

Unmasked

How do autistic and queer identities intersect? In this painting, I explore the concepts of masking, mirroring, and coming out as aspects of both being queer and autistic. Identities not considered the default (non-white, neurodivergent, queer, among others) are pushed towards assimilation to the default. However, current social justice movements for queer and autistic people are moving away from the ideals of indistinguishability and respectability. I explore my rejection of these ideals through a self-portrait in oil paint.

Expressionistic brush strokes and saturated colors come together to paint a picture of my perception of myself as an autistic person. Instead of an objective representation of what I look like, I painted what I feel like. I used primarily red and purple to represent these communities. Red is the color used for autistic acceptance, and purple is a color I strongly associate with queer identity. The broken shards of mirror compose the mask I am removing. This both represents the journey I made coming out as queer, as well as self-discovery of being autistic.

Though I didn't grow up knowing these things about myself, I learned early on to mirror others behavior. It took until I reached high school that I started to realize the mask was there, and decided to remove it. I can't quite hide the way I used to-- the mirror is broken and the reflection will never be the same.

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Neuroqueer

Miles J.



How do autism and queer identities intersect? How can we meet the needs of the full variety of autistic people? If we realize we operate on a system the falsely assumes normality, what would it mean to live without it? In this paper I examine autism through a lens of personal experience, queer intersectionality, and neurodiversity.¹ I explore what autism means as a personal identity as well questioning how we traditionally talk about it.

¹ The word neurodiversity represents the idea that variations in brain function such as autism or adhd are part of the natural diversity in human beings and not something that is wrong with an individual (Walker, 2014)

Introduction

Autism is rarely understood, even more rarely accepted. Though we are just now defining and expanding the definition and diagnosis of autism, autistic people have been around forever. Due to flaws and prejudices in the diagnosis system, many autistic people who have intersecting marginalized identities fall through the cracks. In the autistic self-advocacy community self-diagnosis is becoming an increasingly popular choice for those who have been ignored by the medical community. People assigned female at birth (afab) often experience several misdiagnoses before realizing that they are autistic and possibly seeking a diagnosis. While there are some controversies tied to self-diagnosis, there are major barriers to accessing a professional diagnosis. Some of them are due to difficulty affording an evaluation, if there's even someone qualified to do so in your area, while other reasons have to do with the potential risks of opening oneself up to even further discrimination (Baggs et al., n.d.). Many self-diagnosed autistic people feel as though whatever accommodations that could be gained from a diagnosis aren't worth it.

As a child I had been described as shy and sensitive, my mother remarked on how amazing it was that I “knew myself so well” that I would sit alone at school. I was constantly told to look people in the eyes and endlessly admonished for responding in grunts instead of words. In time these things were hidden and forgotten, I learned to be a chameleon, to make a mask out of mirrors and only display what others wanted to see. I pretended to have crushes on the boys everyone else said was cute, though I didn't understand why. Every time I expressed myself in a natural way looks from my peers would immediately make me freeze, my face burning. Every word I said felt like it was scrutinized, and the words were often jumbled.

I grew angry with the world, with others, but I thought I was just feeling the same thing as everyone else. I felt alone, and as elementary slipped into middle school I slipped into depression and anxiety. I wasn't anyone and everything before still feels shrouded in a fog. My short years at middle school were coming to a close. It was about this time that I started turning more to online spaces for social acceptance. Of course, the internet is a big space and I found myself exposed to people of all sorts of identities and can across confusing queer words. I had for the first time, that I remember, wondered if I was really as straight as everyone thought was normal, I would learn there was a lot abnormal about me, and everyone. Listen, women are pretty! But I wasn't a lesbian. The Thanksgiving break of 8th grade I remember deciding I was pansexual², and it felt as natural to me as anything, though these days I would more describe myself as just queer³. Fast forward another year, filled with the awkwardness of coming out. I'm hit with another question, what makes me a woman? Not much apparently! A lot about my identity around this time was tied to an unnameable confusion, and I became more comfortable inhabiting undefined spaces of being. Freshman year, oddly enough during thanksgiving break again (I guess I can be thankful for my queerness during this holiday), I had decided I was

² Attraction to all genders

³ A vague label that means something different to everyone, it can generally mean not straight or cisgender

agender,⁴ though with many things my identity didn't remain static and gendervague⁵ feels much more fitting at this point in my life. This outing is incubated and saved for the spring of my junior year, this one much more painful than the last.

After gender got taken out of the equation I naively believed all the huge realizations were done. Ha! I had accidentally found uncharted territory for me, the autistic community. I had found a space where it didn't matter if I felt weird or childish, where people could come together with the understanding that we all communicated differently and that it was okay. It was these connections that gave words to the things I had experienced my whole life. I was intrigued, scared, excited. I decided not to act on it much but every so often I would think back to my childhood and the things I remembered made so much sense through this new lens. I went easier on myself when I struggled with things other people seemed to have no problems doing.

It was the summer before sophomore year, my best friend was taking me to see the fireworks on the 3rd of July. The car ride there, I had my chewable pendant tucked safely out of sight, I look over to her and see she's wearing one from the same store. There are moments I remember in my life where I find a connection with other people that is so rare and indescribable for me, that shakes my whole world for a moment and I still feel the aftershocks now. A moment I tried in vain to express through art, but I'll get it one day. We had sat on the grass and she gave me her headphones during the loud display of fireworks and we chewed on necklaces that represented so much more to us. It was small the gestures of understanding that got me to the point of writing this paper.

I'm autistic and queer and those two things can exist together. One did not cause the other, but I cannot separate my perception of my sexuality and gender from being autistic. I've experienced all the joys of sorrows of living as a queer autistic person and, despite what many want to believe and the sometimes seemingly endless list of sorrows, I wouldn't have it any other way.

The use of language

I should briefly address my use of language. In this essay, I will use Identity first language (IFL) over person first language (PFL) in addressing autistic people. Meaning that I will say autistic person rather than person with autism. While many claim PFL is more respectful, the vast majority of actual autistic people feel IFL is more appropriate.

“If a person has a medical condition, we might say that “she has cancer,” or she’s “a person with allergies,” or “she suffers from ulcers.” But when a person is a member of a minority group, we don’t talk about their minority status as though it were a disease. We say “she’s Black,” or “she’s a lesbian.” We recognize that it would be outrageously inappropriate – and likely to mark us as ignorant or bigoted – if we were to refer to a Black person as “having negroism” or being a “person with negroism,” or if we were to say that someone “suffers from homosexuality (Walker, 2013).”

⁴ Basically meaning genderless/without gender

⁵ A gender identity used by some autistic individuals

In using PFL to refer to an autistic person, we are implying that autism is something bad or wrong with a person and that it can be removed from the person, both linguistically and through medical treatments. Although language may seem small in the grand scheme of things, it's the small things that add up and color our perception of a topic.

What is Autism

The question of what is autism is a complicated one. Depending on who you asked, it could be a horrible tragedy that will steal your children, or it could be just another way a brain can function. I would say I fall more into that second camp. Unfortunately, most of the messages we are exposed about autism in mainstream media and academics assume the former. So my definition will be based mostly on my experience and the writings of autistic authors.

In the most simple, bite-size chunk, autism is a neurological variation. What this means is that autistic people's brains function in a way that is different from most of the population and due to that way our society functions, autistic people are disabled. However, it is not necessarily a disorder. "...to describe autism as a disorder represents a value judgment rather than a scientific fact(Walker, 2014)." Though autistic people face struggles in our society, many view it as a part of their identity, and not something that can be separated from who they are like a mental illness. As such there's is no cure that wouldn't completely destroy who the autistic person is on a fundamental level(Sinclair, 1993).

Despite sharing the same neurotype autistic people are extremely varied, just as allistic⁶ people are. On the surface, autism may seem like primarily a social impairment, and while that is a part of being autistic, it's only just what people see on the surface. Autism is much more internal and affects everything about an autistic person. To list out all the shared or common traits among autistic people would be a whole paper in itself. Autism exists on a spectrum and many people may think that means there are people who are more autistic and people who are less autistic, however, this is not the case. The autism spectrum is not linear with a low and a high end. I like to conceptualize it as a color spectrum, with different traits being different colors and the saturation being how strongly they are experienced, that each person can fluctuate through on any given days. Just like how non-autistic people aren't static every day so are autistic people. For example, while an autistic person may be able to talk most days, they might go through periods of time being non-verbal.

"In the realm of conventional academic literature (e.g., peer-reviewed journals and books from mainstream academic presses) the discourse on autism is dominated by the voices of non-autistic writers whose work is based in the pathology paradigm (Walker, 2016)." The experts of autism can still be trusted though, we as a society have just been paying attention to false experts. We wouldn't ask a white person what it's like to be black, so why would we consult allistic people, no matter how much they've studied, what it's like to be autistic? Sadly that is the standard method of studying autism, and I for one am tired of this. When we do see autistic voices in academia and mainstream media, they are almost always "acceptable." They are the

⁶ Meaning non autistic

most tame easy to swallow bit of a person, usually a white cis man, deemed “high-functioning” and ready to uphold traditional views on autism (Walker, 2016). We can pat ourselves on the back for listening to an autistic person without examining or confronting our own discomfort. Ultimately the most valuable voices in the conversations about autism and queerness are queer autistic people and for this reason many if not most of my sources will be from autistic run blogs.

At the Intersection of Queer and Autistic: Neuroqueer

What does neuroqueer mean? Well in keeping with the history and use of the word queer, the definition is loose and very much up to each person who identifies with this word to define. Athena Lynn Michaels-Dillon, Nick Walker, and Melanie Yergeau can be considered the original contributors to the concept of neuroqueer. On Nick Walker's blog, neurocosmopolitanism, he synthesized their original thoughts on the concept of neuroqueer and I am basing my use of the word on that. The most obvious use as the title of this paper is simply the combination of a neurodivergent and queer identity, whatever that may be for the individual. But it can also be the act of experiencing or approaching one's neurodiversity in a way that embodies the ideals of queer theory and identity, often in embracing what society says is wrong about you.

There are many areas of intersection between LGBTQ+ and autistic people. Trans people are more likely to be autistic than the general population, or the other way around, whichever way you want to look at it (Kristensen and Broome, 2015). Both groups of people have been around as long as humans have, but the labels we use to describe them are relatively new. Even the symbols we use to represent both communities are similar, the rainbow flag and the rainbow infinity symbol.

In identities not considered the default, non-white, neurodivergent, queer, among others, we see a push for assimilation to the “norm”, to show the safest version of that person, almost to prove that they are people. In the early movements around gay rights, called the homophile movement at the time⁷, the focus was on fitting into our society's norms. The vagrant gays who were flamboyant and hung out in bars and didn't belong, they were damaging to the movement that wanted to prove that gay people were just like “normal” people. Barbara Gittings was an early gay rights activist, who started her journey during this period. In an interview she did, she and her partner, Kay Lahusen, describe how the goals of the Daughter of Bilitis⁸ was to have lesbians be able to fit into society, work a job, wear skirts, etc. “Kay: ...the most of us. Whereas the most of us really were in skirts fitting in all too tightly. Barbara: Right. Very painfully wearing the mask (Marcus, Gittings and Lahusen, n.d).”

Autistic people, especially those assigned female at birth, often consciously or unconsciously mask things that mark them as autistic to move through a society built for the neurotypical people (Mandy and Steward, 2016). This is called camouflaging and while it can be a useful tool, ultimately this results in burnout and leaves the person less functional than if they were allowed to express themselves and exist naturally (Russo, 2018; Weinstock, 2018). Hiding

⁷ 1950's to early 1960's

⁸ One of the first lesbian activist groups in america

who we are is difficult for any identity, however, it becomes much more troublesome when the things we have to hide are genuine coping mechanisms for daily life.

As time progressed so did the social justice movements, Instead of the homophile groups, we have queer rights that assert that our way of being isn't wrong, even if it is different. Why should we bend over backward to fit into what is arbitrarily deemed normal and acceptable? Instead of changing ourselves, we change the system, we make our own words.

Similarly in the late 2000's we see the blossom of the neurodiversity movement (Kras, 2010) Autistic people have been at the forefront, however, the movement encompasses all those who's brain functioning falls outside what is considered the acceptable or normal in our society. As with the shift away from the homophile movement to our current state of queer advocacy, we see Neurodiversity as asserting that the problem isn't with us it's with society.

Though less common now, LGBTQ+ identities are still believed to be able to be cured using the same methods as ABA.⁹ Both conversion therapy¹⁰ and ABA take something that isn't inherently dysfunctional or bad and trains the patient to act in what is considered to be an acceptable manner, equating outward behavior being in line with the norm as a cure for an internal identity. These therapies can be boiled down to using rewards and punishments to train the patient to behave, or not behave, in a certain way (Socially Anxious Advocate, 2015).

These can appear innocent on the surface, many are claiming to get rid of something unwanted in the patient and don't appear to be overly homophobic/ableist. Many ABA therapists are people who genuinely believe they are helping autistic children (Socially Anxious Advocate, 2015). However, as the adults who survived these can attest to they end up causing more problems while trying to solve something that isn't a problem (Just Stimming..., 2011). While autistic people can certainly benefit with having support in place to help them learn skills to navigate in a society that isn't built with them in mind, ABA focuses on training compliance, not teaching any actual skills.

The core of the issues with behavior therapies based on Lovaas' work is consent cannot be definitely achieved when the patient is coerced into going along with the treatment when they are rewarded for appearing compliant or enthusiastic about therapy, and punished for disobedience or saying no (Shoyer, 2015). You can't make someone not autistic, just like you can't make someone not gay or trans, you can at most make them appear to conform to our idea of normality.

It's not just the separate experiences of being queer and autistic, as, with many intersecting identities, the experience is more than a sum of the parts. Even within marginalized identities there is prejudice, there are homophobic and transphobic autistic people, and ableist¹¹ queer people. Even queer spaces that are meant to be inclusive rarely take into account the needs of

⁹ Stands for applied behavioral analysis, the most widespread therapy used on autistic children to make them appear more allistic(Socially Anxious Advocate, 2015).

¹⁰ Therapy that uses the principles of ABA in one way or another to attempt to change the patients sexuality or gender. Lovaas, the father of ABA was also directly involved in the start of modern conversion therapy with studies that attempted to get rid of feminine behaviors in young boys(Kronstein, 2018; Rekers and Lovaas, 1974). The connections between ABA and conversion therapy have led some autistic people to refer to ABA as autistic conversion therapy(Sequenzia, 2016).

¹¹ Ableism "discrimination or prejudice against individuals with disabilities(Merriam-webster, n.d.)"

disabled members(Tan, 2017). As much as I love attending the pride events hosted by my local LGBTQ+ organization, I often find myself in a state of overstimulation and have to spend the next day recovering from the overwhelming atmosphere. In medical care, some trans autistic people are denied access to gender-affirming services, such as hormone replacement therapy, under the assumption that as autistic people they don't have the ability to have agency over their own body or be self-aware enough to actually be transgender (Rudacille, 2016). While queer people are generally accepted as people, autistic people are rarely ever considered full people with the ability to even understand sexuality and gender much less have complicated identities.

On finding Identity

Again, I'm not nonbinary because I'm autistic, but my experience as a nonbinary person is tied up in my experience as an autistic person. Being autistic is pervasive, it affects every part of our understanding of ourselves. Many autistic trans people share the sentiment that their experience of gender cannot be separated from their experience of autism. Gendervague is the word some are using to explain their gender identity, I myself find myself identifying with it more and more as time goes on. Essentially it means that their gender cannot be separated from their neurodivergence, that they both layer together to create something that cannot be distinguished (Brown, 2016).

Another aspect of the complicated nature of gender and sexual identity for autistic people is difficulty in applying external concepts to internal feelings. Those with alexithymia¹² can have this effect their gender and sexuality in having trouble identifying what they feel (strangerdarkerbetter, 2016). Broader and newer labels, such as queer and gendervague, can help some autistic people describe their identity in a way that is clearly not straight or cisgender but also not trying to fit unidentified feeling into a box.

Another large aspect of gender identity for autistic people is that many autistic people feel as though social rules that everyone else seems to intuitively understand have never been explained to them. I still don't even claim to fully understand gender despite being trans myself. It feels confusing to me why anyone who recognizes that gender roles are meaningless would still adhere and identify with them. If we can look at what it traditionally meant to be a woman and generally agree you don't have to do those things to be a woman, what makes someone a woman? This is a question I still can't answer. It's the question that made me give up on having a clearly defined gender identity.

On top of all this, many autistic people have trouble presenting as in a way society recognizes as either their assigned or internal gender identity due to sensory issues. In my personal experience I have trouble with clothes that are restricting or tight in any way so many traditionally feminine clothing was already out of the question for me before I started transitioning, and after it just became a matter of letting go of things that made me miserable but I put up with because I felt I had to. However it can work against us as well, sometimes sensory

¹²In the simplest terms, alexithymia means a difficulty or impairment in identifying and describing emotions(Musings of an Aspie, 2013). I myself don't have alexithymia, but it is common among autistic people and ranges in severity.

sensitivities and gender identity don't work together and someone is left presenting in a way that is uncomfortable to them socially(strangerdarkerbetter, 2016).

The absence of normality

It could be said that I'm not normal. Though we as a society can generally accept that no one is really normal if we think about it for a second, in practice we still operate under a system that assumes normality and in its absence, dysfunction, deviancy, and brokenness. This is a part of the pathology paradigm,¹³ a term coined by Nick Walker we approach the study and treatment of neurominorities.¹⁴ It asserts that there is a typical/normal way for a brain to be, anything that strays too much from this model is not functioning correctly and should be made as typical as possible. This paradigm is heavily tied to the medical model of disability. This model says that disability is the fault of the disabled person, that what disables them is their limitations or impairments (Walker, 2016). This is what mainstream academic and medical whatever operates under (Kras, 2010). This way of thinking gives power to those in the medical field to have complete control over the lives of disabled people, particularly neurominorities (Vivian, 2013). This is the system that Barbara Gittings lived under tried to discover more about her identity, under a paradigm that said this difference was a pathology “when I first wanted to find out what it meant to be gay, after I first put the label on myself, being a reasonably well-educated girl, I thought, oh well, I'll go to the library. Ha, ha, ha. Famous last words... I found very little information and most of it was false. It rang false. Even if I knew it was me they were talking about it didn't ring true. There was nothing about love. And it was all so strange. Clinical sounding, very clinical. And then later I found the novels of homosexuality and they made me feel a lot better because even though these were fictional characters, they were more like real people (Marcus, Gittings and Lahusen, n.d.)”

If we realize we operate on a system the falsely assumes normality, what would it mean to live without it? This question leads to the counterpart of the pathology paradigm. The neurodiversity paradigm asserts that the human brain is naturally varied and diversity in brain function is as valuable to society as diversity in race, gender, etc. It is tied to the social model of disability, that disability is not purely caused by an internal deficiency of the individual but primarily by society's inability to accommodate (Walker, 2013; Kras, 2010). There are impairments we don't consider disabilities because society accommodates for it. A good example of this is vision impairment, while glasses and contacts can be expensive they are readily available and we don't consider someone who is nearsighted to be disabled or worthy of pity.

Acceptance

Every day of April I see a blue ribbon sign on my way to school. I'm sure the people at this particular house mean well, however, the signs of awareness, the blue puzzle pieces and ribbons, leave a bitter taste in my mouth. For a whole month, each year people participate in autism awareness, you'd think that people would be aware by now.

Awareness means nothing towards the treatment of marginalized people, I'm pretty sure the girl who called me a dyke in middle school was aware of gay people. The thing is awareness

¹³ paradigm:A world view underlying the theories and methodology of a particular scientific subject(Oxford Dictionaries | English, n.d.).

¹⁴ Those whose neurological functioning differs from the majority

doesn't ask much of allistic people, it doesn't inconvenience them greatly to put on a blue pin or hang a sign in the window and remember a few facts attached to the word autism. We can't just be content with allistic people being able to stay in their comfort zone. What we really need, what autistic people have been asking for is acceptance.

“Acceptance requires facing that which makes you uncomfortable, and confronting any prejudice at the root of that discomfort (And straight on till morning, 2012).” Why are you uncomfortable with the flaming gay, or the obvious autistic, or the black woman with natural hair? Is it because they are wrong to reject what you think is normal? Because instead of putting on an uncomfortable mask in an effort to please you, they live in a way that is natural and true to themselves but not the same as you. As hard as it is for all of us to admit we not only hold but uphold these beliefs, we can't change anything if there isn't at least a little discomfort distributed through society. Let's become uncomfortable, because the price we pay for the loud minority of “normal” people to be comfortable is, in my abnormal opinion, too high. In accepting people for who they are we can majorly shift the quality of life for queer autistic people (Cage, Di Monaco and Newell, 2017; Detrie and Lease, 2007; Cooper, Smith and Russell, 2017). Autism, of course, is still a disability, so while acceptance is a good start, it's just that, a start in changing society to be accommodating of autistic people.

Conclusion

Be prepared when autistic voices to ask for change. People of any marginalized identity have been changing themselves to fit into our narrow definition of normality and acceptability and this masquerade is a tiring one. As well as being uncomfortable, be humble and though we may have held hurtful opinions in the past, the good news is that people aren't static. This may just be me being naive, but I think that we have the capacity to change and grow to uplift each other. Even if it's hard at first, even if we'd rather bury our mistakes. If we can start with an honest and ruthless examination of our actions, we can make the steps to doing right by the people around us.

Just as queer people lead queer rights movements and make up most of the voices on related issues, so should autistic people have the right to self-advocacy. We are well past the point where we should start, as a larger society, putting the full diversity of autistic voices at the forefront, not just the ones that are easy for allistic people to hear.

In my own experience of neuroqueerness, a big part is accepting ambiguity. When we can face the fact that we can't know and clearly define everything, this includes the experience of others. When we approach the unknown with a celebration, instead of a rejection, of otherness and ambiguity our notions of normality kinda fall apart and, like with many things in this world, is simultaneously much more complex and simple and delightfully full of contradiction

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