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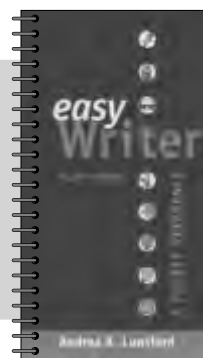
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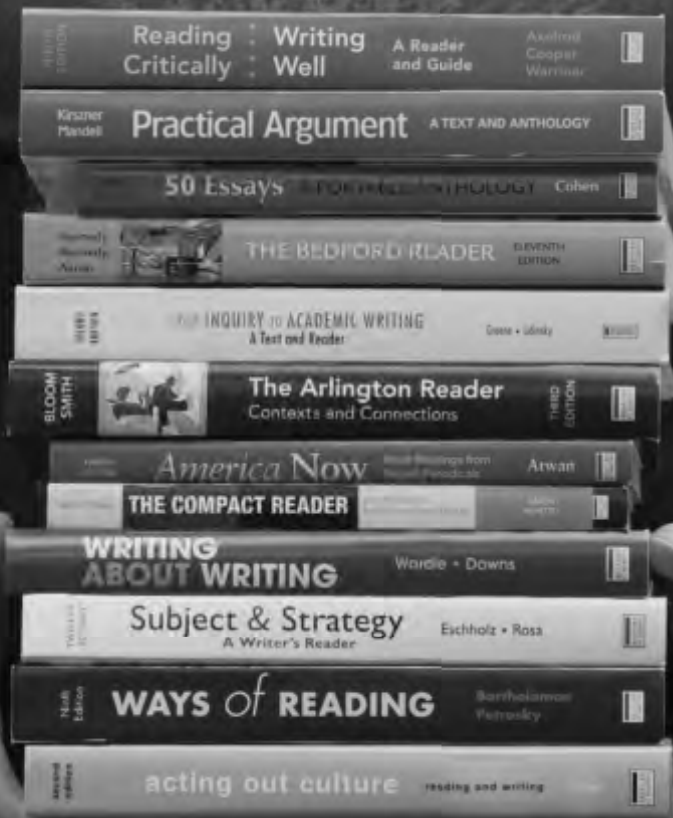


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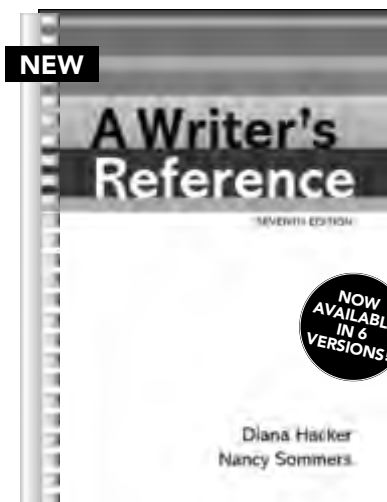
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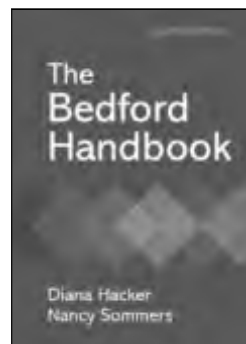
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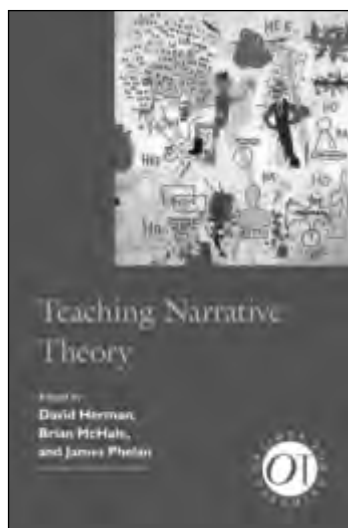
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Autism and Rhetoric

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Paul Heilker and Melanie Yergeau

Public awareness and public discourse about autism are approaching critical mass. April 2, 2008, was the first World Autism Awareness Day, which was voted into existence by the United Nations General Assembly. CNN marked the occasion by launching one of its “worldwide investigations,” devoting the entire day’s programming to discussions of autism. Three recent documentary films, *Autism Every Day*, *Autism: The Musical*, and *Her Name Is Sabine*, all attempt to broaden the public’s understanding of the condition. A 2009 feature film, *Adam*, depicts the awkward love story of an autistic man and his nonautistic neighbor. In 2010, HBO produced a biopic on autistic author Temple Grandin, portrayed by Claire Danes. *Parenthood*, a new, high-profile drama on the NBC television network, features a story line about a family with an autistic child. Generation Rescue has purchased significant ad space annually for the past several years in *USA Today*, imploring lawmakers to “green our vaccines,” and a multi-year Autism Speaks television campaign compares autism incidence with statistics on lightning strikes, car crashes, and the likelihood of becoming a professional athlete (AutismSpeaksVids; Autism Speaks, “Learn the Signs—Ad Council Campaign”). In the past two years, corporations such as Barnes & Noble, Toys“R”Us, Lindt chocolates, and Starbucks have publicly promoted the fight against autism—with \$1 paper puzzle pieces sold in the checkout lane, with pithy coffee-cup quotes and book promotions, and with

Paul Heilker is associate professor of English at Virginia Tech, where he teaches courses in rhetoric, writing, and composition pedagogy and serves as co-director of the doctoral program in rhetoric and writing. He is author of *The Essay: Theory and Pedagogy for an Active Form* (NCTE, 1996) and coeditor of *Keywords in Composition Studies* (Heinemann, 1996). His work has appeared in such journals as *College Composition and Communication*, *Rhetoric Review*, *Composition Studies*, and *Writing on the Edge*. **Melanie Yergeau** is a PhD candidate in rhetoric, composition, and literacy at The Ohio State University. A recipient of the 2009 *Kairos* Best Webtext Award and the 2008 *Kairos*-Bedford/St. Martin’s Graduate Student Award for Service, she researches how disability studies and digital technologies complicate our understandings of writing and communication. Active in the neurodiversity movement, she serves on the Board of Directors of the Autistic Self-Advocacy Network (ASAN) and directs its Central Ohio chapter.

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chocolate rabbits in special gold wrappers. And in May 2010, NASCAR hosted its first Autism Speaks 400 stock car race.

We could go on, but what, we wonder, despite this amazing increase in public discourse about autism, can we really communicate about it? The new welter of voices exhorting the public to become more aware and increase our understanding of autism really has very little to offer. In its own advertising in April 2008, CNN noted that autism “remains one of the greatest mysteries of medicine [. . .] Although autism will be diagnosed in more than 25,000 U.S. children this year, scientists and doctors still know very little about the neurological disorder.” And a contemporaneous article on autism published in *Newsweek* is titled simply “Mysteries and Complications” (Kalb).

Here, then, is the first way that autism is rhetorical: we are being swamped by a massive increase in fundamentally uncertain yet persuasive discourse. Let us recall Aristotle’s ancient distinction between the necessary and the contingent: the proper domain of rhetoric, he wrote, is not the realm of the necessarily true, certain, or stable, but rather the realm of the contingent, possible, and probable (1357a par. 4). We do not yet know what causes autism. In addition, there is considerable argument about what, exactly, autism is, how we should think about it, and how we should respond to it. Is it a disease? A disorder? A disability? A diversity issue? All these things, and more? How meaningful—and to whom—is the concept of autism spectrum disorders (ASD) (and all that such a rainbow metaphor entails)? How meaningful—and to whom—are the distinctions among autism, high-functioning autism, Asperger syndrome, and pervasive development disorder—not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS)? And how meaningful—and to whom—are the distinctions between people on the autism spectrum and those who are often presented as their polar (and more desirable) opposites, the neurologically typical?

Whatever else it may be, autism is a profoundly rhetorical phenomenon. And we all—parents, educators, caregivers, policymakers, the public, and autistic people themselves—would be significantly empowered to understand and respond to it as such. In the continuing absence of stable scientific or medical knowledge about autism, we need to shine a bright and insistent light on how brazenly rhetorical any utterance, especially any highly visible utterance, about autism really is—and, equally important, on how rhetorical any silence about neurotypicality really is. There is an enormous amount of work to be done on this front for anyone interested in rhetoric, public discourse, or medical rhetoric. Every text about autism in the ever-increasing barrage of public discourse on the subject—every news story, every memoir, every popular magazine article, every film, every public service announcement, every conference paper, every website, every journal article (including this one), every television broadcast, every blog entry—every public text on autism is begging for a rhetorical analysis.

We understand that to professionals in our field, the idea that all texts are rhetorical is now self-evident. What we want to suggest here, however, does not

strike us so: we contend that human neurology itself, autistic or other, is likewise a profoundly rhetorical phenomenon. We contend that autism itself is a rhetoric, a way of being in the world through language, a rhetoric we may not have encountered or recognized frequently in the past nor value highly in academic contexts, but a rhetoric nonetheless. If autism is a rhetoric, then we are beholden to respond to it with cultural sensitivity, ethical care, and pedagogical complexity. And if autism is a rhetoric and autistics are minority rhetors, English faculty already possess all the tools and experience they will need to do exactly that.

AUTISM IS A RHETORIC

Let us proceed, then, with some definitions. Though the definitions of *rhetoric* are legion, what most have in common is their focus on language use in the social realm. Most definitions of rhetoric focus on the role of communication in social interaction. Kenneth Burke, for instance, writes that the “basic function of rhetoric [is] the use of words by human agents to form attitudes or to induce actions in other human agents” (41). Similarly, Marc Fumaroli says, “Rhetoric appears as the connective tissue peculiar to civil society and to its proper finalities” (253–54). And Gerard A. Hauser maintains simply that “[r]hetoric is communication that attempts to coordinate social action” (2). 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 realm. The National Institutes of Health define autism as “a spectrum that encompasses a wide range of behavior” but whose “common features include impaired social interactions, impaired verbal and nonverbal communication, and restricted and repetitive patterns of behavior” (“Autism” par. 3). Likewise, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) says, “Autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) are a group of developmental disabilities defined by significant impairments in social interaction and communication and the presence of unusual behaviors and interests” (par. 1).

Given the definitional confluence of autism and rhetoric in communication and social interaction, it is simple to assert that autism is a rhetorical phenomenon. But we want to go further. According to Jim Corder, “Each [of us] is a rhetorical creation. Out of an inventive world (a past, a set of capacities, a way of thinking) [. . . we are] always creating structures of meaning and generating a style, a way of being in the world” (152). Following Corder, then, who defines rhetoric here as a way of being in the world through language, through invention, structure, and style, we contend that autism itself is a rhetoric, that autism is a way of being in the world through language, through invention, structure, and style. According to Corder, “Every utterance belongs to, exists in, issues from, and reveals a rhetorical universe. Every

utterance comes from somewhere (its inventive origin), emerges as a structure, and manifests itself as a style” (141).

But sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes, Corder says, an utterance gets blocked in invention and cannot move into structure or style. According to Corder, sometimes we block into a portion of our invention that is so private, so secret, so truly original with ourselves that it will give rise only to private forms of structure and style, ones that will not sustain communication with others. Sometimes, he maintains, such blockages in invention occur when a person “refuses conflicts by refusing to come out into structure and style.” And sometimes the blockage occurs in structure, Corder contends, when we simply stall in a structure or keep returning to it, “unable to move backward to explore or to use an inventive world and also unable to move forward and realize [ourselves] through a unique style” (142).

Paul Heilker speaks: *When I understand autism as a rhetoric, as a way of being in the world through language, I thus have a very different sense of the silences I often inhabit in the presence of my autistic son. A rhetorical perspective on autism allows me to see how sometimes Eli may be blocked into a portion of his invention so private, so secret, so truly original with him, that it will give rise only to private forms of structure and style that will not sustain communication with others. Eli occasionally speaks to himself even when others are present, quietly, but urgently, above a whisper but at a volume clearly directed to no one but himself. When I ask what he is doing, he says simply, “I’m talking to myself.” A rhetorical perspective on autism helps me understand why he engages in this behavior. A rhetorical perspective on autism likewise lets me understand there are times when Eli refuses conflicts by refusing to come out into structure and style. I now have a rhetorical explanation for why, when he was in seventh grade, Eli literally pulled his head inside his shirt for an entire class period because he did not want to make an oral presentation. When he gets angry and frustrated as he tries to articulate something, when he stops and says aloud, “Unnhhh, how do I SAY this?”—I now know that something in his invention is not getting out into structure and style, that it has stalled there, that he is working through a rhetorical process. When he returns to his obsessive topics of interest, as people on the spectrum tend to do, talking about America’s Funniest Videos, homestarrunner.com, or *SpongeBob SquarePants*, for instance, understanding autism as a rhetoric lets me see that he is returning to his favorite inventive universes, that he wants to share topoi in those universes which he continues to find valuable over long stretches of time, that bear repeated usage. When he recites long strings of stock discourse—reciting the entire script of the movie *Toy Story*, as he did once on a long vacation car ride—I understand that he is choosing to repeat—to inhabit for a short time, in a world that is endlessly in flux—a very familiar and comforting rhetorical structure.*

Melanie Yergeau speaks: *Understanding autism as a rhetoric brings a certain level of legitimacy to what I might consider my commonplaces—repetitive hand movements, rocking, literal interpretation, brazen honesty, long silences, long monologues, variations in voice modulation—each its own reaction, or a potentially autistic argument, to a discrete set*

of circumstances. For instance, I grew up understanding autism (that is, my way of being in the world through language, through invention, structure, and style) as distinctly “less than,” as a journal entry I wrote shortly after dropping out of high school suggests:

I've always been quiet. For as long as I can remember, adults have been telling me to speak louder and more often. After being told this, I usually speak inaudibly and less frequently. I've never really been a people person either. Don't get me wrong, I like people; I just don't like being around them. They make me nervous and I never know what to say. I'm sort of hyper and fidgety and do weird things with my hands, and always have twenty things going through my mind at once. [. . .] I imagine about everyone's life but my own, probably because I always tend to screw up mine with the way I act. I have a hard time smiling at people. That's just pitiful. It is like an intoxicating disease, spreading from my voice all the way to my nervous system. It rusts up my joints and leaves me with overemphasized, robotic movements.

Coming to autism rhetorically recasts items such as “difficulty smiling”—from pitiful disease symptom into autistic discourse convention, from a neurological screwup into an autistic confluence of structure and style. So too has understanding neurotypicality as a rhetoric legitimized my autistic ways of communicating: such an understanding involves calling attention to normalized discourse patterns frequently portrayed as desirable and ideal, involves calling attention to ways of being that are not the ways of being.

Sometimes, Corder says, the difficulty arises not because an utterance gets stuck somewhere along the line from invention to structure to style, but rather from “[i]nstances of traffic colliding as [an utterance] tries to cross from one rhetorical universe into another, [which results] in frequent interruption in the flow of ideas, in *apparent* illogicality, in the occurrence of strange words and coinages” (143; emphasis added). Sometimes, he notes, “different portions of invention try to move simultaneously into structure and style” and two or more inventive sets try “to be known through one sequence of structure and style” (144).

Paul speaks: *Understanding autism as a rhetoric helps me understand Eli's long-standing habit of radically shifting the topic of conversation without warning and without transition, without signaling the shift. When he was in grade school, one of his teachers said that talking with Eli was like listening to an old eight-track tape player, that he shifted topics the way an eight-track shifted songs at the touch of a button. To use a different technological analogy, Eli changes topics so radically and rapidly and easily that he sometimes seems to be listening to multiple channels of some invisible radio simultaneously, moving instantaneously from one channel to another. From Corder's rhetorical perspective, though, what may otherwise appear as interruption, illogicality, and strangeness may instead be more usefully understood as differing portions of Eli's invention trying to move simultaneously, or close to simultaneously, into structure and style, that multiple inventive sets are trying to work through the same sequence of structure and style.*

Such a rhetorical perspective also offers an explanation for two of Eli's “autistic” behaviors that no other discourse about autism has provided. The first of these is his overweening

interest in puns. A pun is an instance of a word inhabiting two distinctly different rhetorical worlds at the same time. Indeed, the farther apart these worlds are conceptually or culturally, the better the pun, typically. Eli's intense interest in puns, indeed, his delight in finding utterances that pile up a long series of individual puns to create an even larger collective pun (such as jokes ending with punch lines like "Only Hugh can prevent florist friars," "Chess nuts boasting in an open foyer," "He was a super-calloused, fragile mystic hexed by halitosis," and so on) is a function of his desire to have multiplex and disparate inventive universes work through singular sets of structure and style. The second of these is Eli's remarkable ability to find points of intersection between divergent data sets. He will regularly point out connections between texts, for instance, that I think probably no one else has detected, such as "Did you notice that 'The Blue Monkey' is a diamond in Looney Tunes Back in Action and a night club in Inspector Gadget 2?" His familiarity and ease with having multiple inventive worlds move simultaneously through singular structures and styles seem to help Eli to see connections between disparate events or items, connections that other people typically cannot or do not see.

LISTENING AND SILENCE

We could and should continue this kind of analysis, using other rhetorical concepts as lenses through which to view and understand autism. We might ask, for instance, which kind of rhetoric—judicial, epideictic, or deliberative—do autistics tend to employ, and what might that mean? Or what are the characteristic tropes in autistics' discourse, and what might that signify?

The kind of work we are suggesting involves what Krista Ratcliffe calls *rhetorical listening*, a practice that urges us to fundamentally alter how we hear and respond to the discourses of others. Defined generally as a trope for interpretive invention, she says, rhetorical listening signifies a stance of openness that a person may choose to assume in relation to any person, text, or culture. Defined more particularly as a "code of cross-cultural contact," Ratcliffe writes, "*rhetorical listening* signifies a stance of openness that a person may choose to assume in cross-cultural exchanges" (1). The goal of rhetorical listening, she contends, is "to generate more productive discourses, whether they be in academic journals or over the dinner table" (46). Ratcliffe challenges us to consider just how open our stances really are in relation to autistics and their rhetorics, their ways of being in the world through language.

Let us consider, for instance, *echolalia*, a characteristic kind of language use among autistics, in which they repeat stock words and phrases verbatim that they have heard other speakers use. Typically, this behavior is seen as an impairment, a deficiency that needs to be alleviated. But if we listen rhetorically, this repeated use of stock material starts sounding more like a traditional and valued kind of invention. In the middle ages and early Renaissance, students were trained to keep what were

known as “commonplace” books, large journals in which they meticulously copied down, verbatim, words, phrases, sentences, and even entire dialogues and passages from other speakers that they thought noteworthy. And they were likewise trained to deploy this stock material regularly as they composed. From a disease model perspective, an autistic’s preferred echolalic reverting to stockpiles of quotations from films, television programs, websites, and books, rather than generating “original” formulations, is seen as a pervasive developmental delay. When we choose to listen rhetorically, though, when we purposefully adopt a stance of cross-cultural openness toward autistic discourse, we can begin to see that we engage in similar, though not identical, echolalia in academic settings, when doing research and citing sources. As Ratcliffe suggests, such a stance offers the possibility of generating a more productive discourse, a way to value autistic rhetoric and build upon it, rather than try to eradicate it.

Similarly, rhetorical listening allows us to generate a more productive discourse about autism and the rhetorical triangle. Ratcliffe contends that rhetorical listening “does not presume a naïve, relativistic empathy, such as ‘I’m OK, you’re OK’ but rather an ethical responsibility to argue for what we deem fair and just while questioning that which we deem fair and just” (25). Empathy—a loaded word in autism discourse, a characteristic that autistics are said to lack—presumes that one can be so in tune with another person as to actually understand that person’s emotional state, to even perhaps vicariously experience it. But empathy involves a certain level of erasure, and as Dennis Lynch writes, “whatever empathy’s expressed aims may be, asking people to empathize usually locates the obstacles to empathy—to listening and being heard—solely in the minds and habits of individual participants, and so obscures or ignores the political and economic and bodily dimensions of social struggles” (5–6). So too, Lynch notes, does empathy necessitate “bodily displacement” (10). Thus, when psychologists and rhetoricians alike suggest that autistics cannot imagine or acknowledge the mental states of others, that autistics cannot emotionally or rhetorically reciprocate, that autistics cannot gauge the needs and expectations of an audience, these scholars stand, as neurotypicals, presuming to know what they cannot possibly know, to have experienced what they cannot possibly have experienced. In a flagrantly arrogant construction, such scholars suggest that autistics cannot write or read in a rhetorically effective manner because they are empathetically challenged, because they lack empathy for neurotypical readers; yet, neurotypicals can read and write about autism and autistics because *their* empathy is so fully realized: they understand autistics better than autistics understand themselves. By and large, our various disciplinary assumptions about empathy are normalized constructs, and rhetorical listening can help us complicate our understanding of empathy and theory of mind as rhetorical concepts: the supposed ability to read minds, to invoke audiences, in the words of Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford, and to

imagine how those audiences will feel, react, connect, identify. In listening rhetorically, that is, in “consciously standing under discourses that surround us and others while consciously acknowledging all our particular—and very fluid—standpoints” (Ratcliffe 28), we can recognize autistic ways of knowing and empathizing as differences rather than neurological deficits, differences which can usefully complicate a host of normative and unchallenged assumptions in the field.

Indeed, adopting a rhetorical perspective on autism and rhetorically listening to autistics could radically revise what we think we know about autism, could fundamentally challenge some of our most foundational assumptions about autism and autistics. In *Unspoken*, for instance, Cheryl Glenn suggests we should come to understand “silence *as a rhetoric*, as a constellation of symbolic strategies that (like spoken language) serves many functions” (xi). Silence, she notes, “has long been considered a lamentable essence of femininity, a trope for oppression, passivity, emptiness, stupidity, or obedience” (2). Whereas “speaking or speaking out continues to signal power, liberation, culture, or civilization itself,” Glenn writes, “[t]hat seeming obverse, silence, signals nothingness” (3). And nowhere is this more true than in the discourse surrounding autism, where an autistic’s silence is construed as both a heartbreaking tragedy and the cancellation of personhood. In a 2005 *USA Today* article, for instance, Thomas Insel, director of the National Institute of Mental Health, described autism as “a tremendously disabling brain disease, which really robs a child and a family of the personhood of this child” (qtd. in Jayson par. 5).

But a rhetorical perspective offers us new, different, and more useful ways of thinking about at least some autistics’ silences. As Glenn notes, “[S]ilence takes many forms and serves many functions, particularly as those functions vary from culture to culture” (15). Moreover, she asserts that “all human silences are a form of communication; listeners and observers will attach various and individualized meaning(s) to the silence, regardless of the silent person’s intent.” Glenn then begins to list the many things silence might mean, including agreement, disagreement, boredom, indecision, uncertainty over someone else’s meaning, impoliteness, overpoliteness, anger, communion, thoughtfulness, a lack of information, a lack of urgency, fearfulness, empathy, or a lack of attention (16).

Rhetorical theory maintains that we speak in order to address some exigence, some social situation which compels us to speak, about which we cannot remain silent. There is some gap, some break, some disruption, some failure, some need that is not being addressed, not being met, and about which the speaker cannot remain silent (see Bitzer, for example). All of our chatter, in other words, is an indication of how very needy we are, a manifestation of our desperation to use language in an ultimately impotent attempt to bridge our biological separateness, as Burke notes (21).

Paul speaks: *Thinking again of my son, a rhetorical perspective on autism makes me wonder, how many different silences does Eli have? And what do these various silences*

signify? What are their rhetorical functions? What are they intended to communicate? And to what audiences? My experiences with Eli suggests that a rhetorical perspective on some autistic silences, at least, offers a very different way of understanding and valuing this characteristic of his rhetoric. Eli is highly verbal, witty, fully mainstreamed in school, and a sociable guy. We talk a lot. But one of his characteristic ways of being in the world through language is to embody and enact extended silences. We have a fifteen-minute drive to school in the morning, and there are often extended silences in the car, silences I feel compelled to fill up but he does not. While I can't stand the silence, he is comfortable in it. He does not feel the exigence, the gap, the break, the disruption, the failure, the need in the social fabric. He is not compelled to speak, therefore he does not speak. In other words, rather than being some kind of deficit or delay or withdrawal, rather than signifying his entrapment, frustration, depression, or loneliness, his silence signifies his contentment, his satisfaction, his fully realized development, and his fully successful rhetoric. His silence during our car rides is a manifestation of his fully successful integration into the world—he has no compelling gaps, needs, or failures that must be addressed. He is not silent because he is withdrawn; he is silent because his integration in the social world is unproblematic, because he has no exigence. As Glenn suggests, sometimes, even for autistics, “Words are unnecessary because no tensions need to be resolved with conversation or words” (17).

The range of abilities and disabilities, of gifts and deficits of those on the autistic spectrum is enormous, of course, but we do think that adopting a rhetorical perspective on autism allows us, indeed, requires us, to critically reexamine and reevaluate our assumptions about autistic silences, perhaps even the silences of nonverbal autistics.

EMBRACING DIFFERENCE

Emerging from the social upheavals of the 1960s, college composition teachers of the day were forced to wrestle with difficult questions about diversity, language, and identity. As the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) put it, “What should the schools do about the language habits of students who come from a wide variety of social, economic, and cultural backgrounds? [. . .] Should the schools try to uphold language variety, or to modify it, or to eradicate it?” (“Students’ Right” 709). These concerns spurred the field of composition to publish “Students’ Right to Their Own Language” in 1972, a resolution adopted by the National Council of Teachers of English as an official position statement in 1974 and reaffirmed in 2003:

We affirm the students’ right to their own patterns and varieties of language—the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style [. . .] The claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another [. . .] A nation proud of its diverse heritage and its cultural and racial variety will preserve its heritage of dialects. (710–11)

Melanie speaks: *I first noticed the banner on my way home from a campus colloquium on disability and narrative. I had just delivered a paper of my own, a paper in which I outed myself as an Asperger's autistic—only to be greeted by a giant, hand-painted image of a baby-blue jigsaw puzzle piece three houses down the road. The image on the banner was somewhat masked by a fold in the fabric, but I recognized it instantly as a local version of the iconic logo for Autism Speaks. Puzzle pieces hold a special place in my heart. That is, I hate them. They symbolize so much of what is wrong with popular autism discourse—representing autistic people as puzzling, mysterious, less-than-human entities who are “short a few cognitive pieces,” who are utterly self-contained, disconnected, and need to “fit in.” Tacked to the upper story of the sorority house, the puzzling banner provided details for a campus cookout fundraiser, all proceeds to be donated to Autism Speaks, which had recently formed a student chapter at my university.*

To be perfectly clear: when it comes to Autism Speaks, I'm biased. I'm autistic and I don't feel that they speak for me. And when the president of my university chaired their Walk for Autism in 2008, and when he said that “it [autism] should not exist,” I wrote him a letter. And when I came across an Autism Speaks U flyer boasting “Got questions? We've got answers!”—I wrote the faculty advisor a letter. And when the president of my university responded with what seemed like a polite yet automated response, I felt frustrated. And when the Autism Speaks advisor insisted that she “empathized with my position” and implied that I, on the basis of my diagnosis, could not empathize with hers—I wrote to the president of the Autistic Self-Advocacy Network (ASAN) and began forming, with another autistic graduate student, an alternative autism group at my university. And when the campus newspaper, in a one-month period, released a series of autism-related articles that featured student quotes such as “The rate of diagnosis has increased.[. . .] It's such an alarming thing” and “I think it is in our best interest, especially for those of us who carry a burden for ASD individuals, to make an effort to help in any way we can”—I felt the burn. Alarming and burdensome, indeed.

In my estimation, the missing piece from the so-called autism puzzle seems quite obvious—autistic people. And I say this not in some metaphorical, autism-has-trapped-our-souls vein. Popular autism discourse has infiltrated my campus, above and beyond the walls of the psychology and allied health departments, and I worry. I worry about the transparency of this discourse. I worry about how (un)knowingly and (un)critically my students and my colleagues and my professors have digested it. Nonautistic autism discourse seems to have attached to the linings of many an intestinal wall.

But what I perhaps fear most is the construction of the autist as an inherently arhetorical being. Certainly, diagnostic criteria describe autistics as lacking in social and emotional reciprocity, as ultra-individualistic and perhaps noncommunicative—what we in the rhetoric and composition fold might denote as egocentricity or lack of audience awareness (see Jurecic). The autist, as medically constructed, is self-focused, a two-pointed rhetorical triangle floating outside the context bubble. And yet such a stance on autism and audience awareness is itself autism and audience unaware. As Tyler Cowen suggests,

The more likely truth is that autistics and nonautistics do not always understand each other very well. It's odd that the people who make this charge so often, in the very act of doing so, fail to show much empathy for autistics or to recognize their rich emotional lives. Even when the cognitive capabilities of autistics are recognized—most commonly in the cases of savants—it is too often accompanied by a clichéd and inaccurate picture of a cold, robotic, or less than human personality. (par. 19)

I would here posit that in the same manner that neurotypicals find autistics mysterious, so too do autistics find neurotypicals mysterious. Predicting the expectations of a mysterious audience is indeed a difficult task, a difficulty that would seem understandable—and yet when audience issues occur on the part of the autist, the result is considered pathological.

In my role as a spectrumite student, I'm much more likely to be pathologized than I am in my role as teacher. My behaviors as a student—lack of eye contact, fixation on narrow topics, odd manner of speaking—are explained by the documentation sitting in the university's disability services office. And, with the exception of large lecture courses, I've yet to have a professor who hasn't commented on the way I speak, variously describing me as quiet, as socially inept, as unable to produce spontaneous speech. When I succeed in the realm of speech, I become the subject of a triumphant mini-narrative, one in which success is defined as "overcoming" my autistic tendencies. And herein lies the catch (and frustration)—by virtue of achieving this normalized concept of success, I'm categorized as a "high-functioning" autistic. And the labeling doesn't end there. When I describe myself as autistic, I frequently feel compelled to denote myself as mild or high functioning—and not because I like the labels. If I don't make some reference to the mildness factor, colleagues at conferences and coffee shops often fumble, "But you don't look autistic." Or they suggest that I must be high functioning even for a high-functioning person, because I "cope" so well. High functioning has come to denote my "ability" to play neurotypical, to pass.

Although teachers of English have generally become more tolerant and accepting of language diversity based on race, gender, class, and ethnicity, for instance, there will soon be a rapid increase in the number of students coming to college whose identity is formed by and reflects a very different culture, one with its own preferred forms of socialization and language use, its own diverse rhetoric. Understanding autism as a rhetoric puts us on familiar footing, however, lets us call upon our considerable though occasionally vexed experience of dealing with difference, of responding to issues of diversity, language, and identity in our classrooms. We have substantial collective wisdom we can draw upon to help this newer minority population try to learn, as other minority populations have tried to learn, to both appropriate the language of wider communication and to maintain the language of their home cultures and identities. Still, it remains to be seen, as increasing numbers of autistics begin writing and speaking in the archly constructed discursive spaces of higher education, the extent to which they, too, might be allowed to exercise their right to their own language.

Conceiving of autism as a rhetoric, as a way of being in the world through language, allows us to reconstrue what we have historically seen as language deficits as, instead, language *differences*. Students on the autism spectrum, like all students, have their own culturally and individually distinctive topoi, tropes, dialects, and so on, and their rhetorics thus constitute both cultural and individual representations of their selfhood. If we can come to see our autistic students through the lens of rhetoric more than through a stock and overdetermined lens of autism, we might come to better appreciate what they do have to offer instead of fixating on what they do not. Indeed, if we give them the opportunity, we might get a chance to learn how they see themselves.

We purposefully conclude here without imparting prescriptive advice, if only because no prescription can help an instructor authentically respond to a student, regardless of neurology. We have no illusions about the challenges English faculty will face as increasing numbers of autistic students come to college, and we are vividly aware of how intractable some autistics' uses of language can be. But if we in the academy can learn anything from popular autism discourse, it's this: there are people speaking about autistics, and then there are autistics speaking. Misinformation and unethical representations of autism and autistics abound—in the media and even on our college campuses—and we might do best to unlearn everything we think we have learned about autistics, who, as a group, are about as amorphous and diverse as neurotypicals.

Finally, if we accept the idea of autism as a rhetoric, then we have to acknowledge the possibility of what Corder calls “a biorhetoric, the rhetorical imperative one serves” (161). Understanding the verbal and nonverbal manifestations of autism as a rhetorical imperative does much to dissolve the idea of otherness, to give credence to the idea of a single, inclusive, broad spectrum representing all of human neurology. And as the sense of otherness diminishes, we fellow rhetors, we—as parents, educators, caregivers, policymakers, the public, and people on the autism spectrum themselves—will come to understand our common dilemma and our common hope. As Corder concludes, “There is no normality: we search for inventive-structural-stylistic-contextual sets that will give, amid some pain, some peace or understanding or fruitful work or whatever one can find to live with” (168).

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