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Autistics, Myths and Robots: Artistic Resistance to Dominant Disability Discourse

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ABSTRACT

Despite growing awareness, misconceptions about autism (also known as autism spectrum disorder or ASD) persist within science, academia, and popular culture. These misconceptions perpetuate harmful stereotypes that contribute to the ongoing stigma, exclusion, and isolation experienced by autistic individuals. A significant barrier to overcoming these challenges is the underrepresentation of autistic voices across multiple fields and disciplines, making it difficult to effectively challenge and transform prevailing social norms and attitudes about disabilities and neurological differences. While efforts are being made by advocates to improve representation through community-based participatory research and coproduction models, the arts remain a particularly powerful yet underutilized tool for disrupting problematic discourse. Through creative expression, the arts offer a unique avenue to subvert reductionistic pathologies, dehumanizing language, and unfavorable depictions of autism that have been deeply engrained in both academic and cultural discourse. This poem critically engages with widespread stereotypes, using sarcasm and humor to reclaim and reshape existing depictions of autism. By doing so, it aims to empower fellow autistic individuals to challenge these narratives and express their own experiences through whatever creative mediums resonate with them, ultimately offering a more nuanced and representative understanding of autism in the process.

Keywords: Arts, neurodiversity, critical autism studies, representation, stereotypes, subversion

Author's Note:

As an autistic scholar and artist, I rely on a combination of lived experience, community involvement, and research training within this creative piece. A significant source of inspiration comes from the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, particularly their powerful reclamation of terms like "queer" that were once used as weapons of marginalization and exclusion. By embracing and redefining these terms, this community has subverted their original pejorative meanings, transforming them into symbols of identity, pride, and resistance. This act of linguistic reclamation not only disrupts the power dynamics of hate and oppression but also fosters a sense of solidarity. In a similar vein, my work seeks to challenge and overturn the derogatory labels and misconceptions that have been imposed upon autistic individuals, using creative expression as a means to redefine our realities. Historically, academic and societal discourses have often dehumanized autistic people through harmful and reductive descriptions, perpetuating what I refer to in this piece as "myths" about autism. Through this work, I critically deconstruct these demeaning representations, employing a sardonic lens to counter these narratives and expose their absurdity. Incorporating examples from my experiences as an autism and neurodevelopmental researcher, I seek to highlight and dismantle these entrenched misconceptions, including deficit-based models, problematic pathologies, and stigmatizing descriptions of autistic individuals. As someone who experiences echolalia (i.e., the repetition of words, phrases, and sentences) and who frequently incorporates pop culture references when communicating with others, this piece also serves as a homage to the songs, films, and

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television shows that resonate with me and my special interests. To ensure clarity and accessibility for readers, I have included detailed endnotes that explain both the research references and the various pop culture elements, providing a comprehensive overview of the content and its meaning.

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Beep boop boop bop – that's how we autistics allegedly speak.
I am R2D2, Optimus Prime, and the Tin Man all rolled into one (coo coo ca choo).[1]
According to esteemed authors, my robot mind lacks a "quintessential ability which makes people human"[2]
although others posit a simpler and perhaps less offensive explanation:
our autistic minds are similar to "great apes"[3] and "robots"[4]
which *totally* makes sense when you think about it
with us disabled folks being devolved, dysfunctional, deficient, and all.
I'm sorry to inform you, researchers, but Dr. Botha has left the chat.[5]

Yes, I am the Ape Man (coo coo ca choo).
I hope they at least meant respectable apes like Caesar from *Planet of the Apes* (a famous ape rights activist)[6]
or King Louie from *The Jungle Book* (master of catchy songs and dance moves).[7]
Just to clarify: I wouldn't want to be lumped in with the wrong crowd of apes
there are some bad apples out there who like to throw barrels at people
. . . cough . . . cough . . . I'm looking at you, Donkey Kong.[8]
Remember autistics: "Apes alone weak. Apes together strong." [9]
Beep boop boop bop. Translation: I'll take my offensive science to go.

Most of my days feel like they're narrated by David Attenborough:
"The solitary autistic stalks its prey," which, as Hollywood alludes to,
is a well-balanced diet of string theory, math equations, and code-breaking
(seriously, we *really* wouldn't want the folks at home getting autism wrong).
Although, I should add for posterity's sake: we also like counting cards in casinos[10]
as savants with calculators for brains, this comes quite naturally to us.
Beep boop boop bop. Translation: I'll take my stereotypes to go.

Aside from my poor Theory of Mind and empathy deficits[11]
(which can always be improved with several bouts of Applied Behaviour Analysis)[12]
did you ever wonder why we autistics *don't* like to make eye contact?
Well, like Superman (or Brightburn when vexed), our eyes shoot laser beams as hot as the sun,
so be sure not to upset us, or we might accidentally punch a hole in the moon.
Dear neurotypicals, you've been sufficiently warned.
Beep boop boop bop. Translation: I'll take my eye contact to go.

Alas, if only we had more effective genetic testing!
We could simply *Gattaca*[13] our way to neuronormative perfection!
You know, that sweet, sweet benchmark to which all autistic lives are measured.
Hold the phone; we better call up the folks at Spectrum 10K[14]
that way, we can finally clear up all this neurodiversity gobbledegook!
Especially when one's genetic information can be shared and used for "future research purposes"
(hmm . . .
nothing to read into there).[15]
Beep boop boop bop. Translation: I'll take my autistic DNA to go.

Sorry, not sorry for channeling my inner Abed from *Community*[16]
(you'd get the reference about references if you ever watched the show).
Beep boop boop bop. Translation: Tin Man out.

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Notes

[1]I am paying homage to "I am the Walrus" by The Beatles, a song widely regarded for its experimental style, absurd lyrics, and invitation for deeper reflection about hidden meanings. By channeling the same spirit of unconventional creativity and playful ambiguity, this poem attempts to test the boundaries of artistic and academic expression with a similar spirit of rebelliousness, prompting the audience to reconsider the validity and authority of psychological researchers and practitioners.

[2]I am addressing descriptions of autism used by Baron-Cohen (2001). According to Baron-Cohen, a core component of autism is a deficit in "Theory of Mind" or ToM, the ability to attribute mental states, including beliefs, desires, intentions, and emotions, to others, which enables us to understand their experiences and relate to them. Because autistic individuals apparently struggle to understand that others possess unique thoughts, feelings, and perspectives of their own, they experience a phenomenon Baron-Cohen refers to as "mindblindness." As one can imagine, these types of deficit-based perspectives promulgate negative stereotypes about autistic individuals and how they experience the world.

[3]Reference to descriptions of autism used by Tomasello and colleagues (2005). As the researchers state within their article, "We argue and present evidence that great apes (and some children with autism) understand the basics of intentional action, but they still do not participate in activities involving joining intentions and attention" (p. 675). Although this statement may seem innocuous, these dehumanizing depictions and comparisons to animals can be particularly harmful, especially when researchers frequently repeat them. For these reasons, many research teams incorporate autistic advisors to either review publications or support projects through co-authorship to ensure that the design, implementation, and interpretations minimize harm and promote greater representation within science and academia.

[4]In *The blank slate: The modern denial of human nature*, Pinker (2002) discusses autism as an "innate neurological condition with strong genetic roots" (p. 62). He goes on to draw a comparison between autistic individuals, robots, and chimpanzees, stating that they "remind us that cultural learning is possible only because neurologically normal people have innate equipment to accomplish it" (p. 62). Such descriptions are problematic because they otherize autistic individuals, positioning them as fundamentally different from and implicitly less than neurotypical people. By placing autistic individuals alongside robots and animals, these statements risk dehumanizing them and reducing their ontological and social statuses to subhuman levels. This kind of rhetoric perpetuates harmful stereotypes and reinforces the marginalization of autistic people by suggesting that they lack the essential qualities that define human cultural and social life.

[5]Dr. Monique Botha is a prominent autistic self-advocate and researcher whose work has made significant strides in challenging the detrimental rhetoric prevalent in neurodevelopmental research. I find their contributions to autism research and activism to be highly impactful. Botha's research is especially focused on critiquing deficit-based models of autism and the ongoing neglect of community-informed research and practice. For a deeper understanding of their position, please refer to Botha (2021). In this article, Botha reflects on their multifaceted role within academia and the autism community, stating, "In my title, I ask 'academic, activist, or advocate?' — and my answer is that I am all three. You cannot belong to a community that suffers from violence, marginalization, and suicide and not be" (p. 9).

[6] In a critical scene from *War for the Planet of the Apes* (2017), Caesar confronts a group of military captives with a poignant statement: "I did not start this war . . . And now, I fight only to protect apes." This declaration marks a turning point in the film, revealing Caesar's sense of justice and his stakes in the ongoing conflict. By asserting that he did not initiate the war, Caesar clarifies that the violence and chaos were thrust upon his kind by human aggressors, shifting the narrative from one of aggression to one of defense. His commitment to protecting his fellow apes is quite admirable; therefore, in the context of the poem, I am highlighting the fact that if researchers are going to compare autistics to apes, then perhaps we should be able to challenge them by stating which apes we prefer.

[7]For a demonstration of King Louie's skills, please refer to "I Wan'na Be Like You" in *The Jungle Book* (1967).

[8]I am referring to the classic Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) game *Donkey Kong* (1981). The game is set across multiple levels, each presenting unique challenges such as climbing platforms, avoiding obstacles, and overcoming barrels thrown by Donkey Kong. *Donkey Kong* was groundbreaking for its time, introducing many elements that would become staples in the platforming genre. Its success not only established Nintendo as a

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key player in the video game industry but also laid the foundation for its future flagship characters and franchises.

[9]This line appears in *Rise of the Planet of the Apes* (2011), where Caesar, a highly intelligent chimpanzee protagonist, demonstrates his advanced communication skills by using sign language to converse with Maurice, an insightful orangutan. In this scene, Caesar conveys the idea that a single stick, when isolated, is easily broken with minimal effort. In contrast, a bundle of sticks, tightly bound together, becomes significantly stronger and more resilient, making it difficult to break even under substantial force. This metaphor not only underscores Caesar's strategic thinking but also symbolizes the power of solidarity and collaboration, themes central to the apes' eventual uprising and quest for freedom.

[10]I am playfully referencing the film *Rain Man* (1988), which has significantly influenced public perceptions of autism through its portrayal of the character Raymond Babbitt, an autistic savant. This depiction, while groundbreaking at the time, has contributed to a common misconception perpetuated by Hollywood: that autism is synonymous with savantism, extraordinary talents, or superhuman abilities. Such portrayals often overlook the diverse realities of autistic individuals, reinforcing a narrow and stereotypical view that fails to capture the full spectrum of autistic experiences and challenges.

[11]I am highlighting some of the abovementioned theories that have been routinely presented and defended by famous autism researchers. Over the past fifteen years, numerous autism advocates have been debunking them and introducing new frameworks for understanding autistic experiences, such as the double empathy problem, originally presented by Milton (2012). The double empathy problem postulates that misunderstandings occur mutually between autistic and non-autistic individuals, indicative of a bidirectional breakdown rather than a unilateral fault of autistic individuals. Notably, the double empathy problem acknowledges that autistic and non-autistic individuals experience the world differently and that this is often reflected in their communication styles and preferences.

[12]Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) is a widely used form of behavior therapy that aims to improve various skills and reduce challenging behaviors in autistic individuals, particularly autistic children. However, ABA is also a subject of significant controversy and criticism within the autistic community. Critics argue that ABA can be problematic for several reasons. For one, the approach often focuses on modifying behavior to align with neurotypical norms rather than valuing and accommodating autistic ways of being. This can lead to a lack of respect for the individual's authentic self and potentially contribute to emotional distress. Additionally, some advocates express concerns about the methods used in ABA, which may include practices perceived as punitive or coercive, undermining the autonomy and dignity of autistic individuals. They also point out that ABA's emphasis on compliance and normalization can overshadow the importance of supporting and affirming autistic identity. As a result, many autistic individuals and advocates call for alternatives that prioritize respect, self-determination, and a strengths-based approach to therapy.

[13]In the film *Gattaca* (1997), society is depicted as adhering to eugenic principles to select and engineer individuals with ideal genetic traits, thereby creating a rigid social hierarchy divided into two distinct categories: "valids" and "invalids." In this dystopian world, advanced reproductive technologies are employed to manipulate genetic outcomes, ensuring that offspring possess desirable attributes such as intelligence, physical prowess, and resistance to disease. This engineered perfection not only influences the societal status of individuals but also significantly impacts their opportunities and life paths. Those classified as "valids," having been born through genetic selection, are afforded greater privileges and access to prestigious positions. In contrast, "invalids," or those born naturally or with perceived genetic flaws, face systemic discrimination and are often relegated to lower-status roles. The film explores the ethical and social ramifications of such practices, highlighting the profound effects of genetic engineering on personal identity, social mobility, and human potential.

[14]Spectrum 10K is a prominent genetic research study based in the United Kingdom, recognized as the largest of its kind focusing on autism. The study, led by Dr. Simon Baron-Cohen at Cambridge University's Autism Research Centre (ARC), aims to collect DNA samples from 10,000 autistic individuals, reflecting its ambitious scope and the significance of its research goals. The project's objective is to enhance understanding of the genetic factors associated with autism, potentially leading to new insights into the condition. However, Spectrum 10K has faced considerable controversy and resistance from autism advocates and activists. Concerns have been raised about various aspects of the study, including the language used in the research materials and the ethical implications of handling and sharing genetic data. Critics argue that the study's

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approach may not adequately consider the perspectives and rights of autistic participants, and there are fears about the potential misuse or misinterpretation of the data. As a result of these ongoing protests and petitions, the Spectrum 10K project has been temporarily suspended, highlighting the need for further dialogue and reassessment of how autism research is conducted and communicated. For more information, please refer to Aucademy (2021) and National Autistic Society (2021).

[15]I am referring to Baron-Cohen's (n.d.) "Participant Information Sheet" for the Spectrum 10K project at Cambridge University. Many autistic individuals have expressed significant concerns about the language used in these documents and the implications for how researchers plan to handle and share the genetic data collected. Criticism often focuses on the clarity and sensitivity of the terminology used, as well as apprehensions regarding the ethical management and future use of personal genetic information. These concerns reflect a broader dialogue within the autistic community about ensuring that research practices are respectful, transparent, and aligned with the interests and rights of autistic participants.

[16]The character Abed Nadir from the television show *Community* (2009-2015) is portrayed as being on the autism spectrum, with someone actually telling Abed directly, "Well, you have Asperger's" (short for Asperger's Syndrome, a condition that now falls under the umbrella of autism spectrum disorder or ASD). Abed is depicted as having a deep passion for film, television, and pop culture, which he frequently uses as a means of communication and self-expression. His character often references these interests to navigate social interactions and understand the world around him, making them central to his personality and interactions within the show. Abed's unique way of relating to others through his special interests provides both comedic and poignant moments in the series.

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