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The Autist as a Social Being: Affect Alienation and Atmospheric (Dis)Attunements

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A core criterion for an autism diagnosis are struggles with social communication and interaction, painting Autistic people as having a deficient sociality. However, research that focuses on autistic lived experiences often reveals an alternative sociality instead. Inspired by critical autism studies and feminist and decolonial methodologies, I draw on my own lived experiences as a genderqueer and queer Autistic Arab in this piece. I propose that Autistic people are “affect aliens” (Ahmed 2016), whose hopes and desires exist in a disjointed manner with the world we live in. Using Kathleen Stewart’s (2011) method of “atmospheric attunements,” I also examine everyday social interactions as charged sites of trouble and confusion for Autistic people.

Autism(n.): from German Autismus, coined [in] 1912 by Swiss psychiatrist Paul Bleuler from Greek autos "self" + -ismos suffix of action or of state. The notion is of morbid self-absorption. (Online Etymology Dictionary n.d.)

The concept of enclosure on one’s self and rejection of sociality is embedded in the very etymology of the word “autism.” This reveals the pathologizing clinical gaze that defined autism for the general public. Although Bleuler first coined the word to refer to children with schizophrenia, it was repurposed in the 1940s to describe the neurological difference(s) with which we are familiar today (Evans 2013). The implications of this etymological choice are that Autistic people are so focused inwardly that they lack a sociality. This is not supported, however, by current research or by the lived experiences of Autistic¹ people. Both indicate a rich alternative sociality, which I will endeavor to outline in this piece.

The first part of the essay argues for a redirection toward Autistic theory (theory about autism by Autistic scholars), highlighting how scholarly legitimacy and the boundaries of expertise have been contested subjects within academia. Some examples of Autistic theory that already exist are Dinah Murray, Wenn Lawson, and Mike Lesser’s monotropism theory (Lawson 2024) and Damian Milton’s double empathy problem (Milton 2012). These have been important contributions to the literature, although they have been oriented to Global North discourses. In the second part, I elaborate on my choice to embrace the personal in this essay as I draw on my own lived experience as a late-diagnosed Autistic person who has grown up in the Global South and recently moved to the United States. The third section is dedicated to synthesizing research findings that unveil elements of Autistic sociality. I then offer my own intervention by looking at Autistic sociality through the respective frameworks of affect alienation and atmospheric (dis)attunements, drawing from affect theory, specifically scholarly contributions by Sara Ahmed (2010, 2016) and Kathleen Stewart (2011).



Attention to affect and internal subjective experience has the potential to explain Autistic sociality more accurately than behaviorist approaches have, as it circumvents allistic (non-autistic) misinterpretations of autistic behavior. Facial affect differences between Autistic and allistic people contribute to these misinterpretations, as well as to negative first impressions of Autistic people (Foster et al. 2024). Indeed, the Autistic lived experience is commonly an experience of being misunderstood (Banks et al. 2024). Often, the intentions, motivations, emotions, or other internal states that allistic people assign to Autistic people's facial affect are incongruent with the Autistic person's internal experience. This is one of the reasons affect theory will be mobilized here toward a greater understanding of Autistic experience.

In summary, what follows is an attempt at an Autistic affect (auto)theory, a contribution to Autistic research, and a proposal to further its solidarities with other forms of situated knowledge, such as feminist and decolonial standpoint theory.

Toward Autistic Theory

Scholarly work relies on delineating a theoretical framework. Yet, as a practice embedded in power relations, theory-making has not always been accessible to all. The feminist critique of the so-called objective researcher, able to dispassionately theorize from a distant and omniscient point of view (Haraway 1988), is by now well-established in the social sciences, as are the calls for greater reflexivity and stating of one's positionality in one's work (Segal 1990). Furthermore, scholars focusing on the subaltern and decolonizing academia (Spivak 2003; Tuhiwai Smith 2021) have rightly critiqued the scholarly status quo, where theory is often perceived as coming from the Global North while data is extracted from the Global South.

This attention to positionality has also been applied to disability research, through critiques of the oppressive theoretical paradigm and set of relations within said research. Indeed, research conducted by neurotypical and/or able-bodied researchers, without centering the perspectives of disabled people, risks being useless at best (ignoring the needs and having no positive consequences on the material realities of disabled people) and harmful at worst (perpetuating the exploitation, marginalization, and alienation of disabled people) (Stone and Priestly 1996). The framework of "no participation without representation" or "nothing about us without us," along with an emancipatory research paradigm, was proposed by disability studies scholars (Kichen 2000; Oliver 1992) as a way to redress this epistemological injustice.

More specifically, the emergence of the field of critical autism studies has reflected the need to apply this framework to research on autism. Davidson and Orsini (2013) defined the key tenets for critical autism studies as exploring the power relationships that construct autism as a pathology, challenging preexisting deficit-based medical narratives around autism, prioritizing the lived experiences and perspectives of autistic people in research, and highlighting the individual nature of autism, which does not lend itself to generalizations. Following these core principles is meant to grant epistemological integrity to scholarly work on autism. The third tenet in particular emphasizes the importance of Autistic authorship in research on autism and the imbrication of the personal (lived experiences/perspectives) in the scholarly. The time for "Autistic theory" within academia has clearly come, and while there are many examples of theories of autism by Autistic authors (Lawson 2024; Milton, 2012), the Autistic theory I envision foregrounds the work of underrepresented thinkers within this category. It is a theory that takes up the demands issued by feminist (especially feminists of



color) and decolonial thinkers, while adding the perspective of disability studies and critical autism studies.

I must note, however, that the notion that disabled researchers are always best situated to contribute to the study of disability cannot be held as an absolute truth as “disabled” can be a complex, nuanced, and shifting identity (Inckle et al. 2023). The multiplicity of Autistic subjectivities in particular (Stenning 2024) makes it difficult for any Autistic researcher to claim insight into the experiences of all Autistic people. For that reason, I signal some of the specificities that have contributed to my own Autistic subjectivity: being assigned female at birth, being late-diagnosed, being raised and spending the majority of my life in the Arab world before moving to the United States, and intersecting identities rooted in queerness and gender non-conformity.

Embracing the Personal and/as the Scholarly

The dominance of the “objective” empirical research paradigm, where the researcher is not part of the community they research, has led to the pathologizing and medicalizing of all manner of difference, including autism (Davidson and Orsini 2013). Conversely, the involvement of Autistic researchers has led to the questioning of long held deficit-based theories of autism. For example, Autistic researcher Damian Milton critiqued Simon Baron-Cohen’s popular theory that Autistic people lack theory of mind—the ability to understand that other people have different beliefs, emotions, and intentions than one’s own. He proposed instead his theory of “the double empathy problem” (2012), which signals that both Autistic and allistic people can lack insight into the other’s perspective. The breakdown in communicating meaning is thus a “two-way street.” This theory has since been explored by researchers in multiple disciplines and generally gained approval within the Autistic community (Milton et al. 2022).

In addition, allistic researchers can reach wrongful conclusions based on observations of the emotional expressions of Autistic people as there is often a mismatch between visible expressions and internal experience (McQuaid et al. 2022). Thus, misunderstandings and incorrect assumptions can easily form as allistic researchers judge Autistic people by allistic standards. For example, is it true that Autistic people lack empathy, as was long believed, or are allistic researchers incapable of detecting how Autistic people express empathy? (Cheang et al. 2024). There is no reason to believe that Autistic people would not land on various points on the empathy spectrum, as they do on other traits.

Abandoning the idea that a researcher must maintain the illusion of objectivity and listening to the perspectives of Autists can easily correct many of these misconceptions. As Autistic academic Monique Botha points out, “The idea of objectivity is used to side-line autistic expertise in disingenuous ways, especially when this knowledge challenges the status-quo” (2021, 1). For these reasons, I do not shy away from using the personal in this article, illustrating the theoretical with my lived experience as a 36-year-old Autistic genderqueer Arab person, who spent my first 34 years undiagnosed. As previously expressed, it is important to keep in mind that autism is highly individual, and I do not assert that my perspectives or experiences are generalizable to all Autistic people. However, I propose that there are enough commonalities across the experience of Autistic sociality to render this intervention meaningful. This approach is part of an alternative epistemology for knowledge production, which acknowledges that all understanding is constructed, and that the personhood of the scholar mediates this understanding (Gadamer 1999). My personhood seeps into the fabric of



my arguments. I see no reason not to make it explicit and intertwine the personal with the scholarly for the benefit of a clearer view on Autistic sociality.

Elements of Autistic Socialities

A core criterion for an autism diagnosis in the latest edition of *the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* or the DSM (2013) is struggling with social communication and social interaction, which paints Autistic people as having a deficient sociality. However, Crompton et al. (2020) found that Autistic people effectively share information with one another, which would require social skills. Hence, Autistic people are not socially deficient but rather have an alternative sociality, marked by different standards and expectations.

Indeed, compiled insights from research done by Bagatell (2007), Ochs and Solomon (2010), and Prince-Hughes (2024) reveal the outlines of this sociality. Firstly, Autistic sociality is marked by a preference for communication in writing, especially online communication, with Bagatell even likening access to online communication for Autistic people with access to braille for Blind people or sign language for Deaf people. When Autistic sociality is performed in person, it places low value on aligning face-to-face and maintaining eye contact while interacting. Autistic conversationalists who communicate through speech might speak quickly, use a lower or higher volume than an allistic person in the same situation, have restrained affect, or use language differently from allistic peers (echolalia, obscure and/or highly specific language, etc.), while those who use alternative modes of communication might use gestures, pointing, sign language and/or assistive technology. Many Autists have a preference for monologuing instead of dialoguing, taking turns telling a long story for example. Researchers also noted a topic preference for objective knowledge, an avoidance of “small talk” in favor of discussions around common interests, and a “neuro-holographic” style of communication that can be perceived as not staying on topic. Attention to details over the whole, fixity of focus (including repetition), and networks of private idiosyncratic associations are both accepted and encouraged. In addition, Autistic sociality includes corporality through solo stimming (self-stimulatory behavior), interactive stimming, and cooperation to meet sensory needs. Autistic people may consider sitting side by side doing different activities or sharing entertaining media to be satisfying forms of socializing, as they include the sharing of energy through being present in the same physical location. Within certain autistic circles, specific linguistic norms are expected to be followed, primarily the use of identity-first language (Autistic person) instead of person-first language (person with autism).

Autistic sociality has also been characterized as displaying reduced status-seeking and reputation management, which reflects a dislike of social hierarchies and a preference for egalitarian societies (Caldwell-Harris and Schwartz 2023). It accords less importance to conformity with the group than allistic society does, which might explain why Autistic people tend to often diverge from gender and sexual norms (Attanasio et al. 2021; Dewinter et al 2017; George and Stokes 2018; Peachey and Crane 2024; Pliskin 2022).

In addition, research on Autistic sociality has frequently explored Autistic people’s affinity with animals and the role of animals as mediators for socialization (Solomon 2012; Solomon 2015; Malcolm et al. 2018). Solomon (2015) proposes that being with therapy animals offers an opportunity to be social through “sensory modalities of knowing.” In addition, she states that Autistic people’s interspecies sociality with animals challenges assumptions that



sociality must necessarily involve language and theory of mind and that it is a uniquely human phenomenon.

Furthermore, author M. Remi Yergeau (2018) argues that autistic sociality is a queered way of being and communicating. Just as queer sociality challenges normative ideas of gender and sexuality, autistic sociality challenges neuronormative ideas of how people should interact, communicate, and relate to one another. Yergeau frames elements of autistic sociality such as stimming and echolalia as “embodied rhetorics,” maintaining their inherent value.

Finally, given the significant overlap between Autistic and geek circles, RPGs (role-playing games) can serve as effective containers for Autistic sociality, allowing Autistic participants to create their own cultural space while capitalizing on their interests (Fein 2015 and 2020). Indeed, these various elements of Autistic sociality have also been discussed as elements of “Autistic culture.” When scholars use the term “Autistic culture,” they are generally pointing towards shared cultural practices enacted within autism communities (Block 2015). This project has precedents in the use of “Deaf culture” within Deaf studies and is connected to Autistic self-advocates who have begun framing autism as akin to a foreign culture, seeming deficient only to those who refuse to learn its norms (Silverman 2008). This conceptualization has provided a sense of identity and pride to Autistic individuals (Strauss 2013). Furthermore, the use of “Autistic culture” has not been limited to North America and Europe. Its potential to empower Autistic individuals has made it a popular concept and led to its spread worldwide, reaching regions such as Siberia (Gokh et al. 2018). Undoubtedly, social media has facilitated this spread. The group “This is autistic culture” on Facebook has 13,300 members at time of writing (December 7, 2024). Regardless of whether it is valid to speak of an Autistic culture or not, it is undeniable that the differences in how Autistic people naturally socialize are only considered deficits because they inconvenience or annoy allistic people. Autistic people can have similar feelings towards allistic sociality, but relations of power compel them to learn how to perform this kind of sociality if they can, while allistics do not have to learn to code-switch in this way.

For Autistic POC, there is a double code-switching as they must navigate dominant white and allistic socialities. Unfortunately, the dominant autistic voices within research have primarily been white while Autistic people of color, especially Black Autistic people, have been under-researched and underserved (Cascio et al. 2021; Onovbiona et al. 2024). They often find themselves as the only Autistic person in a room of allistic people and as the only person of color in a room of white Autistic people (Omeiza 2024). By not seeking out the perspectives of Autistic people of color, researchers are missing out on the rich heterogeneity of the Autistic community. Moreover, we cannot confirm if the formulations of Autistic sociality so far presented hold water without observing whether they apply across gendered, racial, aged, and classed differences. We are at risk of essentializing autism when we primarily pay attention to some Autistic people, those that reproduce the stereotype of the white, middle or upper class, Autistic boy.

Affect Aliens

Beside looking at research on Autistic people, we can also use conceptual contributions by academics to help further define Autistic sociality. I propose that Autistic people are “affect aliens,” a term coined by Ahmed in the context of discussing feminist killjoys (2016). Ahmed describes affect aliens as those who do not feel the right thing at the right time, those who feel



happy about the wrong objects, and those whose hopes and desires exist in a disjointed manner with the world they live in. This strikes me as an apt description of the Autistic experience, as Autistic people have been considered disordered for not expressing the expected feelings, for deriving joy from their special interests as pathologized in the DSM 5 as “restricted, repetitive interests and activities” (2013), and for generally not following neurotypical social norms as pathologized in the DSM 5 as “persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction” (2013). Although the concept of affect alien is not the same as having feelings of alienation, the former can often lead to the latter. When one is out of step with the world they inhabit, it is difficult not to feel alienated. Indeed, it is no coincidence that the metaphor of being alien has long appealed to autistic sensibilities (National Autistic Society n.d.).

There is a picture of me on my seventh birthday. I am dressed in obviously uncomfortable clothes (itchy, tight), surrounded by a crowd of people whose faces trigger no memories, and a little girl is forcing a smile onto my face, lifting the corners of my mouth to puppeteer me into the “correct affect.” I could scarcely hope for a better physical manifestation of Sara Ahmed’s argument regarding happiness as a disciplinary technique. Ahmed (2010) argues that “the happiness turn” in various academic disciplines in the 21st century promotes happiness as a project of self-governance and self-enhancement and as an individual responsibility towards others. The little girl was communicating that I was not happy when I should be. Peers often expressed explicitly or implicitly that I was failing my responsibility to be happy and that this was ingratitude towards my parents and whatever higher force they thought brought me into this world. I owed them my happiness. If I only tapped into the power of “positive thinking,” I would be perfectly fine. Being an affect alien though, the wrong objects made me happy. Books and being able to spend hours daydreaming alone were what made me happy, but I was aware that this was not what others wanted of me. I kept being offered dresses as birthday presents by family members and struggled to hide my disappointment. My mother whispered instructions to make my smile brighter or my voice sound more excited. Gendered expectations do intermingle with neurotypical ones in this example. The theme of this issue is autistic a/socialities, a/genders, and a/sexualities, but it can be difficult to disentangle autistic sociality from autistic a/genders and a/sexualities, as those divergences from social norms seem to feed into each other. How can you perform so-called appropriate sociality if you are deemed to be incorrectly performing gender and/or sexuality? While socio-cultural conditioning restricts the range of appropriate behavior and expression, there are many ways to find oneself outside of that range. Paraphrasing Tolstoy, within a society, all socially condoned socialities are the same, each divergent sociality is divergent in its own way.

Divergent socialities, however, hold radical dormant possibilities within them. Indeed, several authors have gestured at the disruptive political potentials of Autistic sociality, especially at the common intersection of Trans and Autistic identities: Ashley (2025) recognizes the potential in neuroqueer knowledges and neurotrans affects to choreograph new ways of being that do not rest on the normative and calls for solidarity across trans studies, disability justice, and critical neurodiversity studies to achieve this future. Pyne (2021) similarly suggests escaping the trap of neuronormative and neoliberal futures through the trap door of crip trans time and autistic disruptions.

Conversely, J. Logan Smilges (2023) embraces crip negativity, not out of a desire to reject crip futures but rather to allow us to pause in the present and take time to mourn, rage, or otherwise make space for feeling bad. Sometimes this means feeling bad over how much we need (internalized ableism strikes again) and other times, over how resistant others can be to



accommodating said needs. Smilges considers crip negativity as a necessary step towards collective liberation. I propose that embracing Autistic affect alienation can serve a similar purpose.

“You think too much.” “You can have anything for your birthday, except for books.” “Stop bothering the nice lady. She doesn’t want to hear about Greek mythology.” “You are never happy anyway.” “What are you, a philosopher?” I did not attach to the correct objects, did not exhibit the correct desires, and did not perform the right feelings in front of others. Growing up, I was often called variants of killjoy and party-poopers in Arabic and French. Why could I not be happy at loud parties and reflect others’ enjoyment on my face? Why was I so quiet in large gatherings where people frequently spoke over one another?

“Don’t mind her, she is always like this,” my family started to say. “Like what?” I wondered. At times, people accused me of looking judgmental when I was merely lost in thought. To try to fix my affect problem, I spent hours in front of the mirror, practicing facial expressions. My mother thought it was vanity, but I just wanted to appear more human. The autistic affect alien may learn to wear a mask and perfect a performance, while internally residing in their home planet (Miller 2003).

Ahmed (2010) looks at political figures such as the feminist killjoy, the unhappy queer, the melancholic migrant, and the angry Black women in her book *The Promise of Happiness*. I set forth a fifth figure: the frustrating Autist. The Autist is frustrating because he is a “puzzle,” because she does not react as expected, because the manifestation of their unmet needs in a social space embarrasses their caregivers, potentially more so when their autism is unidentified. Research I have conducted with late diagnosed Autistic adults indicated that while they did not have the label “Autistic,” labels of “brat,” “contrarian,” “stubborn,” “difficult,” “oversensitive,” “dramatic,” or “manipulative” were often applied instead. The latter three were more common for those assigned female at birth, due to deeply ingrained gendered stereotypes (Frasca et al. 2022; Paganini et al. 2023). This is not to say that those identified in childhood have it easier, as a neuronormative society still imposes compliance on them in the form of intense behavioral modification techniques. The frustrating Autist must be disciplined into behaving in a more socially acceptable manner. This rhetoric can be found in Ivar Lovaas’ dehumanizing description of Autistic children as raw materials from which psychologists following his method can construct a person (Chance 1974). It continues to this day through the Judge Rosenberg Center justifying using electroshocks on Autistic and intellectually disabled people by graphically describing acts of violence allegedly committed by one of their residents on their website (Judge Rotenberg Educational Center). Although there has been evidence of excessive use of those shocks for benign behavior (Gonnerman 2012), the center relies on the trope of the violent mentally disturbed person, often present in popular culture (Pieper et al. 2023), to legitimize harm. A ban on the devices used to administer the electronic shocks has yet to pass, despite an ongoing campaign by disability rights activists (Autism Self Advocacy Network and Center for Disability Rights).

The frustrating Autist could be perceived as resisting social norms when she flaps her hands, rocks back and forth, or talks to herself. Her “agitation” challenges capitalistic and ableist requirements for bodies to be docile and productive (Chen 2012). But we could also adopt an alternative perspective. In Ahmed’s words, “What if the world ‘houses’ some bodies more than others, such that some bodies do not experience that world as resistant?” (2010, 12). She is referencing how privilege structures embodied experiences. Being autistic means frequently running into the world’s resistance to our ways of reaching well-being or a calmer nervous system. As a neurominority, we did not get to set the rules and experience a world at



odds with our needs. When socializing inevitably leads to corrections because our social performance is deemed unsatisfactory to the allistic majority, self-trust is eroded. After all, how can we trust our instinctive social impulses when they are often poorly received? Thus, ironically, Autistic people might have to relearn Autistic sociality as adults. Unmasking, which includes not camouflaging Autistic traits anymore, is a delicate dance of micro-decisions, moderated by privilege. Black Autistic activists online have frequently highlighted that people of color cannot afford to completely unmask in public in a world that gives us less benefit of the doubt than it does to white autistics (Moore 2024; Potts, 2024; Ventour-Griffiths 2022). I acknowledge here my own privilege as a lighter skinned Arab who could pass as Spanish or Portuguese. Darker skinned Autistic people have to make more internal calculations than I do to ensure their safety. As Black Spectrum Scholar (@Blackspectrumscholar) expressed in her Threads comment on January 1, 2025, “In interactions with law enforcement or healthcare, compliance and masking can mean the difference between life and death.” But how about when we are alone? Sadly, I have heard from many Autistic people that they cannot unmask even when completely alone. Suppressing stims and instinctive ways of moving, even policing our own thoughts, can become second nature after a lifetime of negative reactions from others, ranging from rejection to abuse. Therefore, practicing listening to our bodies and respecting our preferences in private might have to be the first step before we can begin to reclaim Autistic sociality. We might then accept the invitation issued by Maier, Hsu, Cedillo, and Yergeau (2020) to share in their project of collective Trans/Crip worldmaking by creating and maintaining trans disabled spaces where alternative scripts for belonging and mutual care are put into practice.

Atmospheric (Dis)Attunements

Kathleen Stewart’s framework of “atmospheric attunements” offers another valuable lens through which to examine autistic sociality. Stewart asserts that paying “analytic attention to the charged atmospheres of everyday life” can lead to generative questions about “how forces come to reside in experiences, conditions, things, dreams, landscapes, imaginaries, and lived sensory moments” (2011, 445). She defines an atmosphere as a “force field,” a “lived affect,” and “an attunement of the senses, of labors, and imaginaries to potential ways of living in or living through things” (452). Her work, situated in affect theory, illustrates how scholarly attention to affect, far from being mere self-indulgence, can constitute an essential intervention.

Through the focus on atmospheres, scholars employing affect theory have emphasized how feelings are not just created within a person but through the resonance of bodies with one another (Kanyeredzi et al. 2019). This begs the question: what kinds of atmospheres are created through the resonance of autistic and allistic bodies and consciousnesses? How qualitatively different is this from the atmospheres created by autistic-autistic interactions?

Stewart’s framework can also be put into conversation with Erin Manning’s ideas (2013) concerning Autistic sociality. Manning argues that Autistic sociality is an affective and embodied attunement that is deeply engaged with the world. It is a “more than human” sociality. She uses Autistic activist Mel Baggs’s sensory engagement with her environment (sound, movement, and light) as an example. Baggs’ hyper-attunement to textures, rhythms, and light, rather than just human voices or faces, is often mischaracterized as a deficit in empathy or as being “nonrelational,” but Manning reclaims it as a profound hyperrelationality instead.



Nevertheless, everyday social interactions are often charged sites of trouble and confusion for Autistic people. Even so-called “high-functioning” Autistic people are usually judged as socially awkward by allistic people (Grossman 2014) and subjected to social skills training to enhance social competence, although these trainings are not empirically validated and may increase stigma while inhibiting authenticity (Bottema-Beutel et al. 2017). Therefore, there is great potential to excavate insights into autistic subjectivity through paying attention to the seemingly ordinary everyday interactions between Autistic and allistic people, or among Autistic people. It is in this spirit that I offer the following:

2015. I enter a room with my friend and coworker. She greets the magician. Technically, you do not need to know that we are working with a magician, but I insist on you knowing. He smiles widely and cheerfully wishes her a good morning. I greet him with the same words and tone. He says a curt hello and turns his back. The atmosphere just shifted, did it not? I try to confirm this with my friend, but she has not noticed. Was my greeting unsatisfactory? But I mimicked her words and tone perfectly. Does he already dislike me? I cannot imagine why. We barely know each other. Have I had a chance to fall in his esteem already? I guess I will never know.

2020. I am in a work meeting, one of many. Through various communications, I have become aware that there is a lack of clarity. Each team member has understood the assignment differently. This will cause problems. I have tried to communicate this to a coworker privately, but they are too convinced their interpretation is correct. At the meeting, I ask a carefully phrased question to ensure everyone can get on the same page. Immediately, the air shifts. Have I stepped on a social landmine? Why are they looking annoyed? It is agonizing to spend a lifetime noticing how often others believe you have messed up but having no idea why or how to fix it. It will take another coworker pointing out that asking questions makes me look incompetent. This makes no sense to me, nor do I understand why reputation management trumps efficiency. As I am not the person in charge, however, I have no choice but to accept that there will be mistakes and tasks will have to be redone or to point out my co-workers’ misunderstandings in front of the head of the project and earn their resentment. Neither option enthruses me.

2022. I am visiting a friend for Christmas. We are walking outside in an unfamiliar city on a cold December night, and he is asking me questions. “Did we go left or right at the traffic light?” “Have we passed a bridge on our way here?” I am unable to answer any of them. I have been too focused on forcing myself to keep placing one foot in front of the other despite the various sensory assaults on my system. He looks at me as if he is seeing me for the first time and my heart twists. This is it. This is the moment. The moment he will start thinking less of me, the moment he will start treating me like I cannot do anything on my own, the moment he will stop trusting me. It has happened many times before. And he is perplexed, for a little while. He cannot wrap his head around how someone “so smart” can struggle so much at the basic task of memorizing a short route. He becomes overprotective and I must remind him he is not my parent. But then he readjusts, integrates his new discoveries into his perspective of me, and apologizes. The disattunement turns to attunement again, proof it can happen. In my experience, it is rare that someone has the humility and emotional intelligence to self-correct a false interpretation of my actions and capacities.

2024. In a room surrounded by other Autistic people for the first time, I feel my body relax. I stop trying to discipline myself into an acceptable form. The conversation twists and jumps and zings. Detours are taken, interruptions happen, but it is not chaotic. There is a shared rhythm, and I am content to sit back and observe it. So, this is what it is like to not have



to strain and bend to socialize with others. Yet, I feel a creeping sense of alienation enter my psyche. I cannot help but notice that I am likely the only non-white person in the room, and most definitely the only non-American. Their cultural referents mean nothing to me. I don't even know if a life like mine will make sense to them, its shape laughably out of place in this space. My biggest Autistic struggles before moving to the US had to do with being Autistic in a country at war. The sounds of spy drones were sensorily overwhelming, even when they did not trigger PTSD. I kept getting lost and suffering meltdowns because my GPS was malfunctioning due to GPS jamming. I could not trust that plans would not change at the last minute due to the possibility of bombing, as detrimental to the autistic need for structure and predictability as you could get. How can I express any of that without being met by looks of pity, the attunement immediately broken? This is the autistic immigrant's dilemma: Cultural spaces are neurotypically dominated. Autistic spaces are white dominated. Make your choice. Which part of you do you feel like suppressing today?

This dance of attunement and disattunement does not merely reveal interpersonal factors at play. Social and professional expectations, frameworks of individuality versus interdependence, gender, race, ethnicity, and nationality, all operate in the background of these vignettes. A friend has suggested that the magician in the first vignette might simply have disliked me because I was a visibly gender non-conforming person and/or an Arab in a conservative Midwestern town. Perhaps. But it could also have easily been my Autistic presence and sociality, which has ruffled many feathers over the years. The second vignette is presented within a discussion of neurodivergence, but how much could cultural ideals have played a role, as the team was multinational? The point is that none of these atmospherically charged encounters happened in a vacuum. They are an origami of forces, which can be unfolded in various ways. Finally, while the last vignette presents the possibility of a different resonance between Autistic bodyminds, it is still not a perfect harmony, as discordant notes are bound to arise. This is not meant as a gesture of pessimism concerning Autistic socialities, but as an invitation toward awareness of who is being alienated in any given encounter.

Conclusion

The Autist is a social being. The fact that our sociality takes different forms than what the majority is accustomed to does not diminish its value. Autistic sociality redefines the parameters of the social, showcasing that it does not have to include language or be limited to human-human interactions. It destabilizes verbal, corporeal, linguistic, temporal and spatial norms embedded within allistic sociality and reflects different values, such as a focus on transmission of information clearly over managing a social image. It embraces Autistic traits that are usually devalued such as stimming and sharing information about one's interests at length and in detail. Per Autistic social norms, information is a gift. Misunderstandings arise when allistic individuals associate negative intentions to this sharing of information, such as believing it is a kind of power move (Kotowicz 2022). Further research on the differences between Autistic and allistic sociality and implementing workshops targeted at teaching allistic people Autistic social norms (as the reverse already exists) could go a long way toward making this world more livable for Autists.

I have explored two theoretical frameworks through which to understand Autistic sociality. As affect aliens, Autists are frequently alienated from others in social environments because they do not express the expected emotions or hold socially condoned desires. This gives rise to the figure of the frustrating Autist, "puzzling" everyone with their behavior, exhausting



well-meaning parents, and exasperating authority figures with their non-conformity. One might say that even if Autistic people do not choose to rebel, their innate differences prime them to destabilize the status quo. How might that impact acceptance of gender divergence and non-conformity, queer and kinky sexualities, and alternative relationship styles, both by Autists and allistic society? Secondly, as Autistic people experience frequent moments of disattunement, a closer look at those moments provides an embodied perspective on wider forces and systems that perpetuate inequality and marginalization. How far could we take such analysis?

Furthermore, it is clear that ignoring race, ethnicity, and national origin is not tenable in research, services, or advocacy surrounding autism. As long as the focus remains on white voices, the Autistic global majority will suffer the consequences of this neglect. Within the topic of Autistic sociality, examining how Autistic POC handle code-switching for both race and neurotype would be a compelling topic of study. The under-researched Global South also deserves much more scholarly attention as it houses millions of Autistic people, many of whom might not be aware they are Autistic, given the global imbalance in knowledge and resources (Durkin et al. 2015). What might the world look like if they were all empowered with access to those resources? Could we see a tipping point where Autistic rights begin to be taken seriously by the allistic majority? In the meantime, working on the creation of Autistic spaces and building of Autistic community remains our best chance at reclaiming Autistic sociality and being able to express it in its full weird glory.

Notes

1. I have chosen to capitalize the noun Autist and the adjective Autistic throughout this essay to emphasize their status as a marginalized identity. It is a reclamation of neurodivergent selfhood in the face of dehumanizing rhetoric and medicalizing discourse.

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Autistic A/Genders,
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