

Autism in Words: Exploration of Autism in Literature

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Oftentimes, myths about Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) dehumanize autistic individuals by portraying them as emotionally detached and incapable of sincerity or empathy. Progress in ASD research has worked towards correcting erroneous claims like the one above by clarifying the clinical underpinnings of the disorder. The DSM-5 states that ASD is a neurodevelopmental disorder that impacts an individual's social communication and interpersonal relations (50). The American Psychiatric Association asserts that ASD can be characterized by difficulties in nonverbal communicative behaviors, impaired language abilities, and repetitive and/or restrictive patterns of behaviors, or interests (51). While a clinical definition is necessary for diagnosis, it's important to assess whether its objective, check-list nature fully captures what it means to have autism. Generally, the limited exposure to neurodivergent narratives and the amplification of clinical and neurotypical perspectives produces a disconnect in understanding the reality of autism. This tension seeps into various sectors of social life and transforms attitudes within the community, leading to neutral doctors, misunderstanding teachers, anxious peers, and misguided family and friends. The ultimate question becomes: who holds power over the narrative- the authorial voice of observers of autism or those with actual lived experiences? Through intimate accounts, autistic authors Robin M. Eames and A.J. Odesso, challenge readers to reconsider the perspectives that they hold on autism. In the poems "Crip Mythic" and "Nothing Goes Away" respectively, the authors expose the omnipresent authorial voice by subtly revealing binaries that reinforce this power dynamic. Although the message is unified, each writer uses a distinct literary style to convey their thoughts.

Through clever binaries and tragic irony, "Crip Mythic" reveals the immediate and long-term impacts that societal stigmas surrounding autism have on neurodivergent individuals. Eames begins by exaggerating the repetition of the letter "m" to produce phonetic awareness while reading the first stanza: "my body is not my body but a metaphor in someone else's mouth" (ll.1-2, underline mine). This added sensory weight draws the reader's attention to their mouth, acting as the perfect prelude for Eames's introduction to the first binary of the poem, the dichotomization of the body and the self. The narrator's lack of possession over their body is not only reflected in the literal meaning of the verse but also through the intentional use of an uncapitalized "m" in the first "my" of the sentence. As the plot unfolds, the poem is structured to follow a pattern in which an external viewer's perspective is emphasized, highlighting the direct role they play in shaping the separation the speaker feels. The first commentators are a group of strangers, who give the metaphor substance. According to them, the narrator's body is "a curse, a broken destiny, a terrible doom, [and] a disappointment" (ll.3-4, commas mine). Through these comparisons, Eames begins to uncover the stigmas that reduce neurodivergent individuals as misfortunate, and their lives as negligible. This impression is solidified when the narrator writes, "my body is a fate worse than death for those who have never fought off death to live in my body" (ll. 5-7). The strangers, who have never actually fought off death, just as they have never actually experienced life as a neurodivergent individual, are quick to write it off as a fate worse than death.

Indeed, the irony in the above statement introduces the second binary: life versus death. Readers see the shame heighten when the speaker's body becomes the "aching heart" of a sorrowful family member (ll. 12) and then transforms to the "specter of someone it hurts to recall" (ll. 14). Eames completes the idea by writing, "I am all grandfathers all elderly parents, the occasional aunt or sibling struck down by disease haunting the text" (ll. 15-17). The second half of the poem is imbued with vivid ghost imagery as a way of reinforcing the tragedy of stigmatization. Despite being very much alive, the speaker has been undeservedly deemed as too triggering to

approach, becoming the eternal source of sorrow for the "aching heart" of the family (ll. 12). A sorrow that is equated to the pain of premature familial deaths and the loss of cherished elders. The dehumanization is not limited to the words and attitudes of strangers and family; it extends to clinical blindness, as doctors experiment with the body to "answer [scientific] enquiries" (ll. 10, "scientific" mine). Moving from one failed treatment to the other, the author is left feeling "drugfucked and divine" as their body is strained by the continuous search for the correct cocktail of medications (ll. 11). Even through a dispossessed state, Eames reveals the profound objectification that neurodivergent individuals experience as a result of the stigmas that exist in personal relationships and institutional settings. "Crip Mythic" subtly commands readers to reconsider their own attitudes about autism, cautioning us about the weight our assumptions carry.

In contrast, in the poem "Nothing Goes Away," Odesso places readers into a conversation between the speaker and their doctor, emphasizing the contrast between the authoritative voice of the doctor and the lived experience of the patient. The poem opens with Dr. Wolf stating, "If there's anything we know about the autistic *brain*... it's that nothing goes away" (ll. 1-3, italics mine). From the start, readers can gauge that Dr. Wolf is uninterested in stimulating conversation between her and the speaker. Rather than introducing or asking, Dr. Wolf "states" that this is a general characteristic of the autistic brain. The binary between doctor and patient forms when the speaker thinks to themselves, "In answer- cautious, but content- I nod" (ll. 3). The pauses created by the en-dashes alter the reading of the line, suggesting that the response, rather than the actual answer, to the doctor's statement is a cautious nod. Thinking about the dynamic at play, on one side of the table is Dr. Wolf, armed with numerous degrees, years of schooling, and an overly objective demeanor; on the other end, is the patient, burdened by the stigma surrounding their diagnosis.

In any situation, this sort of imbalance of power would induce anxiety in any individual. Odesso, however, adds another layer by implicitly illustrating the speaker's difficulty with verbal communication. Typically relying on the "pristine conveyance" of a keyboard- the use of assistive technology for communication- the speaker is only provided a pen (ll. 11-12). As their "wrist jerks stiffly" and their "fingers jot cliffs"- a clinical feature that manifests in some autistic individuals- the only physical reaction to the statement the speaker can produce at the moment is a blink: "And then I blink" (ll. 13-14). This blink, however, in no way means that the narrator fully agrees with Dr. Wolf's claim. Instead, "I would like to tell her my *mind* is a shattered mirror" (ll. 4-5, italics mine). The contrast between Dr. Wolf's use of "brain" and the speaker's use of "mind" changes the contour of the discussion. Rather than agreeing with Dr. Wolf's detached, sweeping description, the speaker intends to share an intimate reflection of what it feels like to live with autism. Focusing specifically on language production, a combination of abstract and concrete words is used to convey the sense of struggle the narrator feels while trying to verbally communicate:

Longing to confess that glass-cold-to-molten, mercury-backed-transforms thought into pierced flesh, soundly refuses translation, slips my tongue (ll. 8-11). The use of concrete words like "glass," "molten," "mercury," "flesh," and "tongue" evokes an image of glassmaking. This image is strengthened by the earlier reference to the speaker's mind being a shattered mirror. Hidden in this concrete imagery is the abstract idea of the pain the speaker experiences while trying to communicate verbally. This pain is emphasized when the speaker writes that "thought" feels like "pierced flesh" that "refuses translation" and ultimately "slips" their tongue. The choppy rhythm of these lines communicates the strain the speaker feels, suggesting the short, concise sentences often spoken by those physically injured. Odesso contrasts the internal feelings of the speaker with the authorial behavior of the doctor to demonstrate how stigma impacts which features of autism are emphasized. While the doctor embraces this generalized trait of hyperintelligence in the autistic brain, she fails to acknowledge other characteristics that would require more accommodation, such as allowing the patient to bring their assistive communication device. Odesso uses this poem as an opportunity to criticize the unwillingness of even those in the clinical field to fully integrate neurodivergent individuals into the world and to reveal that stigmatization seeps into every social institution.

*This author wrote this paper for English 232: Stories from the Spectrum taught by Dr. Catherine Reedy.

In conclusion, the poems “Crip Mythic” and “Nothing Goes Away” by Robin M. Eames and A.J. Odesso, respectively, challenge the dominant perspective of autism by highlighting the role the various authorial voices play in shaping the narrative that defines autism. In their poems, each of the authors subtly points out the exclusive amplification of clinical descriptions of neurodivergence and neurotypical narratives, which ultimately create an incomplete representation of what it means to live with autism. The poets achieve this by using vivid imagery, binaries, and extended metaphors to beautifully expose the transmission of stereotypes and stigma regarding autism. The poems intend to spark a larger project, confronting these assumptions to create an inclusive environment. Both Eames and Odesso, allow readers to reflect on their own attitudes regarding neurodivergence, by providing an intimate account of what it actually feels like to live with autism. Through their narratives, readers are able to get a glimpse of the reality of autism, and through the poet’s critiques are able to recognize the limitations within our own societies. Rather than living in a world run by stereotypes and fear, our mindset should be working towards empowerment. This can materialize in numerous ways, including greater autism literacy, integrating accommodations in social sectors, etc. Stigmatization produces a deaf and blind community, unwilling to make changes. Through accounts like “Crip Mythic” and “Nothing Goes Away,” the intention is to prevent such a narrow mindset from dominating society. I will end this paper with a stanza from Palestinian poet Mohammed El-Kurd’s poem, “This is Why We Dance”:

If hearing about a world other than yours makes you uncomfortable,
 drink these sea, cutoff your ears, blow another bubble to bubble your bubble and
 the pretense. Blow another town of bodies in the name of fear (Rifqa, ll. 23-28).

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