been subject to regimes of medical surveillance, institutionalization, and eugenicist ideological discourses intent on managing, and in many cases

⁷⁶ For an excellent survey of the diverse activities, groups, and projects taking place within the fields of disability arts and culture, see Petra Kuppers, *Studying Disability Arts and Culture: An Introduction* (London: Plagrave Macmillan, 2014).

⁷⁷ For a collection of critical response to this work, see Sandra Umatham and Benjamin Wihstutz, eds., *Disabled Theater* (Zürich: Diaphanes, 2015).

eradicating, disabled subjects and disability as such.

The presence of *Disabled Theater* in the same festival as *Sundance Kid* highlighted the dramatically contrasting approaches that these works adopted in their engagements with disability and neurological difference. *Disabled Theater* assumes a direct and even confrontational style, appropriating equally the unadorned presentational idiom of postmodern dance and the apparatuses of spectatorship associated with medical theaters, freak shows, and other genres of popular performance with origins in the early modern fascination with human deformities. The work features several instances where the company's 10 actors directly discussed their disabilities, and culminates with a series of short, self-choreographed solo dances by each of the performers that demand the audience set aside its usual criteria for viewing dance and other types of theatrical performance, particularly those associated with virtuosity and technical skill. The performance seems to operate according to the conviction that "When people with starable bodies [...] enter into the public eye, when they no longer hide themselves or allow themselves to be hidden, the visual landscape enlarges. Their public presence can expand the range of bodies we expect to see and broaden the terrain where we expect to see such bodies."⁷⁸ (2009:9). *Disabled Theater*, that is to say, is self-consciously motivated by a political conviction about the social value of rendering disability visible. As such, *Disabled Theater* reflects an understanding of disability politics that is relatively recent (within the past several decades) and historically and geographically specific: it is an understanding that is above all shaped according to as it has developed by appealing to distinctively modern, liberal, Euro-American approach to

⁷⁸ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Staring: How We Look* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 9.

accommodating difference through specific forms of cultural recognition and social inclusion.⁷⁹

In contrast, *Sundance Kid* (like *Einstein on the Beach* and the other early performances Wilson developed with disabled collaborators discussed above) contains scarce, if any, direct or thematic invocations of autism or disability. Rather, Knowles's work is more resonant with Davidson's reading of Eigner's disability poetics and Savarese's notion of a neurocosmopolitan aesthetics: with its intensively visual and sonorous attunement to the variable dimensions of cognitive and sensory experience, Knowles's work (including his collaborations with Wilson in the 1970s) involves aesthetic and performative strategies that "unseat normalizing discourses of embodiment" and cognition,⁸⁰ suggesting "a denaturalization, even a dethronement, of privileged neurotypicality."⁸¹ In this chapter, I have been especially concerned with describing how this is accomplished via Knowles's (and Wilson's) aesthetic preoccupation with manipulating the patterning of language. I have situated this aspect of these artists' performances and aesthetic practices in relationship to cybernetic and systems-theory models of cognition developed in the postwar period, and particularly to the interleaving of digital and analogical representational systems that defined these models' accounts of mental ecology. In turn, I have suggested that this cybernetic context can contribute to an account of the aesthetics of neurological difference in these works, in contrast to the tendency within the critical literature on Wilson to ascribe his engagement with mental disability to broader modernist (or, for that matter, postmodernist) aesthetic concerns.

Finally, unlike *Disabled Theater*, Knowles and Wilson's performances stop short of

⁷⁹ I discuss some of the political and ethical questions raised by *Disabled Theater* in Leon Hilton, "Presence, Rhetoric, Difference: Jérôme Bel and Theater HORA's *Disabled Theater*," *TDR/The Drama Review* 58, no. 4 (Fall 2014): 156–162.

⁸⁰ Davidson, 121.

⁸¹ Savarese and Zunshine, 20.

linking their aesthetic strategies to any easily recognizable or pre-established political program—even as their performances, created both individually and in collaboration, emerge from a powerful non-pathologizing impulse that remains palpable in the works themselves. In the 1970s, when Knowles and Wilson first met and began to collaborate, the politics of neurological difference were still inchoate: they had yet to coalesce into distinct, movements, organizations, or positions. By 2013, when *Sundance Kid* premiered, there was an established and actively growing neurodiversity movement that also sought to support the development of distinctive forms of “autistic culture”—a context that I address at greater length in the following two chapters. Does this historical shift alter how we might understand the aesthetic and political status of neurological difference within Knowles’s (and Wilson’s) art, poetry, and performance? Performing a duet with the voice of his younger self recorded in the 1970s, in *Sundance Kid* Knowles created his own temporal feedback loop, sonically re-circuiting a performance from his—and, indeed, our—past into the historical present.

CHAPTER THREE

Shaping the Right Statement:

Voice, Function, and the Textured Skin of Difference



Figure 9. Stills from Amanda Baggs's *In My Language* (YouTube, 2007)

A length of rope splashes in a shallow river; fingers thrum below a running faucet's weighty stream; the glint of a tear gathers in the corner of an open eye, watery yield of a body's effort to stay still.

This chapter is centered around two works of digital media, Amanda Baggs's 2007 YouTube video *In My Language* and Wu Tsang's 2008 video art piece *The Shape of the Right Statement*. It focuses on the way these videos each work against normative conceptions of "language" through specific aesthetic and performative strategies, seeking seek to reroute and refigure the ways in which (bodily) *sensation* is linked to contemporary articulations of

(collective, social, and political) *identity*.¹ Unlike the works and practices discussed in the first half of this study, the videos by Amanda Baggs and Wu Tsang that I consider here were created in direct response to, and engagement with, the historical emergence of the concept of neurodiversity.² This chapter thus occupies a transitional point within the alternative genealogy of neurodivergent aesthetics that this dissertation seeks to develop. The previous two chapters have focused on events and practices situated, for the most part, historically prior to the advent of neurodiversity so named: they looked back upon earlier moments in light of later developments. The two chapters that make up the second half of this study focus on topics that are historically contemporary with the emergence and articulation of neurodiversity. As discussed in the Introduction, I use the term neurodiversity to designate both the specific social movements organized around the concept of autistic self-advocacy that began to take shape in the 1990s, and more generally to denote the range of political claims and theoretical consequences that continue to be generated in the wake of these movements. As such, the latter half of this study constitutes an inquiry into the politics and aesthetics of autism, disability, and neurological difference in the present and more recent past.

Yet there are also important continuities between the case studies examined in the two halves of the study, insofar as this chapter builds and expands upon the previous chapters' emphasis on the status of language and verbal self-expression within the politics of disability and neurological difference over the past half-century. This chapter proposes that the work of Baggs and Tsang offer alternative modes of addressing a key, and still unresolved, point of contention

¹ Here I am informed by Amber Musser's interest in how masochism can "reveal the sensations that become attached to difference." See Amber Musser, *Sensational Flesh: Race, Power, Masochism* (New York: NYU Press, 2014), 1.

² Since 2014, Baggs has written under the name Mel Baggs. My use of Amanda here reflects the name Baggs was using at the time the video was first posted.

within the history of autism and neurological difference concerning the assessment of an individual's capacity for speech, communication, and linguistic expression. With the emergence of autistic self-advocacy and the advent of neurodiversity discourses beginning in the 1990s, this point has been especially contested within the ongoing debates over the diagnostic distinction between Low Functioning Autism (LFA) and High-Functioning Autism (HFA), which is largely (though by no means exclusively) made on the basis of an individual's perceived or assessed capacity for verbal communication. Many autistic self-advocates and neurodiversity proponents reject the validity of such distinctions; in response, some critics of neurodiversity—many of them family members and caretakers of individuals labeled as low-functioning—have responded that the rejection of such distinctions glosses over and marginalizes the needs and experiences of low-functioning autistics.

Rather than attempting to resolve this debate, in this chapter I suggest that Baggs's and Tsang's videos point toward ways of reframing its terms by focusing specifically on how these works navigate the relation between *voice* and *touch*. As I will suggest, these videos proceed by way of a patient interrogation of the aesthetic and political consequences that might follow once the “voice”—understood that “phonic substance” which both supports and exceeds the verbal utterance³—is (re)routed and (re)circuited through *tactility*—a sensory mode that also involves

³The notion of the voice as bearer of a “phonic substance” that both supports and exceeds its function as the material/sonic carrier of meaning within speech has an extensive intellectual lineage extending from Roman Jakobson and the Prague School of Linguistics and the structuralist research of Ferdinand de Saussure through the deconstructive investigations of Jacques Derrida and the psychoanalytic reflections Jacques Lacan, to more recent theoretical reflections on the voice by contemporary thinkers including Mladen Dolar and Fred Moten. This chapter is especially indebted to a deconstructive strand of this line of thinking that understands the voice as what Fred Moten calls “an irruption of phonic substance that cuts and augments meaning.” Fred Moten, *In The Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 14.

proximate vocabularies of *texture*, *pressure*, and *haptics*. I argue that Baggs and Tsang, in different but complementary ways, draw attention to the gaps, elisions, and misrecognitions that are inevitably produced when the capacity for verbal language is no longer considered the primary criteria for being granted the status of full, autonomous personhood. Indeed, I will argue that the use of voice and touch found in these videos unsettles efforts to distinguish between “high” and “low” functioning levels within the broader discursive field of autism research and treatment, and reveals such efforts to be a symptomatic extension of the broader processes and techniques of normalization within which autism and neurological difference have attained coherence over the past half-century.

In order to advance this argument, the chapter draws from both disability studies and queer theory. If the binding of sensation to identity is one of the primary accomplishments of the expressions of disciplinary power that could best be called “normativity,” Tsang’s and Baggs’s works indicate that queer and disabled modes of subjectivity and taxonomies of personhood are each positioned within broader histories of “normalization.” Yet these two works also point toward wayward trajectories within these broader histories, unsettling any straightforward understanding of the alignment between bodily sensation, political identification, and verbal expression.⁴ This is especially evident to the extent that Baggs’s and Tsang’s videos uncover unexpected performative and epistemological resonances between facilitated communication (FC) technologies used by individuals with communication-based impairments, and the queer performance techniques of drag and lip-synching. Prompted by these aesthetic cross-hatchings,

⁴ Annemarie Jagose has suggested that “the more valuable insight afforded by Foucault’s call to bodies and pleasures is the recognition that one’s relation to the disciplinary system of sexuality is necessarily articulated with regard to historically specific and bounded sites of contestation.” See Annemarie Jagose, *Orgasmology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 182.

the chapter also explores the way recent efforts to consider autism in relationship to gender and sexuality have been marked by preoccupations and anxieties having to do with touch, tactility, and bodily pressure.

In the chapter's final section, I situate my readings of the Baggs and Tsang videos in relation to the conceptually rich elaborations of touch and texture found in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's later writings. Here, I focus on how Sedgwick's attention to texture were central to her pursuit of "non-dualistic" modes of intellectual, affective, and sensory engagement. In so doing, I also expand upon my earlier assertions, set out in the Introduction and the immediately preceding chapter, on Christopher Knowles and Robert Wilson, that Sedgwick's work on the cognitive dimensions of affect are especially germane to critical considerations of the politics (and aesthetics) of autism, mental disability, and neurological difference. "Even more immediately than other perceptual systems," Sedgwick writes, "the sense of touch makes nonsense out of any dualistic understanding of agency and passivity; to touch is always already to reach out, to fondle, to heft, to tap or enfold, and always also to understand other people or natural forces as having effectually done so before oneself, if only in the making of the textured object."⁵ Evoking Baggs's own representations of her "autistic" experience of language with striking precision, Sedgwick's reflections on the non-dualistic models of personhood and intersubjective relationality that can be made present through touch and texture gesture toward other ways of conceptualizing the politics of neurological difference through the senses.

⁵ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Weather in Proust*, ed. Jonathan Goldberg (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 69.

In 2007, Amanda Baggs uploaded an eight-minute video to YouTube entitled *In My Language*. The video opens with a shot of Baggs's upper body in silhouette against a window, and shows her repetitively flapping her hands; the video soon cuts to a shot of Baggs scraping a basin with a wooden tool; then scratching a plastic corrugated surface with her fingertips; and next batting a piece of string with her hands. Further shots follow: we see Baggs rubbing her face with the pages of a magazine; running her hand over a metal grate; and finally, a close up shot of her hand flapping gently against a window. The soundtrack to these images is Baggs's voice, emitting a soft but sustained hum. At about the four minute mark, the screen goes black and the word "Translation" appears, center screen; we next fade up on a close-up of Baggs's fingers flipping gently beneath a stream of water flowing from a bathroom sink faucet. A computerized (female) voice begins to speak. Baggs uses a text-to-speech voice generating software program in order to speak—a process that falls within the category of "Facilitated Communication" (or FC), a broadly used designation to describe techniques that enable persons with language and speech impairments to communicate using either assistive technology or another person acting as a mediator. In Baggs's video, the computerized "spoken" text is accompanied by subtitles at the bottom of the screen:

The previous part of this video was in my native language. Many people have assumed that when I talk about this being my language that means that each part of the video must have a particular symbolic message within it designed for the human mind to interpret. But my language is not about designing words or even visual symbols for people to interpret. It is about being in a constant conversation with every aspect of my environment. Reacting physically to all parts of my surroundings.

In this part of the video the water doesn't symbolize anything. I am just interacting with the water as the water interacts with me. Far from being purposeless, the way that I move is an ongoing response to what is around me.

Ironically the way that I move when responding to everything around me is described as 'being in a world of my own' whereas if I interact with a much more limited set of responses and only react to a much more limited part of my surroundings people claim that I am "opening up to true interaction with the world." They judge my existence, awareness, and personhood on which of a tiny and limited part of the world I appear to be reacting to.

The way I naturally think and respond to things looks and feels so different from standard concepts or even visualization that some people do not consider it thought at all but it is a way of thinking in its own right. However the thinking of people like me is only taken seriously if we learn your language no matter how we previously thought or interacted.

As you heard I can sing along with what is around me. It is only when I type something in your language that you refer to me as having communication. I smell things. I listen to things. I feel things. I taste things. I look at things.

It is not enough to look and listen and taste and smell and feel, I have to do those to the right things such as look at books and fail to do them to the wrong things or else people doubt that I am a thinking being and since their definition of thought defines their definition of personhood so ridiculously much they doubt that I am a real person as well. I would like to honestly know how many people if you met me on the street would believe I wrote this.

I find it very interesting by the way that failure to learn your language is seen as a deficit but failure to learn my language is seen as so natural that people like me are officially described as mysterious and puzzling rather than anyone admitting that it is themselves who are confused not autistic people or other cognitively disabled people who are inherently confusing. We are even viewed as non-communicative if we don't speak the standard language but other people are not considered non-communicative if they are so oblivious to our own languages as to believe they don't exist.

In the end I want you to know that this has not been intended as a voyeuristic freak show where you get to look at the bizarre workings of the autistic mind. It is meant as a strong statement on the existence and value of many different kinds of thinking and interaction in a world where how close you can appear to a specific one of them determines whether you are seen as a real person or an adult or an intelligent person. And in a world in which those determine whether you have any rights there are people being tortured, people dying because they are considered non-persons because their kind of thought is so unusual as to not be considered thought at all. Only when the many shapes of personhood are recognized will justice and human rights be possible.⁶

Baggs writes in the description accompanying the video on YouTube that it is “a statement about what gets considered thought, intelligence, personhood, language, and communication, and what does not.”⁷ In this way, Baggs insists that the capacity for complex symbolization—a capacity autistic minds are frequently presumed to lack—should not be taken as *equivalent* to language

⁶ Amanda Baggs, *In My Language*, YouTube video, 8:36, 14 January 2007: www.youtube.com/watch?v=JnylM1hI2jc (1 August 2012)

⁷ Ibid.

and communication as such. Baggs reconfigures language through the body's sensory interaction with its environment, and the environment's interaction with the body.

Soon after it was posted online, Baggs's video began to circulate among members of various online autism self-advocacy communities, of which she is an active participant, and the video's popularity soon began to rise, quickly surpassing half a million views. It caught the attention of CNN and *Wired* magazine, both of which featured stories on Baggs, describing her video work as putting "a new face on autism,"⁸ and providing a glimpse "behind the veil" of autistic experience. Baggs, who lives in public housing for people with disabilities in Vermont, vehemently objected to interpretations that framed her video and online writing in such terms. "I've said a million times I'm not trapped in my own world," she told *Wired*. "Yet what do most of these news stories lead with? Saying exactly that."⁹

Despite Baggs's objections to the misreadings to which it has been subjected, *In My Language* has gone on to become one of the most well-known and frequently viewed statements associated with neurodiversity and autistic self-advocacy. The video has also attracted significant amount critical and scholarly attention. The anthropologist Paul Antze, for example, discusses Baggs's video in relationship to the broader ethical dimensions of autistic and disability self-advocacy. He argues that Baggs's video reflects an unresolved tension within the political rhetoric of neurodiversity between an appeal to the tenets of liberal universalism and a more radical critique of the liberal sensorium in which medicalized and pathologizing accounts of

⁸ CNN Transcripts, 22 February 2007, <http://edition.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0702/22/ltn.01.html>.

⁹ David Wolman, "The Truth About Autism: Scientists Reconsider What They *Think* They Know," *Wired*, 2 February 2008, www.wired.com/medtech/health/magazine/16-03/ff_autism?currentPage=all.

autism, mental disability, and neurological difference have been produced and disciplined.¹⁰ Media theorist Mark Coté, for his part, suggests that Baggs's video is indicative of the new sensory affordances made possible through widespread access to digital technology and the Internet, suggesting that *In My Language* reflects a newly democratized landscape of media production in which "the human and technics are in transductive relation." Indeed, Coté suggests that Baggs's video shows how digital videos like Baggs's "stake out a new mediated realm of the senses."¹¹ For both of these authors, Baggs's emphasis on the particularity of her experience of language serves as the occasion for broader reflections on ethics, politics, technology, and the senses.

Erin Manning discusses Baggs's video extensively in her philosophical reflections on perception and individuation. For Manning, *In My Language*—and most pointedly the rhetorical strategies at play within the video's spoken text—offer insight into phenomenological dimensions of autism. Referring to Baggs's video, Manning writes that for autistics,

It's not that communication doesn't happen, it's that communication is everywhere amplified by the more-than of its apparent content. The shape of words—their affective tonality, the way they taste, what they provoke, how they appear, what lines of drift they trace—is as intensely foregrounded for autists as the what of their content. Lulling shapes well toward eventness active in the preconscious of articulation, shaping in the invigoration of an enthusiasm not of the subject, but in and of the event.¹²

¹⁰ Paul Antze, "On the Pragmatics of Empathy in the Neurodiversity Movement," in *Ordinary Ethics: Anthropology, Language, and Action*, ed. Michael Lambek (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 313.

¹¹ Mark Coté, "Technics and the Human Sensorium: Rethinking Media Theory through the Body," *Theory & Event*, 13, no. 4 (2010).

¹² Erin Manning, "The Shape of Enthusiasm," *Parallax* 17, no. 2 (2011): 87–88.

In Manning's reading, the "language" of Baggs's autism operates according to a non-representational syntax that collapses distinctions between referent, concept, and expression through the felt force of an encounter, creating what she describes as "a symphony of complex inframodal relations between objects, gesture, and sound."¹³ Manning asserts the way Baggs describes her autism resembles the "process philosophy" associated with thinkers such as Alfred North Whitehead, Gilles Deleuze, and Gilbert Simondon: "Baggs creates relational nexuses that expose the world at the incipience of its sensory becoming."¹⁴ While in many ways resonant with Baggs's own rhetoric in her video, my objection to Manning's reading is that it invokes autism as a metaphorically rich philosophical figure, one that stands in for access to a form of unmediated experience otherwise unavailable to neurotypicals. In so doing, Manning seems to imply that autistics are (perhaps uniquely) capable of encountering the world "as it really is," in all of its sensory plenitude. Such quasi-Romantic and almost mystical discussions of autistic perception risk glossing over, or even ignoring entirely, the lived experiences and material struggles of autistic people—precisely in ways that mirror the political logics that Baggs's video itself warns against.¹⁵ This is not to suggest that philosophical or aesthetic approaches should not

¹³ Erin Manning, *Relationescapes* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 221.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 215.

¹⁵ Though slightly more cautious than Manning, a similar risk arises in Steven Shaviro's brief invocation of autistic perception in his recent book on speculative realism, *The Universe of Things*. Shaviro writes: "We might well describe such non-correlational thought as *autistic*—provided that we use this term in a non-pejorative and non-medicalized sense. As the neurodiversity movement helps us understand, autistic modes of thought should not be stigmatized as deficient just because they are entirely *different* from neurotypical ones. Contrary to popular (and sometimes medical) prejudice, people along the autistic spectrum are not solipsists, and they are not lacking in empathy. [...] Autistics are fully immersed in the world, immanently and without relations of phenomenological intentionality. In consequence, they seem to be less incorrigibly 'correlationist' in their basic attunement to the world than neurotypicals are." Steven Shaviro, *The Universe of Things: On Speculative Realism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 132.

applicable to discussions of autism and the cultural production of autistics. Rather, it is meant to indicate the importance of emphasizing the theoretical and conceptual operations that are already at work within the quotidian modes of experience represented within Baggs's video.

The Shape of the Right Statement, a 5-minute work of HD digital video art created in 2008 by Los Angeles-based artist and filmmaker Wu Tsang, responds to *In My Language* in ways that are decidedly different from most critical and scholarly assessments of Baggs's work. Tsang's piece consists of a single, static shot of the artist directly facing the viewer, seated in front of a shimmering, silvery backdrop. Tsang wears a collar-bone-exposing black top, thin gold-chain necklace, and elastic beige wig cap. With a fixed and unblinking gaze, Tsang recites excerpts from the text voiced in the second half of Baggs's original video. Despite its apparent formal simplicity and visual directness, Tsang's video is distinguished by the virtuosic achievement of the artist's vocal performance, which mimics the sonic valances of Baggs's speech-generating software with remarkable, even uncanny precision. As the work progresses, the artist's concentration and his effortful exertions to evoke the sonic qualities of the computerized speech heard in Baggs's earlier video become gradually more discernible in his face, as tears begin to pool in the corners of his eyes and eventually stream down his cheeks.



Figure 10. Still from Wu Tsang's *The Shade of the Right Statement* (HD Video, 2008)

The Shape of the Right Statement was filmed at The Silver Platter, a local dive-bar in Los Angeles's MacArthur Park neighborhood that for many years served a predominantly Latino/a, lower and working-class gay and transgender clientele, a large number of whom were also undocumented immigrants. For several years in the early to mid-2000s, The Silver Platter was the location of Wildness, a weekly queer party run by Tsang and several friends and collaborators from the Los Angeles performance art and nightlife communities. During this time, The Silver Platter provided Tsang with a space to create works of art and performance within a local context that was both generative and fraught with political tensions related to the potentials, and limitations, of forging alliances and communities across several lines of social difference.¹⁶ The numerous works of video, visual art, and performance that Tsang and his collaborators produced there reflect the bare-bones glamour that made the bar into a fragile site for exploring of the possibilities of social coalition and collective creation. Unabashedly engaging the politics

¹⁶ The party, along with the story Tsang's complex relationship with the owners and patrons of The Silver Platter, is the subject of Tsang's 2011 film *Wildness*.

of marginalization, these works grapple with overlapping—but unevenly distributed and experienced—positions of social exclusion, disenfranchisement, and non-normativity.

The Shape of the Right Statement was Tsang’s first attempt to make artwork using a performance technique that the artist has come to call “full body quotation,” in which performers speak and embody previously existing texts or recorded documents. In an interview with Chloe Wyma, Tsang describes the technique as follows:

Full body quotation is a performance technique I’ve been working on, but the name could change as it evolves. The performer has a hidden audio source and she re-speaks voices mimetically—not just the text but tone, breath, accent, idiom, etc. The idea is to question authenticity and intention of the speaker, and understand content differently, out of its original context. For the two films in the Triennial, I was working with really different source material, and at very different times. The earlier film “SRS” [“Shape of a Right Statement”] is quoting Amanda Baggs an autism rights activist, who at the time I was very interested in cross-identification between autism rights and trans/gay rights as being struggles to de-pathologize so-called “conditions” of being autistic, etc. This new film “FHWPALT3” [“For How We Perceived a Life (Take 3)”] is quoting various sources from research and field work about the making of Jennie Livingston’s 1990 documentary, “Paris is Burning.” In both instances, I chose material where the performers all had complicated relationships to the sources. The full body quotation technique is a way to perform our ambivalences.¹⁷

¹⁷ Chloe Wyma, “‘I Dislike the Word Visibility’: Wu Tsang on Sexuality, Creativity, and Conquering New York’s Museums,” *Blouin Art Info*, 2 March 2012: www.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/761447/i-dislike-the-word-visibility-wu-tsang-on-sexuality-creativity-and-conquering-new-yorks-museums

Here, Tsang allows us to read a performance technique that involves specific and precisely defined *bodily* practices—involving speech, but also of “breath, accent, idiom, etc.”—in relation to the explicitly *political* projects it is intended to advance. Tsang’s full body quotation might thus be understood as formal aesthetic strategy that uses the performing body, and voice, to index relational dynamics like identification, empathy, and coalitional alliance—and especially to register the hazards (what the artist calls “ambivalences”) that surround and support such relational structures. The very nomenclature of Tsang’s technique—“full body quotation”—highlights the corporeal dimensions of the rhetorical citationality exhibited in *The Shape of the Right Statement*. Tsang’s technique directly and explicitly reveals the political ramifications of the link between body and voice. Furthermore, Tsang associates this vocal and bodily technique with the struggle against pathologization that is shared by people with autism, on the one hand, and transgender and queer subjects, on the other. In *The Shape of the Right Statement*, the shared struggle for de-pathologization is linked to the physical exertions of the performing body by way of a remarkable, even virtuosic feat of vocal mimicry.

When viewed together, *In My Language* and *The Shape of the Right Statement* suggest that recent political movements organized around de-pathologizing understandings of autism, mental disability, and neurological difference (on the one hand) and those having to do with non-normative forms of gender and sexuality (on the other) should not be conceived as simply parallel or analogous projects. Indeed, these works demonstrate how the politics of neurological difference and those of sexual and gender difference—especially the historical (and ongoing) relation of each of these mobilizations to struggles for de-pathologization—are more tightly meshed than might be immediately apparent. Moreover, these video works help illuminate why

this is so by drawing out a set of interconnected relations between voice and touch; language and the body; (political) identity and (corporeal) sensation. In the following section, I consider in greater detail how and why the voice—understood as that which provides the “phonic substance” of speech and therefore as that which is situated at the place where language meets the body, even as it exceeds the terms of this relation—has been a key topic of contestation within clinical and cultural representations of autism and adjacent forms of neurological difference involving the impairment of communicative functions.

The Missing Voice

It seems indeed that if, in autistic beings, the voice lacking, it is because the voice has missed them as beings—or that these beings have missed their voices, as we would say of a tennis player who wasn’t in the right position to receive and return the ball.

—Fernand Deligny, “The Missing Voice”

The topic of the autistic’s use of his or her “voice” has been a perennial concern within the scientific and cultural history of autism: since Leo Kanner’s 1943 paper establishing autism as a distinct psychiatric disorder, the clinical literature has evinced a near-obsessive level of interest in the patterns, tones, and pitch vocalized by autistic children. Much of the early psychiatric research on autism focused on what researchers termed “echolalia,” in which autistic children were identified as being especially prone to mimicking the speech-sounds of others in a manner that Kanner and others characterized as “rote and literal.”¹⁸ The “problem” of echolalia has been

¹⁸ See Adriana L. Schuler and Barry M. Prizant, “Echolalia,” in *Communication Problems in Autism*, eds. Eric Schopler and Gary B. Mesibov (New York: Plenum Press, 1985), 163–184.

seen as one of the most telling symptoms of the communicational, behavioral, and social “deficits” that continue to make up the disorder’s diagnostic criteria. Echolalia and other vocal attributes associated with autism, in other words, have been taken as evidence of the autistic subject’s obsessive and perseverative behavioral tendencies, her difficulties in communicating verbally, and ultimately, her failure to (in the words of Kanner) “relate themselves in the ordinary way to people and situations.”¹⁹ While there have been significant scientific and therapeutic advances in the medical research and psychiatric treatment paradigms used to address the pathologized speech patterns and vocal behaviors of persons diagnosed with autism in ensuing decades, echolalic speech continues to be one of the primary diagnostic hallmarks of autism and associated “spectrum” disorders.

Venturing beyond the clinical precincts of the psychiatric literature and scientific research, it is equally clear that processes involving voicing and verbal speech have been major points of contention in the wider cultural terrain within which the politics of autism, mental disability, and neurological difference have taken shape. Indeed, the assertion of “voice” in its more abstract or metaphorical dimensions—which is to say the capacity of articulating one’s subjective experiences, needs, and desires in ways that can gain recognition and accommodation within a broader social world—has been at the heart of the ethical and political claims of neurodiversity discourse and rhetoric: neurodiversity has taken as its principal aim the project of making space for the “voices” of autistics and others stigmatized as neurologically atypical (even though the form that such appeals have taken is language and speech-based).

An anthology of writings by autistics published in 2012 by members of the Autistic Self-Advocacy Network (ASAN) titled *Loud Hands: Autistic People, Speaking* reflects the seemingly

¹⁹ Leo Kanner, “Autistic Disturbances of Affective Contact,” *Nervous Child* 2 (1943): 242.

contradictory position occupied by the autistic “speaking subject,” in both its title and in the essays it contains.²⁰ The phrase “loud hands” refers to the way in which behavioral specialists often instruct autistic children to practice “quiet hands,” in order to encourage them to resist the desire to engage in bodily stimming. As the text of *In My Language* itself also indicates, the autistic subject’s vexed relation to language draws attention to what might be called the existential, even ontological trouble that autism and other disabilities affecting rhetorical capacities might be said to represent. Indeed, Baggs and other neurodiversity self-advocates have developed alternative accounts of the place of voice, speech, and language within the political and philosophical consolidation of the human as an autonomous, self-reflective, sovereign subject. (In so doing, they also echo Fernand Deligny’s critique of Althusser’s account of subjectivity as being formed by the vocal “hail” of ideology, and his subsequent attention to finding the autistic’s “missing” voice in his experimental cinematic and cartographic projects). The bifurcated structure of *In My Language* reflects the paradoxical political mandate that the essentially “non-verbal” aspects of autism and other forms of neurological difference must be rendered into verbal terms in order to become capable of broader political recognition and accommodation.

The complex and unsettled status of the autistic voice continues to structure one of the most contentious debates about the politics of neurological difference, regarding the psychiatric distinction between “high functioning” (HFA) and “low-functioning” (LFA) manifestations of autism. Many neurodiversity proponents have criticized this distinction as a false representation of the true range of abilities and impairments that characterize the spectrum of neurotypes that

²⁰ Julia Bascomb, ed., *Loud Hands: Autistic People, Speaking* (Washington, DC: The Autistic Self-Advocacy Network, 2012).

are currently subtended within contemporary neuropsychiatric diagnostic protocols. Even as the concept of the “spectrum” has, since the early 1990s, gradually come to dominate psychiatric, biomedical, and cultural discussions of individual variations within autistic symptomology, the low/high functioning distinction persists as a distinction that reiterates earlier frameworks. Like other contemporary diagnostic protocols related to the assessment and treatment of autism spectrum disorders, the distinction between high- and low-functioning is not grounded in the detection of any specific biological or neurochemical pathology, but rather developed and reiterated upon the basis of behavioral observation and assessment.²¹ The persistence of the diagnostic distinction between HFA and LFA, neurodiversity proponents have argued, unwittingly marginalizes and disempowers individuals who have been placed on the low-functioning end of the spectrum and effectively serves to divide autistics from one another on the basis of an (allegedly) arbitrarily imposed criteria of “functionality.”

The critique of the HFA/LFA distinction has taken a variety of forms within the writing of autistic self-advocates and their allies. In a 2013 blog entry, the autistic self-advocate Cynthia Kim writes that functioning labels “assume a uniform set of competences” that do not correspond to the experiential variety and inconsistency that most people diagnosed with autism experience. Rather, Kim argues, autistic functioning is “fluid, nonlinear and nonuniform.”²² Similarly, in a 2007 online interview with the autistic writer Donna Williams, Amanda Baggs responds to a

²¹ High-functioning autism is commonly, if not universally, used interchangeably with Asperger syndrome. Yet as demonstrated by the controversies surrounding proposals to eliminate Asperger syndrome from the most recent revision to the DSM, whether the wide range of abilities, impairments, and behaviors that have come to be associated with autism can be attributed to a single, biologically discrete disorder remains far from settled within biomedical and psychiatric research.

²² Cynthia Kim, “Decoding the High Functioning Label,” *Musings of an Aspie: One Woman’s Thoughts about Life on the Spectrum*, 23 June 2013: <http://musingsofanaspie.com/2013/06/26/decoding-the-high-functioning-label/>

question about her level of function by saying, “I don’t like the idea of functioning levels because I don’t think you can measure everything about a person and assign them a single level, people are more complicated than that. [...] I think people come up with a ‘functioning level’ when they think of a particular ability as more important than others and then they measure a person’s entire ‘functioning’ by that ability.”²³ Baggs calls attention to the fact that the limited set of behavioral criteria used by both psychiatric experts and laypeople to determine on which side of the functioning divide an individual falls are more reflective of social and cultural values than they are accurate indicators of an underlying ontological reality. To move to another example, in their introduction to a 2010 special issue of *Disability Studies Quarterly* devoted to the topic of neurodiversity (which included contributions from both autistics and neurotypicals), Ralph James Savarese and Emily Savarese write:

If we accomplish anything with this volume, we hope that people will reconsider the use of such terms as high- and low-functioning. They are always demeaning and quite often inaccurate. Is Stephen Hawking low-functioning? Is being able to tie one's shoes the pinnacle of human achievement? [...Each of this issue’s contributors] is sensitive to the problem of representation, understanding that autism has suffered from one misinformed or disparaging depiction after another and with truly tragic consequences.²⁴

Here, Savarese and Savarese suggest how diagnostic psychiatric categorizations operate as *representational* markers within the broader cultural field in which autism and cognitive

²³ Quoted in Donna Williams, “Putting Autism on Trial: An Interview with Amanda Baggs,” *Donna Williams’s Blog*, 3 July 2007, <http://blog.donnawilliams.net/2007/07/03/putting-autism-on-trial-an-interview-with-amanda-baggs/>

²⁴ Emily Thornton Savarese and Ralph James Savarese, “The Superior Half of Speaking,” *Disability Studies Quarterly* 30, no. 1 (2010), <http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/1062/1230>

disability are intelligible; such distinctions have the potential to perpetuate social stigma and even material harm to the persistence of autistic life-worlds if left unquestioned.

It is worth lingering on the rhetorical strategies at play in assertions such as those made by Baggs, Williams, and Savarese and Saverese, and to examine more closely the deeper histories and styles of argumentation from which they draw. Reading these and similar accounts, it is clear that the neurodiversity critique of the low/high functioning distinction gains its rhetorical force by combining two approaches: first, such critiques involve an especially robust extension of the “social model” thesis, a key (if contested) tenet of disability activism and disability studies that understands disability to be an essentially *social* phenomenon, rather than an individual, private, or “innate” biological one.²⁵ Second, the neurodiversity critique is informed by the energetic dismantling of epistemological dualisms of many kinds that has characterized a range of political movements over the past several decades. In other words, the effort by neurodiversity advocates to discredit and erode the low-function/high-function dyad operates according to a double movement: it first insists on the historical contingency of psychiatric expertise about autistic disorders, pointing to what it views as normative cultural biases in order to argue that such designations are arbitrary, false, and ultimately harmful to the persistence of viable autistic life-worlds. It next seeks to expose the implicit moral and ethical hierarchies that are produced by the imposition of a “hard” line of distinction between two paired terms. In so doing, it seeks to reveal the effacements and remainders that are produced by such impositions. In this regard, debates about neurodiversity bear the notable trace of certain intellectual-political stances and rhetorical approaches that came to prominence in the 1990s. In

²⁵ See Tom Shakespeare, “The Social Model of Disability,” in *The Disability Studies Reader, Second Edition*, ed. Lennard Davis (New York: Routledge, 2006), 197-204.

particular, the terms of these debates are organized by a constitutive ambivalence, characteristic of that decade, concerning the status of identity knowledges as the primary “ground” for social and political critique. Indeed, many neurodiversity criticisms of the low/high function dyad operate analogously to the critiques of gender binarisms developed within deconstructive and poststructuralist feminist theory in that decade. Like feminist critiques of the gender binary, neurodiversity critiques of the LFA/HFA distinction destabilize the very “subject” of politics.

Perhaps inevitably, what might be called the social constructionist (or, perhaps, “deconstructive”) hermeneutic that characterizes this neurodiversity position has not been immune from criticism and even outright hostility from certain quarters: some family caregivers of autistics have been particularly vocal in their opposition to the more radically constructionist neurodiversity positions, noting that rejecting the low/high functioning distinction has led to misleading representations of autism and neurological disability which gloss over the extent of the challenges faced by certain autistics and their families. For instance, Amy S. F. Lutz, the mother of a child diagnosed with low-functioning autism, accuses high-functioning autistic self-advocates of propagating an antiseptic view that masks the extent of the debilitation and suffering that characterizes some individuals’ and families’ experiences of living with the condition:

Amanda Baggs, Tracy Thresher, and others offer a sanitized version of low-functioning autism, which is all the public sees. The kids with the unfortunate trifecta of autism, intellectual disability, and dangerous behaviors aren’t on TV singing with Katy Perry. They’re in one of the 11 in-patient hospital units in this country dedicated to this population (many with waiting lists months long), in residential treatment facilities, or barely managed at home behind closed doors. It’s only once you’re thrust into this

world—as I was, when Jonah broke a teacher’s nose when he was in kindergarten—that you see how many there are: kids who have blinded themselves or bruised and concussed their parents and siblings or who spend their days in highly restrictive equipment to keep them from doing so. These children will never write one blog or produce one video. Despite that—or rather, because of that—they couldn’t be more convincing. And any portrayal of autism that glosses over their profound disability closes the door on them all over again.²⁶

Lutz’s discussion calls attention to the fact that even as shifts in social policy and medical care over the past several decades have dramatically transformed the circumstances of developmentally disabled individuals over the past several decades, access to care continues to be experienced and distributed unevenly across the social field. Lutz’s critique of the “sanitizing” accounts proffered by Baggs and other autistic self-advocates offers a powerful reminder of the significant disparities in social, cognitive, sensory, and linguistic capacities that neurodiversity rhetoric aims to unify under the essentially *political* category of “neurological difference.” Indeed, Lutz offers an important rejoinder to those who would too easily dismiss the low/high-functioning distinction, and calls attention to how such arguments unwittingly re-stigmatize the “bad subjects” of neurodiversity—those individuals whose vital persistence hinges upon the kinds of care that only state-supported psychiatric institutions are presently equipped to provide. For Lutz, it is a lamentable irony as autistics gained increasing cultural recognition as the most authoritative experts on their own condition, the depth and severity of suffering (not infrequently

²⁶ Amy S. F. Lutz, “Is the Neurodiversity Movement Misrepresenting Autism?,” *Slate.com*, 16 January 2013
www.slate.com/articles/health_and_science/medical_examiner/2013/01/autism_neurodiversity_does_facilitated_communication_work_and_who_speaks.html

characterized as “devastating” within the clinical literature) that can accompany an autism diagnosis has been unwittingly minimized.

Addressing the low-functioning/high-functioning controversy requires entering some of the most ethically and conceptually fraught terrain within critical disability studies. It involves grappling with the hard reality that many individuals with autism cannot be easily assimilated into an affirmative, “difference-and-diversity” model of neurological personhood: not only persons with severely impaired linguistic and communicational capacities, but also those persons for whom the concept of harm (including self-harm) appears to be punishingly out of reach. It seems necessary to develop new and more capacious conceptualizations of autistic “functioning” that are not constrained by hard distinctions separating low from high, but that do not inadvertently minimize or fail to account for the more difficult and painful dimensions of what I have been calling autistic life-worlds. As Stuart Murray has argued, “the worrying aspect is that an idea of autistic functioning equates with an idea of disabled human value, that the shorthand that ‘function’ has become allows for processes of assessment and judgment that fix those with autism into inflexible ontological categories, and that these categories themselves then pass for the norm.”²⁷ Murray notes that the very concept of “function” has been pervasively defined according to strictly maintained epistemological, ethical, and even moral economies that are, in turn, sanctioned through the performative force of expert assessment and diagnosis. How might our conceptualization of “function” be reformulated in ways that do not reproduce the forms of political, legal, and social exclusion faced by individuals who have been consigned to the low-

²⁷ Stuart Murray, “Autism Functions/The Function of Autism,” *Disability Studies Quarterly* 30 no. 1 (2010), <http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/1048/1229>

functioning end of the autism spectrum? More fundamentally, is it possible, or even desirable, to develop an account of autism as a “mode of relation outside of function”?²⁸

Seeing, Touching, Voicing

In this section, I examine more closely how the specific aesthetic procedures found within the video works by Baggs and Tsang reflect the political ramifications of debates surrounding the status of autistic “function,” focusing in particular upon the way these videos elaborate an alternative relation between vocal and tactile sensory registers. *In My Language* begins with a sound: it is a soft, almost gentle hum, not quite a song or melody, but a kind of intoned refrain oscillating between back and forth between several low pitches. The voice is identifiably feminine: it is also somewhat haunting, and is responsible, in large part, for lending the video its haunting, almost mournful sonic atmosphere. Along with the sounds made by Baggs’ manipulation of the objects—scraping, hitting, stroking—this humming generates the entirety of the sound-world of the video’s first half, and shaping the sequence of images it accompanies according to an audibly continuous, if not-quite musical, organizing structure. Baggs’s humming departs from the typical function of the voice as the phonic-material “support” for verbal expression—as, that is to say, the supplemental, bodily substratum of speech (and, hence, of “communication” and its attendant facilitation of intersubjective exchange, recognition, and sociality). Instead, Baggs’s humming reveals the human voice to be another means by which the body physically engages, negotiates, and interacts with the materiality of the world. The hum of Baggs’s voice seems to function as a palpable anchor or barrier, delimiting the boundary

²⁸ “*Qu'en serait-il d'un mode de relation qui ne serait pas utile à la société, pas utilisable, pas utilisé? Un mode de relation hors fonction?*” Fernand Deligny, *Nous et l'innocent* (Paris: Maspero, 1976), 43.

between (human) self and (object) world. Complementing the images of Baggs's deliberate, rhythmic, and repetitive bodily movements, the humming becomes an almost pliable sonic surface—a ground (but also a ceiling and a wall) upon or against which Baggs marks out a certain territory of action and negotiates the terrain between herself and the quotidian world of domestic objects that surrounds her.

In the latter, “Translation” half of the video, Baggs's nonverbal humming is replaced by the computerized voice generated by Dynavox, the speech-generating software that Baggs uses to communicate verbally. While the incidental sounds produced as Baggs interacts with the objects of her environment persist (we hear, for instance, the trickling of the water faucet over her fingers and into the sink), the video's mode of address shifts dramatically with the introduction of the sound of the spoken text. In contrast to the first half of the video's distinctly amorphous visual and sonic composition, the directness and forthrightness of Baggs's words lend the latter half of the video the quality of a manifesto. Yet the semantic “content” that this voice communicates to its viewer-listeners reaches us at a “remove” from its putative origin, having been first manually typed as written text into a text-to-speech computer program, and subsequently “voiced” by way of the computer's technological apparatuses that facilitate the production of sounds that are recognizable and decipherable as words and sentences.

Tsang's discussion of full body quotation, cited earlier, has at least two significant referents that are interwoven through Tsang's decision to bring Baggs's video into the context of a queer club space. The first is lip-synching, a performance technique associated with virtuosic drag performance. The second is the assistive technology that Baggs herself uses in her video to generate speech. In each case the act of speaking—and the self-presence that is assumed to undergird it—is fractured and displaced, attaining a more complex and lasting *temporal*

dimension. This gap between enunciation and enunciator is responsible for a specific kind of *frisson* in which the unseen source of a given sound produces an anxiety in the viewer/auditor. In Tsang's piece, this gap is closed and resolved in the self-presence of the sound and image of the artist, who is seen and heard declaiming Baggs's text. And yet the persistence of this gap is also held open by the parameters of the full body quotation, in that Tsang's vocal performance mimics the "artificial" pacing and tonality of Baggs's speech generating software.

The disruption of the vocal circuit between psychic interiority and expression staged in *In My Language* finds a kind of recursive or, perhaps more accurately, chiasmic doubling in Tsang's *The Shape of the Right Statement*. If Baggs's FC voice has been designed to mimic, as closely as possible, the recognizable tonalities of human speech, Tsang's performance strives to mimic the artificial sonorities of computerized speech. In Baggs's video, we are presented with a voice through the mediated technology of the type-to-speech software that she uses to communicate with others. In Tsang's, the artist attempts to mimic the sonic valences of Baggs's technologically mediated voice through a virtuosic vocal performance—a technique which has in turn become the basis for Tsang's further elaboration in subsequent artistic projects that also involve strategic "re-voicings" of previously recorded material. In each case, the alliance between human voice and verbal expression is strategically disrupted in order to polemically expand the purview of what kinds of expressive behavior can be considered language, communication, and even "thought" as such.

In place of the variously telescoping and circuiting layers of mediation that the two videos construct to further widen the gap between the body of the "speaking" autistic subject and the "content" communicated by her speech, *In My Language* and *The Shape of the Right Statement* propose different modes of organizing and arranging sensory experience. More

specifically, the videos are each acutely attuned to the role of tactility—and more particularly *haptic* sensory modes—within the (performative) production of linguistic, communicational, and expressive “content.” Yet for Baggs and Tsang, the haptic is not simply an especially prominent or aesthetically privileged sensory mode; it also functions as a structuring, formal element in these videos’ performative interventions.

In its entry for the word “haptics,” the Oxford English Dictionary cites a 1966 entry in the Publications of the American Dialect Society identifying the term as “that sub-system of nonlanguage communication which conveys meaning through physical contact.”²⁹ If this definition hews remarkably closely to the narration offered in Baggs’s video, I also mean to evoke a description of the term offered by Gilles Deleuze, in his study of the painter Francis Bacon: “We will speak of the *haptic* whenever there is no longer a strict subordination in either direction”—that is, toward the eye (optical) or hand (tactile)—“but when sight discovers in itself a specific function of touch that is uniquely its own, distinct from its optical function.”³⁰ Here, Deleuze indicates how the haptic offers a mode of describing visual media that would depart from prevailing epistemological traditions in which other sensory modes are subordinated to the priority of the ocular. The concept of the haptic upends the “ocularcentrism” of modern regimes of visibility, orienting us instead to instances in which touch and tactility overtake the sensorial

²⁹ “haptic, adj. (and n.).” OED Online. December 2014. Oxford University Press. www.oed.com/view/Entry/84082?redirectedFrom=haptic& (accessed March 17, 2015)

³⁰ Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 155.

“purity” of vision. Extending from Deleuze, we might say that the haptic returns the body to the act of seeing, undoing the Cartesian equation of sight with (disembodied) cognition.³¹

Informed in part by Deleuze, film theorist Laura U. Marks offers a powerful account of “haptic cinema” in her book *The Skin of the Film Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*. Marks notes how certain formal properties of the cinematic image, such as “changes in focus, graininess (achieved differently in each medium, and effects of under- and over-exposure,” can all effectively “discourage the viewer from distinguishing objects and encourage a relationship to the screen as a whole.”³² For Marks, the haptic constitutes a “visual strategy that can be used to describe alternative visual traditions, including women’s and feminist practices”—though Marks makes clear that she is not associating the haptic with “a feminine quality in particular.”³³ For Marks, the haptic has been an important aesthetic strategy within feminist filmmaking because it subverts and disrupts dominant cinematic protocols that have metonymically linked the disembodied purity of ocular vision with the equally disembodied values of scientific knowledge and rationality. Extending from Marks, I would propose haptic strategies and approaches to be equally central to the account of disability aesthetics I am seeking to elaborate in this study. As such, I suggest that *In My Language* and *The Shape of the Right Statement* each position themselves against dominant epistemological and sensory logics that analogize the purity of ocular vision with the “transparency” of language, developing instead an aesthetic and performative association between haptic vision and autistic language.

³¹ Martin Jay offers an intellectual genealogy of ocularcentrism in *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

³² Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 171–72.

³³ *Ibid.*, 170.



Figure 11. A shot filmed through a plastic slinky, from Amanda Baggs's *In My Language* (YouTube, 2007)

In the case of *In My Language*, this haptic dimension is achieved in part through the formal composition of individual shots, as in the striking sequences filmed through the center of a bouncing plastic slinky. In one of these shots, the slinky creates a yellow and orange spiral through which Baggs's bare feet and the tip of her finger are visible on the floor (see **Figure 11**). In this shot, the entire screen fills with the spiraling, kinetic dynamism of the bouncing orange rings, whose rhythmic movement dominates the whole surface of the image and produces a palpable sense of repetitive rocking or swaying. (This sequence recalls the visual vocabulary of Alfred Hitchcock's film *Vertigo*, in which brightly colored circular spirals mimic the circling camera movements that are meant to both signal the protagonist's dizzying spells of vertigo, and haptically *induce* a comparable proprioceptive experience in the viewer's body.)

The video also contains several powerfully visceral images of sensory “smearing”—as in the shot where Baggs is shown with her face grazing over the pages of an open book held up to her face, smelling and touching the pages as they graze by her nose in a single, multi- (or perhaps cross) sensory motion. I would additionally describe Baggs’s deliberate, almost rhythmic use of editing and montage as haptic: Baggs enlists the percussive quality of the jump cut to produce a visual/haptic effect that seems to evoke the rhythmically repetitive qualities associated with autistic “stereotyped” behavior, such as “stimming” (the clinical term used to describe the perseverative bodily motions characteristically linked to the condition) and vocal echolalia.

The haptic qualities of Tsang’s work functions differently, evoking by other means the tactile preoccupations of its antecedent. In contrast to the elaborate, kinetically patterned visual style of Baggs’s video, *The Shape of the Right Statement* is formally austere and presentational. Its single-take, static mid-range shot captures the artist facing the camera, gazing steadily outward at the unseen viewers he addresses. I want to focus in particular on the several tears that begin to well at the corner of Tsang’s eyes partway through the video before spilling over and rolling down his cheek near the work’s close. I would suggest that are several ways to understand Tsang’s tears. The first would be to read them as a non-conscious, “physical” response to the bodily strain involved in the performance—as issuing, that is, from the artist’s tear-ducts simply from being held open for too long without blinking. Here, the tears are not correlated to an interior psychic state ascribed to the speaker. A second interpretation of the tears would be to view them as a symptomatic indication of Tsang’s emotional response to, and investment in, the semantic content of Baggs’s text that he recites. In this account, the tears are

read as visual indications of the artist's subjectively "interior" emotional state.³⁴ Yet is possible for the view to hold both of these understandings of the tear simultaneously—and that this ambiguity only heightens the interpretive and aesthetic complexity of the work. In each case, the tear "communicates" (via the haptic "subsystem of nonlanguage") in a way that exceeds the semantic content of the spoken text.

In his influential essay "Signature Event Context," Jacques Derrida writes that the word *communication* "can designate nonsemantic movements" as well as semantic ones, noting that forces, tremors, and shocks can all be "communicated—that is, propagated, transmitted."³⁵ Derrida notes that for a "communication" to attain semantic or "expressive" currency, it must be situated within a regime of representation, "the representative structure which marks the first degree of *expressive* communication, the relation idea/sign."³⁶ What I have been describing as the haptic elements in Baggs's and Tsang's videos thus could be said to arise specifically within the interstices between "movement" and "expression": indeed, Baggs's assertion that "my language is not about designing words or even visual symbols for people to interpret" can be read as a refusal of the "representative structure" through which "expressive communication" is adjudicated. Showing herself "in a constant conversation with every aspect of my environment," Baggs insists that her tactile interaction with her surroundings are just as expressively communicative as neurotypical spoken language.

³⁴ Here I am in part informed by Eugenie Brinkema's discussion of the cinematic formalization of affect by way of a reading of Janet Leigh's tears (or are they merely drops of water?) in a famous shot from Hitchcock's film *Psycho*. See Eugenie Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

³⁵ Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context," in *Limited Inc.*, ed. Gerald Graff, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman and Samuel Weber (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 1.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

Baggs's use of text-to-speech software to voice the words heard in the video's second half also invokes the practice of Facilitated Communication, a mode of producing speech that challenges notions of individual autonomy and the representative structure of expressive communication through what of Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson has called the "performative rhetoric of the body."³⁷ Lisa Cartwright's work on the ethics of intersubjective communication has shown how language and touch have overlapped within the history of autism. In her study of the controversies that emerged in the early 1990s surrounding the use of facilitated communication with autistic and other children with language impairments, Cartwright notes that debates over the use of FC centered around the question of physical touch between facilitators and their clients, and "opened up the larger question about the relationship between affect and expressive representation."³⁸ Once the fantasy of speech as an autonomous exercise of subjective expression was shattered by the site of the previously "voiceless" emerging into sociality, the very embodied/physical and tactile practices of these methods were placed under suspicion. From its inception the method was controversial, with many researchers doubting the veracity of the content it generated. As Cartwright notes, "Both sides' ways of understanding the human subject and its constitution through speech [...] precluded a more complex understanding of human voice and agency as always coproduced, with the splitting of the subject always enacted in relationship to and in dependency upon others."³⁹ The use of FC among people with disabilities points toward an account of expressive communication that is collaborative, relational, and enmeshed within a social world where human agency and voice are "co-produced." Tsang's video, in turn, makes

³⁷ Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson, "Rethinking Rhetoric through Mental Disabilities." *Rhetoric Review* 22, no. 2 (2003): 161.

³⁸ Lisa Cartwright, *Moral Spectatorship: Technologies of Voice and Affect in Postwar Representations of the Child* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 166.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 159-60.

canny reference to Baggs's use of FC through the technique of "full body quotation," which is in part a riff on the queer performance practices of drag and lipsynching. Recalling the denaturalizing tendencies of camp, Tsang's technique is designed "to question authenticity and intention of the speaker, and understand content differently, out of its original context."⁴⁰ It is a way of "performing ambivalence" that further layers and interweaves separate but intersecting histories, traditions, and strategies of vocal expression.

What are the consequences of an understanding of communication as it is produced through touch? In her account of the tactile dimensions of autistic self-expression, the rhetorical theorist Shannon Walters notes, "People with autism who negotiate the complexities of touch in their lives cultivate touch as a habit that drives the bodily production of *ethos*."⁴¹ Walters develops a careful account of the ways in which autistics and others with communicational disabilities manage to occupy an alternative, dissensual relation to the neurotypical norms of expressive communication through touch. I want to suggest that what Walters describes as the autistic *ethos* of touch can be read in both Baggs's and Tsang's videos as an especially *queer* aesthetic element, one that serves to connect these works' treatment of autism and the politics of neurological difference to non-normative configurations of sexuality and gender expression.

The thematics of touch, pressure, and texture, in turn, have been key to the ways in which autism has been articulated in relationship to questions of gender and sexual difference, as well as ongoing debates concerning the sexuality of autism. In one of the few critical essays addressing sexuality and autism, Rachel Groner surveys a range of autobiographical literature authored by autistics addressing their experience of sexuality. Indeed, Groner notes that "One of

⁴⁰ Tsang, in Wyma, "I Dislike the Word Visibility."

⁴¹ Shannon Walters, *Rhetorical Touch: Disability, Identification, Haptics* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2014), 121.

the seemingly universal sensations that many people with ASD tolerate, and even crave, is intense pressure.”⁴² Recall an account by the autistic writer Lucy Blackman, who describes her experience of her facilitator’s hand as a rich site of both attention and information: “The steady touch on my own hand and forearm somehow made me bring it into focus, and at the same time feeling the point of contact gave me an accurate measurement as to the distance between my fingertip and my sensation of that touch.”⁴³ Blackman’s description also evokes a passage from the work of Temple Grandin, arguably the most widely recognized and influential autistic writer. In her 1998 memoir *Thinking in Pictures*, Grandin famously describes how as a high school student at a Vermont boarding school in the 1950s, she constructed a “squeeze machine” in which she could place her body in order to generate “the tactile equivalent of a complex emotion”: by controlling the machine’s degree of pressure on her body, Grandin reports that the machine has helped me to understand complexity of [human] feeling.”⁴⁴ In turn, Grandin’s use of the squeeze machine as what might be called an *affective prosthesis* led to her subsequent work developing widely used animal husbandry techniques, which rely on similar machines to mediate the bodily pressure experienced by animals in industrial slaughterhouses. Throughout her work, Grandin frequently attributes her unique empathic relations with livestock animals to the intensely tactile aspects of her experience of autism, especially referring to the squeeze machine’s “language of pressure.” Grandin writes that using her squeeze-machine “enabled me to learn to be gentle, to have empathy, to know that gentleness is not synonymous with

⁴² Rachel Goner, “Sex as ‘Spock’: ” in *Sex and Disability*, eds. Robert McRuer and Anna Mollow (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 274.

⁴³ Blackburn is quoted in Walters, *Rhetorical Touch*, 119.

⁴⁴ Temple Grandin, *Thinking in Pictures: My Life with Autism* (New York: Vintage, 2006), 90.

weakness. I was learning how to feel.”⁴⁵ These examples from the writing of Blackburn and Grandin already indicate how Baggs’s concern with touch and texture in *In My Language* can be placed within a larger conversation among autistics about the relation between sensory experience the capacity to experience and communicate emotion in ways that might be understood by a broader (neurotypical) world.

Here, we might also find the terms to situate Baggs’s video as a work of queer performance. Groner makes a case for autistic sexuality as a queer formation, arguing that “autistic sexuality is illegible to heteronormativity.”⁴⁶ Previous discussions of Baggs’s video have overlooked the fact that Baggs has identified as a lesbian and, more recently has written, “I don’t experience myself as having a gender identity, I call it being genderless.”⁴⁷ Yet beyond Baggs’s recourse to “legible” (or “illegible”) markers of sexual and gender identity, the *haptic* account of language and communication set forth in the video indicate a queer relation to both neurotypical and heteronormative matrices of intelligibility, navigating an errant pathway through the thicket of language, sensation, and identity.

Texture is a sensory quality or characteristic that can be felt with the hand or other parts of the body: texture is the *how* or *what* of touch—the informational “content” that is revealed within the haptic encounter. Renu Bora writes, “how one feels matter seems to invite comparisons with how one’s own or some else’s matter can be shaped.”⁴⁸ As I have been describing in relationship

⁴⁵ Temple Grandin, *Emergence: Labeled Autistic* (New York: Warner Books, 1996), 108.

⁴⁶ Groner, “Sex as ‘Spock,’” 265.

⁴⁷ Mel Baggs, “About Mel Baggs,” <https://ballastexistenz.wordpress.com/2007/04/05/what-pdd-nos-officially-means/>

⁴⁸ Renu Bora, “Outing Texture,” in *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*, ed. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 123.

to *In My Language* and *The Shape of the Right Statement*, Baggs and Tsang investigate how the *shaping* of a statement can be as determined by the feel of an object as the “content” that is expressed by a single voice. “To touch is always already to reach out, to fondle, to heft, to tap or enfold,” writes Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “and always also to understand other people or natural forces as having effectually done so before oneself, if only in the making of the textured object.”⁴⁹

Sedgwick’s preoccupations with texture, reflected in both her theoretical writing and her growing devotion to a textile art practice, became central aspects of her attempt to navigate a number of problems having to do with the commerce between language (written and spoken) and materiality. Her discussions of texture also, perhaps not coincidentally, contain some of the only instances in which her work addresses disability directly—if often in glancing and ambivalent terms. The cover image of *Touching Feeling* is a striking photograph of the textile artist Judith Scott embracing one of her fiber sculptures. Scott had Down syndrome and was deaf, and was institutionalized for thirty-five years in an Ohio asylum. Scott’s twin sister Joyce eventually helped her move to Creative Growth, an organization in Oakland, California that provides residential programs for adults with disabilities with an emphasis on art and creative practice. While there, Scott started to create vibrantly colored, nest-like textile sculptures, assemblages of twine and strips of fabric tightly bound together to form large fibrous masses. The sculptures soon began to attract the attention of art critics and collectors in the late 1980s. Although devotees of “outsider art” heralded Scott as an exceptional talent, public and critical discussions of her work consistently centered around the material, bodily, and cognitive deprivations that Scott experienced throughout her life, and that were presumed to define both the limitations and

⁴⁹ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 13–14.

intensity of her aesthetic practice. Critics, Sedgwick notes in the Introduction to *Touching Feeling*, insisted that Scott's severe developmental and linguistic limitations prevented her from consciously understanding her creative output as "artwork" in any conventional sense.

Sedgwick, however, is skeptical of such assessments. Instead she writes of the powerful sense of identification that she feels with Scott, "less as a subject of some kind of privation than as the holder of an obscure treasure, or as a person receptively held by it."⁵⁰ For Sedgwick, the photograph of Scott embracing her fiber sculpture—in which "the sense of sight is seen to dissolve in favor of that of touch"⁵¹—exemplifies the kind of generous, affirming, and reparative model of cognitive and affective engagement that Sedgwick hopes to achieve in her theoretical work. In Scott's bodily absorption within the contours of her sculpture ("whose curves and planes," Sedgwick notes, "are biomorphically resonant and whose scale bears comparison to Scott's own body"⁵²) Sedgwick sees a visualization of the affective dimensions of intellectual labor itself: Scott's profound sense of devotion to the textural qualities of her materials—including a deeply sensed knowledge of their limitations—recalls for Sedgwick the way scholars both hold, and are held by, their objects of study. The photograph elicits her identification because it "conveys an affective and aesthetic fullness that can attach even to experiences of cognitive frustration."⁵³ Even as the photograph visually confirms the "disabled" status of Scott's body, it also reveals that the category of "disability" inadequately accounts for the full range of Scott's corporeal relationship to her work. Sedgwick suggests that in the photograph, "the

⁵⁰ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 24.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 23.

obvious fullness of Scott’s aesthetic consciousness...seems to radiate at some angle that is orthogonal to disability.”⁵⁴

In her subsequent writing, the association between texture and bodily fallibility takes on an increasingly autobiographical cast, as Sedgwick reveals how her own diagnosis with metastatic breast cancer shaped the development of her textile art practice, her growing fascination with the nondualistic tenets of Tibetan Buddhism, and her increasing interest in exploring what she calls “the middle ranges of agency”—a phrase the recurs repeatedly in her later writing. In “Making Things, Practicing Emptiness,” Sedgwick describes her work in textile art as having a “quite strenuous resistance to being translated into verbal propositions.”⁵⁵ Later in the same essay, Sedgwick asserts that “unlike making things, speech and writing and conceptual thought impose no material obstacles to a fantasy of instant, limitless efficacy.”⁵⁶ Sedgwick’s considerations of texture and touch, and her insistence that the “sense of touch makes nonsense out of any dualistic understanding of agency and passivity,” offers a resonant framework for reexamining some of the key issues addressed in *Shaping the Right Statement* and *In My Language*. That her writing on texture often involved reflections on disability and illness (including her own) further suggests the extent to which an attention to touch and texture can illuminate contemporary debates about autism and neurodiversity.

Indeed, Sedgwick’s reflections on the way texture and the practice of textile art can confound the rigid dualisms that structure the routines of thought, language, and relation are echoed in Baggs’s own recent writing and online presence. In a 2014 entry on her blog,

⁵⁴ Ibid., 24.

⁵⁵ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Making Things, Practicing Emptiness,” in *The Weather in Proust*, ed. Jonathan Goldberg (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 69.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 79.

Ballastexistenz, Baggs posted a video and a series of photos documenting her newfound interest in crochet. To accompany these images, Baggs offered a series of reflections on her recent preoccupations with crochet and weaving:

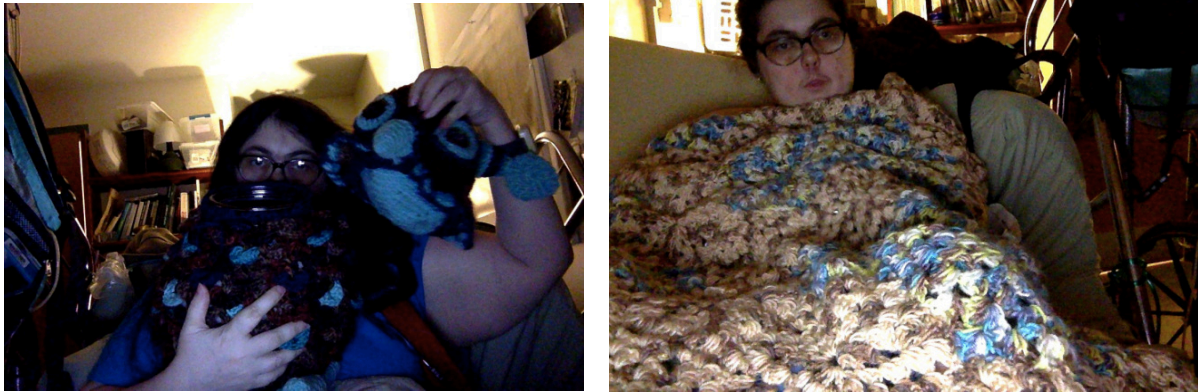
Crocheting is my new perseveration. You can call what I was doing in this video stimming, dancing, or whatever you want, but it's how my body moved naturally and it felt great. Crocheting is pretty much all I do these days. It's nice to have something I can do with my hands that doesn't require language or strenuous activity. I could never crochet or knit, growing up. It was visually too confusing to find where the stitches were. I had some of that problem when I was trying to learn this time, but apparently my visual processing is finally mature enough that I can distinguish what a stitch looks like. Once I figured that out, the rest became easy, and I took off really fast.

As an autistic person, and my particular type of autistic person, I need things to do that aren't words, aren't abstract, and aren't surfing the net. I've been looking for something like this a long time. I was trying to get into sewing, when I found my old childhood crochet hooks in my sewing box. I never did get into sewing, because I took off so fast with crochet I haven't looked back. It's my only real interest at this point, and I bore people by trying to talk about it. But I love it. I always have at least three projects going at once that I switch off between depending on how I'm feeling.⁵⁷

Baggs's writing, photographs, and video reveals how she has used crocheting as a strategy for inhabiting the world "as an autistic person," one that is particularly effective and absorbing because it is a type of activity done with one's hands that is "not abstract." The photographs

⁵⁷ Mel Baggs, "Crocheting and Dancing," *Ballastexistenz*, 30 April 2014, <https://ballastexistenz.wordpress.com/2014/04/30/expressions-of-posautivity/>

posted alongside this blog entry show Baggs interacting with her textile creations (see **figures 4 and 5**):



Figures 4 & 5
Images posted to Mel Baggs’s blog in April 2014

The inventive and playful manipulation of thread and yarn on view in the video and photographs suggests an eminently practical, non-abstract, and absorptive mode of engagement, a form of “communication” that is particularly suggestive for augmenting the terms in which disability aesthetics and the politics of neurological difference might be understood as a minoritarian sensory formation. As Baggs asserts at the close of *In My Language*—in a passage that Tsang revoices (and indeed, re-embodies) in *The Shape of the Right Statement*—the persistent failure to acknowledge or accommodate the “many shapes of personhood” has continued to delimit the possibilities for persistence and survival of those whose modes of expression and relationship to language are not recognized as such. “People are dying because they are considered non-persons, because their kind of thought is so unusual as to not be considered thought at all,” Baggs cautions in the final lines of the video. As will become clear in the next and final chapter, Baggs’s warning remains as necessary to heed as ever.

CHAPTER FOUR

“Avonte’s Law”:

Surveillance, Schematization, and the Wandering Line



Figure 12. Security footage, released to the media by the New York City Public School District, of Avonte Oquendo running toward the exit of the Riverview Public School in October 2013.

1.

A little after noon on October 4, 2013, a 14-year-old African-American eighth-grade student named Avonte Oquendo ran out of the side entrance of the Riverview Middle School, located in the Long Island City neighborhood in Queens, New York. Briefly stopped by a security guard after attempting to exit the school’s main entrance and instructed to return to his special-education classroom, Oquendo can be seen in a security video released by the New York City Police Department running instead in the direction of the side entrance before vanishing outside. Oquendo’s disappearance prompted an extensive search effort involving both the police

department and the wider New York community, the latter largely spearheaded by members of his immediate and extended family. Identified by both his family and the New York public school district as severely autistic and nonverbal (a description repeated in media accounts of the case), Avonte reportedly had an affinity for trains, cars, and water systems. In the hope that he may have fled into a nearby subway station, handmade posters with photographs of Avonte's face were soon plastered in stations running the full length of the New York City subway system—the largest public transit network of its kind in the world. Over several months in late 2013 and early 2014, daily newspapers from the *New York Post* to the *New York Times* covered the search effort with an intense amount of scrutiny. The pervasive circulation of Oquendo's image in print, televised, and online media was augmented by almost daily updates on the search by the police department, the Department of Education, and the Oquendo family. For several months, the city seemed captivated by the case and baffled by the disappearance.

In spite of the extensive search effort—one of the most sustained and intense in the recent history of New York— on January 16, 2014 a city search and rescue team discovered his remains in a forested area near a pier in the College Point section of Queens, drawing one of the most publically magnetizing search and rescue operations in the city's recent history to a close. Subsequent forensic investigations were unable to determine the precise cause of Oquendo's death; the city's medical examiner's office concluded that he had most likely fallen from an embankment into the East River and drowned.

Oquendo's disappearance and the discovery of his remains several months later prompted local officials and politicians to call for reviews of educational policies and school security protocols for students with disabilities enrolled in special education programs. One day after Avonte's funeral, which was held at St. Paul's Cathedral and attracted an overflow crowd of

hundreds of mourners, both Oquendo's mother Vanessa Fontaine and grandmother Doris McCoy appeared at a news conference alongside New York Senator Chuck Schumer, who announced his intention to introduce federal legislation—to be known as “Avonte's Law”—that would fund a program to provide “voluntary electronic tracking devices” to be worn by autistic students enrolled in public schools, to be administered through the U.S. Department of Justice. In the official congressional record of the U.S. Senate, Schumer's proposed legislation is summarized as follows:

Avonte's Law Act of 2014 - Amends the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act of 1968 to authorize the Attorney General to make grants to law enforcement agencies to: (1) reduce the risk of injury and death relating to the wandering characteristics of some individuals with autism and other disabilities, and (2) safeguard the well-being of individuals with disabilities during interactions with law enforcement.

Requires grant awards to be used to: (1) provide education and resources to law enforcement agencies, first responders, schools, clinicians, and the public in order to reduce the risk of wandering by such individuals, help to identify signs of abuse in such individuals, increase their personal safety and survival skills, and facilitate effective communication with individuals who have communication-related disabilities; (2) provide training and emergency protocols for school administrators, staff, and families; (3) provide response tools and training for law enforcement and search-and-rescue agencies, including tracking technology; or (4) provide response tools and training to law enforcement agencies in order to recognize and respond to individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Directs the Attorney General to establish standards and best practices relating to the use of tracking technology to monitor children with autism and other disabilities.

Requires each law enforcement agency that receives a grant to comply with any such standards and best practices.¹

A second piece of legislation, also named Avonte's Law, has more recently been approved by the New York City Council, providing enhanced funding for schools to install automated alarm systems in special education classrooms.

Shortly after Oquendo's disappearance attracted the attention of the police and the school district, images from the Riverview School's video surveillance cameras were released to the media. One image that circulated across media platforms in the days and weeks following the disappearance is particularly striking: in a landscape shot, a blurry body in full profile can be seen midstride passing in front of a bank of white elevators (**figure 1**). The image is ghostly, haunting and haunted by the fleeting trace of the body. That Avonte is running is suggested by the fact that the left leg is elevated so as to be almost parallel to the ground—a visual shape of bodily comportment that suggests a kinesthetic fleeing. The image's pixelated blur, signaling the rapid movement and direction of a fleeing body, presents Oquendo as a ghostly apparition—as if his bodily form has been captured while in the process of fading from view. Viewed retroactively, the ghostly qualities of the image attain a more disturbing cast, as if portending the death that even the presence of the surveillance camera that captured the image has failed to prevent.

¹ U.S. Senate S.2386 — Avonte's Law Act of 2014, 113th Congress; full text available at www.congress.gov/bill/113th-congress/senate-bill/2386.

At the close of the previous chapter, I cited the closing lines of Amanda Baggs's 2007 YouTube video *In My Language*, which forcefully asserts, "People dying because they are considered non-persons, because their kind of thought is so unusual as to not be considered thought at all."² For all of the attention that Baggs's video has received, the most radical and, indeed, polemical aspects of its argument have often been overlooked, if not dismissed. Yet in its final moments, Baggs's video insists upon calling attention to the real and enduring threat of mortality that shadows autism and neurological disability. A number of recent epidemiological studies reveal mortality rates among persons with autism or ASD to be twice as high as they are for the general population.³ Autistic mortality is in part heightened because of frequent comorbidity with other health conditions, yet it is also linked to enhanced vulnerability to accidental and preventable causes of death. Moreover, as neurodiversity advocates have sought to emphasize, autistics have been especially vulnerable to mortal harm from those charged with their care.

Any politics of neurological difference must thus confront the *biopolitical* mandates of modern regimes of political power, which are defined by the "right to 'make' live and 'let' die."⁴ In such a context, any individual death—whether "natural," "accidental," or "preventable"—reflects broader, structural conditions that organize and distribute life and death in aggregate through the hierarchical schematization of difference across and within a population. The task is

² Amanda Baggs, *In My Language*, YouTube video, 8:36, 14 January 2007: www.youtube.com/watch?v=JnylM1hl2jc (1 August 2012).

³ See, e.g., SE Mouridsen et. al., "Mortality and causes of death in autism spectrum disorders: an update," *Autism* 12, no. 4 July (2008):403-14.

⁴ Michel Foucault, "*Society Must Be Defended*": *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976*, trans. David Macey (Picador 2003), 241. As Foucault argues, the very concept of a "mortality rate" that can be measured across a general "population" is one of the primary creations of the new technologies of "biopower" that he proposes emerged in the second half of the eighteenth century.

thus to develop techniques and strategies to respond to and modify these structural conditions in order to ameliorate the threat of injury, abuse, and death that autistic people continuously confront. “Avonte’s Law,” and similar legislative and policy proposals, have recently emerged at the forefront of political efforts to safeguard the lives of autistic and other disabled students enrolled in public schools.

In the final sentence of *In My Language*, Baggs declares, “Only when the many shapes of personhood are recognized will justice and human rights be possible.” Baggs’s assertion assumes a new significance in relation to Oquendo’s disappearance and death. Viewing the pixelated, spectral shapes of a fleeing body outlined in the surveillance stills, we might also consider Avery Gordon’s reflections on haunting, in which she argues that in confronting violence and its aftermath we are required to confront the “ghostly” remnants of the violent dispossessions of social life in order to offer “a hospitable memory *out of a concern for justice*.”⁵ Yet for Gordon as for Baggs, this concern for justice is made in the conditional tense. Their call is for a form of justice that exceeds the present conditions of adjudication; in the formulation of Jacques Derrida, it is a justice that is still “yet to come.”⁶ Heeding this call does not discount the importance or even the necessity of pursuing practical, strategic tactics that can be applied in the here and now. But it remains aware that these are bound to be provisional and contingent, and liable to be absorbed and reintegrated into the logics and procedures that produced the need for them to begin with.

⁵ Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 64; emphasis in original.

⁶ Jacques Derrida, “Force of Law: The Mystical Foundations of Authority,” in *Acts of Religion*, trans. Mary Quaintance, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2002).

This chapter elaborates an alternative account of, response to, the “wandering characteristics” rendered visible in surveillance images like the one discussed above. I argue that the security-based solutions set forth in Avonte’s Law to track the wandering tendencies ascribed to autism and autistics by expanding the forensic apparatuses of the criminal justice system must be understood in relationship to longer histories of surveillance as a technique of power, especially as it operates at the nexus of disability and racial difference. When viewed from this perspective, such policy proposals reflect the persistence of disciplinary and, indeed, *carceral* logics within the historical formation of power that anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli has called late liberalism. I argue that the policy solutions put forward in Avonte’s Law and similar proposals are at best inadequate, and at worst damaging, to the persistence and flourishing of autistic and other neurologically divergent forms of life.⁷

In order to develop this argument, the chapter first positions the case of Avonte Oquendo in relationship to “the twinned formations of neoliberalism and liberal cultural recognition” that defines late liberalism as a historical formation.⁸ I next turn to examine how “security”—understood broadly as late liberalism’s exemplary mode of governmentality—operates by way of the visual surveillance of difference, with particular attention to the complex intersections of autism and neurological disability with blackness and racial difference as raised in the case of Oquendo. I especially consider the intersections of race and disability within anxieties about *wandering* that surfaced in the aftermath of Avonte Oquendo’s disappearance—about bodies that

⁷ “Form of life” is the term that Giorgio Agamben uses to designate “a life that can never be separated from its form, a life in which it is never possible to isolate something like a naked life.” See Agamben, *Means Without End: Notes on Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 3-12.

⁸ Elizabeth Povinelli, “Defining Security in Late Liberalism” in *Times of Security: Ethnographies of Fear, Protest, and the Future*, eds. Martin Holbraad and Morten Axel Pedersen (New York: Routledge, 2013), 20.

threaten to escape from visual scrutiny and elude the ability to be securely located, both spatially and temporally. In order to develop an alternative approach to the “wandering” evoked in the language of Avonte’s Law, I draw from discussions of the politics of movement and the social “mobilization” of bodies developed within performance theory and critical dance studies, theorizations of the concepts of wandering and *fugitivity* within black studies and critical race theory, as well as the evocative, deeply *sensory* terms in which autistic subjects have described experiences of navigating through space.

Methodologically, this chapter is concerned with how the critical rubrics of disability studies, and disability aesthetics, might be used to assess the surveillance of the movements and trajectories of specifically marked subjects and populations. Expanding, contrapuntally, upon my discussions in previous chapters of theatrical performance, cinema, cartography, and video art and digital media, this chapter engages aesthetic questions by way of an essentially “political” concern with the organization of the sensible—with the “regimes of perception and signification” that determine what is sayable and speakable within any given historical formation.⁹ This chapter thus reads the forms of visual media produced in relation to the Oquendo case and proposals like Avonte’s Law—including security camera footage, images of Oquendo that were circulated in the course of the search effort, and the forms of cartographic surveillance generated by electronic tracking technologies—in relationship to the “schematization of the visual field” by the operations of power.¹⁰ The chapter concludes with a Coda on what I identify as a “counter-cartographic” impulse in the work of visual and performance artist William Pope.L. I suggest

⁹ Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliot (London: Verso, 2009), 48-49.

¹⁰ Judith Butler, “Endangered/Endangering: Schematic Racism and White Paranoia,” in *Reading Rodney King, Reading Urban Uprising*, ed. Robert Gooding-Williams (New York: Routledge, 1993), 16.

that Pope.L's inventive and disruptive manipulations of cartographic imagery, viewed in relationship to his interest in developing an aesthetic ethos of blackness through abjection and marginality, offer the grounds for reconceptualizing the visual, spatial, and embodied intersections of race and disability on the basis of errant bodily movement.

2.

The anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli uses the term late liberalism to indicate a historical “formation of power—the twinned formations of neoliberalism and liberal cultural recognition—that emerged in the late 1960s as a method of solving the crisis of liberal economic and social legitimacy in the wake of economic stagflation and colonial and social revolutions.”¹¹ As Povinelli's formulation would suggest, late liberalism occupies a juncture of what might seem to be two contradictory historical tendencies: the first, which Povinelli calls liberal cultural recognition, developed as a response to a range of social mobilizations arising in the 1960s and 70s demanding the expansion of political rights and state-supported resources to disenfranchised groups—including women, racial and sexual minorities, and people with disabilities. In the decades since, these movements have achieved considerable success in entering and transforming the institutions and infrastructures of liberal governance in ways that have had substantial and lasting implications for previously marginalized groups. This has occurred at both the level of the state itself, as well as within the array of bureaucratic, non-state organizations that reproduce and imitate its procedures—from non-profits and NGOs to universities and research centers. The liberal politics of cultural recognition can be seen, for instance, in the way bureaucracies and institutions of all kinds have increasingly adopted the

¹¹ Povinelli, “Defining Security,” 20.

language of diversity and multiculturalism into their modes of operations. Other examples of the liberal politics of recognition include what the legal theorist Janet Halley and her collaborators have called governance feminism, “the incremental but by now quite noticeable installation of feminists and feminist ideas in actual legal-institutional power.” Halley writes that the use of the word “governance” is meant to suggest “multiplicity, mobility, fragmentation, a regulatory or bureaucratic legal style, as well as ready facility with non-state and para-state institutional forms.”¹² Much recent scholarship on the politics of liberal recognition has emphasized how social and cultural difference is managed and accommodated through a language of bureaucratic administration that is diffusely distributed throughout a range of local institutions, sites, and organizational forms.¹³

The second historically concurrent tendency that Povinelli mentions, neoliberalism, operates by way of a systematic dismantling of the postwar social welfare state, whose functions it seeks to relegate to the sphere of private, free-market enterprise.¹⁴ In this sense, “late liberalism” is a critical term that illuminates a form of power that seems, paradoxically, to be both expansive and contractive; it allows us to understand how historically marginalized groups have gained recognition and “inclusion” within the infrastructures of social welfare (both state

¹² Janet Halley (with Prabha Kotiswaran, Chantal Thomas and Hila Sham), “From the International to the Local in Feminist Legal Responses to Rape, Prostitution/Sex Work and Sex Trafficking: Four Studies in Contemporary Governance Feminism,” *Harvard Journal of Law & Gender* 29, no. 2 / 335 (2006): 340–41.

¹³ There is a growing body of critical literature on the liberal politics of cultural recognition. In addition to Povinelli, see e.g. Roderick Ferguson *The Reorder of Things: The University and Its Pedagogies of Minority Difference* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012) and Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

¹⁴ See David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

and non-state) that neoliberal economic policies have aggressively, and effectively, sought to disassemble.

Yet on closer inspection, it becomes clear that the “expansive” politics of cultural recognition and the economic mandates of neoliberalism have been far from oppositional or contradictory historical developments. Rather, they have often been complementary, even mutually constitutive, processes: two sides of the same coin. Povinelli’s definition of late liberalism is indebted to Michel Foucault’s account of “security as an emergent mode of liberal governance predicated on the equally emergent problematic of the population.”¹⁵ Foucault influentially argued that liberal regimes of security are predicated upon the historical development, beginning in the nineteenth century, of the statistically derived concept of the “population” as the primary object of liberal governmentality.¹⁶ Foucault further demonstrates that the historical development of psychiatric power and its techniques of “normalization” have been central to this process. This line of thought has made Foucault’s assessments of the regimes of modern surveillance an especially valuable resource for disability studies.¹⁷ Foucault and Povinelli’s formulations draw attention to the ways in which a vast array of security techniques and surveillance apparatuses have come to play a central role in the “mattering” of human life across various axes of social difference. Their work illuminates modern liberal modes of counting, managing, regulating, and normalizing the aggregations of human life within given

¹⁵ Povinelli, 28.

¹⁶ See especially Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977–1978*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave, 2007).

¹⁷ See Michel Foucault, *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France 1974–1975* (New York: Picador, 2004). For disability studies’ engagements with Foucault’s work on populations and normalization, see especially Lennard Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (London: Verso, 1995), as well as the collection *Foucault and the Government of Disability*, ed. Shelley Tremaine (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005).

populations—and of shaping how “life itself” comes to “matter.” Such accounts point to the inherent limitations of the late liberal politics of recognition in the context of neoliberalism, forcing us to ask, as legal theorist Dean Spade writes, “why legal change in the form of rights has not brought the deep transformation” sought by the emancipatory social movements of the 1960s and 70s, and “why disparities of life chances have increased during a period when we have seen the elimination of formal segregation and the advent of policies prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sex race, and disability.”¹⁸

The twinned formations of cultural recognition and neoliberalism that Povinelli argues define late liberalism intersect with the modern categorization of disability in especially complex ways. Indeed, the extent to which post-1960s mobilizations for the rights of people with disabilities have needed to grapple with both of these formations, in tandem, is striking. The assertion that disability is an explicitly *social* category that necessitates legal accommodation, protections, and rights—a position that has long been identified as a signal achievement of the modern disability rights movement—emerges in historical contiguity with a period when the state-supported institutions of social welfare that disabled individuals depend on have been under increasing assault. Thus, the politics of disability within late liberalism confronts a paradoxical situation, in which it is forced to seek political recognition and accommodation from a state whose social welfare infrastructures are being increasingly dismantled and privatized.¹⁹

Moreover, cultural recognition claims made on the basis of a political or social model of disability are more complex to articulate and sustain, since the very apparatuses of security and

¹⁸ Dean Spade, *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 20.

¹⁹ On disability and the austerity politics of neoliberalism, see David T. Mitchell with Sharon L. Snyder *The Biopolitics of Disability: Neoliberalism, Ablenationalism, and Peripheral Embodiment* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015).

disciplinary surveillance that define liberal modes of governance were themselves developed as a way of managing the aggregate “health” of the population, and of maximizing its productive capacities. The modern politics of disability, then, runs up against the contradictions of rights and recognition-based claims for the inclusion of people with disabilities within a liberal social order that premises its conception of political personhood upon an able-bodied and able-minded capacity to labor and produce value. In this sense, when followed to its logical end, contemporary disability politics requires confronting what the disability activist, artist, and theorist Sunny Taylor has called “the right not to work”—an ideal is “worthy of the impaired and able-bodied alike,” since it points towards the extent to which normative conceptions of moral value, worth, and personhood are tied to “a complex system of historical, cultural, and geographical discrimination that has evolved inside and alongside capitalism and that we now simply regard (and too frequently dismiss) as disability.”²⁰

The contested status of disability within late liberalism is especially apparent within the controversies surrounding Autism Speaks, which is presently the largest autism advocacy organization in the United States. Since its founding in 2005 with the financial backing of Bob Wright, then-chairman of General Electric and the grandfather of an autistic child, Autism Speaks has been the subject of intense debate within the neurodiversity movement and among autistic self-advocates. Organizations including the Autistic Self-Advocacy Network (ASAN) and the Autism Women’s Network (AWN) have forcefully criticized the organization, focusing on its “rhetorical constitution of autism as enemy through its metaphoric representation of autism as disease, epidemic, and abductor,” as well as “the skillful, systematic, pervasive, and global

²⁰ Sunny Taylor, “The Right Not to Work: Power and Disability,” *Monthly Review* Vol. 55, Issue 11 10 (March 2004), <http://monthlyreview.org/2004/03/01/the-right-not-to-work-power-and-disability/>

deployment of these and other rhetorical devices through its corporate-style, neoliberal, market approach to cultural and political rhetoric, deploying its rhetorical tactics and strategies more as a powerful corporate lobbying machine than as a traditional disability advocacy organization.”²¹

Moreover, the Autism Speaks staff, officers, and board of trustees has been made up almost exclusively of neurotypicals. For these reasons, many neurodiversity proponents and autistic self-advocates have argued that Autism Speaks operates from the desire for an “autism-free world”—a goal that they identify as being contiguous with the longer history of eugenics and its logics.²² As the blogger and autistic self-advocate Brigianna Spencer writes, “Autism Speaks has accomplished internally what it wishes to accomplish worldwide: zero autistic people.”²³

The controversy over Autism Speaks within neurodiversity and self-advocacy communities came to a head in late 2013, at the same moment in which the search for Oquendo was taking place, as the organization prepared to sponsor a “policy and action” summit in Washington D.C. In response to Autism Speaks’ melodramatic rhetoric in describing the event—“This week is the week America will fully wake up to the autism crisis,” co-founder Suzanne Wright wrote in an essay announcing the summit—as well as the inclusion in the event of officials representing the Judge Rotenberg Educational Center, a Massachusetts facility under

²¹ Alicia A. Broderick, “Autism as Rhetoric: Exploring Watershed Rhetorical Moments in Applied Behavior Analysis Discourse,” *Disability Studies Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (2011), <http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/1674/1597>. See also Alicia Broderick and Ari Ne’eman, “Autism as Metaphor: Narrative and Counter-narrative,” *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 12, no. 5-6 (2008): 459-476.

²² See, for instance, abfh, “Autism Speaks’ Eugenic Agenda,” *Whose Planet Is It Anyway?*, 22 October 2007, <http://autisticbfh.blogspot.com/2007/10/autism-speaks-eugenic-agenda.html>

²³ Brigianna Spencer, “Why Parents of Children with “Medical Autism” Should Support Neurodiversity and the Anti-Cure Movement,” *Kyriolexy*, 14 December 2012, <https://speakingon.wordpress.com/2012/12/14/why-parents-of-children-with-medical-autism-should-support-neurodiversity-and-the-anti-cure-movement/>

state and international investigation for abusive treatment of its disabled residents, neurodiversity proponents and self-advocates staged a number of political actions, both online and in person, protesting the summit.²⁴ John Elder Robison, a writer and autism expert diagnosed with Asperger's, resigned from Autism Speaks' Science and Treatment board. In his resignation letter addressed to the organization, Robison wrote: "Autism Speaks says it's the advocacy group for people with autism and their families. It's not, despite having had many chances to become that voice. Autism Speaks is the only major medical or mental health nonprofit whose legitimacy is constantly challenged by a large percentage of the people affected by the condition they target."²⁵

As Robison's letter makes clear, the contemporary politics of autism involve competing and often irreconcilable visions of the very "meaning" of the condition itself. Autism Speaks—an organization made up almost exclusively of non-autistic, neurotypical representatives, many of them with autistic family members—operates on the basis of a neuro-biomedical model that leaves little room for the affirmative, cultural and identity-based models put forward within neurodiversity and autism self-advocacy. Through their rhetorical style and political tactics, Autism Speaks represents autism and ASDs as a threat not only to the health of autistic individuals, but to the welfare (financial and emotional) of their families, communities, and the broader public. Thanks to its considerable financial resources and connections to the private

²⁴ See Lucy Berrington, "A Reporter's Guide to the Autism Speaks Debacle," *Psychology Today*, 14 November 2013, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/aspergers-alive/201311/reporters-guide-the-autism-speaks-debacle>. On the allegations against the Rotenberg Center, see Laurie Ahern, "Torture not Treatment: Electric Shock and Long-Term Restraint in the United States on Children and Adults with Disabilities at the Judge Rotenberg Center" (Washington, DC: Mental Disability Rights International, 2010).

²⁵ John Elder Robison, "I resign my role at Autism Speaks," 13 November 2013, <http://jrobison.blogspot.com/2013/11/i-resign-my-roles-at-autism-speaks.html>

sector, the organization has successfully propagated this view of autism throughout the arenas of social policy, public discourse, and cultural representation. Moreover, the privatized, corporate-style approach taken by Autism Speaks is emblematic of a neoliberal approach to disability more broadly, one that seeks to redirect the obligation to provide resources and care for disabled people away from the social welfare state toward the individual, the family, and the private sphere.

The critiques of Autism Speaks that have emerged from within the neurodiversity and autism self-advocacy movements can provide important context for situating the introduction of Avonte's Law within the contemporary politics of neurological difference, since it and similar proposals were crafted and introduced with substantial policy guidance and lobbying support from the organization. Its president, Liz Feld, and chief medical research officer, Dr. Paul Wang, each made numerous media appearances in support of the law, and the organization has deployed considerable resources in furthering its passage through extensive publicity campaigns.²⁶ Furthermore, both Autism Speaks' rhetoric asserting the need for the legislation, and the language of the law itself, subscribe to a neuro-biomedical model of autism and other mental disabilities that simultaneously asserts and fortifies the authority of law enforcement, clinical and educational experts, and families over the lives of autistic and other neurologically disabled individuals.

The legislative proposals that have invoked Oquendo's name would thus seem to conform to a familiar set of procedures within late liberalism, in which the state's recognition of a vulnerable class or population becomes the occasion for reasserting, intensifying, and

²⁶ See, e.g., "Autism Speaks' President Liz Feld Talks Avonte's Law on ABC New York," *Autism Speaks*, 25 January 2015, <https://www.autismspeaks.org/news/news-item/autism-speaks039-president-liz-feld-talks-avonte039s-law-abc-new-york>

expanding the elaborate apparatuses of security, surveillance, and control that define contemporary liberal modes of governance. When such appeals are made on behalf of a group or population that is presumed to be less than fully capable of speaking for or representing its own interests—as has historically been the case for autistics and others living with communicational and intellectual disabilities—the authority of biomedical and psychiatric expertise attains both a diagnostic and regulative function. Indeed, the political and legislative response occasioned by the case of Avonte Oquendo case is a particularly vivid example of the way in which appeals to state recognition for the protection of a certain group—in this case, autistics and other “individuals with communication-related disabilities,” as the legislation puts it—can be used as the grounds for expanding the surveillance of those same groups. The neurodiversity critiques of *Autism Speaks* point to how competing models of disability and neurological difference can have material implications for the way in which disability “appears” within the spheres of law and social policy. It is thus necessary to examine more closely the *visual* logics of neurological difference under late liberalism, and the procedures of securitization and surveillance that are integral and constitutive to its functioning.

3.

Let us to return to the security camera image that I described at the opening of this chapter (**figure 1**). The video surveillance camera is a technological apparatus emblematic of late liberalism’s visual logics of security and control. Surveillance cameras are distinguished by their technological and visual recursivity: as Ann Wagner notes, “the technology of the [video] monitor opens outward, as well as in. Not only does it register a process of surveillance, it itself

asks for monitoring.”²⁷ In this image, a body appears “as it were centered between two machines”—the camera and the monitor—“that are the opening and closing of a parenthesis.”²⁸ Borrowing Wagner’s metaphor of the parenthesis in order to read this image of Oquendo’s fleeing form, we might also recall media theorist John Fiske’s observation that surveillance is a technological method for “imposing norms” in which “those who have been othered into the ‘abnormal’ have [surveillance] focused more intensely upon them.”²⁹ The security camera’s recursive technological form reflects a more general structure of surveillance that exerts itself over a broader social field through various techniques of normalization. The surveillance stills render visible an “abnormal” subject, held between parentheses, whose physical safety (it has been subsequently been argued) might have been assured with the use of even more extensive apparatuses of technological surveillance that would have been attached to the body itself.

I would like to focus on the pixelated “blurring” that suffuses the figure of Oquendo’s body in this surveillance still, which condenses and makes visible the temporal and spatial dynamism of a body on the move. When these images were released and publically circulated through the media in connection with the search effort, the bodily movement indicated by the distorted pixelation of the image was taken as implicit evidence of the “wandering” tendencies often linked with autism. The pixelated blur, in other words, was discursively construed as a visible manifestation of “autism” itself—along with the corresponding social, emotional, and communicational deficits with which the condition is associated. Recalling the rhetorical

²⁷ Ann Wagner, “Performance, Video, and the Rhetoric of Presence,” *October* 91 (Winter 2000), 68. Wagner is partly drawing from Rosalind Krauss’s pivotal essay “Video, The Aesthetics of Narcissism,” *October* 1 (Spring 1976), 51.

²⁸ Wagner, “Performance, Video, and the Rhetoric of Presence,” 68.

²⁹ John Fiske, “Surveilling the City: Whiteness, the Black Man, and Democratic Totalitarianism,” *Theory, Culture, and Society* 15, no. 2 (1998): 81.

strategies favored by Autism Speaks, which casts autism as a dangerous “abductor” of children, the visual traces of Oquendo’s fleeing form seemed to index an unruly and uncontrollable subject, incapable of containing the impulsion toward movement.

The visual representation of Oquendo’s autism was further amplified by the posters that were quickly plastered throughout the New York City subway system as part of the extensive search effort prompted by his disappearance (see **figure 13**). The posters featured a school portrait in which Oquendo appears, smiling, facing the viewer. The portrait was accompanied by text identifying its subject as “autistic and not able to communicate verbally,” and encouraging subway riders to get in touch with the New York Police Department with information about his location. For several months, the posters became omnipresent visual emblems reminding subway riders to be on the lookout for the missing student. Yet the inescapable presence of subway search posters had the added consequence of publically circulating not just the image of an individual autistic person but also a specific representation of “autism” itself.



Figure 13.
Search poster in a New York City subway station, November 2013.

Both the surveillance footage and the missing posters are visual images saturated with historically dense meanings that condition how the human subject that they render visible is in turn viewed and understood. In being identified with autism, these images conform to a certain visual and epistemological logic of representation that has made it difficult, if not impossible, to view non-verbal autistic persons as wholly autonomous, rational subjects. Amit Pinchevski notes that autism has come to symbolize an epistemological boundary”—as much symbolic and “actual”—that effectively excludes autistics from the sphere of fully rational, autonomous human subjectivity and personhood. Pinchevski argues that autism represents “the ultimate impasse”: “a paradigmatic case of arrest in communication, socialization and development,” that “constitutes the antipode against which the medical-scientific discourse measures its rational tools for accessing another mind.”³⁰ In a similar line of argument, the autistic literary scholar Melanie Yergeau proposes that the rhetorical construction of autistics as less than fully rational and autonomous subjects has had dire and often deadly consequences for the “ontological” status afforded to them: “Autistic being,” Yergeau writes, “is predicated on un-being.”³¹ Pinchevski’s and Yergeau’s accounts help us understand how the visual and discursive signifiers associated with Oquendo’s autism in these examples—the pixelated blurring in the surveillance footage, and the identification of Oquendo as “autistic and unable to communicate verbally” in the search poster—reinforce a view of autism that is defined by opacity, unknowability, and an attenuated or even vacant ontological status.

³⁰ Amit Pinchevski, *By Way of Interruption: Levinas and the Ethics of Communication* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2005), 164.

³¹ Melanie Yergeau, “Clinically Significant Disturbance: On Theorists Who Theorize Theory of Mind,” *Disability Studies Quarterly* 33, no. 4 (2013), <http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/3876/3405>

Any reading of the security camera images of Oquendo would be insufficient without accounting for the degree to which “surveillance reifies the social construct of race.”³² Doing so can also help us begin to articulate the complex intersections of race and disability in relationship to the event of Oquendo’s escape and the policy proposals that emerged in its wake. In an essay on the video surveillance footage that fueled the 1991 Rodney King riots in Los Angeles, Judith Butler argues that the question of visibility is always inflected and shaped by the operations of power. Butler proposes that it was not simply that the prosecutors’ subjective *interpretations* of the surveillance footage in the Rodney King case reflected their own racist presumptions. Rather, drawing from Frantz Fanon, Butler argues that the very *conditions of seeing and perceiving* were, and are, determined in advance by what she terms a “racist schematization of the visible field.”³³ As Butler writes: “The visual field is not neutral to the question of race, it is itself a racial formation, an episteme, hegemonic and forceful” (17). These schematizations delimit the conditions of possibility within which the act of “seeing” takes place, determining the way visual perception is transmuted into knowledge.³⁴ The racialized organization of the visual can have profound and far-reaching material consequences, as the example of the King case attests.

Scholars of blackness and visibility have further emphasized the degree to which the schematization of the visual field reflects the ideological coordinates through which the black

³² Simone Browne, “Race and Surveillance,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Surveillance Studies*, eds. Kirstie Ball, Kevin Haggerty, and David Lyon (London: Routledge, 2014), 72.

³³ Butler, “Endangered/Endangering: Schematic Racism and White Paranoia,” 16.

³⁴ “...all knowledge goes from something visible to something utterable, and inversely.” Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, trans. Sean Hand (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 46-47.

body has been historically rendered visible.³⁵ A number of critics have especially noted the persistence of visual logics that construe the black body as spectacular, excessive, and “hypervisible” and yet, simultaneously, evacuated of interiority, autonomy, and subjectivity. In *Scenes of Subjection*, for instance, Saidiya Hartman describes the emergence of a “racist optics in which black flesh is itself identified as the source of opacity, the denial of black humanity, and the effacement of sentience”—a visual corollary to the dehumanizing and objectifying conditions of enslavement.³⁶ These and other accounts of the ideological conditions of black visual representation further indicate the extent to which surveillance must be understood as a political technique for imposing norms, and for regulating the social field according to racialized hierarchies of personhood.

How have surveillance stills of Avonte Oquendo’s escape been viewed according to the racialized schematization of the visual field of the kind described by Butler and Hartman? It is here imperative to keep sight of the historical and epistemological distinctions between a “racist optics” that denies and effaces black humanity and sentience, and the visual markers through which autism has come to be viewed as an “epistemological boundary.” Yet it is also important to consider how separate visual signifiers of subjective “impasse” have functioned in historical tandem with one another. As I suggest in the following sections, such a reading might contribute to the project of critically assessing—and proposing alternatives to—the biopolitical surveillance of bodies, subjects, and populations that have been classified as “abnormal” along different, if historically, axes of social differentiation.

³⁵ See Nicole Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

³⁶ Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 20.

The effects of racial stratification continue to be profound and far-reaching when it comes to disabilities of every kind in the United States. Black and Latino populations currently experience significant deficits in access to diagnosis, treatment, unrestricted educational opportunities, and federal and state disability benefits. Racial disparities in the diagnosis and treatment of autism are particularly pronounced: one recent study found that Black and Latino children are diagnosed with autism up to several years later than white children.³⁷ These disparities persist and in many cases worsen when autistic children enter the public education system: recent studies have found that black children are overrepresented in special education classrooms and that they are disproportionately assigned to restrictive educational environments when compared to their non-black counterparts.³⁸

Behind these profound statistical disparities in access lies a deeper history having to do with shifting ideas of race and class within the genealogical emergence of the modern formations of childhood, psychiatry, and mental health. As such, the scientific and cultural construction of autism has been a profoundly racialized process since even before Leo Kanner first defined it as a discrete clinical category in the early 1940s. Medical sociologist Gil Eyal, drawing upon a Foucauldian analysis of psychiatric power, argues that autism “must be understood within an

³⁷ See Jason C. Travers et al., “A Multiyear National Profile of Racial Disparity in Autism Identification,” *The Journal of Special Education* 47, no. 1 (2011): 41–49, and David S. Mandell et al., “Race Differences in the Age at Diagnosis Among Medicaid-Eligible Children With Autism,” *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* 41, no. 12 (December 2002): 1447–53.

³⁸ Russell J. Skida et al., “Disparate Access: The Disproportionality of African American Students With Disabilities Across Educational Environments,” *Exceptional Children*, 72, no. 4 (2006): 411–424.

emerging project for the early monitoring and surveillance of childhood.”³⁹ From the inception of modern psychiatry in the nineteenth century through the early decades of the twentieth century, childhood mental disorders were grouped together under the broadly applied category of the “feble-minded”—itself a descriptive diagnosis applied to those who were (in the words of the American Association on Mental Deficiency) deemed to be “socially incapable” by medical authorities. Yet as historians of mental health including James Trent have demonstrated, the designation of feble-mindedness was an extremely vague category whose application, in practice, functioned more often as a mechanism of social control.⁴⁰ As Eyal writes, “Who were these ‘socially incapable’ individuals? It is hardly a secret that they were disproportionately likely to come from the lower rungs of society: immigrants, African Americans, and lower-class whites.”⁴¹

With the emergence of the modern disciplines of childhood psychiatry in the middle of the twentieth century the broad categorizations of mental deficiency, idiocy, and feble-mindedness developed in the nineteenth century were increasingly discarded in favor of newly discrete clinical categories, including autism. Yet the forms of social hierarchization and control with which the earlier designations had been used to enforce continued to persist within the newly medicalized diagnostic matrices for mental illness and mental disability that were developed in the decades following World War II. With the deinstitutionalization of mental disability and mental illness that began in the early 1960s, autism was increasingly defined as a condition that was distinct from the more severe and restrictive ethical economies associated

³⁹ Gil Eyal et. al, *The Autism Matrix* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), 30.

⁴⁰ See James Trent, *Inventing the Feeble Mind: A History of Mental Retardation in the United States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

⁴¹ Eyan, *Autism Matrix*, 78.

with mental retardation. Such fluctuations in the meaning and diagnostic application of new clinical categories continued to be stratified around both race and class, as both factors were highly determinative of the access that families of children identified as having mental (neurological, communicational, cognitive, etc.) disabilities could have to the specialized realms of treatment and care.

Eyal's account of the largely overlooked role of race in the genealogy of modern psychiatry is echoed in the psychiatrist and historian of medicine Jonathan Metzl's research into the history of schizophrenia. Using the clinical records of the now-defunct Ionia State Hospital for the Criminally Insane in Michigan as the basis for his study, Metzl demonstrates how policy shifts in the institutionalization of the mentally ill transformed schizophrenia from a diagnosis given largely to middle-class white women in the first half of the twentieth century into one that became overwhelmingly assigned to African American men by the 1960s and 1970s. He convincingly argues that this shift can be directly linked to broader national anxieties about racial antagonisms in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement and the growing demands for political enfranchisement made by black Americans at midcentury: "the civil rights era," Metzl writes, "catalyzed a shift in the structure of buildings, institutions, diagnostic codes, and even in the structure of minds, attitudes, and identities [...] And prisons emerged where hospitals once stood."⁴²

As Metzl, Eyal, and other recent scholars of mental illness and mental disability demonstrate, developments in the psychological sciences—including the emergence of cognitive and neurobiological paradigms that have increasingly predominated within the fields of

⁴² Jonathan Metzl, *The Protest Psychosis: How Schizophrenia Became a Black Disease* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009), xxi.

psychiatric expertise since the 1970s—have both shaped and been shaped by the surveillance and management of hierarchies of difference, often through institutional and, indeed, *carceral* modalities of social control. These accounts provide historical context for understanding the ways that psychiatric expertise has contributed to persistent racial stratifications in the diagnosis, treatment, and management of mental illness and disability, which has frequently taken place along diverging axes of medicalization and criminalization. This is an ongoing process, as indicated in disability scholar Julie Passanante Elman’s argument that since the 1990s, “the increasing medicalization of white adolescence paralleled (and, in some ways, facilitated) the increasing criminalization of black and Latino/a youth in an age of ‘school-to-prison pipelines,’ in which nonwhite students are disproportionately diagnosed with ADHD, placed in special education programs, suspended, and criminalized.”⁴³ Finally, these accounts can reveal the extent to which disciplinary institutions including the prison, the school, and the psychiatric institutions have been key sites where shifting scientific concepts of race and disability, criminality and pathology, have played out over the course of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first.

4.

The historical intersections between race, disability, and neurological difference condition the way the video surveillance footage of Oquendo’s escape from his school is perceived, interpreted, and mobilized. This history indicates that such footage emerges within a visual field that is deeply schematized by complex legacies of regulation and social control exerted over

⁴³ Julie Passanante Elman, “Policing at the Synapse: Ferguson, Race, and the Disability Politics of the Teen Brain,” *Somatosphere: Science, Medicine, and Anthropology*, (4 May 2015), <http://somatosphere.net/2015/05/policing-at-the-synapse-ferguson-race-and-the-disability-politics-of-the-teen-brain.html>

certain human bodies and minds that have been signaled out for surveillance. As such, this history could be said to constitute the “optical unconscious” of the surveillance images I have been considering.⁴⁴ I am informed by Alexander Weheliye’s proposal that “race” should be understood as “a set of sociopolitical processes of differentiation and hierarchization, which are projected onto the putatively biological human body.”⁴⁵ I have been suggesting that the pixelation on the surface of the video surveillance stills have been construed as visible evidence of the “wandering characteristics” associated with autism—and that were subsequently blamed for Oquendo’s ability to elude the apparatuses of security put in place to protect the physical safety of students with disabilities enrolled in New York City public schools. How might this pixelation—this visual “blurring” that would seem to impede the desire to fully and clearly *see* the ostensible subject of the image—be read according to an understanding of race as being produced through the “projection” of sociopolitical hierarchies upon the body? It is with this questions in mind that I now turn to a closer examination of the anxieties about “*wandering*” that have been at the heart of recent political and legislative proposals to enhance the surveillance of autistic students in public schools.

In medical, psychiatric, and social scientific literature, the tendency for autistic children and adolescents to wander away from or escape the supervision of adult guardians is termed “elopement.” A study conducted by researchers at the Johns Hopkins Medical School and

⁴⁴ This term, first proposed by Walter Benjamin, is meant to indicate the aspects of objective reality that can only be revealed through the technical enhancements to human perception provided by photography and cinema. See Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art at the Age of its Technical Reproducibility (Second Version)” (1955), in *The Work of Art at the Age of its Mechanical Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott, (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 37.

⁴⁵ Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 5.

published in *Pediatrics* in 2012 reported that nearly half of children with ASD were found to have engaged in elopement behavior with a substantial risk to bodily harm, and that the risk of elopement increased with higher degrees of autism severity.⁴⁶ (This study was cited in the Schumer news conference announcing the proposal for Avonte’s Law.) Yet like so much of the neuro-biomedical, psychiatric, and public policy research on autism and neurological difference, definitive scientific explanations accounting for the specific (biological, neurological, or psychological) *causes* of autistic elopement have been much more difficult to identify than the statistical likelihood of such behavior to occur within an increasingly studied population. Most of the medical literature and policy prognostications by mainstream autism advocacy groups have only hazarded a guess about the ostensible “cause” of this tendency toward elopement. Partly in response to the media scrutiny generated by the Oquendo case, Lori McIlwain, the executive director of the National Autism Association, wrote an editorial essay for the *New York Times* calling for federal funding for electronic tracking devices for autistic students in public schools. Citing the same *Pediatrics* study, McIlwain proposed that elopement might be attributed to the attraction that some autistic individuals feel toward the kind of sensory stimulation provided by highway traffic, trains, or waterways.⁴⁷ Other medical studies, by contrast, have suggested that elopement behavior might represent an attempt to *escape* over-stimulating sensory environments that contain loud noises within confined spaces.

⁴⁶ Connie Anderson et. al. “Occurrence and Family Impact of Elopement in Children With Autism Spectrum Disorders,” *Pediatrics* 130, 870 (2012): DOI 10.1542/peds.2012-0762.

⁴⁷ Lori McIlwain, “The Day My Son Went Missing: Wandering Is a Major Concern for Parents of Children With Autism,” *New York Times*, 12 November 2013, www.nytimes.com/2013/11/13/opinion/wandering-is-a-major-concern-for-parents-of-children-with-autism.html

In light of the criticisms that neurodiversity proponents have increasingly leveled against organizations like Autism Speaks and the rigidly biomedicalized accounts of autism and disability upon which they base their policy agendas and rhetorical approach, the clinical research and public discourse about autistic elopement must be examined with particular care. As mentioned above, many of these critics have maintained that at their root, the positions advocated by Autism Speaks are implicitly organized around the desire to cure, and thus eradicate, “autism” as such. These critics have charged that Autism Speaks aims to achieve a world, as Brianna Spencer puts it, “with zero autistic people.” In this regard, it bears asking whether the specific policies advocated for by Autism Speaks and allied organizations like the National Autism Association, reflect and advance such an agenda, even when these policies are pursued in support of improving the care, treatment, and well-being of the constituency they claim to represent. It is equally important to bear in mind the extent to which psychiatric and biomedical paradigms for studying mental disability have contributed to “the production of racialization as an object of knowledge,” and to consider the racialized legacies of social control from which modern diagnostic institutions and standards of measurement have emerged.⁴⁸

It bears repeating here that my concern is not to dispute or disprove the specific findings of studies that proceed on the basis of biomedical and psychiatric models of autism. Rather, my aim is to consider the wider political, historical, and social contexts within which such claims, hypotheses, and methods are situated, and to examine more scrupulously how different forms of expertise about disability and mental illness are adjudicated and distributed through relations of power that operate across various modes of governance. The discursive refrain of autistic elopement as it travels through multiple and diffuse organizations, knowledge formations, and

⁴⁸ Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 5.

venues—from peer-reviewed journals of forensic psychiatry and pediatrics to the rhetoric of advocacy groups, and from the editorial pages of the *New York Times* to the omnibus crime bill presented for debate in the US Congress—is a particularly important one to scrutinize in relation to the productive operations of power through surveillance. Yet I am also interested in what different terms might be used, and what other critical resources drawn upon, to consider how anxieties about autistic elopement are positioned within the broader contestations over scientific, and specifically psychiatric, expertise that structure the politics of neurological difference. I will now, therefore, consider several alternative perspectives on wandering and elopement that might be called upon in relationship to the Oquendo case and Avonte’s Law. Each of these perspectives would prove difficult to incorporate into the idioms of liberal governance, yet they all provide significant countervailing accounts of, and responses to, autistic elopement.

The voices and first-hand experiences of autistic people have been notably absent within legal, popular media, and biomedical discussions of autistic wandering. Yet such accounts do exist, in both the growing body of published writing about autism authored by autistics, as well as on the continuously proliferating blogs, message boards, and discussion forums that make up the online neurodiversity community. One striking recent example can be found in *The Reason I Jump*, a text by Naoki Higashida, a 13-year-old Japanese nonverbal autistic teenager who wrote the book in 2007 using a facilitated communication system he developed in tandem with his mother and a special education teacher. The book was translated into English in 2013 by the British novelist David Mitchell and the Japanese poet KA Yoshida. The book is structured as a series of 58 questions about various aspects of Higashida’s experiences of life with autism. One of the questions concerns elopement directly:

Q50: Why do you wander off from home?

A: Once, when I was a little kid at kindergarten, I wandered off from home and had to be picked up by the police. Back then, in fact, I used to leave home quite regularly and, as I look back from this distance, I can think of several reasons why I did it. It wasn't because I wanted to go out for a specific purpose, like wanting fresh air. It was because—this is hard to put into words—my body moved because it was lured outside by something there.

As I was walking farther from home, I didn't feel any fear or anxiety. It came down to this: if I didn't go outside, then I would cease to exist. Why? I can't say, but I *had* to keep walking, on and on and on. Turning back was not permitted, because roads never come to an end. Roads speak to us people with autism, and invite us outward. There's not much logic in any of this, I know. Until someone brings us back home, we don't know what we've done, and then we're as shocked as anyone.

I stopped wandering off from home on the day I very nearly got mowed down by a car, because the fear of it made a deep impact on my memory. So when something enough happens, I think we can rein in this habit of wandering off. Meanwhile, please keep an eye out for us.⁴⁹

Among a number of striking elements in Higashida's account is the notable assertion that his impulse to wander farther and farther from home is directly tied to his existential persistence: "if I didn't go outside, then I would seek to exist." Higashida offers an account of autistic being rooted in his felt need to move outward toward the external environment: "lured outside by something there," Higashida's sense of his body's being pulled outside and along endless roadways challenges the limits of both his descriptive abilities ("this is hard to put into words")

⁴⁹ Naoki Higashida, *The Reason I Jump: The Inner Voice of a Thirteen-Year-Old Boy With Autism*, trans. KA Yoshida and David Mitchell (New York: Random House, 2013), 94–95.

as well as what he recognizes to be the rational terms of intelligibility (“There’s not much logic to any of this, I know”). The passage ends with Higashida’s reassurance that once confronted by the potential dangers of elopement, autistics can “rein in this habit of wandering off” if they are suitably instructed to avoid the dangers that they might face if their wandering habits continued unchecked.

Higashida’s insightful and compassionately formulated assertion that autistics need the careful guardianship of non-autistics to be aware of their wandering proclivities finds a pernicious political echo within recent policy and legislative efforts to expand the technological surveillance of neurologically disabled students through the “voluntary” use of GPS tracking devices for students enrolled in public schools. In place of Higashida’s intensely personal request to his non-autistic readers to “please keep an eye out for us,” such policies seek to expand the panoptic “eye” of surveillance through the ever-proliferating apparatuses of security have come to characterize late liberal modes of governance. I want to examine more closely the diverging “ways of seeing” that are involved in Higashida’s request, on the one hand, and the surveillance footage of Oquendo’s fleeing form, on the other. How can we understand the gap between these two scopic systems?

We might begin by returning to the distinct modes of kinesthetic movement that the terms “wandering” and “elopement” have been developed to name. Randy Martin asserts that critical dance studies can attune us to the way bodies move and are made to move within the wider choreographic currents of political modernity.⁵⁰ He urges scholars of dance to expand their focus from specific choreographic works and performances in order to consider the dynamics of social

⁵⁰ Randy Martin, *Critical Moves: Dance Studies in Theory and Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998).

“mobilization” more broadly, which he defines as both “the means through which bodies gather and are assembled,” and the “materialization of identity that is accomplished in the process.”⁵¹ Martin’s call for a critical dance studies traces the emergence since the 1980s of what he terms a regime of “generalized surveillance,” an “entire structure of participation surrounding the maintenance and viability of the means of production.”⁵² Indeed, Martin’s attention to the politics of mobilization point us toward the importance of *movement*—of masses and groups, but also of individual bodies—to the historical expansion of techniques of surveillance. His account of mobilization enables an understanding of “wandering” and “elopement” as socially produced categories that mediate between specific, singular instances of embodied movement and the broader “structure of participation” and “generalized surveillance” from which such movements threaten to escape.

In a similar register, André Lepecki proposes the concepts of the “choreopolice” and the “choreopolitical” to describe the political mobilization of bodies by police power. Lepecki refers to two influential philosophical accounts of police power: Louis Althusser’s account of the cop’s “hailing” of the subject into ideology, and a contrasting account of the police more recently formulated by Jacques Rancière. For Rancière, the policeman is not so much the embodiment or avatar of the ideological apparatus of the state. Instead, for Rancière, “the police” are the force that regulates, manages, and propels the kinetic *circulation* of bodies in public spaces. The police are the ones who say, “move along, there is nothing to see here!”⁵³ From Rancière’s account, Lepecki offers the following definition of police power: “The police is that which is pre-given in

⁵¹ Ibid., 208.

⁵² Ibid., 193–94.

⁵³ Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. Steve Corcoran (New York: Continuum, 2010), 37.

the circulatory organization of the polis as what predetermines pathways, establishes routes for circulation, and fits both into one single mode of being. In that sense it does not hail. Instead, it choreographs.”⁵⁴ From this perspective, it should perhaps not be surprising that the surveillance of subjects who have been identified with the tendency of straying from “predetermined pathways” and “established routes for circulation” has been increasingly entrusted to the domains of policing and police power.

These accounts of the social mobilization and choreopolicing of bodily movement might illuminate why police and policing have increasingly come to the forefront of policy discussions concerning the safety of autistic and other neurodivergent individuals and groups. Autism Unites, a national autism organization run largely by the parents of autistic children that advocates “community integration” practices, has recently begun hosting a series of events with local police departments under the title “Be Safe,” to “teach individuals with ASD to interact safely with the police in situations ranging from an everyday encounter to an arrest.”⁵⁵ Julie Passanante Elman argues that the surveillance of disability in the US has increasingly taken the form of what she terms “policing at the synapse,” as an ever more molecular attention to the workings of the brain within specific populations and territories has become more integrated into the techniques of police surveillance and the technologies developed to further its reach.⁵⁶ In this regard, we can consider the proposals to fund forensic GPS tracking devices in relationship to such choreopolitical perspectives on the policing of the synapse.

⁵⁴ André Lepecki, “Choreopolicing and Choreopolitics: or, the task of the dancer,” *TDR: The Drama Review* 57, No. 4 T220 (Winter 2013), 19.

⁵⁵ See Autism Unites <http://autismunites.org/>

⁵⁶ Elman, “Policing at the Synapse.”

Such accounts of wandering and elopement in relationship to the choreopolicing of bodies (and, increasingly, synapses) attain a different cast when they are viewed in relationship to the thematic refrains of wandering, escape, and “fugitivity” as they have been theorized within black studies and critical race theory. Especially for the fields of black performance and cultural theory, *fugitivity* has become a vital term for describing conceptions of racial blackness that emerge through eluding and escaping spatial, political, and philosophical forms of confinement.⁵⁷ The figure of the fugitive who “evades the regularized and regulated paths of circulation—of goods, of persons, of information”⁵⁸ occupies a rogue position within the rigidly ordered regimes of choreopolitical surveillance. In her recent monograph on figurations of “wandering” in black aesthetics, philosophy, and performance, Sarah Jane Cervenak argues that wandering has been a significant philosophical modality in response to the violent racial exclusions of Enlightenment rationality, which has persistently denigrated and pathologized blackness by seeking to render it into a manageable object of scientific knowledge. Cervenak defines wandering as “errant, nonenunciative, unreadable movement,” and suggests that such forms of movement have been crucial strategies by which black subjects have negotiated and

⁵⁷ See e.g. Lindon W. Barrett, *Racial Blackness and the Discontinuity of Western Modernity* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 90–93. On the trope of fugitivity in slave narratives, see Samira Kawash, *Dislocating the Color Line: Identity, Hybridity, and Singularity in African-American Narrative* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997). For accounts of fugitivity and escape as modalities of black performance, see especially Daphne A. Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006) and Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), as well as the anthology *Black Performance Theory*, eds. Thomas F. DeFrantz and Anita Gonzalez (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

⁵⁸ Kawash, *Dislocating the Color Line*, 80.

resisted the forms of objectification and regulation to which they have been subjected.⁵⁹ In his 2008 essay “The Case of Blackness,” Fred Moten offers a resonant account of “fugitive movement,” which is for him a way of evoking that which constantly escapes and exceeds any “externally imposed social logic.” In one passage, Moten elaborates upon blackness itself as fugitive movement, a form of “stolen life” that evades capture by the law:

This fugitive movement is stolen life, and its relation to law is reducible neither to simple interdiction nor bare transgression. Part of what can be attained in this zone of unattainability, to which the eminently attainable ones have been relegated, which they occupy but cannot (and refuse to) own, is some sense of the fugitive law of movement that makes black social life ungovernable, that demands a para-ontological disruption of the supposed connection between explanation and resistance.⁶⁰

Such discussions of blackness as fugitive, wandering movement suggest a kind of *Gestalt* shift in the terms of this analysis—a change in perspective and scale that would position the specific anxieties about autistic elopement that have surfaced in response to Oquendo’s disappearance against, and in relationship to, much further-reaching and historically encompassing legacies of black pathologization. Indeed, these perspectives reveal that the very concepts of fugitivity and wandering are inseparable from the racialized schematizations endemic to (late) liberal regimes of security. In such a constrained conceptual economy, it should not surprise us that the response to minoritarian fugitivity has been more surveillance.⁶¹ Yet wandering need not be the occasion for the further intensification of the apparatuses of security and surveillance that are endemic to

⁵⁹ Sarah Jane Cervenak, *Wandering: Philosophical Performances of Racial and Sexual Freedom* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 20.

⁶⁰ Fred Moten, “The Case of Blackness,” *Criticism* 50, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 179.

⁶¹ I thank Tavia Nyong’o for this formulation.

late liberalism. The haunting surveillance and security stills point to the necessity of cultivating a “hospitable memory” to the spectral images of Oquendo fleeing his school, formed out of a “concern for justice.” Such a perspective can suggest an alternative set of responses to Higashida’s request to “please keep an eye out for us,” in ways that avoid the temptation, endemic to the logics of late liberalism, to equate such watchfulness with the eye of choreopolitical surveillance. Can we conceive of a practice, a politics, or an ethics of looking—“keeping an eye out”—that would also move errantly, fugitively away from the conditions within which certain bodies, subjects, and forms of life are precariously situated between life and death?

Coda: William Pope.L’s Counter-cartographies

Forensic tracking devices, linked to satellites, enable the bodies to which they are attached to be mapped along pre-existing GPS grids. In contradistinction to the choreopolitical mapping of the movements of wandering bodies that would be funded by “Avonte’s Law,” I would like to briefly consider another cartographic example by turning to the work of the contemporary American artist William Pope.L. Despite the frequent appearance of maps and diagrams in Pope.L’s work, the artist’s use of cartographic imagery has been an under-discussed aspect of his practice. By “cartographic,” I first and most directly mean to indicate an aesthetic interest in or orientation toward the visual representation of space that is not *subjective*—i.e., confined to the perspective of an individual seeing subject—but rather disembodied, surveilling, and “objective.” I also mean to suggest the possibility of rendering visible the spatial and temporal dimensions of a body’s movement through space and over territory. Yet if one aspect of the cartographic impulse is objective, seeking the optimal gridding and organizing of space so as to survey it and in so doing to bring it under sovereign control; there is another aspect of this same

impulse that I wish to attend to—a radical, alternative, experimental, and (indeed) *oppositional* use of the cartographic within Pope.L’s performances and aesthetic practice. For William Pope.L, the landscape is “No longer a static terrain awaiting inscription by our activity,” but rather becomes itself an “activity—a field of collective actions and processes.”⁶²

Perhaps Pope.L’s most well-known and frequently discussed works are from a series of performance pieces that the artist has undertaken since the early 1990s that involve him crawling along the gutters of busy urban streets for hours at a time (sometimes dressed in a superman costume). Pope.L’s crawls can be considered “reflections on the social hierarchies constructed around difference, particularly race, gender, class, disability, and homelessness.”⁶³ In “Notes on Crawling Piece,” a brief text published in *Art Journal* in 1997, Pope.L offers a provocative reflection on his motivations for undertaking the *Crawl* series, which he writes are a “performing social struggle poetically/analytically via the Jeremiad ad agency.” He further elaborates: “to incite a recursive dynamic between the privileged/subordinate—to test us/our negotiation of the social. To crawl: to SUFFER: provocation to action.” Intriguingly this paragraph ends with Pope.L quoting from his mother: “My Billy, put your money where your mouth is—put your ass where the rest of us live.”⁶⁴ Pope.L’s text offers up a rich array of possibilities for reading his crawling performances, allowing us to understand the *Crawls* as offering alternative cartography, a *tracing* of space through movement, which takes place precisely at the juncture between the aesthetic and the political and traces its seems. Pope.L’s

⁶² Jessica Maxwell, “William Pope.L Landscape + Object + Animal (review),” *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, No. 28 (2011): 150.

⁶³ Rebecca Peabody, “‘The Reassurance Project’: William Pope.L in the Archive,” *Getty Research Journal* 4 (2012): 195.

⁶⁴ William Pope.L, “Notes on Crawling Piece. a.k.a. How Much Is That Nigger in the Window? (Summer 1991/Streets of New York City),” *Art Journal*, 56, no. 4, “Performance Art: (Some) Theory and (Selected), Practice at the End of This Century,” (Winter, 1997): 66.

crawls, as well as his frequent invocation of cartographic imagery, converge in the conjunction of racial blackness with the wandering indeterminable figure traversing the urban landscape.

The cartographic currents that animate Pope.L's aesthetics find different form in his *Failure Drawing* series, which the artist has been pursuing since 2003, mainly using a ballpoint pen to apply doodles to various materials—mostly scraps of paper and clothing—that he collects while traveling. In an artist's statement, Pope.L writes that the *Failure Drawings* series are “made from maps and usually picturing birds eye or multiple views in one work. The drawings are created on found surfaces discovered while traveling and, and once the artist returns home, developed over many months sometimes years.”⁶⁵ Consider, for instance, *Failure Drawing #636 Far Above the Ocean* (2009-2010), which the artist's catalogue raisonné indicates is made of ink, acrylic, ballpoint pen, oil stick, marker, correction fluid on map, and that it measures 24-3/4 by 32 inches (see **Figure 14**).



Figure 3. William Pope.L, *Failure Drawing #636 Far Above the Ocean* (2009-2010)

⁶⁵ Ibid.

The map used as a found surface for #636 has been divided by bold red bars into seven distinct rectangular segments: a large rectangle dominates the middle segment of the surface, stretching horizontally across the drawing's entire plane; this large rectangle is positioned, vertically, a few inches below the drawing's top edge and a little less than halfway from its bottom edge. Above are three smaller rectangular sections formed by the same red bars, filling the space between the large rectangle and the drawing's top edge; below, two tall rectangular sections, and one larger one fill out the surface. These red lines create a grid, designed to present and organize information visually in the clearest possible manner. They are functional and communicative, indicating the map's status as an authoritative, politically sanctioned visual representation of a specifically delimited territory. To this sanctioned, gridded surface, Pope.L applies a mass of messy liquids (paint, pen ink, correction fluid), interrupting the readability of the map underneath and thus destroying its functionality as a visual guide that might to be used to navigate a terrain. He also traces lines manually using the manual application of a ballpoint pen: following and in some places diverging from the map's printed lines, the ballpoint segments constitute a haptic interruption or refusal of the map's functionality.

Rizvana Bradley has recently written of the haptic as “the viscera that ruptures the apparent surface of any work, or the material surplus that remains the condition of possibility for performance.”⁶⁶ #636 is an example of this visceral rupture. In its eruptive play with the viscous materiality upon the map's planar surface, *Failure Drawing #636*, can be placed in contiguity with Pope.L's career-spanning fixation on the topographic as a site of social abjection and, consequently, aesthetic possibility. If Pope.L's mode of crawling “cracks open all the kinetic

⁶⁶ Rizvana Bradley, “Introduction: Other Sensualities,” *Women & Performance* 24, nos. 2-3 (2014): 130.

assumptions related to ideological, racial, and gendered mechanisms of urban belonging, circulation, and abjection,”⁶⁷ we might venture that these liquids take on a similar aesthetic function to the one that Pope.L himself assumes in his crawl performances, in which he aimed to embody the social abjection of blackness through a specific manner of bodily comportment (the crawl) and territorial movement (progressing slowly over major urban arteries). How might we read the raised, brackish material applied to the flat surface of the found map accordingly? Pope.L, produces a “counter-cartography” that is centered around all of the corporeal and choreographic surplus that “official” maps could never capture. Pope.L’s alternative cartographies operate by way of a viscerally palpable, performatively deformational suspension of visual schematization. In this regard, we can understand how the Crawls can be placed within a more general cartographic current within Pope.L’s practice. Both the Crawls and the Failure Drawings play upon the concept and experience of “territoriality” in order to display and then deform the matrices of power that undergird them. Pope.L’s counter-cartographies evoke what Moten calls “the fugitive law of movement that makes black social life ungovernable.”⁶⁸ Pope.L’s mappings are critically attentive to the intersections of blackness, disability, and bodily movement within the schematized visual field. Amanda Baggs declares, “Only when the many shapes of personhood are recognized will justice and human rights be possible.” Pope.L charts a different path, and invokes another scopic regime, pursuing other ways of seeing a body as it makes its way across a territory.

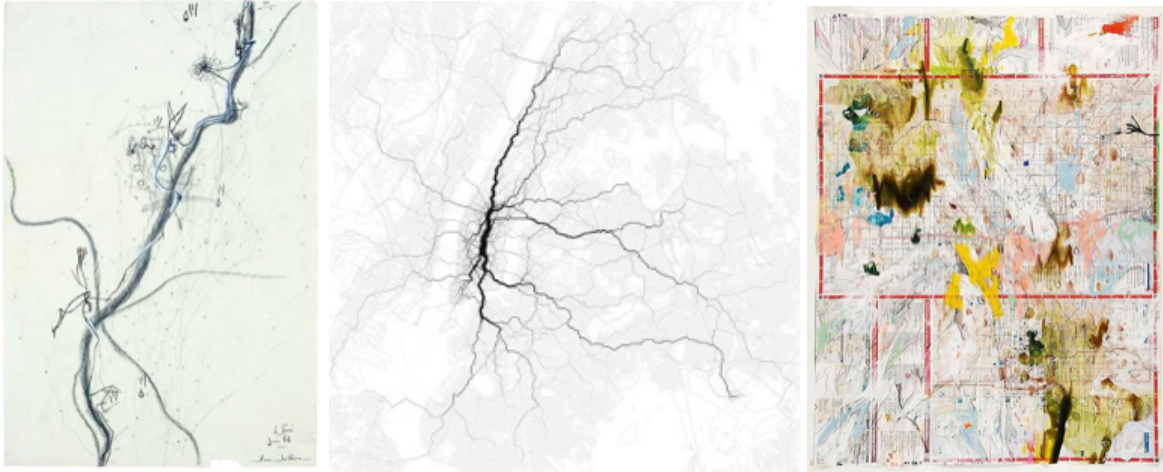
⁶⁷ André Lepecki, *Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement* (London: Routledge, 2006), 97.

⁶⁸ Moten, “The Case of Blackness,” 179.

Conclusion

“We Do Not Yet Know What the Human Is”:

Cartographies of the Otherwise



The map merges with its object, when the object itself is movement.

—Gilles Deleuze³⁶⁷

In the Introduction, I suggested that neurodiversity has the potential to be understood as what I called a *minoritarian sensory formation*, informed by Deleuze and Guattari’s suggestion that a minority is not simply a statistically defined categorization, but can also function as a “seed” or “crystal of being” “whose value is to trigger uncontrollable movements and deterritorializations of the mean or majority.”³⁶⁸ The case studies that make up the previous four chapters point

³⁶⁷ Gilles Deleuze, “What Children Say,” in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel Smith (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 61.

³⁶⁸ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 106.

toward a number of diverging, and sometimes converging, political, aesthetic, and ethical trajectories that become apparent when neurodiversity is understood in precisely such terms. Rather than simply staking out a claim for autistic or neurodivergent personhood within dominant, normative terms of liberal recognition, I have considered aesthetic and performative strategies that “unseat normalizing discourses of embodiment” and cognition,³⁶⁹ and gesture toward the possibility of “a denaturalization, even a dethronement, of privileged neurotypicality” that might take place through specific formal tactics and aesthetic orientations.³⁷⁰ I have also at various points assessed the degree to which neurodiversity and neurological difference are concepts that push up against the “limits of liberalism,” and its “fetishization of autonomy and agency.”³⁷¹ I explored examples that included accounts of the human voice and agency as coproduced and intersubjective made apparent by practices of Facilitated Communication³⁷²; as well as instances in which an engagement with haptics, texture, and pressure supplemented or unsettled the neurotypical organization of the sensorium, making “nonsense out of any dualistic understanding of agency and passivity.”³⁷³ The status of language was also an organizing concern: I explored how debates about the distinction between low- and high-functioning autism within the contemporary politics of neurodiversity have revolved around

³⁶⁹ Michael Davidson, *Concerto for the Left Hand: Disability and the Defamiliar Body* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 121.

³⁷⁰ Ralph James Savarese and Lisa Zunshine, “The Critic as Neurocosmopolite; Or, What Cognitive Approaches to Literature Can Learn from Disability Studies,” *Narrative* 22, no 1 (January 2014): 20.

³⁷¹ Cora Kaplan, “Afterword: Liberalism, Feminism, and Defect,” in “*Defects*”: *Engendering the Modern Body*, eds. Helen Deutsch and Felicity Nussbaum, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 303–4.

³⁷² Lisa Cartwright, *Moral Spectatorship: Technologies of Voice and Affect in Postwar Representations of the Child* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 159-160.

³⁷³ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Weather in Proust*, ed. Jonathan Goldberg (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 69.

assessments of the capacity for verbal communication and self-representation; described Christopher Knowles's visual patterning of words into poetic forms that can be both recited and typed, heard and seen; and discussed Wu Tsang's "full body quotation" as a performance technique that draws equally from the repertoires of queer aesthetics and assistive technology designed for people with communication-based disabilities. At the same time, just as neurodiversity points towards liberalism's limits, it is not always therefore resistant or oppositional to its pull, as indicated in my discussions of the controversies surrounding Autism Speaks and the intersecting histories of race and disability within the operations of psychiatric power.

As a way of weaving together some of the trajectories I have pursued, I would like to return to the questions of cartography and sensing that have threaded through the preceding pages. The chapters at the beginning and the end of this study both involved different kinds of mapping practices, representations, and imaginaries. Between the *ligne d'erre* that is traced through a "becoming visible of form"³⁷⁴ and the "wandering characteristics" glimpsed as spectral pixelation on a security camera still and tracked by police surveillance via GPS devices, we have found ourselves at the conjunction of the countercartographic and the choreopolitical. Modern techniques of mapping reveal "the ways that human experience is spatialized according to strategic operations" of disciplinary power.³⁷⁵ Maps and diagrams, in other words, are not simply visual representations of the ways space is organized within an existing social order, but active and forceful *agents* that "grid life according to the force-patterns [they impose] on social

³⁷⁴ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Pleasure of Drawing*, trans. Philip Armstrong (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 92

³⁷⁵ Tom Conley, "Mapping in the Folds: Deleuze 'Cartographe,'" *Discourse* 20, no. 3 (Fall 1998): 127.

bodies.”³⁷⁶ Yet in proximity to each of the examples of mapping I encountered over the course of writing this project, there has appeared a desire to cultivate a politics of neurological difference that would escape spatial fixity and teleological constraint. Often, if not always, the “something else” that escapes the imposition of social order has taken on the guise of *aesthetic* practice—of performance or theater, cinema, video art, digital media—which I have, in turn, attempted to link to ongoing discussions of disability aesthetics, especially its implications for the domains of ethics and politics. The mapping and tracing techniques developed by Deligny and his collaborators, as well as by William Pope.L, and (if less literally cartographic) Christopher Knowles, Robert Wilson, Amanda Baggs, Wu Tsang, Judith Scott, and Eve Sedgwick, can be understood as *minor* aesthetic dissensions that sought ways of departing from the “major,” subjectivity-regulating function of cartography and the techniques of discipline and surveillance to which it has been linked.

These alternative cartographies into the politics and performance of neurological difference can be situated in relationship to a number of other projects that viewed mapping as a critical methodology and political tool. For instance, Deligny’s turn to cartography took place in geographic and historical proximity to the practices of “psychogeography” first introduced in the 1950s by Guy Debord and the Situationists, who developed playful techniques for navigating urban environments in order to investigate “the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, whether consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals.”³⁷⁷ The influence of psychogeography perhaps culminated in the events of May 1968, during which Situationist slogans like “*Sous le pavé, la plage*” (“beneath the pavement, the

³⁷⁶ Ibid.

³⁷⁷ Guy Debord, “Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography,” in *Situationist International Anthology*, trans. Ken Knabb (Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006),

beach”) were scrawled on the walls of buildings throughout Paris. This Situationist refrain certainly reverberates with aspects of Deligny’s tracing of wander lines, which he understood as a method of revealing and uncovering primordial pathways that had been long obscured beneath the accumulated weight of human development. Yet with the concept of psychogeography, the Situationists sought to develop a specific a set of political tactics that individuals and groups might adopt in order to “detourn” the organization of urban space in accordance with the needs of capitalist production. They believed that the actions of a small coterie of avant-garde dissenters could engender broader revolutionary disruption.

This attitude would seem very far from the Delignian cartographic impulse, which is more attuned to the lower frequencies of acting and being that take place at the margins of the human community than it is to a disruptive program of urban revolutionary action. Deligny was stubbornly resistant to programmatic political positions, and this has made him a simultaneously fascinating and frustrating figure on whom to base an inquiry into the politics of disability and difference: his unstinting commitment to local, provisional, and non-institutional forms of collective living represents both an admirable example of radical withdrawal and an unsatisfying model to turn to when searching for ways to navigate the practical complexities of the contemporary politics of neurological difference.

Another alternative cartographic example worth mentioning in this context is the influential concept of cognitive mapping, a term first used by the British geographer Kevin Lynch to describe the practical strategies individual city-dwellers employ to navigate and make sense of urban environments that are increasingly difficult to conceptualize in their spatial

totality.³⁷⁸ Frederic Jameson adapted Lynch's concept in order to propose a new methodology for Marxist-oriented cultural criticism that would be capable of restoring "the missing psychology of the political unconscious."³⁷⁹ For Jameson, cognitive mapping is a metaphor for tracking the ways specific aesthetic works are shaped by the local, provisional, and *practical* strategies that individual subjects develop in order to negotiate "the gap between phenomenological perception and a reality that transcends all individual thinking or experience."³⁸⁰ As such, Jameson's cognitive mapping is an aesthetic procedure that arises at the nexus between the realm of individual experience and the abstract reality of a social structure that is unknowable in its full totality. The autistic author Donna Williams, in her book *Autism and Sensing*, offers a provocative account of her own cartographic approach to navigating the sensorium in a passage that recalls Jameson's emphasis on the practical and embodied dimensions of cognitive mapping as well as the sensory, tactile accounts of language encountered in my discussions of Baggs, Tsang, and Sedgwick. Williams writes:

I developed physically-based mapping, which involved knowing things not through their visual shape but through their shape experienced through my own physical movement. So, for example, if I felt a glass with my hands or gripped it in my teeth, my concept of that glass had nothing to do with the word "glass" or with how it looked or what it was used for, it had to do with the pattern of movement involved in feeling its form.³⁸¹

³⁷⁸ Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960).

³⁷⁹ Colin McCabe, "Preface" in Frederic Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), p. xiv

³⁸⁰ Frederic Jameson, "Cognitive Mapping," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1991).

³⁸¹ Donna Williams, *Autism and Sensing: The Unlost instinct* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 1998), 62.

Indeed, Williams's description of mapping as a process of physical movement, patterning, and feeling of form is additionally illuminating for the discussions of autistic wandering and elopement set out in the final chapter, in which I drew from Amanda Baggs and Avery Gordon to call for the cultivation of new ways of seeing, perceiving, and recognizing the many different shapes that personhood can take as a requisite for a form of justice that is still to come. As Deligny writes, the maps of the wander lines do not reveal much, except that we do not yet know what the "human" is, or what it can do (and in this way, they reveal much more than they might be visible at first glance).

In closing, I would like to return to the case of Victor, the wild boy of Aveyron, in light of the alternative cartographic reflections and practices I have discussed here. In their essay on Victor and his relationship with Itard, David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder propose, "The story of the wild boy is the story of Itard's personal and professional failure to bridge a gap that Victor refuses to cross."³⁸² If Victor was one of the first in a long line of wanderers to resist, elude, escape, and refuse the categories imposed on him by the diagnostic institution, then he too was a cartographer whose errant trajectories the still-emergent concepts of neurodiversity and neurodivergence have only started to bring into view. Refusing to cross the bridge of Itard's creation, he set off on a pathway that has yet to be traced. As much as they are anyone's, these lines are his.

³⁸² David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, "Compulsory Feral-ization: Institutionalizing Disability Studies," *PMLA* 120, no. 2 (March 2005): 629.

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