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# Celebrating Neurodivergence amid Social Injustice

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## Abstract

Burgeoning narratives of neurodivergence increase representation in media, producing an unprecedented visibility and awareness of what it means to be neurodivergent in a neurotypical world. In this article I examine the ways in which a neurodivergent subject position can provide liberatory insights into oppressive patriarchal gender structures, while exploring productive tensions of the histories and lineages of neurodivergence marked by inequities, erasure, and epistemic injustice (Catala et al. 2021). Although self-diagnosis is often accepted among communities, individuals without diagnosis face delegitimization in navigating institutions, accentuating race, class, and gender disparities. How do we honor a lineage of stories of neurodivergent individuals who could not claim this identity, and what does it mean to celebrate neurodiversity and simultaneously hold space and honor the absences marked by intersecting oppressions? Using Maria Lugones's world-traveling as a method, I reflect on these tensions via narratives of my own discovery of neurodivergence and diagnosis, contextualizing it within a larger lineage of neurodivergent family who do not identify as such, as well as my encounters with varying levels of access, privilege, and understanding. I position my autoethnographic analysis against anecdotes and discursive media of the neurodiversity movement, finding that an autistic subject position complicates both femininity and gender.

This article contains mention of eating disorders, bullying, trauma, sexual assault and violence, gender discrimination, misogyny, transphobia, racism, and ableism.

## Celebrating Neurodivergence amid Social Injustice

*I am having a night terror again. My family is downstairs. While I sleep, they discard their human suits and gather as wolves. In my dreams, a feminine wolf follows me around. She wears a long trench coat, hiding most of her body to be seen as human, but I know she is a wolf. We recognize our own. She is omniscient and sees through my attempts to practice and become human. She knows I can never fully become one.*

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This article explores subjectivities of my own neurodivergence and tensions between epistemes of naming, identity, kinship, and lineage. I employ Maria Lugones's ideas of world-traveling and faithful witnessing to my past selves, my grandmother, my friends, and other communities I encounter to understand opportunities for coalition and solidarity as intersubjectivity is built, while simultaneously holding complications of communication and language around naming shared experience. Autistic people experience a unique relationship with gender that contains liberatory potential (Davidson and Tamas 2016; Walker 2021; Moore et al. 2022). However, from a situated perspective, the potential of a neurodivergent subject position to emancipate is not without trappings of gender oppression and racial constructions (Kearl 2021). In seeking feminist solidarity in ways that transgress the colonial/modern gender system (Lugones 2007), I return to the question: What does it mean to be feminine and neurodivergent? Ultimately, I show that this question contains productive tensions and paradoxes, as I find that neurodivergence thwarts normative constructions of femininity while deconstructing binary notions of gender itself. Autistic epistemes, therefore, become a tool with which to critically examine gender more deeply, and at times, in excesses beyond language. Drawing upon Lugones's work, I examine the extent to which gender is also a racialized neurotypical construction shaped by oppression. Lugones writes, "World-traveling, streetwalker theorizing, curdling, and trespassing are all different and related forms of noticing oppression at its logic and moving against it. Some of the movements are emphatically epistemic; all include an epistemic shift" (Lugones 2003, 12).<sup>1</sup> To partake in the feminist praxis Lugones is suggesting, I first explore anecdotes of my past self through memory. As I wade into the prospects of memory and past selves, I encounter my grandmother, a neurodivergent woman who would never have identified as such or even known the term. There, I explore entanglements with neurodivergence and cisheteronormativity. Then I examine what it means for me to claim a subject standpoint of neurodivergence and how this implicates the intelligibility of my raced and gendered experiences, investigating the plurality of selves that exist between tensions of identification and nonidentification. Finally, I discuss possibilities and foreclosures for coalition as I claim this subject standpoint through my own friendships and memberships in evolving communities.

### Faithful Witnessing and World-Traveling

My grandmother was an infamous picky eater. "I hate cooking," she would say in her later years. "I just want a peanut butter sandwich." No cheese, no seasonings. Some say, "no adventure." Some say, "selfish." My mother was determined I would not be like her mother—living in fear, foreclosing possibility and opportunity. I am four years old and I sit at the kitchen table. I am gagging. A lot of things make me gag. The feeling of cotton balls, the sound of my finger on the handle of the car window. My mother forces me to eat cooked carrots anyway. The smell nauseates me. She bribes me. "For each carrot you eat, you can put your finger through the candle flame one time." I am fascinated by flames, water, smoke, and steam. I learn to close my eyes and swallow without tasting. I still gag but switch my attention to the flame. My grandmother looks on, washing dishes. She turns her back, staring out the window.

I am six years old. I can skip first grade, they say. She needs socialization though, my mother says. They do not know what's wrong with me. Poor little girl, my mother says, but we will figure out what's wrong with you. After being poked and prodded by various doctors, my body is no longer my own. I am put on a restricted diet. I am taking

twenty-five supplements a day. I am a first-grader religiously repeating affirmations to clear my energy centers. Look at the food sensitivities, the tiredness, the meltdowns, the fidgeting. There must be an answer. I have learned to choke down cooked carrots by now. My food preferences are inconsequential. My sensory preferences are inconsequential. I force my body still. My first-grade teacher calls my mother, "Did you put your kid on drugs? She's always been a good student, but she has stopped fidgeting."

Lugones writes that the practices of world-traveling and faithful witnessing are inherently transgressive:

But though the map must contain this abstraction, in engaging in this embodied thought experiment, you (without quotes to indicate your concreteness rather than your "trueness") are sensing the geography looking for signs of power and of limitations, reductions, erasures, and functionalist constructions. This is, in terms of logical levels, the first transgression. And that is also a fundamental transgression, since you are sensing, recognizing, and moving through the spatiality of your everydayness as possibly reductive, demoralizing, containing, and eliminating your possibilities. (Lugones 2003, 9)

As I witness my mother navigating raising an Autistic child without knowing she has one, I realize she was trying to teach me to survive in a geography that was not built for me, to prepare me for a map that would not accommodate my sensitivities, proclivities, my body. She was trying to make me more resilient than both she and her own mother had been. Resilient, to her and many parents, meant being able to pass as "normal." Unless you were head-banging at school, autism was not a thing for girls then (or for anyone who was not a white boy, for that matter). Restrictive diets were recommended as a "cure" for autism, or as a last resort for little girls for whom medical doctors could not explain what was wrong. So, though I did not get the label, I got the disciplining of the body through the medical-industrial complex that told me there was no space for my embodied subjectivity on the map. Hypersensitive. Food sensitive. Hysterical. Stubborn. Spoiled. But not Autistic.

I have always felt more at home with animals than people. More at home outside in the woods than at school. By third grade, I channel this into an obsession with horses. I draw them over and over in class. I have memorized anatomical books and all the breeds, even the ancient and obscure ones like the Norwegian Fjord. I read every horse novel. I pretend I am a horse. It is much more compelling to be a horse than a person. It is much easier to be with horses than people. When I am with them, I lean into them, feeling their pulse, fur, and muscle against my cheek. I have a horseback riding lesson every Saturday. If it is suggested I might miss a lesson, I melt down. I am irrational. Unreasonable. Monstrous. I throw and kick and scream and flop. My mother does not know what to do. "Stubborn," she says, holding her head in her hands. "I just don't know what to do with you," she says, crying.

Unfortunately, no matter how hard I try to befriend beasts over humans, they cannot come with me to school. Everywhere I go people seem to have access to a map and hierarchy that I do not have. I try to create my own maps. I create characters from books that help me organize it. I read the book, study the character, and then dress and act like the character. No one knows I am using these scripts. Sometimes I read turn-of-the-century etiquette books to better understand how the world is organized. The librarian and I are on a first-name basis. I practice mannerisms, interests, sayings. Depending on what I have been reading lately, I am in other time periods. I tell no one because this is not pretend or a game; this is survival to learn the genres of man.

Autistic masking is common for Autistic people who can do it successfully. To some extent, all people mask. It resembles masking of other marginalized groups wherein one hides parts of one's identity intentionally. However, sensory components of autistic masking are only in incipient stages of research. Autistic masking is understood to contain a more explicitly effortful premeditated cognitive component than other types of masking, a tendency to be so constant and unrelenting that many autistic people report losing their sense of self completely within what might otherwise be considered inconsequentially embodied and ordinary ways of being (Miller et al. 2021).

Masking creates a split self that is necessary to survive, but for many Autistic people, a longing remains to live in the world that your subjectivity more fully inhabits. In third grade, I write a piece titled "Secret World." "I cannot tell you about this world, you can only experience it," I write definitively at the end. "Very mysterious," writes my teacher on my paper. I was not trying to be mysterious, I think, confused. At school, I face bullying and mostly ignore it because of my rich inner life and hobbies. After all, my own world nourishes me. I do my best to navigate school and friendships, which increasingly means performing traditional feminine gender. My characters help, but by sixth grade it is clear this strategy lacks cohesion and there is something "off." One day, I am particularly proud of an outfit I have put together inspired by an older girl I had been studying. "You dress weird," says a classmate. I get told I am weird a lot, especially when people get to know me. This is the year bullying becomes something I cannot ignore. "I am going to come to your house at night and rape you. I am going to kill you in your sleep," a classmate who sits across from me perpetually whispers. I need better characters to protect me, I decide. I study the affect of feminine gender-presentation harder to cover up my weirdness and insulate me from harm.

To explicitly study the affect of femininity with the aim of passing as a neurotypical is a situated proposition that does not occur outside of social contexts. Neurotypicality is bound up in whiteness and settler colonial ideas of a normative body (Rosqvist, Chown, and Stenning 2020; Ngwagwa 2022). In recent years, masking has been named by the autism research community as a central reason for the underdiagnosis of those like me who were assigned female at birth (Cook et al. 2021). This research implies that because those assigned female at birth appear to be able to suppress their autistic traits more effectively to outsider observers, they may also be "less autistic." Masked autistics are more likely to report suicidality (Cassidy et al. 2018), anxiety, and stress (Cage and Troxell-Whitman 2019), leading one to ask the extent to which these traits are truly being suppressed. If a masked Autistic can still their body in public, at the cost of a meltdown at home, are those traits truly suppressed, and to whom? Considering those who are undiagnosed and have been assigned female at birth as not Autistic if they do not meet the diagnostic threshold by a set of clinical observances disregards the way the diagnostic process for determining autism is constructed via observations from children who have been socialized as white boys, as well as disregards the subjectivities of anyone else who falls outside this narrow demographic.

Simon Baron-Cohen, author of the "extreme male brain theory" of autism (Baron-Cohen 2002), which further entrenches outside observations of Autistic characteristics to reductive and biological understandings of gender, has even recognized the role that masking plays in diagnosis disparities for those assigned female at birth (Hull et al. 2020). However, instead of using this data to become critical of the construction of gender itself, many autism researchers still link the gendered proclivity to mask to the biological, positing that there is a "female autism phenotype" that propagates "protective factors" that require Autistic people who were assigned female at birth to have a

greater load of Autistic genetics before meeting diagnostic thresholds (Zhao et al. 2007; Hull, Petrides, and Mandy 2020). The dominant narrative furthered by this research implies a cis woman who masks in childhood and then ultimately finds out she is Autistic, overlooking how Autistic gender minorities have not only been underexamined in the research (Cook et al. 2021), but also the prevalence with which autistic people are more likely to identify as trans (Milton et al. 2021) or complicate and reject notions of gender (Kourti and MacLeod 2019). Centering these complications would lead to greater insights around the way Autistic experience disrupts cisness and gender binaries. As Lydia X. Z. Brown writes, noting that Autistic people are more likely to be trans, genderqueer, nonbinary, or genderless, “For many of us, gender mostly impacts our lives when projected onto us through other people’s assumptions, but holds little intrinsic meaning” (Brown 2020). This entwinement of both neurodivergence and divergence from norms of gender and sexuality is referred to by some as neuroqueerness (Walker 2021). Autistic perspectives on gender and sexuality largely confound the way these constructs are assumed to operate, partaking in a queering of both neuro-normativity and cis heteronormativity.

Furthermore, adoption of these theories fragments opportunities for solidarity across and among social locations. These theories that double down on the biological connections between autism and gender fail to recognize the ways masked Autistics are not only more likely to be Autistic women, but also gender minorities, people of color, and anyone who does not fit into the image of the cishetero white boy. This fragmentation of Autistic presentations undermines opportunities for solidarity across multiple identity markers. Autistic people of color of any gender are more likely to be labeled as “emotionally disturbed,” thereby experiencing the withholding a host of resources, understanding, and support (Kearl 2021), indicating the presence of what Benjamin Kearl would argue are autism’s racializing assemblages. These diagnostic structures, Kearl writes, demonstrate how “autism knowledge is governed by an evolutionary hierarchy designed to render autistics as non- or not-quite-human” (Kearl 2021, 156). Therefore, Kearl argues, we must critically examine autism as a construct. “Telling a different truth about autism means starting from a place that does not use autistics of colour as analogical limit cases for defining autism knowledge, but instead begins with Blackness as constitutive of neurodiversity such that to be pro-neurodiversity is to be anti-racist” (158).

The social model of disability asserts that whereas impairment is rooted in the body, disability is constructed by society (Ferguson and Nusbaum 2012). Compensatory masking and camouflaging strategies to mitigate the impacts of neurodivergence on personal safety are no different. If masking is a form of compensatory survival strategy that is contingent upon passing and assimilating in a white-supremacist, cisheteropatriarchal society, then masking itself is less of genetic origin and more of a socially constructed survival strategy. We mask to assimilate within the hierarchies given and with the social locations available to us. As an Autistic white woman, I must ask myself to what extent does my masking protect myself while upholding the hierarchical ordering of humanity (Kearl 2021) and participating in white cisheteropatriarchal structures?

### Secret Worlds and Other Planets

In “Women from Another Planet? Feminism and AC Awareness,” Sola Shelly writes,

If gender is a social construct, then autistic people, who are less aware of social norms, are less likely to develop a typical gender identity. Autistic girls may not

envisage themselves becoming wives and mothers when they grow up. If social constructs are made of symbols and representations, then autistic concreteness may lead to a less generalized, and more personal gender identity. Therefore, autism may redefine womanhood in a unique way. (Shelly 2004, 7)

My grandmother would never have known about autism, and certainly not in a way that she would recognize herself. The rocking, the anxiety, the need for predictability. The autodidactic flute-playing, poem-writing, picky eating, finger-flicking, stuffed animal-loving grandmother. “I think I’d like to have been born a man,” my grandmother says, staring straight ahead, as she watches *This Old House* on PBS. “I would have been a carpenter,” she says rocking in her chair.

The inextricable intertwining of autism and nonnormative gender and sexualities has been titled neuroqueerness (Walker 2021) and is a threat to normative ideas of gender binaries rooted in colonizing paradigms. Neuroqueerness acknowledges and names the way disability studies and queer studies on their own do not fully address the autistic experience of disidentification with normativity as entangled with both gender and compulsory neurotypicality in a singular subjective experience (Egner 2018). The history of behavioral therapy techniques used for autistic children are evidence of the way these slippery relationships between neuronormativity and heteronormativity have been sustained and enforced by the practices of the psychiatric discipline. Ole Ivar Løvaas, the founder of applied behavior analysis (ABA), which remains the primary behavioral treatment method for Autistic children, did not view autism as separate from divergences of gender and sexuality. Løvaas was interested not only in making Autistic people seem less Autistic but doing so under a larger umbrella of the “Feminine Boys Project,” which targeted boys seen as “at risk” for homosexuality or being transgender (Yergeau 2018, 103). These tendencies to be Autistic, gender-nonconforming, or queer, as Remi Yergeau writes, were seen as differences of categorization, to be dealt with by the same ABA techniques (103).

Interestingly, years later when Baron-Cohen would posit the “Extreme Male Brain” theory of autism (Baron-Cohen 2002), asserting that since men are better at systematizing than empathizing, and Autistics are too, autism may be caused by extreme testosterone in the brain resulting in “hyper-masculine” traits. This theory is still used today, and shapes diagnostic tests used to diagnose autism.

Juxtaposing these seemingly contradictory ways that clinicians perceive and theorize about autism demonstrates the way autism confounds modern psychiatry and gender. In seeking to manage these disjunctures, conflicting theories seek to pathologize autism while upholding gender itself. These culturally embedded aspects of autism diagnosis and treatment demonstrate that the detection of autism itself is based on deviance from neurotypical constructs that reify oppressive gender systems. This supports scholarship that notes that the construction of modern psychiatry is rooted in colonial racializing paradigms, with the normative body of a cis white man at its center (Spillers 1996). As Hortense Spillers writes in “All the Things You Could Be by Now if Sigmund Freud’s Wife Was Your Mother,” early psychoanalytic theory (the DSM’s predecessor) sought to create ideas of normalcy abstracted from social contexts and discarded the way in which it constructed normalcy and ideas about “naturalness” against the cultural backdrop of Antisemitism (Spillers 1996, 87). Robert Chapman chronicles the intertwining of autism’s relationship with modern psychiatry and racialized gender by noting that the historical context for Hans Asperger’s work (known as one of the central early autism researchers) was 1930s Austria during the rise of the



Nazi party. Chapman cites the broadened categorial pathologization of autistic people (at that time given the label of “Asperger’s”) as a product of the rise of Social Darwinism, reifying eugenicist ideas about white men as ideal members of the state. Chapman writes:

On the one hand, in Nazi ideology, the key role of men was to contribute to the state, and the key role of women was to reproduce. . . . Nazi ideology also promoted a hyper-masculinity, whereby manliness was specifically associated with heroic group activities. The ideal traits associated with the “new man” were thus to develop a “soldier mentality.”. . . Without exhibiting all these traits, males would not be considered “real” men, and would have fallen outside the realms of normality. (Chapman 2016, n.p.)

In this historical context, falling outside the realm of normality meant extermination or cure. The entwinement of these ideals is racialized. As Lugones notes in “Heterosexuality and the Colonial/Modern Gender System,” the gender imposed upon the white bourgeoisie was very different from the gender ideals imposed on the colonized (Lugones 2007, 187). Therefore, an autism diagnosis is constructed by fear narratives that hinge on an idealized white male body “worth curing” by the state (Meunier (Gzhibaeassigaekwe) 2017, 432). Autism was designed to mark white male bodies for attempts at salvaging or exterminating. Pathologizing, curing, or exterminating male bodies that did not fit normality served to uphold what Lugones would call the colonial modern gender system. This system created gender as a *product* of racialization and colonization. In this sense, autism is constructed to mark certain bodies as potentially curable, or worth rehabilitating, which, in the eyes of the coloniality of power, is white bodies (Kearl 2021). The *DSM* criteria were created to address white individuals, and especially male individuals who deviated from what Lugones would call the light side of the colonial/modern gender system (Lugones 2007). This raises the question, if we did not have the colonial/modern gender system, would autism as a construct need to exist?

Often, when I am left in my grandmother’s care she is pacing and whistling a repetitive melody, looking at the clock and then back out the window. The mail was supposed to come. He should be home by now. It is late. She gets in her car to drive around the block several times. Often my mother and I will arrive home from the store and there will be twenty-three missed calls from my grandmother. Later in life she got more emphatic with her praxis of unapologetic refusal. Diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis, she phased out doing many things. She phased out cooking, sometimes foods that she never really liked to begin with (I like things plain! PLAIN! she would say). I don’t want to go anywhere, she would say. Even her conception of her patriarchal Catholic religion changed as she claimed, “God knows me, this is my church,” she would say gesturing out to the window and leafing through her bird book with binoculars in hand. When my grandfather says, “Relax, stop pacing,” she refuses. Who is he to tell her what her self-regulation looks like? What feels right in her body? It was not about explaining to others the landscape of her subjectivity or needing a Facebook group to tell her what she knew to be true about herself. It was about exercising her own agency and power that came from within her body. It was about understanding that they would never understand her secret world. As I faithfully witness the way my grandmother embraced her own neurodivergence without having that term to label it, I am grateful for the way she taught me to be neurodivergent against the

grain of power. For her it was not necessarily about wide-sweeping declarations of identity, but about claiming her embodiment.

Lugones writes that as we witness, we see “heterogeneous aggregates of subjects negotiating a life in the tensions of various oppressing↔resisting relations” (Lugones 2003, 7). Years later, my mother and her siblings are sitting across from a priest as he collects notes to compose a eulogy for my grandmother’s funeral. My mother is emotional and nervous. She blurts out, “Oh—one other thing! She always said she wanted to be a man. . . .” Then, recognizing the tension in the room, she adds, “Because men have it easier,” leaning back in her chair. It is silent. The priest looks down at his paper. His pen is still as he tries to figure out what to write.

On faithful witnessing, Lugones writes:

A collaborator witnesses on the side of power, while a faithful witness witnesses against the grain of power, on the side of resistance. To witness faithfully, one must be able to sense resistance, to interpret behavior as resistant even when it is dangerous, when that interpretation places one psychologically against common sense, or when one is moved to act in collision with common sense, with oppression. Faithful witnessing leads one away from a monosensical life. One ceases to have expectations, desires, and beliefs that fit one for a life in allegiance with oppression. (7)

In this exchange, my mother transgresses the colonial/modern gender system in the name of her mother, but then in the next breath reduces her own mother’s questioning of gender to utilitarian ideologies reflecting her own limited lens of gender-nonconformity. As I witness faithfully, I see my mother attempt to practice competencies of resistance while appealing to forces of interlocking oppression.

Joyce Davidson and Sophie Tamas write, “Not only does gender not constitute the definitive core of autistic experience, but for many, gender is barely present at all; it’s a kind of nonsense or nonentity, but one that takes itself far too seriously, in a way that leads many of those on the spectrum to experience intense frustration and in some cases, furious anger” (Davidson and Tamas 2016, 61). Despite my grandmother not knowing about autism or neurodivergence, it was clear she saw some of the same secret world I did, and she was training me to survive living with a foot in both. Later in life, as she claimed quirks, particularities, neuroses, and disconnects from normativity, she inched toward claiming a more unapologetically neurodivergent way of life. This act of approaching, embracing, and embodying one’s neurodivergence is a process of queering and actively practicing neuroqueerness (Walker 2021, 162). The praxis produced by neuroqueering also functions to claim a disinvestment in patriarchy and a resistant stance to misogyny, a giving up on the project of becoming human. Justine Egner quotes *José Esteban* Muñoz in noting “a process of disidentification” with able-bodied groups (Muñoz 1999; Egner 2018, 131), claiming “Neuroqueering answers Kafer’s . . . call that scholars should critically attempt to ‘trace the ways in which compulsory ablebodiedness/ablemindedness and compulsory heterosexuality intertwine in the service of normativity’” (Egner 2018, 125).

Some of my earliest memories of encounters with literacy are what I might call neuroqueer pedagogies of gender survival. *Neuroqueer* is a modern term, with all the trappings of modernity, so I name this space-making predecessor of a neuroqueer lineage with some ambivalence. Regardless of name, these pedagogies arose out of the embodiment that produces a neuroqueer perspective and were designed to carve space outside



of heteronormativity. Lugones writes, “‘World’-traveling is one of those ways of keeping oneself focused on resistance, one that enables us to exercise the multiple visions, multiple sensings, and multiple sense makings” (Lugones 2003, 7). I don’t remember being taught to read but I do remember my grandmother sitting next to me reading the newspaper to me. We read mostly the comics, but our favorite ritual was the wedding announcements. This is where my grandmother initiated me to understand heteronormativity and affirmed my own subjectivity as separate from this. She would fold the paper down and put on her glasses. I would nestle my body against her arm. She would point to the first couple and roast them, acquiring silly voices to show how much they were, in fact, stuck with each other.

*She picks up the newspaper and goes to the wedding announcements. “Oh look at this one!” She says in a high-pitched voice. “How did I end up with him?” “I guess this will work . . . not really!” She says in a cartoonish voice. “Hehehe . . . I’m soooo in love!” She says mockingly. “I’m not. Let’s get this picture over with.” “What. a. Clunk. . . . No thank you.” She says impishly.*

Lugones writes:

She told us that when she is down when things get to be too much, her husband gone on a drunken spree, all her children getting on her nerves, too little money, too much pressure, well, when she is down she dresses up as a clown and she goes to the streets, la plaza, and she talks to people, mostly kids, and she feels fine again. She got some instruction on how to make herself up at Mujeres Latinas, but she would never work as a clown: “No one can own my clown,” she said. (Lugones 2003, 4)

In reading the wedding announcements to me, my grandmother played the clown while no one was watching except me. It was our secret world. In this she demonstrates to me an active subjectivity that is agentive and beyond her status as “wife.” She teaches me a subject standpoint where heteronormativity and the institution of marriage is recognized as an absurdity. She teaches that marriage and gender is performance. It strikes me that she does this in a way that is a neurodivergent and feminine form of loving. It is playful and subversive. It embraces its own creative digressions to contest and resist power even if, as Lugones writes, not redrawing the map. My grandmother once told me she always wanted to be a mother and a wife. These are two desires that I, like many Autistic people assigned female at birth, never shared, and maybe it was because I felt able to dream differently by her early teachings. Years later, as the story goes, my grandmother looked across the kitchen table from my grandfather and after sixty years of marriage said to him, “This marriage didn’t work out.”

### Tensions of Resistance and Gender-Based Violence

In understanding this map, one can also begin to understand all the ways in which oneself and others violate this spatiality or inhabit it in great resistance, without willful collaboration. Indeed, it seems very important to count as resistance all those tensions whose logic belongs to a logic of resistance, even when they do not redraw the spatiality. Consider battering as a way to control women as an

example. The inhabitation of the spatiality may be different in small things like ignoring the batterer's calls a little bit longer or withdrawing one's affection without his noticing. So, then, it is in noticing the tensions, the small deviations, the senseless communications within the spatiality of power that we begin to be able to speak to each other about resistance. (Lugones 2003, 10)

I share my autism diagnosis with a friend who has known me for decades, across diagnoses and life phases. We talk about the ways in which medical and mental health professionals have been comfortable diagnosing and suggesting PTSD, ADHD, eating disorders, chronic fatigue, anxiety, depression, and bipolar, but are uneasy with the possibility of the subjectivities of Autistic women. "I had an aunt who was Autistic," she says, "Everyone thought she was raped, but now we realize she was Autistic." Like other identity markers that further one from the genres of man, neurodivergence narrows the margin of error by which one must perform cisheteronormativity accurately in order to survive. The ways in which ableism works in concert with misogyny is complicated. Autistic people are more at risk for gender-based violence and sexual assault (Reuben et al. 2021). Additionally, women are less likely to be able to access a diagnosis leading to confusion and lack of self-understanding. "Such work essentializes gender differences by rooting autism in biological maleness and contributes to the degendering of autistic people while reinforcing cultural gender stereotypes" (Bumiller 2008, quoted in Egnor 2018, 126). I had a collection of diagnoses before understanding myself as an Autistic person. To be feminine and neurodivergent is to be quickly dismissed and constructed as "crazy," either because you are not Autistic, or because you are.

In my experience, the medical profession found it easier to construct me as a "battered woman" than Autistic, easier to construct me as "helpless," "eating disordered," or "without a father," as reasons for my distress. Note that Autistic children of color are often constructed as "emotionally disturbed" before being able to access the label of autism (Kearl 2021), and, even if they receive the diagnosis, Black Autistic people are more vulnerable to criminalization and to be targets of police violence (Hutson et al. 2022). This is not to say that abusive relationships were not harmful to me, or that I am beyond being affected by misogyny. This is to say that what was most harmful to me is being gaslit about how I define my own neurodivergent experience. What was most harmful was being told normativity was not most traumatic, when it was. As Autistic people, what traumatizes us may not be on the same levels as what is assumed. This is destabilizing, threatening, and disorienting to the medical-industrial complex and threatening even to some who call themselves feminists. No one ever listened to me about what was abusive to me about *typical* relationships. Trauma was not the professionals' view of eating disorders but rather it was not being able to pick my own foods or tolerate the lights in the cafeteria. Trauma is sitting in a therapist's office and being told you are perseverating because you are looking for your father when really you are looking for communication scripts to navigate relationships. As feminists, we must come to some degree of shared agreement about what is traumatic to women and nonbinary, trans, and other gender-nonconforming people to further our causes, but sometimes neurodivergent voices and perspectives throw a wrench in the neurotypically anticipated efficiency of this conversation, revealing the ways normativity may be uncritically embedded in mainstream narratives.

Eventually, I found myself gravitating toward less healthy relationships. In a way, these seemed to not require the same level of hiding one's anxiety or reading minds. They seemed more obvious and with more room to make mistakes without it being

my personal neurosis—a relationship sandbox where I might figure something out. This was, of course, not true in many regards as codependent, manipulative, and abusive relationships have grave consequences. However, after several years of feeling like I could not navigate normal relationships and finding no answers anywhere, the debilitating anxiety around the pursuit of “normal” relationships was intolerable. I stopped using “normality” as a proxy for “healthy,” but I did not have any replacement tools or gauges. I thought maybe I could figure it out on my own. When I ended up in a textbook abusive relationship, I had trouble understanding the meaning, and especially, stigma that everyone else seemed to attach to this experience. Did they not realize that all my relationships had been characterized by debilitating anxiety? Did they not realize that the reason I could not do “normal” relationships is that they expected me to tolerate uncertainty in a way I am not capable of? Some of my relationships were a nightmare, but the alternative of pursuing “normal” relationships had been equally traumatic in a different way. In a way, these new traumas were easier to grapple with than the mystery that led up to it. Normality had discounted how anxiety-producing navigating normal relationships was for me, and that isolation and sense of failure is soul-crushing.

It seems it is not understood that toxic or unhealthy relationships might be entered into not because the person has low self-esteem or some type of victim complex, but only after seeking healthy ones and finding oneself unable to manage without support and acknowledgment of their needs. This is an attempt to find an adaptation and should not be considered a weakness. These possibilities, in my case, were not considered and instead were narrated in ways that situate deficits and flaws in the individual. This is another example of how misogyny exploits and invalidates neurodivergence, especially unrecognized neurodivergence, and works in concert with hegemonic neurotypicality. The professionals never presented possibilities of neurodivergence playing a role in a way that constituted a valid perspective worth preserving and worthy of support. At best, this situation was constructed as a product of unwanted traits that I could work to eliminate: naivete or depression. The discourse of nonprofessionals was even more damaging, and instead employed tropes that reinforced “battered women” stereotypes, which I never related to. I certainly was not seeking an abusive relationship or the consequences of one, but I had been suffering silently with “normal” relationships, and no one seemed to acknowledge the validity of that perspective as being of primary importance. The trauma was less in the acts of the gender-based violence I experienced, and more deeply from being disavowed by other women when I narrated my truth about it, as it revealed the way my very existence, behavior, and perspective defied definitions of femininity and what was acceptable for women to want and contest.

Misogyny perpetuates gender-based violence but then denies individuals the right to narrate their own trauma. The medical-industrial complex then denies anyone other than cis men and nonwhite neurodivergent people the right to accurate diagnoses that may help define their trauma and have access to healing and support. Misogyny uses autism as an excuse to harm Autistic women and, at the same time, would prefer that women not claim the identity of Autistic, all while ignoring any epistemic authority of autistic individuals to explain their own experiences that could rectify these epistemic inconsistencies (Catala et al. 2021). It is more convenient to misogyny for undiagnosed Autistic women to be “crazy,” because then all women might be crazy. If Autistic women are understood as having their own epistemic sensibilities that the patriarchy does not understand or see, then what other epistemic sensibilities might women possess?

The show *Everything's Gonna be OK* (2020) written by autistic writer Josh Thomas, features Matilda, an autistic character played by Kaila Kromer, who is an Autistic actor. The show contends with some of the tensions of misogyny, consent, Autistic women, and ideas about femininity and power. In the first season, seventeen-year-old Matilda wants to explore her sexuality and is depicted consciously developing strategies and plans that help her understand herself and others in this process of self-discovery. She is shown deliberately experimenting with alcohol and other coming-of-age rituals associated with typical teenage life. In season 1, episode 5, "West African Giant Millipedes" (*Everything's Gonna be OK* 2020), Matilda attends a party and experiences a rejection from Luke, the object of her affection. She then drinks more heavily and comes across Zane, an eighteen-year-old who is in a trailer outside the party. She laments about her struggles to Zane, recounting that she has been rejected despite her "budding sexuality." After some prodding, Zane confirms for her that he thinks it is because of her autism. Matilda asks Zane to kiss her and then, as he takes off his shirt, asks him if they are having sex and he says yes. The next episode shows Nicholas, Matilda's older brother and caretaker (played by Josh Thomas), in the principal's office. They are sorting out what happened that evening after Matilda's sister, Genevieve, punched Zane in Matilda's defense and is facing suspension. As Nicholas says to Zane's father, "drunk, crying, underage, Autistic," pointing out that the optics are not good for Zane and meet the criteria for rape. In the end, both parties drop the incident, with Genevieve relieved of any punishment for punching Zane. Upon arriving home, Matilda perseverates, asking Nicholas for detailed definitions of what constitutes rape. Nicholas struggles with the conversation, which exasperates Matilda, who asks if she is being treated differently because she is Autistic. Nicholas admits it does complicate it and finally, after listing many scenarios, says it's a "rainbow of rape." He attempts to explain the variety of situations that constitute rape but struggles to articulate the various shades. Matilda finally asks Nicholas if he thinks she has been raped and he cannot answer. By the end, she indignantly and angrily declares that she used Zane, not the other way around. "I didn't say it had to be good," she says after they wade through one scenario. Nicholas and Matilda half-jokingly discuss that maybe she will call him next time before she has sex to figure out the situation.

The themes presented in this show reveal that Autistic people often point out discrepancies in neurotypical and patriarchal understandings of relationality, consent, and agency, even as constructed by some versions of feminism. Autistic people are said to struggle with consent and experience different complications than neurotypical people (McNaughtan 2019), but this episode shows how the legal realm does not acknowledge the multiple possibilities for what neurodivergent consent and sexuality might look like. It also does not address the ways in which great harm is caused by not allowing one to narrate the complexities of their own sexuality and gender, especially for neurodivergent and disabled people. "West African Giant Millipedes" shows both the way Autistic people are vulnerable to gender-based violence while rejecting ideas of Autistic women as fragile or nonagentive. On world-traveling, Lugones writes, "I think of antistructural selves, relations, and practices as constituting space and time away from linear, univocal, and cohesive constructions of the social" (Lugones 2003, 7). Matilda inhabits an antistructural self that is not cohesive with the common notions of femininity or autism. She narrates her own neurodivergent understanding of her sexuality and gender, which confounds much of the map of the colonial/modern gender system (Lugones 2007) as well as modern-day feminism.

### Standpoint and Coalition

I am attending a virtual bookclub on Black feminism. I arrive late and they have just completed introductions. They ask me to introduce myself and respond to the prompt, “Who are your people?” As usual, I stumble over the question. Can I say my dogs? I think to myself, struggling to answer. White people, in general, seem to struggle with this question. To become white, oneself and one’s lineage engages in erasure of ethnicity. I know this is part of it. Yet Autistic people have trouble sustaining long-term friendships, and often describe strong kinship with animals. This is also part of my social isolation. Can I not answer this question because of my whiteness or my autism? Given the history of the DSM, perhaps these things overlap, I think. Finally, I mutter something about educators because I cannot think of anything else. Perhaps if I had openly identified as Autistic to the group, I would be able to also say, “The Autistic Community,” or perhaps then even my answer of my dogs would have been intelligible.

To claim myself as neurodivergent is claiming a particular subject standpoint. As Nancy Hartsock writes, the purpose of standpoint is to expose the perverse partiality in the understandings of the world that men have constructed, “its character as an analysis of both achievement and political struggle occurring in a particular historical space” and that it is “neither self-evident nor obvious” (Hartsock 2004, 48). To claim a neurodivergent subject standpoint as a feminine-presenting person is to extend the epistemologies developed from recognition of women’s “invisible labor” to new reaches of subjectivity and to new conceptions of the labor of gender. Autistic people who are assigned female at birth tend to possess greater competencies to mask. Masking is a form of labor that we practice for survival. To claim neurodivergence as a person who can otherwise mask for certain durations of time is to destabilize the patriarchal fabric of social relations. To name this as shared experience places the agreements by which heteropatriarchy constructs women’s subjectivity on unstable ground. If Autistic people reveal the far reaches of the level of performance of gender, they reveal the temporal essence of gender itself, and unravel it. To claim myself as neurodivergent is to further give up on the project of becoming human (Wynter 2006), and by default, a woman.

To name myself as neurodivergent and feminine is to stop gaslighting myself about my embodied experience. Lugones writes:

When you think about the map, you see that people are organized and channeled spatially in ways that contain them in a systematic way from getting together against the grain of power. Or, you may not quite realize that. You may not realize how you collaborate in the production of that spatiality. This latter possibility has to be investigated concretely, in the flesh, to the extent to which your motility and your desires are or are not of a piece in moving through your everydayness. You may, from your vantage point (not from “up high”) not recognize any containment; thus there may be no trespassing in your walking the map of oppression. (Lugones 2003, 9–10)

Until I claimed this standpoint, to some degree I accepted the “you” and the high vantage point even if on the inside, I felt abject. I am still abject, but I now have a community I am becoming a part of to be abject *with*. As Hartsock points out, when we claim a subject standpoint, we inscribe self-definition and through that self-definition threads of shared experience become possible. We also more clearly trace inhumanities

and “embody a distress which requires a solution” (Hartsock 2004, 49). My grandmother taught me that I would be in a world that would not understand my intelligence, subjectivity, or humor. She prepared me for a world of isolation wherein my body must be still (unless I am alone), and I must perform gender and heteronormativity to survive. She also made sure to tell me she is in on the joke. There are other people here, but we have no name for it. We just know each other when we see it. In a way, my grandmother was claiming a feminist standpoint, but did not have the means to articulate the ways in which her subjectivity was unaddressed by normative notions tied to white feminism. Even postmortem, she was my only true coalition for a long time until I found narratives of Autistic women and nonbinary people. When I read these narratives, I saw my subjecthood articulated for the first time in language, and in a way that bridged my secret world and the neurotypical world.

To claim a subject standpoint is to join a world that is invisible to some and to announce myself as visible to others. To claim an invisible disability as one who “passes” is to destabilize the certainty with which sense-making is assumed by institutions of power. I point out the partial knowledge as constructed by neurotypical worlds, normative socialities, and neurotypical understandings of gender. However, as I name the aspects of my subjectivity that institutions do not see or see only partially, I map myself onto the institutional map and activate the endless hunger to be omniscient that is associated with the high vantage point of the dominant system of power that Lugones describes.

### Friends and Futures

I watch an online video of largely white middle-class young people speaking on neurodivergence. This is the second video I have seen condemning labels of neurodivergence being misused and overused. Many of them self-identify as neurodivergent and discuss how the laborious process of getting a diagnosis is essential for students to receive good care. Many of them remark that misdiagnosis, self-diagnosis, or overdiagnosis invalidates and undermines their own experience as a (presumably) “correctly diagnosed” neurodivergent person. I watch and try to reconcile the arrogance with which none of them have acknowledged the way in which access to diagnosis for many diagnostic criteria was and still is fundamentally inequitable. I notice the way they seem to be uncritically linking their identities and needs more firmly to the credibility of the *DSM-5*, more threatened by potential self-diagnosed peers taking away the uniqueness of their identity, than by seeing opportunity for solidarity. This seeming gatekeeping army of neurodivergence is something I expect from medical professionals, but not from young people.

I struggle with the tensions of knowing that to some extent they are speaking back to the co-opting from the identity and visibility politics of how neurodivergence is constructed in spaces like TikTok. But, as many Autistic groups note, self-diagnosis must be accepted until the inequities are resolved. When I was professionally diagnosed (a procedure I am ashamed to admit I had to pay over \$1000 for) I contemplated whether it might be a move of solidarity to never share that I was professionally diagnosed. I worry I am reifying gatekeeping categories shaped by the medical-industrial complex and white settler colonial ableism. I worry I am undermining solidarity with those in the lineages who never got that validation of their sensory needs through an official diagnosis. I worry I am leaving my grandmother behind and all the populations who struggle to access diagnosis or to see themselves in diagnosis (of which I was



one until not too long ago). Self-diagnosed Autistic people are much more likely to be women (McDonald 2020). Devon Price argues that self-diagnosis must be valid because the Autistic community needs solidarity, writing, “Diagnosis is a gatekeeping process and it slams its heavy bars in the face of anyone who is too poor, too busy, too Black, too feminine, too queer, and too gender nonconforming, among others. The Autistics who lack access to fair diagnosis need solidarity and justice the most desperately out of all of us, and we can’t just shut them out” (Price 2022, 44).<sup>2</sup>

Before I received this diagnosis, I was still Autistic. The diagnosis affords me a means of articulating my inner experience and working in solidarity with those with similar experiences. It allows for a development of ontologies that elucidate the neurodivergent experience in conversation with the *DSM* and political spaces. What about those who cannot safely come out as Autistic? Recent studies find that first impressions of Autistic people without intellectual disabilities are more positive when others are aware they are Autistic (Sasson and Morrison 2017). Yet coming out is a privilege, as disclosure comes with material risk and consequences said to be “profoundly uneven” (Davidson and Henderson 2010, 158). Studies find that Autistic disclosure is a process constantly managed by Autistic people, and though many neurotypical people assume that disclosure will have positive effects, Autistic people largely identify the harmful aspects of disclosure (Thompson-Hodgetts et al. 2020). These differential perceptions of the phenomenon of coming out highlight the epistemic gap between Autistic and neurotypical people.

Or who still cannot even see themselves in autism because the *DSM* language is steeped in white patriarchy, and just think there is something permanently “wrong” with them? Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasigna asks, “What would medical schools look like if disabled, Mad, neurodivergent, and Deaf people wrote the textbooks, defined the diagnosis in the *DSM*, threw out the *DSM*?” (Piepzna-Samarasigna 2021, 77). Price recommends self-diagnosis reframed as self-determination or self-realization, shifting focus onto the social structures and communities that cultivate autistic solidarity and access to community and support across race, class, and gender, instead of relinquishing access to support to biomedical designations (Price 2022, 44). I notice this sentiment reflected in some of my students when I probe their thinking around diagnosis. In a class discussion, it was revealed that many of my students regarded official diagnosis as necessary to claim a neurodivergent standpoint. Instead of turning back on the *DSM*, they were doubling down on the hard lines. Are they saying my ancestors and others who do not claim this language cannot come with me in solidarity?

### Hangin' Out and Neurodivergent Sociality

Resistant networks are often historically muted or distorted. Communication is complex. Expressive gestures, acts, movements, and behaviors are often incommunicative with respect to some audiences and communicative with respect to others; meaning is often conveyed obliquely, indirectly, sometimes in ways hard to access but always differentially. (Lugones 2003, 25)

As I claim this subject standpoint, I access resources and information in the form of online communities. These communities validate my weird quirks, offer suggestions for how to navigate ableism, trauma, and a world that is constantly trying to undermine epistemologies of Autistic people. As I travel into these communities, I see myself for the first time reflected in a larger group.

Reddit User [u/terminator\\_chic](#) writes,

With pets we're starting at ground zero with communication, and all of our effort goes into understanding each other and being kind. With humans there is a specific expectation regarding communication. It's all assumed, so instead of figuring out the best ways for the two of you to communicate, you have a map you're expected to use whether it's the best option or not. Oh, and someone didn't bother to give you a copy of the map, but everyone else has one and it's your fault you didn't get one. ([u/terminator\\_chic 2023](#))

The relief of finding others who feel more human with nonhumans: Autistic struggles to maintain friendships are perhaps Autistic struggles to maintain neurotypical friendships. This calls into question what constitutes a friend, being in community, or the very sociality upon which most friendships are defined via enactments of neurotypical behavior. We tend to find each other by the types of sociality we produce and the way we have been cast out because maybe we interrupt too much, are quiet at the wrong time, have stains on our clothes, or something is just "off." Neurodivergent feminine friendships may not look like typical feminine friendships. They may involve shared perseverations and interests, neuroses, overlapping speech, and quirky senses of humor. I argue that this alternative sociality is a practice of Lugones's curdling (Lugones 1994).

One of my friends that I speak most with frequently has ADHD. She is a woman of color who is neurodivergent but not autistic. We share the awkward social moments of humiliation and the pain of being neurodivergent in a world that largely ignores these realities. Our neurodivergence brings us together across lines of difference. The more I learned about my autism, the more I wondered if she might be Autistic too. I ask her if she has ever investigated it. She relates strongly to the resources I have sent her, and I wonder if that's why we found each other. Although ADHD has been a strong part of her experience, I ask her one day if she identifies as "neurodivergent." "No . . ." she says slowly and pauses. "I guess I've just been so busy dealing with the other identities that have been put on me, you know?" I nod.

Why do I feel the need to attach someone I care about further to the medical model? When I receive the texts of her questioning herself about her own sensory experiences, I know that the only way she can ever consider asking for formal accommodation is to identify and possess the diagnosis of autism. Like my grandmother, I fear I am leaving her behind as I access my own rights to certain accommodations as Autistic. Furthermore, racial inequities with all forms of diagnosis are well-documented (Shim 2021), with people of color less likely to be diagnosed with autism (Yergeau 2018, 156–57). When I look at some of the online groups I have joined, many of them are predominantly white. Dialogue within these groups sometimes may reify a hierarchy of diagnoses, with Cluster-B personality disorders most stigmatized, a trend corroborated by studies of mental health providers (McKenzie et al. 2022). By participating in the shared dialogue that is happening here, I also am uncomfortable with who is missing. I am asking myself, what world are we building?

Autoethnographic Autistic subjectivity reveals the limits of language itself. Yergeau writes, "My skin is my cognition and it is metaphorically on fire" (Yergeau 2018, 176). This autoethnographic exploration has attempted to extend my reflexivity, while simultaneously interfacing with the limits of my own knowing or the limits of the linguistic tools I have to describe myself. At times my knowings are revealed by claiming identities of neurodivergent and woman, and at other times, these labels wear heavy and

discordant with my Autistic subjectivity. Autoethnography enables me not only to explore this subject position by what it names, discloses, and faithfully witnesses, but also what it does not. Faithful witnessing acknowledges where we have moved with the oppressor and where our epistemic sense crumbles, either by the limited linguistic tools we are using to describe it or because of the lack of our own experiences of living against the grain. Lugones generously points us toward scaling down and calls us into examining a smaller grain size, something particularly useful for describing tensions in masked Autistic identity and embodiment. Lugones writes, “I also mean levels of motility: sometimes you are stuck in a chair and the tiny movements in your hands are a level of intense resistance that requires a closeness of understanding to sense tactually the forcefulness of the motility” (Lugones 2003, 2).

Like my grandmother taught me, even as I identify, I need to understand that this does not resolve tensions of my subjectivity and my resistant and oppressive selves. To claim myself as Autistic is a move that disrupts the logic of patriarchy and partakes in a conversation that uses language germane to the medical-industrial complex, and therefore whiteness. I both reify hierarchy and write myself into a resistant position. Paradoxically, by coming out, I provide complexity while unavoidably engaging in reduction. Jen Rinaldi speaks of the use and futility of disclosure in autoethnography, claiming “coming out comes with baggage” (Rinaldi 2013). We must make safe space for coming out while foraying beyond coming out and into a static label that weighs our resistant selves down and forecloses liberatory possibilities. In order to find the multiplicative worlds Lugones speaks of, we must come out and come out beyond coming out at the same time. The only way out, as I see it, is to practice faithful witnessing of possibilities both within and outside of these groups that enable us to claim this identity against the grain of power, and then provide the flexibility to loosen it when it inhibits our own solidarity and feminist praxis.

How can I recognize motility if I do not move in and between communities with different levels and layers of identification and disidentification? As Lugones suggests, I must become a streetwalker, wandering off-course the maps of power, reminding myself of the purposes of identifying as neurodivergent and feminine, and to recognize their limitations. I must cling to the label when it is needed to resist and survive but recognize the limitations of the vantage point that it produces. I must faithfully witness the voices of those who are not identified with that label and question the bounds of what worlds it is developing.

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## Notes

1 World-traveling, as Lugones suggests, is a praxis that requires the holding of paradoxes of resistance and oppression (Lugones 2007). In applying this praxis as autoethnographic method, I explore these subject positions as interwoven in ways that shift between resistant and oppressive stances depending on context and intersections with other identities. To examine the neurodivergence and femininity in the embodied way that Lugones is suggesting, I demonstrate how sometimes these identities work as fractured selves, while at other times they blend.

2 On his Instagram, Price has recently shared cautions for self-diagnosed autistic people in seeking an official diagnosis, especially for trans people who may be seeking gender-affirming services, as an autism diagnosis is often used to undermine access to gender-affirming care.

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