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No Future for Academic Crips: An Autoethnographic Crippling of Academic Futurity

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No future for academic crips:

An autoethnographic crippling of academic futurity

By

A. Adams

A Thesis Submitted in Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Masters of Arts in

Communication Studies

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No future for academic crips: An autoethnographic crippling of academic futurity.

A. Adams

This thesis has been examined and approved by the following members of the student's committee.

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Prof. Diana Joseph, Committee Member

Abstract

No Future for Academic Crips attempts to situate crip theory, critical disability studies, and communication theory squarely in the context of academia, problematizing the constraints placed on autistic identity by the demands of a graduate education. Utilizing autoethnographic vignettes along with theoretical writings regarding the creation and consolidation of crip identity, this thesis theorizes what a "neuroqueer future" looks like for academics. Six vignettes are presented to demonstrate strategies for survival employed in academic spaces, followed by analysis contextualizing and criticizing those strategies. Finally, implications for neuroqueer futurity and identity are discussed.

Author's Note: This thesis utilizes "disablism" instead of "ableism" as the term for anti-disabled oppression, refocusing the center of disablist oppression onto the marginalized, rather than "normal" abled bodies. Besides recentering disabled folks as the target of disablism, the general meaning remains the same as "ableism." Cited sources that use "ableism" retain their cited use. In addition, this paper utilizes "autistics" as the preferred term of choice to refer to individuals on the autism spectrum, unless directed by literature not to. Such reference establishes autism and disability writ large in the realm of identity in the same fashion as race, gender, or nationality.

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I've largely resisted the urge to attribute my progress in academia to other people, thinking it would downplay the effort I have put into surviving this long. However, there are some people that I absolutely cannot imagine finishing this project, this program, or this chapter of my life without. First of all, I owe a massive debt of gratitude to Dr. Justin Rudnick, my advisor. Thank you for being a supportive voice, while also cracking the whip when I was being lazy. In addition, thank you to Professor Diana Joseph of the English department. Your supportive presence assisted me in not just finishing this paper, but rediscovering that I enjoy writing. I'll certainly circle back around to CNF at some point in my academic career, and I have you to thank for that.

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Thank you to my parents, of course. For the last 24 years, I've enjoyed unconditional support and that helped make me the scholar and person I am today. One doesn't just leave Chicago behind, and all the lessons you taught me in the city guide me no matter where I go. I still don't know where this whole academia thing is going to take me, but I at least know that I will have support back home.

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Chapter One: Introduction

It is November, and the end of the semester is in sight. Sitting in the back of a chilly classroom, I try to grit my teeth and survive another lecture that seems straight from the 1990s. Another video plays, and the virtue of the (allegedly misinformed) scholar goes unquestioned. The audio is loud. It is too loud. I can't hear anything. The professor stops the video to consider a question. When the video begins again, it remains too loud. It's taken on a shrill quality. I pull the hood of my sweater over my head and try to put my head down on the desk. There is too much going on in here. I need there to be less happening. Fewer voices. Less noise. The professor needs to stop writing on the board while the video plays. I need to get out of here. A classmate notices and asks if I am okay. I am not.

After class, the professor asks what happened. I explain that I am autistic and the sensory experience of having an unnecessarily loud video along with trying to track both her writing and the video set off an adverse reaction. The professor insists that she could not have known, and that I don't "look autistic." I do not respond and leave. Later she will send me an email admonishing me for being rude.

Being disabled in academia, for me, is a constant process of disclosure. Existing in a space that does not respect visible disability, let alone invisible disability, requires the constant performance of either passing or visible disability in order to survive. From professors constantly parroting that they "couldn't tell" that I am autistic, or contending with a never-ending barrage of "I didn't think of that" whenever neurodivergence is brought up in a pedagogical setting, I am constantly othered for simply attempting to exist in a space clearly not built for me. In that sense, it becomes necessary to document and understand my own performance of otherness, and how it fits into a larger body rhetoric of disability. Existing methods commonly employed by instructors

to understand disability are not only unhelpful, but actively harmful (Seidler, 2011), as instructors resort to simulation of disability to generate some kind of sympathy from abled students and observers, who walk away with an "understanding" of how bad disabled folks have it. Alternatively, abled observers may watch shows like *Everything's Gonna Be Okay*, and use disabled characters to "relate" more to the disabled experience, as if there is something to relate to that can be accessed by an abled body.

In constructing a performance of disability, those who are labeled as "crippled" by outside actors need to be able to navigate a world not designed for them. Being Black, this happens on multiple axes, as disorder is generated not just through being autistic, but also through Blackness in a white supremacist culture. I find myself often in the unenviable position of needing to defend myself from disablist oppression and white supremacist racism, while also needing to manage the fact that autism is a largely invisible disability compiled upon a hypervisible Othering through Blackness. Each anecdote in this paper is faithfully recreated to the best of my memory, including sensory experiences where they are relevant to the narrative being established. To echo Garland-Thomson (2017) once again, narrative allows for a more complete self-identification, which reinforces resistance to eugenic logics. In this paper, two narratives will be presented, each followed with a reflection of how I regard/ed my actions and responses to the moment. Doing so allows for, at least, an image of what crip identity means to this one subject, in relation to the world around them.

To approach an anti-disablist future for myself and myself only, this thesis attempts to situate moments of disabled performance within a context of disability activism, cripple rhetorics, critical race theory and crip futurism. At the beginning of each section are vignettes, recreated from memory of moments within my own experience being recognized as disordered

during my time in academia. Rather than theorizing a universal autistic positionality, this thesis attempts to explore my own political/crippled position, situating my performance as a result of my relationship with my body, mind, and environment in order to create "an academic cripple" Ultimately, my work here is in service to interrogate the research question: *What constitutes a future for this disabled academic?*

Preview of Chapters

In Chapter 1, I will introduce the topic and methods, while generating the problem statement and research questions. In Chapter 2, relevant literature will be reviewed situating this reflection in existing literature on crip justice, critical race theory, performativity, and autistic identity. Chapter three will be a review of the methodology, justifying autoethnography, along with explaining the structure of self-reflection in the thesis. In Chapter 4, I will interrogate moments of explicit Othering as it applies to a crip context. Upon examining three anecdotes outlining occurrences of being Othered, implications for the construction of crip futures will be discussed. In the 5th chapter, I will undergo interrogation of "passing" as it relates to ability. Implications will be discussed after confronting three anecdotes in which the concept justifies or contextualizes my actions or responses to circumstances. In the final chapter, theoretical implications will be discussed, including a return to the larger problem statement. Limitations and further avenues will be discussed before a larger focus on what ways in which projects like these assist and hinder dismantling of eugenic logics.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Situating Autism

For decades, Autism Spectrum Disorders (henceforth referred to as "ASD" or "autism") have remained a part of the public consciousness, understood by way of contrasting frameworks that define and explain the existence of the disorder. At various points in its history, autism has been understood as both a biomedical disorder that impacts everyday communication and social ability (see Bumiller, 2008; Jurecic, 2007), and a sociocultural identity stemming from non-normative neurology (Heilker and Yergeau, 2011). Both attempt to explain how autism functions, and how people on the spectrum live with their diagnoses, but in radically different ways. Each frame carries with it a host of separate implications and suggestions for how we communicate about autism, and how we communicate autism itself.

By and large, autism has been injected into the public consciousness in the context of a neurological disorder that results in impaired communication, poor social skills, and delayed development. As a result, the most common understanding of the term "autism" comes with the added assumption that autism and Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD) ought to be prevented, and then cured (Bagatell, 2010). The disorder itself is thought of in the context of autism's impairments on interpersonal and group interaction (Jurecic, 2007). Beyond that, the "disorder" is categorized by "functionality," which attempts to quantify the ability of those impacted to manage in social situations. Those labeled as "high functioning" are often characterized as being able to "pass" as if they were not affected, while those labeled "low-functioning" tend to be characterized by severe motor impairments and an inability to speak consistently (Jurecic, 2007). Primarily, though, the biomedical frame establishes autism as a public health crisis that ought to be studied and eradicated (Bagatell, 2010; Bumiller, 2008).

My primary criticism of this biomedical frame remains that it ignores the role society plays in generating "disordered" communication. Had neurotypical communication methods not been established as "normal," there would be less reason to believe autistic folks are inherently impaired. Because the biomedical framework focuses almost solely on the deficiencies of those diagnosed with ASD, understanding those deficiencies only happens when attempting to universalize autistic experience and life to medicalize autistic folks. By and large, the biomedical frame treats autism as a burden. However, it completely ignores those who identify with their diagnosis not as a disorder, but as a significant part of who they are.

This gap is addressed by a shift in framework. Moving away from a biomedical perspective of disability and autism allows for a more robust understanding of autistic existence. Looking at autism as an identity marker assists in making visible the wants and desires of those on the spectrum, rather than prescribing what is and is not disordered communication. While this particular framework has a much less lengthy history, sampling the work of those looking to understand "the autistic experience" serves as a way to better understand how autistic people function, rather than simply looking at how ASD functions. In fact, autism is described by some researchers as not just an identity, but as *a rhetoric itself*. Heilker and Yergeau (2011) explain:

> Though the definitions of autism are also legion, what they, too, have in common
> is a focus on language use in the social realm, a focus on communication in social
> interaction. Indeed, two of the three primary descriptors of autistic behavior, two
> of the three traditionally cited, fundamental ways that autism presents itself in the
> world, per the medical establishment, have to do with communication in the
> social. (p. 487)

This reconceptualization of autism is, to an extent, a natural follow-up to much of the work that operates from the identity frame. The point of research shifts from attempting to diagnose autism to theorizing experience, a job best done from an identity framework. Applied to autism, the framework established by Heilker and Yergeau proposes that autism is constructed by a socially negotiated deviance from assumed communicative norms. However, they argue this deviance itself constitutes its own norms, patterns, and language, thus constructing autism as a rhetoric in and of itself. Said rhetoric then forms and shapes an identity unto itself.

Not all work is quite that concerned with the rhetoric of autism, however. Bagatell (2010) detailed the autistic experience from the perspective of an outsider's attempts to shift discourse towards the understanding that autistic folks have of themselves. To do so, she employs ethnographic methods, observing autistic folks interacting in a social club exclusively for autistic folks and asking members about what they would like to see change in their interactions with neurotypical people, how they see themselves, and what they think of autism as a whole. Contextualizing the questions Bagatell asked is the "Self-Advocacy Movement," described as "the parallel cry for self-determination by another group of disabled people rebelling against being long underestimated, deprived of choices, treated as eternal children, and thought to lead lesser lives" (p. 36). Members of the group that Bagatell interviewed consistently expressed disdain for the public perception of autistic people. Beyond that, interviewees often emphasized the need for community. For instance, Ben told researchers:

> It's like coming home … I've finally found a place where people don't care what
>
> you do. As far as nobody thinking you're weird or anything like that. . . . It's just
>
> 'be yourself . . . It's like finding a world where you fit, where I'm not like an alien

or something ... I can get off the cure mentality. It's okay to be me. (Bagatell

2010, p. 38)

Conceptualizing autism not as a biomedical affliction, but as an identity joined together through

shared experience and neurology allows for a more robust understanding of disability not as a

dehumanizing factor, but the result of a larger world built for abled people.

Positionality and Assemblage

"Positionality" attempts to define the social and political location of a given subject in

relation to the world around them. In conceptualizing the term and its usefulness in describing

the socio-political situation of a given subject, this thesis attempts to establish three frameworks

in which the term is used, all with different definitions and usage: the discursive frame, the local

frame, and the utilitarian frame. Each frame takes the same term and applies it in order to justify

a form of study attempting to take into account the social positioning of varied individuals.

While there is overlap in each frame, much of the difference lies in the assumptions that go into

what makes the term useful.

Discursive Framing

Discourse serves as one of the primary methods in which people make sense of the

stimuli surrounding them. As a process involving multiple parties, generating discourse requires

messages and stimuli to interact, clash, and mesh to create intelligible information to be "read."

Ardis (1992) explains the role that outside audiences play in reading the language that we use,

and its interplay with our lived experience and bodies. In doing so, she grapples with the

construction of positionality, as audiences determine the preferred role of a given speaker while

reading their language. In this sense, the body also becomes a text that is evaluated along with

the words used within a given message. In the process, a tension is created: the speaker, an

instructor in Ardis' work, enters a given discourse with a social location that is juxtaposed with the perceived social location of that speaker by the audience. Ardis (1992) explains:

> In this essay my focus is on how we embody the language we speak: how an audience (e.g., a student) "reads" the body of a speaker (e.g., a teacher) as it both constructs the positionality of that speaking subject and construes that subject's discursive authority.' In other words, rather than addressing the speech acts of the feminist teacher, I will concentrate on the language, the rhetoric, of her body in the classroom. (p. 168)

Ardis argues that the positionality of an instructor is not simply built by the self-image of the instructor, but in tandem with outside perception of their assumed role. A discourse between the audience and speaker is initiated, and ultimately provides a suggested social location that serves as the expectation for the speaker. Rather than being internally generated based on identity markers, usefulness, political positioning, or even physical location, one's positionality is constantly contested by never-ending discourse regarding the preferred communication and power relationships that the speaker *ought* to embody, rather than the ones they do.

Other work operates from a similar frame, establishing positionality through the constant discourse of performance. Hafen (2009) argues that positionality consists of "Identity negotiation, location, and performance," which ends with a series of political placements and social locations that are then internalized and performed. The discursive element, then, comes in with Hafen's assertion that positionalities are not simply performed on the individual level, but alongside, against, and for others. Hafen attempts to describe the contested positionality of students post-9/11. Discourse on what constitutes "patriotism" colors the ascribed positionality of actors like Michael Moore. The core beliefs of the students regarding the ideal role of

Americans is in constant tension with the actual words and embodiment of actors like Moore. His criticism of the United States, once labeled as "unpatriotic," conflicts harshly with the established drama (along with positional communities that don't tangibly exist) that creates the assumed positionality of the "American." Hafen explains:

> Those imagined communities are part of the myths of nationhood, required by all nations in order to legitimate their borders and sanctify their histories… Having proud sagas tainted with shameful acts is viewed by some as a more honest, multivocal history and by others as an apologist, ignoble history. These differing views exemplify the kinds of discursive frames that position actors apart in any dialogue involving cultural dramas. (p. 64)

To return to Ardis' work, the instructor performs their positionality not by themselves, but alongside, in opposition to, and for the students who serve as the audience. They either successfully embody power as anticipated by the students, or resist the ascribed location of the role of "teacher," complicating the positioning of the teacher. Rather than coming back with a specific positionality, then, the frame established by Hafen and Ardis contends that one's positionality is constantly in motion, contested by new discourse.

Local Framing

What work like Ardis and Hafen's does not center, though, is the specific embodied location of the subject, and how it plays into their positional identification. Others, rather than simply focusing on the discourse that creates positionality, generate a local frame much more interested in the immediate physical component to positionality. Alexander and Warren (2002) argue that positionality primarily concerns itself with "the political space we claim," arguing that racialized bodies inhabit a form of positionality unique to their physical and geographic location.

Social location is theorized as the result of interplay between identity and space. Kinefuchi and Orbe (2008) note that there is a difference between social locations and racial standpoints, though both are rooted in the physical location of the subject. In their study, positionality is read as the proximity with which subjects view, interact with, and respond to a communicative stimulus. Like in Alexander and Warren's work, positionality is more closely related to the spatial metaphor of "location." One's immediate environment, physical body, and geographical location interact in order to generate a position that is physically and communicatively inhabited by the subject.

Alexander and Warren (2002) use narrative description as a means of interrogating the positionality of both Black and White scholars within a dialogue with one another. By situating their positions through their physical bodies, along with real-world interactions that happened in a specific point in space, Alexander and Warren are able to discuss the impact of diversity policies, pedagogy, and academia on themselves. Ultimately, their positions as being able to resist erasure or recognize the power struggle that happens between White and Black scholars stems partially from their Black and White bodies. Kinefuchi and Orbe (2008), on the other hand, utilize the local frame as a means of explaining the positional context surrounding subjects' response to the racial messages in the movie *Crash*. Students' resistance, acceptance, or ambivalence to anti-racist messaging can then be explained by a metaphor for physical location: those who inhabited a position "closer" to the source material and saw themselves as participants often shared physical commonalities with the Black subjects of the movie, constructing a social position (and standpoint) that is closer to *Crash*. Those who did not share physical commonalities were socially distanced from the messages, and their physical bodies correlated to a positionality distanced from the movie's core argument. The interplay of the subjects' physical

body (usually referring to race) intersects with their ability to physically locate themselves in similar situations in order to generate a position from which the message is received.

Utilitarian Framing

Puar (2012) generates a framework for intersectionality that suggests that identities are a collection of events, rather than a simple point on a grid. Puar asserts that identity is better served when thought of as an assemblage, and could be defined by *what identity does*, rather than *what identity is*. While positionality, intersectionality, and identity are not precisely synonymous, a similar utilitarian framework is useful for discussion on positionality as well. Cooks (2003) uses positionality as a tool to emphasize the contexts of symbols expressed through lived bodies, focusing far more on the utility of a given position rather than a concrete definition of "positionality" as a term. For instance, Cooks defines the position of "Whiteness" as a set of rhetorical strategies employed to build, defend, and maintain hegemonic identities. By this framework, positionality is constantly in motion, redefined and reconstituted by the strategies by which we determine what a given position is or does.

Such a utilitarian approach to identity offers a way to discuss how communication from or within a given position translates into real-world action, how it impacts agency, and how it changes the strategies used to perform a given identity. Cooks (2003) describes the strategies of Whiteness as a means of interrogating the pedagogy of interracial communication courses. However, Cooks situates her study, much like Hafen (2009), in the aftermath of 9/11, exploring a reconstituted White position. For instance, the essay is grounded within a student's response to being asked what it means to "be a good citizen" after 9/11:

"No one is telling you what they really feel," she said, looking around at the class

in exasperation. "If I was that woman, and I saw something suspicious, you better

bet I would be on the phone to the police. You don't think if I could have

prevented what happened on September 11th, I would have? That's what it means

to be a good citizen." (p. 245)

Whiteness is then contextualized by how it is that the quoted student could have come to the

conclusion that she did. By discussing the positionality of Whiteness by what Whiteness does,

Cooks attempts to explore the methods by which Whiteness can be taught or talked about within

the classroom. It also allows for a more practical definition of "Whiteness" as both a positional

and pedagogical term. A framework built explicitly on what a position does ends up being far

more capable of describing what that position will end up doing.

It is worth noting that there is overlap between the discursive and utilitarian frameworks

described here. After all, discourse is always doing "something," even when one is not actively

aware that anything is being done. The primary difference comes in how one reaches something

being done, however. In Cooks (2003), Whiteness' position is constructed not from interaction

with marginalized identities, but for the express purpose of marginalizing those identities. The

action and discourse that comes from Whiteness, the interplay between oppressor and oppressed,

becomes the sole purpose of a given position's existence. The utilitarian frame posits that the

sole purpose for a position's existence is the action and discourse it creates, but the positionality

indeed comes first as a means of achieving "what it does." The discursive frame also

acknowledges that "something is done," as discourse is a thing that is "done," but positions

within the framework exist outside the scope of what the purpose of given discourse is.

Critical Disability Studies

Engaging disability as part of a larger project aimed at liberation of marginalized peoples

necessitates a broader purview of what disability is, has been, and can be. Such a need is filled

by the existence of *critical disability studies,* or CDS, described by Goodley (2017) as "a transdisciplinary space breaking boundaries between disciplines, deconstructing professional / lay distinctions and decolonizing traditional medicalized views of disability with socio-cultural conceptions of disablism" (p. 81). McRuer (2017) further explains: there is no "purity" or "innocence" in discourses of disability (p. 64). CDS necessarily explores the roles that disablist conventions play in the creation of oppressions that impact disabled folks in both a theoretical and material sense. That also means interrogating disability, disorder, and the body itself. McRuer goes on to argue that in order to truly understand crip existences (as a simultaneous extension, off-shoot, and tie-in to disability), one must confront what crippling means, is, and does. However, there is no "innocent" or benign way of doing so, fundamentally framing CDS as a hostile presence in opposition to existing social orders. Existing while crippled inherently upsets the order of imagined non-disabled futures, frustrating the eugenic logic that frames any and all consideration of a future without disability. In other words, CDS becomes a lens of opposition in order to confront the future for disabled folks, self-described "crips" and cripples, autistics, and anyone else who finds themselves on the business end of disablism.

Activists, academics, and disabled folks have long theorized the possibility of a world that is both non-hostile to disability and does not need to make room for us, as it already has been made available. The genre of crip futurism exists to explore the possibilities of a world built by disabled folks, for disabled folks. Griffith (2017) explains of existing crip futures: "So much of the imaginary future is 'perfect' because crips don't exist. The message is physical perfection = utopia. All physical ills have been techno/magically cured" (para. 5). Crip discourse builds a future in which disability is properly recognized as not a fault of the body, but instead a result of an environment built for the abled. In generating such discourse, we offer ourselves access to a

more just future, in which performance of crip embodiment becomes more than a cycle of disclosure in which disability becomes identity.

If disability serves as identity, though, the rhetorics of its existence contextualize the embodiment of that identity. The body, and by extension the identities that are contextualized by that body, generate meaning through social interaction (Garland-Thomson, 2000). The act of living as an Other is the act of constant self-representation, to be made constantly aware of your Otherness and wear it as "your" body. Scholars use performance art and rhetoric to better understand the modes through which disabled folks make meaning of their identities and bodies, and ultimately come to better understand what it means to perform being a crip. To return to Garland-Thomson (2000) for a moment, the role of the body as a part of the performance of living is treated as paramount:

> The disabled body is not only the medium but the content of performance. The disabled body on view is the performance. […] In addition to always addressing the question of "What happened to you?" that textual autobiography answers, disability performance at the same time reenacts the primal scene of disability in which the normative viewer encounters the disabled body and demands an explanation. (p. 334)

In short, performance of disability becomes a constant justification of the disabled body's existence.

This even applies to abled bodies attempting to perform disability. As Kuppers (2007) notes, "when nondisabled people don disability paraphernalia or masquerade as disabled, the results rarely offer interesting insights to disability scholars looking for resistances to dominant images of disability" (p. 81). Instead, performers simply replicate dominant justifications for

disabled existence. Bodies become disabled as a result of becoming marginalized, and therefore deserve their marginalization. The modes of enacting one's disability, in performance, become filtered through dominant narratives regarding use, aesthetic, and desirability. Wheelchairs become portrayed as clunky and unwieldy. Crutches become frustrating and unreliable. Hearing aids become bulky and uncomfortable. The performers simply use the markers of disability to signify the marginalization of disability proper.

Such a tendency is explained by Garland-Thomson (2017) as "eugenic logic," or the logics by which futures insist upon eliminating disabled presence. Garland-Thomson explains further that eugenic logic is: "modernity's sustained commitment to eliminating disability from the human condition, this literalizing of disability as disqualification…the master trope of the shared world" (p. 53). Through this logic, it becomes apparent that futures that fail to take access and disability into consideration do so because they simply assume that through eugenic processes, disability will be eliminated. Of course, by extension, if disability no longer exists, neither do disabled people.

Resistance to these logics form the backbone of crip identity. Eisenhaur (2007) furthers that positive identification with disability challenges narratives centered on tragedy, and therefore the eugenic logic. Positive identification does not make speculated futures any less eugenicist, but it does allow an avenue to resist dehumanizing portrayals of disability. Garland-Thomson (2017) argues that narrative plays a significant role in establishing positive crip identity, by reinforcing the restorative potential of self-understanding. Narrative and performance promote self-identification, constructing disability through existence rather than by aligning oneself with prescribed depictions of what crippled existence must look like or be.

Ultimately, the underlying motive of studying crip identity is to supplant the eugenicist notion that disability stems from the body, instead asserting that disability stems from environment. Almassi (2010) explains further:

> If life is easier for righties than for lefties, it is because our modern built environment has been constructed to work for the dominant group's modes of functioning. Consider also lactose intolerance, often regarded as functionally abnormal in the West. Yet considering that many people worldwide are lactose intolerant, and considering the historical peculiarity of substantial diary consumption, being lactose intolerant impedes successful functioning only as framed within particular cultural contexts… Making the case that left handedness and lactose intolerance come to be disadvantageous only in specific social and cultural contexts may seem to be easier than doing so for commonly supposed disabilities such as paraplegia. Yet what the preceding discussion shows is that finding difference attendant to a particular mode of functioning is not sufficient to identify this difference as a disadvantage in an impaired body to be fixed; in understanding the causes of disability, then, we need a more robust account of disability. (p. 131)

Through understanding crip identities as societal in origin, reinforced by environment, the project of creating crip futures is no longer a eugenic project of eliminating disability. Instead, creating crip futures becomes a project of changing environments so that disabled folks can move, communicate, and live along with their disabilities, rather than in spite of them. To return to McRuer (2017), drawing upon more anti-social theories of crip existence paints a far more bleak regard of the very idea of crip futures. Rather than accept an easy reinforcement of the

social model of disability, arguing that it is society itself that renders bodies "disabled," one must endeavor to consider whether or not a "future" as a theoretical goal is even worthwhile on an individual basis.

Through self-reflexive narrative, I plan to use this thesis to interrogate the interplay between the academy and autism while also employing narrative as a means of building a better understanding of an autistic futurity. To assist in the process, two research questions will be pursued in the paper:

RQ1: In what ways does academia replicate and propagate eugenic logics?

RQ2: How do responses to those logics generate a future for an autistic academic?

Now that I've laid a theoretical grounding for this project, the next chapter will review the methodological practices utilized in this thesis.

Chapter Three: Methods

Stories, according to Burke (1973), serve as a contextualizing force that provides both context and clarity for the world and lives in which we exist. They help us understand, negotiate, and find fidelity in the situations that make up those stories. Adams (2008) is clear: we learn our ways of being through telling stories, establishing and connecting narratives about ourselves and others. Stories construct our positions and interrogate the positions of others in relation to ourselves. In the end, narratives (and, by extension, the stories that comprise them) make sense of our relationships to others and ourselves.

For some scholars, narrative is its own part of our existence, something that is shared with others through intent. Coles (1989) operates from a metaphor framing narrative as a "tool," while Richardson (1990) argues that stories are made "available" to people like a resource to be utilized in order to make sense of the world. Narratives, here, are tangible. They are a thing that can be possessed, shared, carried, rejected, and adapted. Brody (2002) argues further: narrative is something that is "tried on" like clothing. In all of these frameworks, narrative is simply one component of a larger existence, something that can be called upon when necessary to make sense of chaos.

Alternatively, narrative can be ontological. Fisher (1984) argues that narrative is an inescapable part of our lives, impossible to ignore. This framework positions narrative as more than a mere tool, but something closer to life itself. Brody (2002) continues, arguing that narrative actually constructs the way we experience life, reality, and everything therein. In this sense, stories are not merely a means of explaining existence; existence is perceived, and perhaps understood primarily, in narrative form itself. When we share stories, we help construct what

reality *is* in the eyes of others. When we explore the stories of others, our own realities are shaped and changed as a result. To be is to be a part of a narrative.

In constructing a narrative of disability, disabled folks, crips, and autistics need to be able to navigate a world not designed for them. As mentioned before, this includes autistics like myself. I find myself often in the unenviable position of needing to defend myself from disablist oppression, while also needing to manage the fact that autism is a largely invisible disability. This thesis situates crip performance and existence through autoethnographic reflection on various parts of my time in graduate school, to interrogate my positionality as an autistic graduate student outside of the context of establishing a "grid" pinpointing my existence, generating discourse regarding the assemblage of experience and performance that makes up who "A Adams" is and what they "do" outside of grid-based intersectional analysis.

Puar (2012) argues that we ought to be reconceptualizing intersectionality and identity with a single notion: grids happen, and we ought to be looking into how to make them not happen. "Grids," here, refer to the simplistic method of identifying individuals by identity markers, looking for intersections on a grid that then comprises the individual and their existence. The "Black Woman," per the grid metaphor, happens at the intersection between "Blackness" and "Womanhood." That intersection is then represented (and acted upon) by a grid of identities, where two lines meet. Therefore, one is able to pinpoint the social location of people and their identities by simply pointing to the "correct" crossing of lines, mapping out the entirety of the individual identity in a single moment. Of course, Puar does not leave her critique there, and suggests a larger reconceptualization that requires a redefinition of the subject and their identity. However, she does pose an important question in her initial criticism: How do we define the social location of individuals and groups of people? A simple discussion of

"intersectionality" does not adequately define the standpoint or narrative of the individual and their many identities, because that is not what the term is supposed to do in the first place. Instead, the assemblage of experience and position addressed by narrative attempts to define the social and political location of a given subject in relation to the world around them. Essentially, narrative allows us to center not just what people are, but what they do with the stories that comprise them.

Autoethnography serves as a means of providing context to narrative. Boylorn (2008) writes that autoethnographers "look in (at themselves) and out (at the world) connecting the personal to the cultural" (p. 413). In doing so, autoethnographers provide a key space in which phenomenon can be explored through a deeply intimate lens. The phenomenological experiences that come with identity can be examined through experience, allowing for deeper interrogation of cultural distortions and misrepresentations. When conducting study from the margins, autoethnography approaches and generates discourse regarding marginalization, serving not just as critique of power, but resistance to structures that generate marginalization. By making the researcher the subject, autoethnography allows for academic inquiry that refuses to speak for others, making it powerful in situating the gaze on the self. At its core, autoethnography tells a story about power, and the role that the subject plays in resisting it, reinforcing it, and surviving it.

However, autoethnography does not need to be prescriptive in order to be useful, or even need to pretend to be generalizable. To adapt Boylorn (2008): as an autoethnographer, I do not intend to speak on behalf of all autistic folks or to insinuate that my reaction is the only/best/right response; it is simply my response. Boylorn continues: "Like all autoethnography what follows is messy, sometimes contradictory, sometimes complicated. By telling my story and reflecting on

my own lived experience (reality), I am using autoethnography to talk to myself" (p. 415). In order to approach an understanding of a lived, embodied futurity that speaks to me, as a subject, I need to reflect not just on events, but on my response to events. I must make myself aware of the moments in which I am Othered, and moments in which I Other myself. Ultimately, I must implicate not just my surroundings, but myself in the generation of utopian futures for disabled folks, as that future applies to me.

Autoethnography, at its core, is the attempt to live with stories from the position closest to that view: the self (Adams 2008). Narrative contains reference and elements of "the good life," which become filtered through the pen, keyboard, or mouth of the storyteller, distilled for a given purpose. For this paper, that purpose is to explore my role as an autistic person in academia. As such, the stories contained in this thesis are a testament to "oppressive systems that, because of their oppressiveness, give us a story to tell" (Adams, 2008, p. 181). As with any endeavor that seeks to labor against the machinations of power, this project is embroiled in ethical concerns on two fronts: concerns over my own agency to represent my experiences through personal narrative, and concerns over the representations of those who are implicated in my renditions of disabling rhetoric in the academy.

Reconciling these ethical tensions is no easy feat. Edwards (2021) argues that autoethnographers "need to find a range of acceptable ways to ensure that persons referred to in autoethnography should be advised, and where possible their recall as to what happened should be sought for clarification" (p. 5). Such concerns are a frequent struggle in autoethnography, considering the method features a microscopic analysis of the self which, as Tolich (2010) notes, is "porous, leaking to the other without due ethical consideration" (p. 1608). Tolich and others might suggest securing informed consent from those involved in the stories we tell in

autoethnography, but Adams (2008) questions, "When should I seek permission to write about others in my life writings? Will I silence myself worrying about harming them? And how might the ethical practice of informed consent function as psychic/ethical violence on my sharing of stories" (p. 184). If there is anything to be learned from these tensions, it is that navigating the ethical terrain of autoethnography is like traversing a minefield.

No solution to the problem of ethical representation in autoethnography will appease everyone. However, in the interests of upholding a commitment to both myself and those who appear in my renditions of disabling rhetoric in academia, I have taken certain precautions in this thesis. First, I have de-identified the narratives as much as possible to preserve the fidelity of the stories while protecting (or obscuring) the identities of those involved. Second, where such de-identification was difficult or impossible, I have chosen to remove certain narratives that would have otherwise featured prominently in an analysis such as this. The stories you see here represent my best attempts at speaking truth to power while shielding those in positions of power from scrutiny they may find uncomfortable--regardless of how their disabling rhetoric made me feel in the moment.

To this end, the remainder of this thesis presents vignettes from various points of my three years in graduate school and represents them as moments of reflection—and critical intervention—on what being a "disabled" graduate student means in a material sense, reflecting on the political, sensual, and emotional impact of various conversations, experiences, and traumas that form assemblage of a post-graduate "career." These stories are messy, incomplete, and at times difficult to write. They all are me talking to and with myself, piecing together a three-year period in my life in which disability was most crystalized. They involve an exploration into a future I had not understood. They involve mentors, friends, and academic

family grappling with logics in contexts in which I said nothing. I explore not just what I do, but what I am. In doing so, I will explore narrative and being from both a practical standpoint and an ontological one. The stories of navigating academia as a disabled student, as an autistic student, and as a crippled student offer real tools to understand "disability" as a confounding factor in navigating a graduate program. In addition, it would be impossible to coherently reflect on my time in academia without recognizing the role that Blackness plays in contextualizing both those experiences and who I am. On an ontological level, the vignettes that follow organize what disability means, and ultimately comprise the assemblage that makes A Adams a person who exists. By looking inward at myself to tease out a depiction of autistic positionality, and looking out at the eugenic world I live in to define the present, these vignettes allow for a full, embodied, experienced understanding of what the future is, and what it could be.

Chapter Four: The Othering of A Adams

Approaching a definition for a disabled academic future requires an in-depth exploration of what constitutes the present. Bracketed by eugenic beliefs and logics, my time in graduate school has been a series of moments in which I am Othered, one after another. These moments serve as the backbone of my (mis)education, and define my relationships with my identity, my instructors, and my work. From conferences, to classrooms, to university hallways, the times in which I find myself most removed from the rest of my colleagues are the moments in which my identity is most crystalized. Each vignette that follows is one part of how a larger future is defined, by presenting an unfiltered image of what the present looks like. Without understanding what the Othering of A Adams looks like, there can be no meaningful interrogation of what the future of A Adams could look like.

"If you need anything": Othering the super-crip

It's syllabus day and I, frankly, expected better than this. That is what I think as I listen to yet another professor launch into yet another lengthy diatribe about how they're not actually disablist, but actually definitely supportive and how if I need anything I can just let them know and how they're here for me, or whatever this faculty member is telling themselves this week, shortly before skipping the disability accommodations section of their syllabus when going over course policies. I may as well be able to see the future, at this point. I hear the same platitudes once, and suddenly I just know I'm getting nothing from them. It's a cynical place, but as I sit in class after another round of pointless introductions, I at least know what to expect.

This is what the introductions always look like. Someone calls on me, and asks what I like to research. I mention autism. I am asked why specifically autism. I mention that the current research is pretty horrible on average and the entire discipline needs to take a hard look in the

mirror before relying on "foundational" literature that is problematic at best, and eugenic at worst. Of course, I use more pleasant language. Often some nonsense about how I am "fascinated" with disability and I want to contribute to the literature base. I play the dutiful role of the starstruck student, pretending that academia is some unique existence removed from disablist violence. And then everyone buys it, and then someone says those words:

Well, if you need anything, I'm here.

That phrase always means the same thing. While the instructor means well, I will have to be the one who explains what I need from an accessibility standpoint. I will need to constantly and continuously self-disclose in order to simply survive in academia. But what it truly means is that I need to *produce*. I need to create. I need to be a productive academic. Write a paper. Finish a literature review. Work on my thesis. Perform my GTA duties. Coach the entire TA office on how autism works. Present research. Revise my CV. And on top of all of that, I need to make sure I am accommodated so that I do not fall behind.

I ignore that thought and try to refocus on the class at hand. Another student is introducing themselves, though for the life of me I cannot bring myself to figure out what they are saying. It's like what they're saying is going in one ear, rattling around my head, and then just vanishing. It's frustrating, but I try not to show. It's just introductions, and I would definitely be labeled "That Student" if I asked for someone to repeat an introduction. Sorry, person behind me in class. I will never know your name, your interests, or how long you have been here. Upsetting as it is, I am struggling to focus. Call it brain fog, executive dysfunction, or just plain inattentiveness. I don't know a precise term for it, and I don't want to. I just know I feel *bad*. Simultaneously over and under-stimulated. I have done this before, though, so I manage as well as I can. I wipe my sweaty hands on my pants, and try to refocus. It almost works. I can at least

register what words are being said by other students. Not that I can tell you what any of them mean, but at least I am ostensibly listening.

The lecture crawls by, a dull drone in the background. This feels slow. This class feels too slow. I chew lightly on my fingers, trying to bring myself back to the class, but nothing happens. The professor sounds like she is underwater, and I can't make out a single word anyone says. A few students ask questions, but they're no more intelligible than the professor. But I have practiced what I do in these situations. I take a few deep breaths, and keep my hands busy. Every so often, I nod as if I understand what is being said. Just don't draw attention to it. As usual, this approach works.

Minutes pass, and I am back. I've missed some amount of information, but it isn't enough to actually set me back all that far. The course will split into groups, which will be the people we work with all semester. Even having missed much of what was said, I am acutely aware that the idea is to get a grad student to guide the undergrads every step of the semester. I am also acutely aware that this will not happen. First of all, I don't want to. *I'm not interested in babysitting*. Second of all, I don't know any of these students. They don't know I am on the spectrum, while the professor certainly does. I make eye contact with the professor, praying that they at least begin to get how awkward this is for me. The instructor holds eye contact for a second, and I *think* they nod.

But nope. They simply go on with the rest of the class. I pick up what the general instructions are from context clues, and engage in discussion with a bunch of students who frankly I do not want to talk to. I'm not quite sure how I will manage this semester, but overall, I know the class should be simple enough to pass. Besides, there are only like five assignments. What's the worst that can happen? The professor walks over and asks to talk. It's a bit of a

shock, and I am sure that is plastered all over my face. Quickly, I straighten up and nod, following the professor outside while the undergrads and other graduate students talk about the plan for the course this semester.

Again, I am struck with a strong sense of *deja vu*, as the professor begins some spiel about how important accessibility is to her, and how the department has done an excellent job of creating the most accessible graduate courses they can. I stay quiet. I've learned that when academics start preening about the alleged accessibility of their classwork, it is best to shut up and let them be happy. Besides, it's early in the class, and I don't know what the course will look like. I could, after all, be in for a pleasant shock. The professor continues, letting me know that I can ask her for anything I need for access purposes. I remain guarded. I've played this game enough times by now to know better. This class being the same as the others would crush me if I did not stay guarded..

I've gone ahead and tried to make sure that all of our class activities have been edited to account for disability.

I've never heard this one before. For just a moment, there's some hope for this class yet. And my reaction is obviously physical, as the professor perks up instantly. I do what I can to make it clear that I am interested. Finally, this class might be better. Academia might be better. I might enjoy this, and be a disabled student, and not *the* disabled student. I'm not entirely sure where my expectations became so low that a statement that a course would try its best to not be an absolute drag was such a pick-me-up, but here we are.

The short conversation ends with no response, and I make my way back into the classroom. It dawns on me as students follow with their eyes as I sit back down that, for better or for worse, the jig is up. After all, the professor just made eye contact with me, made a statement

about the course being accommodating for disability, and then asked me to talk during a break from class. Of course, they all know who the disabled kid is. I don't let my eyes linger on any individual student for long enough to know whether or not they are watching me, but I can feel their stares. And whether they are real or imagined, the experience remains the same. I try to take deeper breaths; the room suddenly feels much smaller. My collar is hot, the bridge of my nose feels ready to burst, and breathing is suddenly an ordeal. My brow starts to burn, a sharp sting racing up and down the two stitched breaks in my right eyebrow. I never learned why this happens, but I know what it means. I no longer wish to be here. And frankly, I no longer wish to be anywhere. As I arrive at my seat and avoid eye contact with the group I will be tasked with working alongside for the rest of the semester, I arrive at a frustrating conclusion:

This actually blows.

For the rest of the class, I go out of my way to answer any and all questions posed. I cite performance studies literature as well as I know the genre, despite not having taken any formal education in the field until now. I ask strong questions to invite deeper discussion, involving the entire class when I can. I do what I can to steer conversation in a way that allows for the most critical conversation possible. I ignore my body, steamrolling through every physical sign that I have reached my limits. As my brow burns, I reach up to scratch my brow scars, which simply makes the sting worse. My hands feel dry, as does my mouth. My jaw hurts from talking too much. The lights feel far too bright. Blinking is a labor, but yet I press on. My collar remains hot, but I simply fan myself discreetly every few minutes. And eventually, gracefully, mercifully, the class ends. Students are dismissed, and I cheerfully catch up the undergrads in my group on the expectations for next week. They understand, and comment on just how *smart* I seem. One of them comments that they couldn't even tell that I am disabled. I laugh at the comment and shrug.

"Nobody ever sees it when I meet them for the first time."

After waving the students goodbye, and maintaining a hearty, spirited conversation with the professor all the way back to the empty graduate assistant office, I collapse into a chair. I launch into a panic attack, heaving strained breaths and trying to calm my brow and chest. My arms are lead. My legs are jelly. I have pushed my body far beyond what it could do, but the aftereffects happen in the dark. Nobody sees, and I am confronted with an ugly truth: I need to do this three times a week for another year and a half. Maybe graduate school was a mistake.

Initial impressions on colleagues and instructors play a critical role in how I manage balancing disability with perceived competence. By exerting complete control over how and when I disclose my disability, I retain agency in the rate at which I expose myself to the beliefs and internalized truths of undergraduate students, fellow graduate assistants, and the professors who ultimately decide whether I retain my funding to continue my education. Regardless of the actual beliefs of the surrounding academics, the need to maintain control over how others read my behaviors is paramount to my comfort. At the crux of that discomfort is the unfortunate space between being dismissed as defective and labeled a "super-crip." McGillivray, O'Donnell, McPherson, and Misener (2019) explain that an overreliance on "overcoming adversity" as a primary narrative for understanding disabled subjectivity creates a particularly dangerous disabled identity: the "super-crip." As disabled folks move from invisibility, constant pressure to overcome adversity becomes its own pressure, remarginalizing disabled folks who fail to meet expectations set far beyond any reasonable mark. On the other hand, those who manage to live up to the expectations of eugenic cultures contribute to their own erasure, as overcoming obstacles created to hinder disability serves as sufficient argument to heap more responsibility onto the super-crip, without meaningfully improving access.

The medical model of ability and disability provide the backbone of the supercrip narrative. When all disability is boiled down to personal impairment and inability, narratives of personal loss and tragedy become projected onto individuals. From there, disability is placed on the margins of humanity until those narratives of tragedy are overturned. In return, those who overcome are welcomed for their ability to approximate the idealized neoliberal body, in that the super-crip bodymind can produce at a rate deemed acceptable. In doing so, the super-crip is elevated to heroic status, defying the odds to realize their full humanity. McGillivray, O'Donnell, McPherson, and Misener (2019) go on to argue that such a narrative serves to undermine attempts by disabled folks to intervene in disablism, by diverting attention from real, experienced barriers that disabled folks face. However, there is more to critique from the model. In addition to inhibiting cultural recognition of disablist structures, embracing the super-crip imposes undue burdens to re-engage with neoliberal demands to produce in order to seem "normal" at large. The very positionality of the disabled bodymind becomes unstable, as it is simultaneously defined by both its alleged deficiency and expected normalcy. The super-crip position is not one that is granted equal status to the abled bodymind, but is still elevated above disability. By spectacularizing the disabled bodymind, the eugenic logic makes its demands clear: to escape disablism, one must assimilate.

As a graduate student, my own options are clear. Once outed, the supercrip narrative is activated. Any success in graduate school is fated to be lionized as a stunning act of overcoming educational barriers, be they tangible or perceived. Expectations rise. Accommodations were offered, but they will continue to go unused. Performance in neoliberal contexts in which a market confines the ways in which I can behave in the classroom makes requesting accommodations nearly impossible, eliminating one of the few options available. The perceived

dearth of autistic professors leads directly to simple calculus: in order to obtain a career, I need to overachieve. And the fastest route to achievement is to become the super-crip. And so tell-tale signs from my body go ignored, as it becomes infinitely more important to secure letters of recommendation, allies in the department, and the goodwill of those who will eventually read and approve my thesis.

Further, agency becomes a crucial turning point. In losing the ability to navigate my own disclosure, control over disabled narratives is turned over to the class at large. Defining disability, when I do not actively define it myself, becomes the job of observers. Griffiths (2020) explains:

> For all of us, *capability* is a capacity to learn and develop and is often assessed on initial employment. *Ability* is contextual, temporal and often unclear. *Willingness*, [...] is the neoliberal devolution of responsibility to the individual. *Willingness* is both what can drive individuals to overcome barriers of capability and ability, but unfortunately can also be used to criticise individuals when they cannot overcome those same (often structural) barriers. (p.125)

Perception of my performance in class was never in my hands, but once my status as a disabled student is disclosed, evaluation of my performance in relation to barriers erected in academia happens exclusively externally. To this end, performing the supercrip makes the most sense. It is the primary mode by which I can reclaim agency. The assigned identity of the subject under neoliberalism is that of a worker. Navigating this identity simply means filtering disability through labor. At the end of the day, super-crips get into PhD programs and get hired. Exhausted autistic students end up burning out on the adjunct track.

"Do We Have Any Questions?": Othering Through Citation

Well, we seem popular.

This is my only sardonic thought as I look into the crowd of my first ever paper presentation at a national conference. I am the last to speak on a panel of forensics researchers, all from my institution. Each has brilliant things to say, excellent critiques to make, and the hard data so often missing from forensics research to back it up. Each of them are trying to make the activity better in some way or another. As am I, I guess. I stop to pull up my paper on my laptop, making sure I have a coherent outline to explore all the work I did. I don't want to need to refresh myself while my friends are delivering what amount to pitches to make forensics a more equitable activity, and I am certain they will do the same for me.

It would be nice if there were more than, like, six people here, though.

It is early morning on Saturday at the conference. Many are still recovering from seeing colleagues, alums, and friends the night before. Others are simply sleeping in. Others still are out for breakfast with friends and colleagues, likely chuckling about the poor schmucks who were assigned early morning sessions that will almost assuredly be empty. I get it. I did the same thing yesterday morning over a bagel. I had forgotten, then, that I would be one of those poor schmucks the very next day. What a life. What a conference. At least the handful of people here look engaged.

As we make our way down the line, a couple of attendees indicate that they have questions, but hold onto them for the end of the session. A nod here, a scribble in a notepad there, a scrunched-up face when something objectionable is heard, all the typical indicators that something of note was said. There should be good questions at the end. Finally, it is my turn. Setting my timer, it occurs to me that my paper is fundamentally different from the others'

arguments. The others all argue that there are procedural issues with the way that ballots are written in speech and debate, in various ways. Some focus on the frequency of problematic ballots, while others take issue with the fact that they happen at all. I, on the other hand, take issue with the ballot itself. Immediately, I know this is not going to go well. Some lady in the front row blows a heavy breath out of her nose as soon as I mention disability. A couple of people look intrigued, and the rest look straight-up disconnected.

Jeez, would it kill y'all to at least pretend to give a damn?

I explain where my analysis is coming from: as a performer, the ballot's role was largely to tell me and students like me to simply stop looking and acting so dang disabled. Stop fidgeting. Make more eye contact. Your movements could be smoother. Stop acting like a robot and just be yourself. Or whatever nonsense abled folks tell themselves is actually *super empowering!* but is mostly just really annoying. Of course, it's the academy, so it isn't like I can just say that those comments are stupid. Instead, I needed to concoct some theoretical lens so an old white dude can say that it's stupid for me. It dawns on me that this is a very cynical way of approaching the situation, but those are the breaks.

As I finish, the screwed-up faces don't really change, and I know that the Q&A session is going to be a wild one. More importantly, I'm expecting one of the most annoying staples of academic questioning, and it comes pretty early. After the others field a couple of questions that are mostly just defenses of forensics, rather than real inquiry regarding the content of the papers, one older attendee has her question taken. This one did not scrunch her face when I was presenting, but honestly after her question, I wish she had.

"So, like, how are we defining disability?"

Immediately, I know what she meant to ask. She doesn't want my definition of autism. She doesn't want my definition of disability. She wants a neat little set of parentheses. She wants page numbers. She wants a spiel. She wants me to start with "Well, the literature argues…" She wants a citation. And I, frankly, don't have one for her. Time feels still. It's hot, and I'm no longer comfortable. I feel the cold pinprick of sweat beading on the back of my neck, and I am suddenly hyper aware of every part of my body. The feeling of not belonging is far from an enjoyable one, but today it crosses from a low hum of unease to outright physical discomfort. Which feels stupid, because I expected this. I knew this question would be here, because it always is. The moment lingers, and then as quickly as it came, it passes. I toss together some inane answer I've long since forgotten, integrating the works of authors I would go on to include in literature reviews for course papers, conference presentations, and my thesis. In real time, the answer was there immediately. Any pause felt was purely my imagination, or maybe my frustration getting the better of me.

The next question asks about why I felt the paper is necessary. The next asks if there is any literature arguing that policing physical performance is disablist. The next asks if the literature supports a different kind of ballot. The next one becomes the next one becomes the next one becomes the next question that asks about the literature about the literature about the literature. Every answer must be contextualized by academic work. Anything else is too anecdotal. Too informal. Not good enough. Not trustworthy. Maybe the student is lying about feeling marginalized? Maybe the students just don't know what marginalization looks like. Maybe I don't know what autism *really* is so I need Yergeau or Bagatell to tell everyone what I can just tell them myself, and then to define disability I need to consult Ferris or maybe Garland-Thomson this time if I want to feel spicy. Or maybe I need to invoke all the *foundational*

research. You know, the papers with titles like "*Is there a 'language of the eyes'? Evidence from normal adults, and adults with autism or Asperger Syndrome*" because clearly, this is the kind of research that I need to define myself.

Finally, the session ends. Everyone is out of questions. The panelists congratulate each other on writing good papers. The audience, which seems to have slightly grown over the course of the session, trickles out the door. I feel my shoulders drop like lead. Every breath feels like it takes an eternity, and I can barely move my legs to leave. I have finished defending my existence, my experience, and pitched possibly making the world (or just forensics) a slightly better place for folks like me. I also got finished justifying everything I know about myself with citation after citation. I am sure it isn't intentional. I am not sure it is even *that* big of a deal. But at my first national conference, it becomes apparent: I matter insomuch as there is literature to prove I matter, and even then all it does is define the ways in which I matter. Then and there, I resolve to write autoethnography. A little inkling of rebellion, aimed at a frustrating hour in a frustrating weekend. I will not be reduced to a citation. I will absolutely not be reduced to a handful of papers, scattered across a panel. This seething anger feels raw, new, fresh. And somehow, the episode is entirely drab. Commonplace. I may as well still be in Mankato. My life in academia, to this point, is four-syllable words, obscure citations, and posturing. Credit must be granted for every breath, every thought, every feeling, every noseburn, every missed moment of eye contact, every moment to stim[1], every missed deadline, every day of executive dysfunction, everything. Credit attributed to everyone but me, but that's the job. That's the academy. In the middle of a convention center in Baltimore, Maryland, I realize that this is the disabled rat race.

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[1] "Stimming" refers to the practice of fidgeting or playing with some sort of tool as a calming tool. It is common among autistics.

You cite everyone else to justify your existence until you write enough that someone is citing you to justify their existence, and then the snake swallows its tail.

That realization is the one that becomes too much. I check my phone. There is nothing I am scheduled to be at right this second, and I cannot spend another second dwelling on this. I go and find lunch, deliberately avoiding contact with anyone who was in the session to prevent more questions. Things come close to returning to normal, but I become painfully aware what "normal" means in this context. This feeling, the frustration, the constant reference to others to justify existing. I would later return to my room, still unsettled. People who were not in the room will ask what the experience was like. I will lie to them, and say it was fun.

The irony of writing academic work in the context of disability partially comes from my general discomfort with the ways in which academics are asked to explain themselves in the form of citation, boiling dynamic identity down to easily-packaged academic referent. To this end, Peruzzo (2020) asks "who is entitled to talk about disability," arguing that direct experience with disability is the primary indicator that one is qualified, so to speak, to competently theorize the disabled position. Interestingly, Peruzzo goes on to argue that the non-disabled voice is necessary in disability studies, "dwelled in a rather under-explored terrain in social sciences and philosophy, swinging between epistemological rejections and ontological stances" (p. 33). In a book shaped by the autoethnographic accounts of disabled folks, Peruzzo's dual claim that personal experience is a necessary wing of disability studies inquiry, while also declaring social sciences "underexplored" underscores the crux of my discomfort, and ultimately, the cruelty of the academic cudgel. The only interrogation that matters is interrogation that is justified through the academy itself.

The neoliberal push for production is key in that constraint. Pressures to constantly publish papers, procure panels, present at conferences, finish classes, teach undergrads swiftly turns the academy into just another workplace. After all, the academic that cannot produce, cannot eat. However, when neoliberalism demands production in the context of the academy, what is lost is the freeing work done by simple self-reflection. Neoliberalism, in its demand for citable, transferable, publishable work, rewards blanket theorizing on the disabled condition, regardless of the theorizing's applicability to other disabled positionalities. Brown (2020) goes even further, noting that such a demand not only flattens the means by which disabled folks consider their lives in relation to the world, but entrenches "the working conditions as a contemporary academic in the neoliberal university as a source of aggravation for their symptoms" (p. 67). Andrews (2020) and other autoethnographers attempt to intervene in the construction of such conditions, by centering the individual experiences of disability as a mooring point for analysis, with citation being simple support contextualizing a unique, independent positionality.

This conundrum is what I refer to when I write that I am my own Other. While the paper itself borrows the frameworks, words, and occasionally the questions of many academics in the hopes of presenting a framework for understanding my own experience in academia, at the core of the argument, I am theorizing from my future, and mine alone. There is no generalizable claim to be had here, in which I utilize an amalgamation of other autoethnographers' work to attempt to universally encapsulate the lived experience of being disabled in the academy. To do so would be to severely limit the range of analysis that can come from such a convoluted, complex, contradictory, revelatory, and infuriating position. There is no singular disabled academic to analyze. There is no universal answer to *what is a disabled academic*? There is no point on a grid

at which "disabled" and "academic" meets that generates a discrete position with its own properties, privileges, and oppressions. Instead, each academic is an assemblage of moments, disabilities, experiences, and positions that creates a *person*. "The Literature" cannot save us. "The Literature" cannot propose a magic solution to ableism within the academy. What "The Literature" offers is a means and a lens to add more context, for us to come to terms with the assemblages we have been presented with. It is an unsatisfying purpose, at times. But it serves to intervene in Othering by preventing the exact kind of behavior this paper claims that it does not undergo in its introduction.

Conclusion

The futurity offered to disabled folks, autistics, and crips is not static, nor is it universally applicable across any single category. Not every crip academic is asked to be a super-crip. Not every academic has their agency stripped regarding when and how to disclose their disability. Not every academic even feels as if the constant need for reference is stifling. Each of these vignettes is a moment in which A Adams, an autistic crip who happens to be an academic, is formed and reformed. Each moment is one part of a larger assemblage that makes a person. Each moment is a scene of Othering, and some are scenes of overcoming. They are scenes of doubt, dismay, and occasionally rhetorical violence. But in service of discovering a future for a disabled academia, resistance to Othering provides a path.

A eugenic future is one in which disability cannot be imagined. For at least my presence as it pertains to the academy, a disabled future is one in which I retain full control over my own disability. I out myself when I please. I engage in work to the best of my abilities on my terms. My identity exists outside of the confines of academic citation. A disabled future, in the direct shadow of being Othered, simply means allowing me to *be disabled*. In the next chapter,

however, the process of being disabled is interrupted by a current need on the road to a eugenic future. In order to survive eugenic logics, one must *not* be disabled, and instead attempt to pass as "normal," whatever that means in a given moment.

Chapter Five: Doing the Dance

Passing, in the context of this chapter, mostly refers to attempts I make to seem neurotypical, or at least "less disabled." What that actually means changes from moment to moment, as the very purpose of passing as neurotypical is unstable, and is redefined in each moment in which I engage with eugenic logics. In some cases, "passing" may not even refer to trying to seem neurotypical. My identity is made least clear in these moments, as contextual forces require me to either abandon, tone down, or overperform a central part of the assemblage of identities that becomes A Adams. By understanding the means I utilize to pass, whatever that means in a given moment, we better understand what facets of disability are and are not acceptable, painting a clear picture of what a disabled future can look like.

"We Could Do the Work.": Passing in Communal Contexts

Conferences are the worst thing ever created, and whoever came up with the idea should be arrested. But they represent one of the few chances I get to interact with other folks interested in disability, so I suck it up and attend them when I can afford it. Never, though, have I attended this national conference. For some goofy reason, I elect to believe my academic friends when they insist that conferences are a validating experience that will make me feel seen. It does not take long for me to remember that the vast majority of my academic friends are white and neurotypical. But by this point, I have already paid two months of rent to pay for membership, registration, airfare, lodging, baggage, and food so it isn't like I can just not go. Besides that, I have a paper to present, neurotypical graduate program representatives to woo, and colleagues from forensics to catch up with before I inevitably end up exhausted and go to bed early.

But most of all, I want to experience the Disability Issues caucus. At other conferences, disability studies has largely been something shoehorned into some other sub- discipline that

your average faculty member *actually* cares about, like rhetoric or health. Having combed

through the program, I settle on a roundtable discussion regarding the future of the discipline. Of

course, the fact that such a roundtable exists does not bode well for the field, but at the very least

it means like-minded academics, I imagine, to commiserate with regarding the lack of jobs, the

academy's frustrating obsession with job production, and generally disablist administrations.

Settling in after watching a paper panel the timeslot before, I become aggressively aware

of the sheer whiteness of the academics in the room. Of course, I'd known how white disability

studies is; the invisibility of Black disability is something I've mulled over for years. But that's

supposed to be a theoretical consideration, something to mention in a conversation to get

scattered murmurs of recognition or derision from people I do not know and will never meet

again. Instead, white academics appraise me from the very moment I walk into the room. I feel

less like a scholar, and more like a novelty. In a moment of panic, I scan the room for my friend,

who just finished presenting a paper, with no luck. She has another competitive paper panel to

present in, and has jogged off to prepare. While I am no extrovert, I am at least functional in

social situations, so I find myself a seat on the outer boundaries of the circle that the group has

made from chairs from around the room. Space for wheelchairs, walking aids, canes, motorized

mobility aids, service animals, and all sorts of accessibility tools is made without fuss, and I calm

down a bit. Of course the *Disability Issues* caucus would manage to find a space in which

everyone could fit comfortably.

Of course, that only would matter if I were comfortable. I am immediately on edge. A

kind Ph.D. student with Tourette's has some harsh verbal tics, and I wince a few times at phrases

like "eat a dick" and "go fuck off; nobody likes you." I clearly have much to work on regarding

internalized disablism. Nobody else seems fazed, however. The group treats one another as old

friends, asking about career trajectories, new Ph.D. students, personal lives, and the occasional giggle about the progression of the conference. A handful complain about the venue of next year's conference. Nobody likes the Midwest. Of course, none of these questions or comments are directed at me. I am, obviously, an outsider. Deep breaths. Find the ball of pink fabric in my laptop bag. Roll it in my hand a few times. Focus.

Once the idle chatter subsides, the actual roundtable begins. A kindly-looking older white man calms the group down and calls the panel to order with a short statement about how glad he is to see every face, old and new, in the circle. He introduces himself as the chair of a full-blown Disability Studies program. I start, having had no idea such a department even existed. Everyone else pays rapt attention. It occurs to me that this man must be some kind of legend in the field, a mainstay in students' theses and dissertations. I expect to become even more anxious, but that doesn't happen. We ease into conversation; while the content is largely grim, it is presented as a chat between friends. It just so happens that the general gist of the chat is "the field is dying; there are no tenure lines. I hope you all like contingent contracts and teaching basic courses."

There are moments of levity, though. One woman mentions that our collective need for the intense security of tenure-track positions is capitalism playing a nasty trick on our ability to see our work as more than a path to a perfectly secure forever job. The comment makes sense to me, but others seem skeptical. One professor comments on how she *cannot* believe that more of the Ph.D. holders in the room aren't being considered for tenure-track jobs.

I would like to believe that I have a functioning Spidey Sense for white nonsense, and it was going off about as loud as it possibly could. Before the speaker even finishes her opening comment, my nose starts to burn harshly, a tell-tale sign that something embarrassing is forthcoming. I avert my eyes and instead look around at the other attendees. Some are nodding

along; others are starting to look uncomfortable. I wonder, in this moment, how I must look in comparison to the others. Thankfully, no eyes drift my way as I go to take a drink of the bottle of water I have been nursing for four hours. A bottle I promptly choke on when the professor finishes her argument.

"I mean, we all know we can do the race work anyway. I'd say a lot of us know it better than the non-white people departments keep hiring for these postings, so we can be more intersectional."

It is all I can do to not make it too obvious that there is now water in my nose. I manage not to hack or cough, but instead clear my throat in my little corner. Nobody looks comfortable, save for the five or six vigorously nodding white people. One of them snaps along, like she is at a spoken word performance. Black disability being invisible is suddenly seeming VERY attractive, and so I wait for literally any white person to point out how patently absurd that statement is. There are some half-hearted contradictions, mostly in the tone of "you shouldn't say that out loud." Nothing is said along the lines of "that was wrong and wwack." The group moves on, and others manage to steer the conversation away from a woman determined to match every Karen stereotype on the planet. The roundtable goes to questions just as I start to feel comfortable enough to contribute, though, so I raise my hand in response to some comment or another. I am ignored.

For the next fifteen minutes, my hand remains in the air, while white scholar after white scholar after white scholar gets to ask two or three questions each. It becomes apparent after the fifth minute that I am not the only one who notices. The kind graduate student makes eye contact with me and shrugs. The department chair from before notices and grinds the conversation to a half, demanding that I get to ask my question. A few respondents look sheepish, caught in the act

of the very same Othering they were just complaining about. I try to recall the conversation I wanted to respond to, explain my personal interest in autistic identity, and ask my question: "As I'm sure many of you noticed, this room is very white. How am I supposed to navigate DS as a Black person?"

Immediately my White Lady Bullshit detector starts working overdrive, even before the words have sunk in enough for me to realize what I have just done. Immediately, I regret asking anything, as Dr. Knows-The-Race-Work immediately launches into her answer as if it was rehearsed. I, to this point, have never experienced someone so intent on becoming the villain of a panel, but she goes for it. She insists that I will be fine, that Disability Studies isn't *that* white. Besides, I should feel lucky: institutions would love to hire an abled Black person who does disability work, and I should have a massive leg up when applying for jobs.

The room, of course, explodes in dissent. The poor offending faculty member looks proud of herself for saying something so *brave*. She gets a few agreeing nods, but most people are clamoring to disagree. When things finally calm down a bit, a PhD in the back of the room quietly responds to my original question: "I think you need to find your people. And asking questions like that makes it really easy to figure out who they are."

That comment ends the roundtable, having run five minutes longer than scheduled. Faculty go back to chatting with friends. Graduate students send embarrassed looks in my direction. The department chair gives me his business card, mildly apologetic about what just happened. I mention that I am used to it. He tells me I shouldn't have to be. We chat for a while longer, mostly about my research interests and thesis plans, and then we go our separate ways. I brood over a funnel cake for the next two hours, lamenting the fact that only about half of the folks in that room saw me as someone who belonged.

I do not go to another Disability Issues caucus panel for the rest of the conference, and elect to skip watching them virtually in 2020.

The initial complication of my attempts at passing are clear: the very nature of conferences means that I am generally conversing with people whom I have never met. As a result, there is no meaningful history of previous interaction with me that would tip off the room regarding any invisible disabilities. In addition, credibility is largely contextual, and one's ability to effectively participate in discussion regarding the future of disability studies is, as far as I was concerned at the time, dependent on one's experience with disability. After all, it would likely not play well for an able-bodied researcher to lecture a room of disabled activists, students, and faculty regarding the future of a field that uniquely involves them. As a result, the basis for any consideration of my disability is disclosure, which comes with its own dangers. Brown (2020) explains:

> [...]Public disclosure brings further risks. Academics, specifically early-career academics, worry about the consequences of being identified as someone dealing with health issues and conditions. In an environment where temporary, as-and-when contracts are more prevalent than permanent, tenured positions, employees are concerned about job insecurity. Individuals fear that by admitting to health conditions or disabilities they may be worsening their chances for employment.
>
> (p. 61)

At a conference, disclosure develops a unique minefield to navigate. Within every moment in which I disclose my disability, there are a host of potential PhD advisors, classmates, and eventually possible employers who hear every word. While the nature of disability studies sessions mitigate some of the potential harms, they still very clearly exist. The fact that the

round-table was about the future of disability studies reinforces the very nature of the session: this is a space in which career directions are to be considered first and foremost. That changes the very terms of disclosure, and the role it plays in being recognized as disabled. Brown (2017) goes on to describe the "disclosure dance" that is unique to academia, exacerbated by the culture of overwork and the need for information management (p. 67). Academics must learn to navigate their presence in neoliberal institutions that marketize and commodify their identities, and identify their working conditions in relation to said identity.

In performing this dance, a cogent truth becomes evident: I am not trying to pass as neurotypical in this particular space. Instead, I am tasked with passing as disabled. This is no new phenomenon, as Griffiths (2020) notes: "as an academic with a non-visible disability, doing disability research, a more open discussion about disability as experienced by academics was required" (p. 126). Constant pressures to be the super-crip interact with the need for rest, often flying in the face of stated desires to create a more accessible academy. Productivity, and its relationship to the bodymind, takes center stage, regardless of attempts to curb the academy's neoliberal tendencies. Griffiths, to further this point, turns to the legal definition of *disability*, as expressed in the Equality Act of 2010: "a physical or mental impairment that has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on a person's ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities" (p. 128). Under neoliberalism, "day-to-day activities" largely and simply means "work." Production is the core of what marks bodies as "disabled," and the academy is not immune from that. In a space in which "the work" is predicated on being disabled, it becomes necessary to externalize any invisible disability, through disclosure or by other means.

Goodley (2018) expounds further, noting that paid labor often ends up central to identity formation in the global north, as neoliberalism inevitably intervenes in self-construction. And as

ableism and neoliberalism interact, employment status and employability become irrefutable markers of wholeness and success. As I attempted to navigate questions regarding future employability, carving out room in professional institutions, and finding someplace for my work to fit in, I must ensure that I am recognized as disabled. Brown (2020) argues that when disability is invisible, disabled actors have the choice on whether to pass, disclose, or simply conceal their disability. In contexts like these, that choice is complicated, and the definition of passing becomes unstable. In that instability, agency and compulsion is called into question. In academia, is disclosure for the sake of participating in one's field a meaningful choice, or is it simply the result of needing to set up a career? Without answers to these questions, disabled folks in fields centering disability play a delicate balancing act in maintaining agency over their identities, and disclosing enough to justify one's research.

Such a conclusion leads us to the crux of the vignette and ultimately this chapter: *am I successfully passing as disabled?* Given the extent to which my presence is ignored or questioned, with little space in between, it would seem that I am not. However, given the unique way that career-centered neoliberal institutions frame disability, I do end up passing. That just happens to not necessarily be a benefit. I am confronted with the potential for coming out, but with different dangers than anticipated. Disclosure in spaces explicitly not designed for disability leaves the potential for undue labor, as I explain being on the spectrum to those who have not spent much time thinking about autism at all. Here, though, I run the risk of needing to perform more work in order to justify my disclosure. It is not enough to simply be disabled. It becomes necessary to be *"disabled enough*," so that the interests that I may introduce in casual conversation are justified.

Beyond that, any disclosure is immediately commodified and marketized. My personhood is boiled down to my ability to secure a job in academia, as illustrated by the faculty member declaring that getting a job will be easy. Suddenly, a question asked regarding community and belonging gets turned into a career-focused question, as if I were primarily interested in my career prospects. In the immediate aftermath of the question, I am no longer simply a disabled graduate student with an interest in disability. First and foremost, I am a candidate for employment, despite my question having nothing to do with employment. Therefore, any and all inquiry into my place in Disability Studies must be filtered through employment. In this framework, it makes perfect sense for Dr. Knows-The-Race-Work to focus on my apparent ease in finding a job because I am Black. The market comes first, and it is my job to pass as someone who can meet the market where it is. "Disabled" and "employable in disability studies" end up going hand-in-hand, and while from an interpersonal standpoint, I clearly do not fit in, I do present a presence that can be easily assimilated into that marketized framework and commodified.

"So Why Do You Study This Stuff?": Passing in Interrogation

The first thing I notice as I pull a chair towards the table in the cramped conference room an entire graduate seminar shares, is that I have far more papers in front of me than everyone else. Probably more papers than them combined. For what is supposed to be a session for presenting final papers, I don't see many papers that seem finalized. Or presentable. Actually, I don't see many papers at all. Just outlines. Immediately it becomes painfully apparent: it's going to be a very long night.

Internal calculus begins, a ritual weighing of my options and potential outcomes. Impact calculus, cost-benefit analysis, and a few prayers to whatever higher power governs academia

will dictate how to respond to a question I have come to abhor in informal paper presentations: *So who would like to present first?*

I've done this dance before, and it isn't a fun one. As an overzealous, newly-diagnosed undergrad, I hadn't learned the politics of presenting on the spectrum. I would volunteer to go first, and inevitably the avalanche of questions would make that decision a bad one. What I hadn't figured out then is a crucial part of surviving academia. Everything has rules. And these rules need to be followed to the letter. Failing to do so will result in an unnecessary defense of my existence that will leave me ignoring my phone, homework, and emails to play *Fire Emblem* on my laptop in the dark later that night. And so by the time this particular session has begun, the rules have been internalized enough that breaking them isn't even an option.

Rule number one: Never go first.

This is the most important rule. Seeming too eager to talk about an identity that most of my colleagues see as a death sentence is a good way to be asked uncomfortable questions about why I'm autistic, what happened at birth, or if I am sure that I am *really* on the spectrum. This one is simple enough. It's basically an extension of not answering every question in high school. Minus, of course, the sitcom English teacher telling me not to mind The Cool Kids, and that I should just be myself. Instead, the real-world English professor usually patiently waits for literally anyone else to volunteer, and then sends me an email about dominating the class discussion later. Or they forgo the email and admonish me for the sin of talking too much. Some days I would honestly prefer getting stuffed into a locker. The neurotypical students avoid going first, basically. So I should as well.

And so I wait, hand only sort of raised as a good-faith effort to seem engaged, but it's not really in the air. It's a show. It's all a show. The professor picks someone else to go first, and I

heave a sigh of relief. The next step, though, is urgent. I retrieve my phone and thumb over to the stopwatch app. In a notebook, I have written down how long each presentation is supposed to be. In this case, ten to fifteen minutes, though this time also includes answering questions. This range is lax, though, as there is more than enough time in the seminar for everyone to go over the allotted amount of time. That doesn't make the timer any more necessary, unless I want to violate another ironclad rule.

Rule number two: Time everything.

As the first student introduces their paper, I keep notes on questions I want to ask. I write out full questions in a notebook, estimating how long it will take me to write them out. Some questions need explanations of what brought me to the question. Those are the most dangerous. I leave those at the bottom of the notebook page. Others are simply logistical. *How did you come up with the topic? How did you decide on this framework? Ooooh, what do you mean by assemblage?* They're all questions that are mostly answered in the presentations proper, but they're safe. They have very little chance of going on for too long, which is the primary goal here. Years of dealing with neurotypical students have made me cynical, uncharitable in my interpretation of responses. But more than that, I have become painfully aware of my tendencies. I do not have a very good internal clock when I am speaking. I often have no clue for how long I have been talking during a conversation, even when I have a script. And so everything needs to be timed to the second, with a clean bailout plan if the comment or question drags on too long.

The first presentation ends in eight minutes and fifty seconds. Too short. But questions can even out the presentation some, so I ask some of the longer questions I have set aside. An extra five minutes are spent on questions clears that up. Mission accomplished. It occurs to me that what I just listened to was less a paper and more an outline. The professor doesn't seem

angry or upset, which seems strange to me. The syllabus very clearly states that today is for

presenting papers. Outlines are not papers. It occurs to me that I don't really know how I will get

through 30 pages of information in ten minutes. I find myself running headlong into the third

rule.

Rule number three: Stay flexible.

The next few presentations reinforce what I learned from the first. Maybe "final paper

presentations" did not actually mean presenting final, finished papers. It occurs to me that I have

taken an arbitrary line in a syllabus far too literally, and put myself in a bad spot because of it. I

try to do a good job of never feeling ashamed of being autistic, but in this moment I am feeling

it. But part of being flexible is rolling with the embarrassing moments. The correct option here is

to simply distill the paper to its base elements, referring to the outline that I wrote months ago to

walk everyone through my thought process. The content, clearly, is not as important as the

process. This presentation is a progress report, a week before the final paper is due. I could talk

about why I selected the framework divisions I wrote about. I could talk about how this paper is

a launching point for a thesis I am planning on writing. I could talk about the inspiration I drew

from the professor's own book. I could talk about needing to draw from other disciplines in order

to write about autism because our own literature base sucks.

I do none of those things. I double down instead.

I explain the entire paper in painstaking detail. In my panic, I have forgotten to start the

stopwatch. I read facial expressions to determine when I should move on. I occasionally glance

at the time to loosely measure where I am. I skip entire sections when I lose track of time. I

spend three minutes on a single citation because it's *just so fascinating* and it has so many

implications for ways that our discipline can rectify its problem with autism research and it's

such an interesting way to apply the theory work we've read in this class and that's why autism functions as identity and suddenly it's been twenty minutes and everyone has a billion questions. A billion is too many questions. The first one is from another graduate assistant. She is one of my closest friends in the department.

"Wait, so you're autistic? That's so cool that you can write this stuff."

I have decided that I do not know this woman. Moving on.

The marathon session of questions is suffocating. I keep my head above water, but I feel the tell-tale burning in the bridge of my nose, along with the dizzying brightening of the lights. My eyes hurt. My head hurts. My hands are shaky. Breathing steadily is hard. This conference room is way too small. Whose idea was it to have a class in here? Whose idea was this presentation session? Why did I leave all of my stim tools at home? I want to put my head down, but I have questions to answer, so I suck it up and just deal with it. My answers become sloppy, and I need to consult the paper that I know back and forth to answer basic questions. I stop recording useful lines of questioning that could cause me to change parts of the paper. Suggestions for new citations get ignored. Canned answers to canned questions reinforce my cynicism.

Eventually, a loud sniffle punctuates a hand shooting into the air. I would prefer the hand go back onto the table, but I imagine I have one more answer in me before I really can't do this anymore. I compose myself, and shuffle papers around before calling on the graduate student, a man a year ahead of me working on his own thesis. He clears his throat and begins with a compliment.

"First, that was a really good presentation. I couldn't even tell that you are autistic. So why do you study this stuff?"

An hour later, I am at home, sitting on my bed in my underwear. The lights are off, and the papers I have just finished presenting have been thrown at the wall, and lie in a corner held together by a bent staple. The soft blue light of the *Fire Emblem* title screen lights the corner where I sit. The sound is off.

The paper will be turned in a week from now, with no edits from the night it was presented.

Navigating the actual processes of academic spaces while disabled is a well-covered subject of inquiry, often in the form of autoethnographic exploration of being disabled as a faculty member. Finesilver, Leigh, and Brown (2020) explore a list of considerations disabled academics must make in determining the accessibility of a space: pain (how much access would hurt now), energy (how much energy the subject has to spend for access), and time (how long securing access may take). Each consideration is cumulative, and conclusions are rarely static. Considerations for access are just as applicable to the classroom, as each and every moment in the classroom requires a constant evaluation of the potential consequences for engagement with abled folks. Coming to incorrect conclusions about the reasonability of engagement often has painful, or at least frustrating, consequences, making constant reconsideration necessary. Taken further, these considerations make up many of the "rules" that Ferris (2008) insists are arbitrary. In many cases, they are. They vary from situation to situation, and the exact same process performed scores of times before (like presenting a paper) may suddenly shift into being a massive burden without warning, simply because of small contextual forces changing.

Take, for instance, the short interaction with the "close friend." Upon realizing that explaining my interest is, in fact, an act of disclosure, it is my call whether to press on with a detailed reconstruction of my paper. The conclusion I come to is that the moment itself will be

painful, but short. And I assumed, in the moment, I had energy for most questions. Absent from my conclusion is a prediction that I would be functionally interrogated for my positionality. The actual content of the interrogation is not as important as the fact that it happens. The first question asked is not one that is asking for an answer at all, in fact. It is simply voicing and confirming what I have divulged: that I am Other. It is also confirmation that attempts thus far to pass as neurotypical have been successful to some extent. Followed immediately is the real meat of the interrogation, though it isn't phrased as a question: *That's so cool that you can write this stuff*.

A distinction is being drawn between the rest of the course and I. I can "write this stuff" because I am disabled. Those who are not disabled cannot "write this stuff," in comparison. As a statement of ethics, I likely would agree with that. However, I find myself annoyed anyway. Disability, from my seat, seems to be getting boiled down to a pass to write about "cool" subject matter, as if disability was purely aesthetic rather than a meaningful part of a larger assemblage that generates a person. But I know that there are marked differences between the rest of the class and I. After all, what is disability but embodied difference? But, for some reason, the fact that questions are being asked after disclosure frustrate me in the immediate moments following the presentation. Leigh and Brown (2020) provide some explanation: "By underwriting a disability, the academic has to be confident and comfortable with identifying as a disabled person. This might change from moment to moment [...]" (p.175). While I may have been fine with "blowing my cover," so to speak, before the initial questions, being pressed on the perceived benefits of disability, while being not-so-covertly complimented on my ability to pass is deeply uncomfortable. Again, disability is commodified, turned into a pass instead of a part of who I am. As a result, my comfort with identifying as a disabled person shifts. McIntire (2012)

explains further, using race as a centering concept: "racial difference inevitably relies on assumptions that are ajar: race [...] is a figure that can never be decoded once and for all" (p. 779). Applied to disability, a similar confrontation occurs. Neurodivergence will always require reliance on positionalities that are constantly shifting. A subject who is willing to disclose one moment may revert to passing as neurotypical in the next. What may be deemed as "good" passing may be negated by shifting cultural contexts, new information, or simply a lapse in behavior. Attempts at universally defining what "passing" may look like outside of individual moments in time serve to collapse definitions and expressions of disability. Assumptions regarding disability are "ajar," making it a figure that similarly cannot be decoded once and for all.

The second moment of interrogation, however, dispenses with attempts at subtlety and illustrates the depths of attempts to pass. Instead of simply hinting at my passing, like the first interrogator, the second just outright says it. "I couldn't even tell that you are autistic." In moments like these, disabled folks are reminded exactly what abled people think of when they imagine disability. Rather than embodied difference, abled folks think of disability as embodied impairment. Returning to my earlier argument: this is another example of academia's need to define disability. Collapsing autism into marked impairment is a stark and obvious continuation of the eugenic logics that the paper I attempted to present challenged. Again, there is no future in which A Adams is not visibly autistic. Any moment in which I "hide" my disability is one worth commending. Problematizing such a response is, frankly, not very hard. At its core, the "compliment" is simple: it is impressive that I manage to not seem *too* much like the other disabled folks. Confronted in other frameworks, the comment is no different than "you're so eloquent" expressed to Black folks who do not speak in African American Vernacular English.

In service of a eugenic future, one in which disability "does not exist," one of the simplest ways to evade the inevitable erasure that eugenic logics produce is to simply engage in said erasure beforehand. Beating futurity to the punch and passing as "normal" allows for largely seamless movement through spaces largely designed to weed out disabled folks.

The moment of the second interrogation serves a larger purpose to reinforce, as Garland-Thomson (2017) describes, "this literalizing of disability as disqualification…the master trope of the shared world" (p. 53). Being disabled, even in a small compliment like the one presented, should be disqualifying in presenting a good paper. Going further, comments like these reveal a larger implication: being disabled should be disqualifying in engagement with academia as a whole. Regardless of a larger focus on disability studies, surprise that an autistic student can produce academic work only makes sense if I am violating some larger arbitrary rule of academia. The very real symptoms of various disabilities are read as not only impairment, but active hindrance in the disabled subject's participation in the academy. For the most part, this is not necessarily problematic. Brown (2020) notes that construction of academic identity includes the physical, felt, and embodied manifestations of disability. The pain and fatigue associated with fibromyalgia, Brown writes, very clearly impact the scholar and what they may perform. They are real setbacks. Similarly, I cannot simply ignore the impact that overstimulation and the exhaustion that follows has on my performance. They are a part of what makes a disabled academic. The issue comes with the reading of disability as disqualifying for academic work, rather than the disability itself.

Here, I would like to disentangle this analysis from the social model of disability. I am not arguing that it is the work of the academic that disables the academic. For many disabled folks, including myself, our symptoms exist outside of the context of the logics that define them.

I would be no less autistic even in a future that embraces disability. My neurology does not simply *change* because the academy procures better means of securing access. It is not the environment that makes me autistic, but my brain. However, this is not contradictory to the argument that disability is exacerbated by reading disability as disqualification. Existing symptoms and performances of those symptoms are routinely punished by the constant movement of academia. Goodley (2018) argues that the academy "norms" ability, flagrantly ignoring the very presence of disability in its constant desire to standardize learning. Educational success, Goodley writes, is framed through individual achievement, and when disability interferes with the "right kind" of achievement (publications, presentation of research, and administrative service) it is discarded as a hindrance, further disadvantaging the disabled scholar. Inheriting participation within a project that was never intended to not be eugenic naturally generates spectacle both when the disabled scholar meets and fails to meet expectation.

Ultimately, this dynamic makes any and all attempts at passing in this moment moot. When I succeed, it is used as a notable departure from disabled disqualification. I am succeeding in spite of my disability, per the eugenic structure, as opposed to alongside it. When I fail to pass, it simply reinforces larger eugenic beliefs about the limitations of disability. But even those assumptions are complicated. Disability *does* come with limitations. There are clearly defined limits to the amount of stressful social interaction I can engage in before I need a break. There are very clearly defined consequences for pushing my limit for stimulation too far. There are significant barriers to communicating in groups and presentations when I struggle to read social cues or facial expressions. My lack of an internal clock to measure how long I have been speaking plays a significant role in my ability to manage presentations. All of these are limitations that simple "inclusion" does not necessarily fix. Reimagining an academia in which

passing is no longer commendable does not erase the impact of moments in which I cannot pass. Those moments just are, with no meaningful value statement one way or another. I am not inspirational for simply existing. I am not tragic when I just barely manage to exist. In my own Otherness, I just am. Passing is just one strategy adopted to end interrogations before they begin, and even that does not always work.

Conclusion

Exploring the means by which I pass as disabled, neurotypical, Black, and just "normal" illustrates a key truth about my time in the academy: under the eugenic present, I cannot "be myself." There is no disabled future for someone who cannot *be* disabled. On the other hand, there cannot be a meaningful future for A Adams, disabled academic, if performance of disability exists only for the purpose of getting a job. Resigning my identity to a neoliberal framework that, at times, even exacerbates the symptoms of disability (Brown, 2020), does not lead to a future in which disability is recognizable outside of neoliberalism. In those moments, as mentioned before, I am not disabled. I am simply the candidate for a job. A disabled future rejects these frameworks, and allows for an assemblage of *difference* to define disability. This is just one disabled future, but it is one in which A Adams no longer has to pass as anything. I just get to be. A disabled future is one in which disability not only exists, but gets to exist upon its own definitions and expressions, not through performances for the purpose of obtaining and preserving capital.

Chapter Six: Towards a Neuroqueer Utopia

These vignettes presented earlier do not come close to encapsulating the entirety of what it means to be autistic, nor do they even encapsulate all of what it means to be *A. Adams, autistic graduate student*. There is no larger point to derive about the lived experiences of other crips that fundamentally reshapes how we understand ourselves. However, there are a few lessons that stem from my experiences here.

First, academia is disablist. In each scenario, I am confronted with a eugenic ethic that infiltrates even the most well-meaning professors and students. Without consistent access to material that intentionally integrates crip academics on a practical and theoretical level, any attempt to engage the academy is doomed to replicate eugenic logics. Even for students, never considering the existence of disabled classmates is not simply a failure of their instructors. At some point, should a disabled future come to exist, it becomes necessary to hold students accountable for their reactions to the people around them. It is not incumbent upon disabled folks and crips to teach abled folks how to not be disablist. It is instead their own responsibility to utilize the wealth of resources available to them in order to better themselves. Ethics aside, teaching abled folks all day is exhausting. Much of the exhaustion experienced in the aftermath of any of these anecdotes comes entirely from the very idea that I would have to catch other academics up on how not to be disablist, which is clearly a daunting task.

Second, performance is exhausting. Each of these anecdotes are simply reflections of what happened in one moment on one day of a currently twenty-four year-long life. Having to navigate conferences and defend my very presence though citation is uniquely draining. To do this every single day for twenty-four years is to engage in a performance that subsumes the self in a variety of contexts that were selected for me. I never get to decide, by myself, what autism is

or what it does. I only get to exist, and there are situations in which it becomes apparent that abled folks would prefer that I didn't. If "difference" is what defines autism, rather than simple neurology, then there is truly no point in pretending that there is a form of performance that can be understood by neurotypical folks. It's "different" all the same. Attempts to mitigate the effort that goes into simply living also just happen to require a lot of work. Passing as disabled in a career-development space that requires hyper-visibility is a full-time job. Passing as non-disabled in order to simply finish assignments is similarly exhausting, forcing an unfortunate double-bind. Passing is exhausting, but navigating academia while constantly disclosing is just as tiring, frustrating, and ultimately unsustainable.

Finally, narrative isn't meant to be understood by outside actors. None of the vignettes here are meant to be relatable, or even intelligible. If the only way to understand performances from the margins is to collapse all marginalized existence into one easy-to-digest performance script, then we are simply incapable of understanding or respecting the myriad oppressions faced by marginalized bodyminds across the spectrum of human existence. What constitutes a utopian future shifts and changes from position to position. What constitutes survival changes from position to position. In some spaces, remaining quiet does "enough." In other moments, challenging a professor's comments might work. Otherwise, removing myself from a conference environment provides a band-aid. However, these acts are all simply band-aids. What is rendered visible, invisible, harmful, helpful, tiring, or empowering shifts in each moment, from each position, and between each person. Ultimately, the processes by which disabled folks engage in resistance to eugenic logics, and the worlds they build, shift rapidly and constantly from person to person. I have no expectation for another disabled academic to read this paper and come to the conclusion that I am "just like them." However, if any single person reads this account and it

makes the process of navigating the eugenic world in which we live a little easier, then this analysis has done its job.

For me, resistance to eugenic world building runs central to the utopian futurity that enables disability to continue existing. Introduced by Garland-Thomson (2017), eugenic world building refers to a process "which strives to eliminate disability and, along with it, people with disabilities from human communities through varying social and material practices that range from seemingly benign to egregiously unethical" (p. 52). Such a project takes on many forms, from genetic manipulation, the desire to find a cure for autism, and restrictive environments segregating off disabled people, to simply enforcing medical normalization in the hopes of reducing human suffering. The elimination of devalued human traits lies at the center of the eugenic world, and a future in which those traits vanish is a eugenic one.

The world in which we live, and the future to which we are heading simply does not want disabled people in it. Both the academy I work and study in, and the one I am looking to remain in long-term simply does not willingly offer space for us. Like any marginalized positionality, space is carved out from the margins to play in a structure not built to accommodate us, but stealing space does not change the structure itself. This is the reality that I run headlong into in every vignette. Being present in a meeting does not mitigate the disablism of those running the meeting. My presence in a classroom does not magically make the classroom a less hostile space for an autistic academic. Every moment spent in the academy reminds that I am a mere visitor, an invader from the margins destined to be sent back as soon as I cannot produce. I exist on borrowed time, as neoliberalism demands that I continue to borrow and produce to pay my debts. In that sense, the eugenic world building project is well underway, and these vignettes serve little purpose besides a grim reminder of the trajectory my career and life are on. Eugenic logics tell us

that the world immediately becomes better the moment disability is eradicated. Meanwhile, my experiences in the academy tell me that my graduate career would be better if my autism were cured. To paraphrase Garland-Thomson's core question regarding eugenic logics: Why, the logic asks, would the academy we learn in together have disability at all? The academy ends up being the very embodiment of the eugenic future.

Unchecked, these logics become futures. The world building will finish eventually, and we arrive at a time without disability. Maybe that doesn't necessarily mean killing off every disabled person. Maybe that just means disabled scholars quit the academy, realizing it doesn't want us. Maybe it means disabled scholars try so hard to pass as abled, the academy forgets we are disabled. We fold ourselves into the academic mainstream, assimilating to survive. We end up inhabiting the marked identity of the neoliberal citizen, per Goodley (2014): willing, capable, and able(d). We perform to an excellent standard, producing publications, performance, syllabi, conference presentations, and all without needing accommodation. Or, if not needing accommodation is not possible, we simply don't ask. The eugenic logic does not care for *how* disability vanishes. It simply asks that it vanish.

To contest this future, I turn to queer theory, and the utopian futures proposed by queer studies scholars to reclaim the potential of queerness in an anti-queer world. Muñoz (2009) introduces the "queer utopian memory," a critique of the present shaped by an incessant desire to fit into structures built to reject queerness. Aspects of an uncertain past crystallize in the form of desire from the modern queer, leading Muñoz to conclude that we are not yet "queer." Queerness, then, is a future. A potential. An ideality, build from a utopia that has not arrived, contesting the anti-queer utopia generated by the present. Muñoz argues that *queer* itself is a

mode of desiring that embraces the future, rending the present a prison. Noss (2012) expands the argument, writing:

> The notion of Utopia brings its own temporal challenges and inspirations. The
>
> recent debate over futurity within queer theory implies a renewed interest in
>
> utopianism, which appears at first blush to be a staunchly humanist project. At the
>
> front lines of this conversation Lee Edelman has argued that queerness is
>
> precisely the refusal of reproductive futures that have never considered the lives
>
> of homosexuals; queerness for Edelman must be the disruptive force against the
>
> future and identity itself. (p. 131)

At the core of queer futurity is an acknowledgement that rejection of reproductive futures enables a queer utopia in which the ideality of queerness is realized. If the world as it exists has never taken queerness into account, then why engage? Instead, the utopian argument goes, the queer project must become disruptive, interrupting the processes by which the present captures, reforms, and eliminates queerness. The prison must be more than simply escaped, but disrupted and destroyed. A future designed "for the children" must, after all, be one devoid of queerness. In the meantime, we wait on the arrival of the queer utopia by rejecting "hetero-supremacy," or the ideology that necessitates that even queer folks evade accusation of propagating the "gay agenda," and assimilate into the larger anti-queer population (Conrad, 2014).

Applied to disability, a disabled utopian futurity becomes possible. Considering the connections between the metaphorical prison of the anti-queer present, and the limiting nature of the eugenic present generates a clear bridge between queerness and disability. The connection is one borne of necessity, not relation. There is no easily-swallowed direct connection that answers "what makes neurodiversity queer?" Instead, the connection is built through the threats of the

status quo. A eugenic future is strikingly similar to an anti-queer one. The future is designed for the ableds, and therefore there is no place for autistic folks in it. We are, in the end, Othered. The status quo simply demands that the Other cease to exist, regardless of the methods by which our vanishing occurs. Interrogating this connection, Egner (2019) explores the concept of "neuroqueer," a project in which neurodivergent individuals engage to "disidentify from both oppressive dominant *and* counterculture identities that perpetuate destructive medical discourse models of cure" (p. 123), resisting a larger desire by a eugenic present to pathologize every part of our bodyminds, from gender to sexuality to autism. As a politic, neuroqueer exists to encapsulate those in the margins, consigned there for eventual elimination by eugenic futures. Our disappearance, though, only happens to the extent that disability goes quietly into the night, so to speak. Similarly to how Muñoz calls queer an ideality, neuroqueer inhabits the same space.

I argue that neuroqueer has not happened yet. Challenges to the boundaries of binary definitions of "crippled" and "normal" contextualize the neuroqueer project, but in the context of a logic built purely to eliminate disability, the project seeks to generate a new future not yet realized. Preserving existence is central in the neuroqueer project, justifying the connection. Egner explains: "neuroqueer is a queer/crip response to normative discussions about gender, sexuality, and disability as pathology" (p. 124). The rejection of eugenic logics, then, allows for the advent of a disabled, *neuroqueer* future in which a utopia is realized. Again, if the eugenic world, as built, does not consider disability, nor provide access, why engage? Rejection of demands to pass, demands to produce, demands to *succeed* as the neoliberal worker consolidates into a neuroqueer futurity that enables a world in which disability is allowed to exist. This future is prevented, then, to the extent to which disabled bodies can be policed, so that disability ceases to exist. Each moment in which the eugenic logic is not rejected, then, is one in which it is

reinforced. As a result, the neuroqueer project cannot arrive until eugenic logics are resisted. Once harmful medical models are rejected, neoliberal demands on the disabled body are resisted, and the disabled academic is simply allowed to *be*, the neuroqueer project generates a future in which we exist. Ultimately, this is what answers our research question: A disabled future in academia is one in which the bodymind matters. A neuroqueer futurity allows for a disabled academia to flourish, in which disability is no longer disqualification. Disability becomes simply the bodymind existing in difference.

Disengaging from eugenic logics upends the experiences presented in the vignettes. When disability is no longer disqualifying, disability no longer needs a cure of any sort. Instead, disability is simply allowed to be. Access remains an important project, but it does not remain the end-all regarding disabled existence and movement. Possibly most importantly, a neuroqueer future disidentifies with neoliberalism. The prevailing notion that bodies must produce in order to generate value runs intrinsically counter to the future this thesis attempts to propose. In doing so, a utopian neuroqueer future challenges the social model. Even in a world in which everything is perfectly accessible, disability still exists. Even in a world in which there is no disablism in academia, I am still autistic, and that still meaningfully impacts the way I think, speak, and experience. It is just no longer disordered.

This realization comes with some reflections regarding my presence in the academy. In particular, my attempts at passing provide key context to the ways in which eugenic logics reproduce to eliminate disability. As mentioned before, a eugenic future does not need to cure disability to eliminate it. Disability simply needs to be folded into the mainstream. Assimilation of disabled bodyminds, as with queer futurity, generates a future in which there is no neuroqueer presence, fulfilling the goal of the eugenic world building process. Every moment in which I

pass, I elect to punt on rejecting eugenic practices for the sake of convenience. As I recall each moment writing this thesis, I am forced to confront a core truth regarding my presence in the academy: my attempts at survival have reinforced the very structures I set out to critique.

When confronted with the ability to force the issue and demand instructors consider disability more pointedly, I punt on the decision. Pressing the issue can be left for another day, another paper, another conference, another meeting. This is the formative demand of neoliberalism and the academy. If I am to live, I need to work. If I am to work, I need to eventually be employed. If I am to be employed, I need to not rock the boat too much. As a result, when a white attendee of a panel declares herself an expert on "the race work," whatever that means, the most I can do is join in on the chorus of unsure murmurs of dissent. When confronted by classroom structures that do not consider disability, rather than actively challenge the structure, I am asked instead to just "persevere," whatever that means. Disablist conversations go unquestioned, and attempts to pass remain preserved. The trick to "surviving" academia is to simply not be disabled, even if I have a disability. Put simply, the trick to survival is to not survive.

Returning to the central metaphor that birthed "passing," Larsen's (1929) novel *Passing* ends with the protagonist being discovered as Black, despite passing as white. The realization is followed by her death. This is the fundamental result of attempting to pass. Eventually, the facade fails, and the logics that make passing a functional strategy for survival win out. The passing offender is eliminated, and the racist, eugenic, homophobic, queerphobic logics that eliminate the subject continue on, unabated. In the context of academia, this is where I can illustrate the stakes of a eugenic future. A future in which there is no disability is one in which eugenic logics have prevailed. Even if we simply reframe disability as "an issue with society" as

opposed to "an embodied existence," I do real damage to a future in which disabled folks exist in attempting to hide disability. After all, why account for material oppression of disabled folks when just building a ramp in a few places works? Why make meaningful efforts to change academia when nobody's *really* disabled, and we can just treat everyone the same? This is the functional endgame of attempting to pass. It is an act, at its heart, designed to placate abled, neurotypical folks.

This is no fun recognition, but autoethnography offers a method of self-reflexivity that is often not easy, nor is it comfortable. In each vignette, an argument can be made for the necessity of attempts to pass. Each moment in which I stay quiet in the face of being Othered can be explained. Each time friends, advisors, and colleagues interact with disability, I have the choice to stand my ground or simply retreat. However, when retreat is safe, what damage do I do to myself? How much can I *actually* resist eugenic logics when I simply pretend they do not apply to me whenever I am approached by the forces I critique here? Ultimately, my attempts to survive the demands of eugenic neoliberalism recreate the neurotypical neoliberal subject the academy demands.

These realizations are in no way meant to be applied at large, of course. Again, I am my own Other, and any autoethnographic account of approaching the neuroqueer future pertains to my own career and life. Given my continued interest in the academy, I do not believe these will be my last brushes against our eugenic prison in the present. I am not convinced I will necessarily respond in the moment in some astoundingly different way, simply because of the analysis done here. My time in academia will always be contextualized by the legacy of ableism and eugenics that follows disability. Politicizing the moments in which I confront that legacy is simply one step in a larger shift towards a future in which disability matters. I refuse to allow

myself to be handwaved as being "more than (just) a disability." I am disabled. I am autistic. I am neuroqueer, and a part of the neuroqueer project.

A purely social model that frames my existence through accessibility and external structures could never approach a nuanced understanding of A Adams, autistic academic. Such a model subsists only until cosmetic attempts at providing accessibility are made, at which point disability functionally ceases to exist. Meanwhile, the phenomenological and embodied "difference" remains. Universities having disability resource centers does not magically cure autism, nor would I want it to. Instead, focusing on the ways in which embodiment impacts real-world living, even with accessibility measures attempted, provides a more complete description of what autism does to and for me.

Being on the spectrum has made existing in academia difficult. As a space dedicated to neurotypicals, the things I do and feel are often treated as unfortunate byproducts of a disordered mind, or ignored altogether. Finding ways to accommodate my diagnosis in class is difficult, but it is a process that I've practiced for over seven years, since I got my diagnosis. Being a part of Facebook groups dedicated to autistic folks who also did speech, appearing in videos and podcasts to talk about the intersection between autism and race, engaging with disability studies work, and writing this thesis were all parts of a larger journey to figure out how to identify myself. I feel a deep connection with being autistic. It's why I use identity-first language to describe myself. The idea that my brain is different, but not worse, matches what I think of myself. It violates what I feel academia (as a weird, formless, *living* entity) "thinks." It reinforces the notion that I am a complete, whole person who can resist ableism. And it reinforces a connection I feel to other autistic folks. Our brains are different from neurotypicals' in some

similar ways, but also in ways that I may never understand. In that difference is where I carved out my social position.

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