Re-storying Autism: A Body Becoming Disability Studies in Education Approach

Patty Douglas
Brandon University

Carla Rice
University of Guelph

Katherine Runswick-Cole
University of Sheffield

Anthony Easton
Independent Artist and Writer

Margaret F. Gibson
York University

Julia Gruson-Wood
York University

Estee Klar
York University

Raya Shields
York University

Recommended Citation:

Re-storying Autism: A Body Becoming Disability Studies in Education Approach

Douglas, P., Brandon University, Rice, C., University of Guelph, Runswick-Cole, K., University of Sheffield, Easton, A., Independent Artist and Writer, Gibson, M. F., York University, Gruson-Wood, J., York University, Klar, E, York University and R. Shields, York University

Abstract

This paper presents and analyzes six short first-person films produced through a collaborative multimedia storytelling workshop series focused on experiences of autism, education and inclusion. The aim of the project is to co-create new understandings of autism beyond functionalist and biomedical ones that reify autism as a problem of disordered brains and underpin special education. We fashion a body becoming disability studies in education approach to proliferate stories of autism outside received cultural scripts—autism as biomedical disorder, brain-based difference, otherworldliness, lost or stolen child and more. Our approach keeps the meaning of autism moving, always emerging, resisting, fading away and becoming again in relation to context, time, space, material oppressions, cultural scripts, intersecting differences, surprising bodies and interpretative engagement. We argue that the films we present and analyze not only significantly change and critique traditional special education approaches based on assumptions of the normative human as non-autistic, they also *enact* 'autism' as a becoming process and relation with implications for inclusive educators. By this we mean that the stories shift what autism might be and become, and open space for a proliferation of representations and practices of difference in and beyond educational contexts that support flourishing for all.

Keywords: autism; multi-media storytelling; disability studies in education; inclusive education; body becoming theory; new materialism

The stories presented in our paper can be viewed online.[1]

Introduction

This paper presents and analyzes six short first-person films produced through the multimedia

storytelling project, *Enacting Critical Disability Communities in Education*, in collaboration

with Project Re•Vision: Centre for Art and Social Justice broadly focused on autism,

education and inclusion. Films were made by nine persons who have attracted or claimed the

---

[1] Go to https://vimeo.com/album/4922206. Type in the password 'restorying' to access the album 'Restorying Autism'. Please note: the videos are intended for readers only and are not for public screening.

label of autism and/or who identify as autistic (hereafter 'autistic persons') and nine persons who work with and care about autistic persons in their/our personal and professional lives as family members, educators, practitioners and researchers. We use the term 'autistic persons' rather than 'persons with autism' in recognition of critical scholarship and activism around disability as social oppression and autistic identity as valid (http://autisticadvocacy.org/about-asan/position-statements/; Runswick-Cole, Mallet, and Timimi 2017). Re•Vision is a research creation centre at the University of Guelph that taps the power of the arts to transform stereotypes of embodied difference and advance social inclusion in health care, education and the arts (Rice et al. 2015; Rice et al. 2016, 2018). The aim of the *Enacting* project is to co-create a proliferation of understandings of autism outside the biomedical, to push beyond conventional functionalist special educational approaches to autism and to consider implications for inclusive educators in Canada and elsewhere.

We fashion a body becoming disability studies in education approach—a social justice approach understanding disability as socially and relationally produced—to proliferate stories of autism outside global North cultural narratives that reify autism as a brain-based disorder in need of professional remedy, brain-based difference, otherworldliness, savantism, lost or stolen child and family tragedy (Murray 2008; Nadesan, 2005). We argue that our approach and the films we present and analyze not only critique received cultural scripts that dominate global North contexts with their assumptions about the normative human and 'critical exigence' to remedy difference (Greenstein 2016; Yergeau 2018). They also unsettle the preeminence of deficit understandings of autism as a problem of disordered brains, re-story what autism and inclusion might mean and enact new ways of being/becoming together in educational spaces. Despite international shifts toward inclusion, autistic people are still more likely to experience inferior education, bullying, marginal employment, mental health struggles and premature death (Hirvikoski et al. 2016; Humphrey and Symes 2008; Stoddart

et al. 2013). The significance of our project is its commitment to new approaches with the potential to open better outcomes for autistic persons and to research with all those who don't 'fit' conventional educational cultures and bodily norms; this is research as transformative praxis–reflection and action grounded in the experiences of marginalised groups and aimed at changing the world (Greenstein 2016; hooks 1994).

Notes around method

Multimedia stories created through Re•Vision's storytelling workshops are short first-person films that combine visuals, audio, movement, ambient sound, spoken narrative and more to push back against exclusionary systems. Along with other researchers such as Brushwood Rose (2009), we have written about our multimedia method, its potency for bringing into being new understandings of the self and supporting social change efforts, and its lineage in and contributions to disability arts, decolonizing movements, popular education, feminist historiography, qualitative research and more in detail elsewhere (Rice et al. 2017; Rice and Mündel 2018, forthcoming; Rice et al. 2015). Within qualitative research and disability studies research more generally, "The act of making space for people to tell their own stories coupled with the translation of these stories into a widely shareable multimedia format has allowed renewed and varied engagements with systemic issues of racism, sexism, ableism, classism, and colonialism" (Rice and Mündel forthcoming, p. 6). Our approach is thus distinct from uses of multimedia in disability research with more therapeutic or individual functionalist aims (see for example Golan and Baron-Cohen 2006).

Briefly, Re•Vision workshops bring together majority and minoritized persons, artists, researchers and community members in 3-5 day workshops to create short films about their/our experiences and knowledge of embodied/enminded difference. Workshops provide artist-storytellers with access to computers, training in filmmaking software, cameras, photography support, story development and so on. In the autism and inclusion workshop

series, we held two workshops lasting three days each. Recruitment for workshops began with the research team's extensive networks (including word of mouth through email and social media such as Facebook groups) in education, disability studies and speaking and non-speaking autism communities in Toronto and snowballed from there. Re•Vision workshops have an explicit social justice aim—to create and release something new about difference into the world. For the autism and inclusion workshop series, persons who identified as a family member, educator and/or autistic person and who expressed interest in counter-stories that push back against dominant or negative conceptions of autism in education were invited to take part. The research team had approximately one month of pre-workshop contact with artist-storyteller participants in both workshops. During this time, we interviewed participants to help them identify the story they most needed to tell at that time and worked with them around access to the workshop (e.g., we made visual schedules and took photographs of the workshop space; worked out communication access such as providing questions we ask during the workshop in advance; filmed and shared a tutorial on the filmmaking software used during the workshops). During the workshops, artist-storytellers were supported further in story development, and by technical and artist support persons and professionals to use computer equipment, filmmaking software, etc. to complete their preferred stories. Following the workshops, we provided further technical support to participants who did not finish their films.

Artist-storytellers in Re•Vision workshops retain ownership of their creations and are invited to participate in subsequent research and arts activities including, for the autism and inclusion project, a day-long post-workshop screening event to begin the work of film analysis, co-authorship on journal articles, professional development forums with educators and academic conference presentations using their/our films. For the post-workshop screening

event, we invited insider (autistic and non-autistic video-makers, researchers) and outsider witnesses (researchers, educators, practitioners) to come together to view and make meaning of the films (Rice et al. forthcoming). Insider witnesses were participants and researchers in our workshops who expressed interest in doing the intellectual work of analysis and co-authoring. Outsider witnesses were international and local researchers, educators and practitioners identified through the team's networks as having a significant intellectual contribution to make given their expertise in critical disability and autism studies. The event was facilitated by the research team lead who delivered an interactive presentation on dominant tropes of autism in education (what would become our 'Setting the Scene' section below). This researcher also facilitated reflection exercises and rich group discussions of the videos made. Through this process, insider and outsider participants and researchers together identified potential articles to be written (a project overview paper, a methods paper and a gender paper) as well as major themes for each article. Participants at the screening event also indicated which papers they would be interested in working on. These working groups identified specific films that would best demonstrate the focus of each article. A graduate student was hired to take detailed notes of the screening event so that the discussion was preserved for analysis purposes.

The films presented in this overview article critique special education and behavioural remedial regimes, and offer new love stories about autism, inclusion, family and relationships that speak back to these systems. Co-authors on the article are persons with and without autism, researchers, graduate students, mothers and siblings of autistic persons and disability artists (not mutually exclusive). We do not, as co-authors, always agree about what autism 'is' or even whether there is an 'it' of autism (Yergeau 2018; Runswick-Cole, Mallett and Timimi, 2017). Hence we do not offer one definition. Rather, we tell our stories to multiply possibilities of what autism might be and become beyond narratives and educational practices

that 'fix' its meaning. In this, we keep the meaning of autism moving, always emerging, surfacing, fading away and becoming again in relation to context, time, space, material oppression, cultural scripts, intersecting differences, surprising bodies, interpretative engagement and more. We follow socio-narratologist Arthur Frank (2010) who argues that stories have a vitality and generate social change when they invite more stories, and lose vitality when they re-produce a narrow set of social (or medical) norms and foreclose the potential for new stories that support non-normatively embodied experiences.

This article is also a unique collaborative contribution within an often-fractious landscape where autistic self-advocates and mothers (and others who are engaged in parenting practices), educators and researchers, many of whom are not autistic do not always align epistemologically and politically with one another. As persons with and without lived experience, the authors of this article share one thing: autism and the experiences of autistic persons matter deeply to us. We, as co-authors and research collaborators, each have our own autism story. Yet, mindful of the dangers of a single story (Adichie 2009; Frank 2010), we present multiple stories in order to promote understanding between ourselves and, we hope, the readers.

We begin by describing the representational field into which our project intervenes—received cultural scripts about autism in and from the Global North, focusing in particular on a disability studies in education critique of biomedical understandings of autism as the preeminent narrative in education and beyond (see Michalko 2002; Oliver 1996 more broadly for disability studies' critiques of biomedicine). We then describe our body becoming disability studies in education (DSE) approach, arguing that it moves beyond critique alone to proliferate new stories of autism and inclusion in education. Our discussion of our six films follows, organised around three interweaving themes that emerged through rich discussions at our post-workshop screening event described above—queer (relations to) movement and

objects, rethinking communication and radicalizing relationality. Using our body becoming DSE approach, we thread through our discussion of each video the interpretations that surfaced from the screening session and then theorise these themes in our conclusion.

Setting the scene: a disability studies' critique of received cultural scripts of autism

Disability studies in education emerged in the 1990s in response to the hegemony of medicalized understandings of disability and functionalist responses that aim to remediate embodied differences in learning and behaviour (Barton 2004; Brantlinger 1997). DSE troubles the meaning of the (normative humanist) human as non-autistic at the centre of special, and at times inclusive, education, including how to support and include as valuable the being/becoming of students 'who require cognitive or physical support in order to exercise their agency' (Greenstein 2016, 57; Frigerio et al. 2017). The preeminent cultural narrative of autism underpinning special education and representations more broadly in the Global North has been a biomedical one. In today's terms, autism is a neurodevelopmental disorder, located (and locatable) in defective brains understood to cause impairments in communication (e.g., non-normative use of language), social interaction (e.g., averted eye gaze) and movement and behaviour (e.g., rocking or atypical attachment to objects) (APA 2013). Embodied differences labelled as autistic are thought to link directly to disordered brains, mere symptoms rather than meaningful, albeit different, ways of being/becoming, sensing, moving and relating (Nadesan 2005, 141). Autism, made into a thing, is thus reduced to a single story (Adichie 2009; Frank 2010) and detached from *how* stories are told, that is, from how embodiment emerges and is made meaningful within and through history, context and human and non-human relationships.

Briefly, autism appeared as a separate mental disorder in the 1940s in the heyday of biological psychiatry and mental hygiene in studies of predominately white bourgeois male children who were thought capable of normal intelligence—and therefore as not only

improvable but curable or capable of achieving some degree of normalization (Kanner 1943; McGuire 2016; Rose 1985, 37). With this, autism was formally distinguished from 'un-improvable' categories such as feeblemindedness and mental retardation or the broad rubrics of 'mild intellectual disability' and 'emotionally disturbed' into which racialised, Indigenous, immigrant and working-class children were (and are) recruited and differently treated (Nadesan 2005, 53-79). Autism emerged as and continues to be a paradoxically privileged, 'improvable' disorder within scientific histories and hierarchies of developmentalism that pathologise and devalue alter embodiments (McGuire 2016). Casting the net of mental disorder and regulation of non-normative embodiment ever-wider, today's blurring of the line between normal and abnormal again rewrites the story of autism, now a spectrum that can be described in terms of severity, freeing neoliberal capitalist markets to proffer remedies, grow autism industry and commodify human difference (McGuire 2017; Mallett and Runswick-Cole 2012).

It is on this terrain that special education and its functionalist imperative to professionally remedy difference proceeds, evacuating the possibility for alternative autism stories, challenging 'schools to change their cultures and practices in order to achieve enabling education for all' (Runswick-Cole 2011, 113). The dominant theory about autism within cognitive neuropsychology (commonplace in special education and inclusion textbooks), for example, advances that autistic people lack Theory of Mind (ToM), or capacity to 'read' the thoughts, intentions and feelings of others. Regardless of what we might think of the idea that *any* of us can read other people's minds (McGuire and Michalko 2011), ToM is put forward unproblematically as the neurological seat of empathy (locatable within brains), the very trait that makes us human (Baron-Cohen and Frith 1985). Within such logics, autistic behaviour becomes meaningless and non-human, the 'involuntary' effect of disordered neurology (Yergeau 2018) or extreme male brains (i.e., brains understood to be

better at systematizing than empathizing; see Baron-Cohen 2002). Autistic scholar Melanie Yergeau (2018) points to how such autism stories 'author autistic people as victim-captives' (3) of disordered brains rather than as authors of their/our own experience.

Until biomedicine finds a cure, then, normalizing interventions become the only hope to recover an autistic child's potential humanity and future. Without intensive, early intervention, an autistic life is imagined as tragic, non-viable and hopeless, a destroyer of families and threat to the economic well-being of communities and nations (Douglas 2013; McGuire 2016). There is, thus, a 'critical exigence' to 'stop autism' (Yergeau 2018, 4). This exigence is all the more pressing given popular portrayals of autism's otherworldliness and unknowability, positioned as so distant from what is considered human that space is created for endless cultural fascination and intensive 'looking'—biomedical or otherwise—as well as intensive intervention (Murray 2008, xvi-xvii). Cultural images of trapped, lost or stolen children (from normal human development and families)—an unthinkable family tragedy—are commonplace. Alternatively, the 'sentimental savant' (Murray 2008), an alien or computer-like individual with remarkable 'splinter skills', and thus both more and less than human simultaneously, fascinates the popular imagination.

Educators and parents, particularly primary caregivers who are usually mothers, are recruited into intensive regimes to remedy autism. The most commonly funded intervention in education in the Global North is Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA), which emerged out of the behaviourist experiments of Ole Ivar Lovaas at the University of California in the 1960s and 1970s and helped fuel what is now a multi-million dollar industry. Lovaas experimented with rewards (food, hugs) and aversives (withdrawal of a mother's affection or electrified floors) to shape 'desirable' (normative) behaviour in autistic and gender nonconforming children (Douglas and Gibson 2018; Gruson-Wood 2016; http://autismwomensnetwork.org/autistic-conversion-therapy/). ABA attempts to reduce

autistic behaviours and increase normative ones such as spoken language or making eye contact through up to 40 hours per week of therapies beginning at age 2, alongside home- and school-based practice.

Despite thirty years of contestation by autistic scholars and activists about the legacy of ABA as part of broader injustices against disabled persons (i.e., confinement, sterilization), and its normalizing aims and intensity, ABA continues to be forwarded as the only evidence-based, funded autism intervention in many educational contexts (Dawson 2004; Gibson and Douglas forthcoming; Hodge 2016; Yergeau 2018). Its effectiveness is measured in functionalist terms such as very slight gains in IQ, spoken language or functional behaviours such as eye contact (Gibson and Douglas, 2018). Autistic self-advocates have forwarded the alternative of neurodiversity, or the concept that human neurology is neither static nor fixed. Autism is a positive brain-based difference and part of the natural variance of life. Autism should be accepted, not cured (McGuire 2016, 105-7; Sibley 2017; Solomon 2008). The neurodiversity movement has been instrumental in disrupting the idea that a worthwhile life is an autism-free life and has drawn attention to the basic human rights of all persons to support, education, housing, and so on. For this paper, we bracket the question of and impulse to 'fix' the meaning of autism—whether as positive or negative brain-based difference—in order to open space in which new stories of autism and difference might proliferate.

Autistic scholar Melanie Yergeau (2018) asks, 'How can we—in the classroom, in the clinic, in the pages of our scholarly annals—how can we transform social spaces in ways that enable those distant Others to speak back?' (31). Responding to this call and to the artist-storytellers on this project, we fashion a body becoming DSE approach to 'speak back' and 'author autism' (Yergeau 2018) beyond biomedicine and special education. Our approach is in solidarity with those in inclusive education who centre the experiences of individuals labelled autistic; work toward changing the *who* and the *what* of inclusive education; promote

affirming representations of difference; 'assume [the] competence' (Biklen and Burke 2006) of all people; and pay attention to the ways in which multiple marginalised identities intertwine in people's storied lives.

Opening possibilities: a body becoming DSE approach

To consider how our workshops and films open possibilities for un-fixing stories of autism in education (and, ultimately, expanding possible life trajectories in education for those who attract or claim this label), we add insights from becoming theory, a branch of feminist philosophy of the body (Grosz 2005; Rice 2014) and the new materialism, derived from the work of leading feminist techoscience studies scholars including Donna Haraway (1991) and Karen Barad (2003). These approaches both 'offer new theories of ontology—of how things come to be things—yet can be distinguished in how they emerge from distinct branches of feminist philosophy and in how becoming theory might be considered as relating new materialism's insights to bodies in particular' (Rice 2018, 5). These approaches are particularly well-suited to our research aims: to re-story embodied difference beyond individual problem bodies in need of fixing; and through this, to open new possibilities for inclusive practice that foreground relational understandings of difference that are, for autistic persons, potentially transformative of current educational inequalities.

Thinking with new materialist and body becoming scholars means we approach accounts of autism, both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic, with a double consciousness that combines a post-structuralist politics of critique with a new materialist politics of possibility: we interrogate knowledge claims for how they reify and reproduce autistic difference as deficiency as well as for how they revision people coded as autistic in more open-ended, less problem-saturated ways that advance an 'anti-essentialist politics of possibility' (Rice 2018). Our analysis of our films builds on post-structuralist insights into language's materializing power and draws on becoming theory to unsettle any stable homogenous notion of autism. In

this, we draw on becoming theorist Elisabeth Grosz (2005) who sees bodies as emergent systems that come to be through improvisational relations with natural and cultural forces that constitute them. We conceptualise bodies as having no clear distinctions between endogenous (inside) and exogenous (outside) forces constituting them—instead, these fold into each other. Through this 'infolding' of flesh and world, everything that happens to people—from ABA to cultural narratives of autism—become ingredients in the history and development of their bodies (and in the materialization of what we commonly call autism). This approach does not discount biological, cultural or environmental forces that produce and sustain human difference and growth but is non-essentialist in theorising opened-ended, 'rhizomatous' trajectories for ways that bodies of difference *become*. .

Body becoming theory understands all matter to have agency independent of people's perceptions or manipulations of it. In a sense, conventional developmental or biogenetic theory on autism would appear to resonate with becoming perspectives by offering integrated views of the role of biology and society, or genes and environment, in the development and remediation of autism. However, as shown above, conventional autism experts typically approach the body, psyche and society as separable variables, as discrete factors which interact in ways that do *not* fundamentally alter one another in the interaction.

> In contrast, becoming theories posit that bodies, selves, and worlds materialize through their interactions and so possess no prior essence or nature. Because they have no nature or facticity that can be discovered prior to their becoming-in-relation, bodily selves and worlds cannot be compartmentalized in the ways that conventional developmental theories presume. (Rice 2018, 19)

While autistic self-advocates, critical autism scholars and authors on this paper do not always agree about the 'nature or facticity' of autism, this insight from body becoming theory suggests that traditional biogenetic or developmental models proposed to explain (and to

remediate) autistic difference are fundamentally flawed for both casting autism as development gone awry and attempting to disaggregate 'causes' and 'effects' into discrete variables and emphasise intervention into one or two variables: typically, the body or brain of the autistic person, rather than ableist environments. Responding to Yergeau's call, our approach rethinks educational understandings of and practices surrounding 'autism' (e.g., ABA, segregated classrooms, deficit understandings) as ones that *matter* to development as an ever-emerging relational, embodied, social and creative process that can be expansively rethought to open new possibilities for the flourishing of persons attracting the label of autism.

The stories2

We turn now to our films in order to explore the tangle of body, selves and world as new possibilities for being/becoming autistic in and beyond education. We present and analyze six films made by self-identified autistic people and family members. Though we explore each of our three themes—re-thinking communication, queer (relations to) movement and objects, and radicalizing relationality—through featuring films from our archive, all of the themes surface in all of the videos.

Rethinking communication

In the becoming of autism as biomedical disorder, both hunting and accounting for 'disordered' communication has been a key concern of psy-professionals. Indeed, in 1979 Wing and Gould identified deficits in social communication, alongside 'difficulties' with social interaction and the lack of imagination as *key features* of autism. Here, we explore ways in which autistic people trouble normative understandings of 'appropriate' ways of

2 All videos were produced in compliance with Canadian copyright guidelines including the non-commercial user generated content exception. This research has received university ethics approval.

communicating and offer an alternative account of communication, in all its forms, as becoming in the world together.

Raya Shield's *Untitled* video uses art, poetry, vocalization and movement to explore how she experienced school as a child and as a university student (https://vimeo.com/album/4922206; password: 'restorying'). To bring viewers into her sensorial interactions with and responses to this environment, Shields intersperses first-person point-of-view clips with those from an outsider perspective, effectively juxtaposing her sensory experiences/expressions of stimming, tics, and language with perceptions of un/knowing others, especially those in systems of formal schooling. The film follows Shield's creation of a poem through arranging words and phrases cut out of magazines and newspapers and gluing them onto paper. The depiction of her process of choosing and assembling words from various sources references the role of echolalia as an important feature of her written communication. Though this way of communicating is often pathologized and 'corrected' via verbal behaviour therapies that teach normative language use, Shields powerfully reclaims her specific language use strategies and her approach to writing as creative assemblage. The process of pasting words on paper is interjected with sequences of Shield's body in motion— flapping hands, tapping feet, rocking torso, shaking head. Throughout the video, Shields repeatedly loops a vocal tic she had at the time she created the video as her counter-narrative on communication—a narrative that exists beside/beyond so-called intelligible language.

Shield's poetic use of movement, image and sound to convey the experience of inhabiting 'an out-of-control body…always in motion… wrenching, spinning, jumping' narrates the physicality of the autistic body that exists beyond the constraints of language; a body that is not always met with welcome in educational spaces where the predominant 'narrative of an independent, self-regulating body clamps down on' her autistic self. Here Shields revisits her (or their) own awkward prepubescence to foreground doubled experiences

of otherness (puberty and autism) as the only kid in middle school who couldn't tie her shoes reliably, who wore her gym uniform backwards more often than not, who spit constantly (a tic), and who drew morbid pictures in art. The loneliness created by othering, Shields suggests, 'alters the brain' perhaps alluding to how discourses of and responses to autism produce and constrain autistic experience. In her direct address to the viewer, 'my eyes take in a lot but yours fence me in' that is anxiously layered with the sound of her beating heart, Shields further gestures towards the power of systems and authorities embedded in them to shape and constrain the being/becoming of those subject to their prescriptions.

The story told in *Paperwork* is one that has been becoming with Meg Gibson in many ways over many years (https://vimeo.com/album/4922206; password: 'restorying'). In it, she describes experiences that she encounters as a parent of a child whose autism diagnosis and way of being collide with the restrictions of educational systems, focusing on her annual experience of filling out special education forms for her daughter's school. It is not a new story to her, having researched and written about it extensively as an academic. Yet, expressing this story in video format gave her pause, bringing into relief 'paperwork' as a special education activity that shuts down rhizomatic trajectories and marks Gibson's daughter's body as having gone awry. This simultaneously 'fixes' Gibson's daughter's story in a moment of time and fixes her body as disordered. Through the telling of this story in video however, new possibilities emerge as visuals, times, sound and movement accompany Gibson's words, and unseen audiences reached.

Gibson invites her viewer to re-consider how the everyday documents we encounter affect actual people. She begins the film with a clip of papers falling on a desk and close-ups of the special education forms she discusses. She immediately layers the human and the relational to counter the abstraction and restricted narratives of autism that such papers represent, as well as any single narrative of autism. Collaboration with others in the workshop

resulted in the cinematic overlay of a girl skipping in a circle while looking down, which is what Gibson's own daughter does when she is happy and thinking hard about something. It is also a movement that is pathologized within diagnostic criteria and school paperwork, one that Gibson presents instead as meaningfully engaged with the world. It is a reminder of the child whose existence cannot be ignored or contained by piles of special education paperwork and categories.

The film shifts to a mass of shredded paper as Gibson describes the inadequacies of systemic responses alongside the challenge to advocate within such limits, always fearful of how this word or that might be used to justify exclusion and incite fear by educators. This juxtaposition of profoundly different ways of communicating—of those practiced by some people who have attracted or claimed the label autism in a context that problematizes non-normative modes of embodiment, and of those practiced in the neoliberal bureaucracies and public education systems operating under a politics of austerity—raise critical questions about the ethics, value, effects, and even 'humanness' of conventionally accepted communication modes. *Paperwork* ends with the skipping child, persisting, demanding the viewer's attention as the clutter of forms and categories, and even Gibson's voice, fall away. In this, *Paperwork* speaks back, and offers alternatives to, the slow death and violence (Berlant 2007) of neoliberal and bureaucratic education systems that exclude those on the margins of education.

Queer (relations to) movement and objects

Sarah Ahmed (2010) writes, 'To experience an object as being affective or sensational is to be directed not only toward an object, but "whatever" is around that object, which includes what is behind the object, the conditions of its arrival' (25). Understood as objective and evidence-based, diagnostic criteria and behaviourist remedial regimes elide cultural assumptions 'behind' what is considered normative embodiment and human/ non-human relations, making problematic non-normative embodiment, movement and relations to objects (e.g., stimming).

In this section, we explore and analyze 'queer' relations to objects and movement in two films by artist-storyteller Anthony Easton that powerfully begin to unravel this often-unquestioned background. Our use of 'queer' not only references political dimensions of non-normative identity as speaking back to predominant educational narratives, but also 'queer' as orientation in Ahmed's (2006) phenomenological and perceptive sense, as a different 'slant' on how we might relate to objects, bodily comportment and desire, and unravel the tacit normative and moral assumptions caught up in their histories and practices.

In the videos, entitled *Fidget* and *Weschler*, videographer Anthony Easton (https://vimeo.com/album/4922206; password: 'restorying') interrogates the sensory experiences of living in a body that is described through biomedical diagnostic criteria and claimed by Easton as both 'autistic' and 'dyspraxic'—a bodybrain that is 'clumsy' and 'out of control'. The first video, *Fidget*, re-stories the box of fidget or 'stim' toys often found when autistic people gather. The film depicts the hands and forearms of someone playing with a box of colourful fidget toys, which Easton layers with the sounds that these toys naturally make. To this, they add an anxiety-inducing, intrusive stopwatch tick-tock sound, signaling the power of biomedicine to shape autistic embodied experience through artificial and timed testing as a bodybrain deficit. Easton's second video, *Wechsler*, is named after the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children. This scale has often been used in special education systems as part of assessment, diagnostic, program and placement decisions for students who fall outside of, or who may not 'fit' what is considered normative—'autistic', 'gifted', Black, brown and other non-normative students—streaming these learners into special education classrooms/placements or normalizing interventions. In *Wechsler*, Easton depicts someone attempting to make the 'correct' pattern with red and white Wechsler pattern blocks (a visual-spatial component of this assessment), which takes them eight times longer than Wechsler said it should. A Philip Glass piece in the background ratchets up tension and uncertainty

about whether this task will be successfully completed. *Weschler* draws its viewer into the often-painful embodied experience of educational testing used to sort, diagnose and treat differences in cognitive 'ability', movement and coordination.

Easton's refusal to comply with testing time limits and 'appropriate' adult relationships to objects in these films queers human relationships to objects and biomedical testing in educational space. Featuring diagnostic objects alongside 'stim gadgets' used by autistic people to be in relation with each other and the world, the videos subvert diagnostic regimes and revalue evocative sensory experiences between bodies and objects. Easton's 'misuse' of objects used in diagnostic and remedial practices surrounding autism and dyspraxia, and their laughter at their own failure to complete the Weschler pattern, we might interpret as examples of Sarah Ahmed's (2006) notion of 'queer objects'. That is, by refusing to orient to the objects in familiar ways, Easton brings other, subversive histories to the fore: the history of their clumsiness, their critical understanding of ableist discourses about embodiment, and their desire for autistic community outside these discourses. By documenting their failure with tests and by laughing while playing with fidget toys, Easton turns stressful into strange objects from which they can draw pleasure. This act of aesthetic documentation allows for the possibility of a kind of queer or 'cripped' camp—a noticing that autistic people might just have a sense of humour alongside a sophisticated ability to speak back in powerful ways to biomedical regimes.

Radicalizing relationality

Our final two videos uproot conventional understandings of autistic people as non-relational and lacking empathy, or Theory of Mind. The films also unearth culturally entrenched humanist understandings of relationality as requiring two speaking, autonomous, self-contained subjects. In this, these final videos offer new love stories, challenge received scripts

of autism as non-relational, and shift the very ground upon which autism stories—indeed all stories of difference—might be told.

Our first video in this section, *Untitled*, by artist and Ph.D. student Estée Klar (https://vimeo.com/album/4922206; password: 'restorying'), begins with the sound of her rhythmic breathing layered with images of her artwork about supporting Adam, her non-speaking son. Such rhythmic breathing—like a 'human metronome'—often helps Adam, who types, moves and collaborates on art projects to communicate. 'Has the good body a way to feel without another body?' asks Adam, his typed words appearing on the screen. Adam has written about how laborious it is to stick with typing when he experiences perceptual and movement differences: 'I sometimes feel my arms and legs but not the ground beneath my feet,' he writes. It is within a relationship of support that Adam finds his ground and where stories of 'autism' proliferate. Here, 'autism' is not a biomedical deficit or thing in need of remedy but *becomes* in a love relationship where bodies rhythmically meld and 'non-speaking-ness' is shared as a unique and ever-moving site of communication, opening possibilities for being and becoming (post) human together.

Klar's son was first diagnosed as autistic at 18 months of age and was immediately referred to intensive Applied Behavioural Therapy. To reiterate, ABA is often the only legitimised form of 'help' offered to families at diagnosis and within public schools, and attempts to train those who have attracted the label of autism to behave normatively: sit still, be quiet, speak on command. Klar starkly contrasts her opening scene of rhythmic becoming with Adam with a clip from a session with ABA therapists requiring Adam to speak in order to get what he wants, even though he cannot. As 'outsider' witnesses, viewers hear the loud presence of a therapist's voice while Adam gestures towards a book he wants. He is ignored: 'Say the letter B and then I'll give you the book,' the therapist says. Adam manages to utter 'B' but the therapist doesn't keep her promise. Another demand follows: 'You have to sit

down first.' We then witness the therapist forcing Adam into a seated position as he reaches for the book he has successfully requested. The therapeutic dominion to remediate bodily difference through corporeal power is graphically illustrated in this scene. This is not a love relationship but an enforcement of speaking and the docile body as the requisite for relationality, communication and sociality. 'Autism', in this relationship, can be nothing more than a brain and body gone awry. 'There's just so much going on that he's able to do,' says Klar, 'but they [ABA therapists] disable him.'

For the remainder of the film, Klar's rhythmic breathing layered with her evocative artwork depicting the 'infolding' of body and world, of Klar and Adam, work together with her spoken narrative to communicate the anxiety of being in a support role in a world that is hostile to embodied difference and the *intra*-dependency Klar advocates. For Klar, support is a mutual collaboration rather than a hierarchical relation. Yet enacting this support is difficult in a world that readily blames, gawks, measures, time pressures, (mis)judges and moves to make all bodies the same. As a counter to the therapeutic goal of remediation, Klar ends her story without words, with her son's movements and playful chanting noises, expressions of his agency and unique way of relating and becoming in the world.

At the centre of our final video *Why* by Frances Woods is not autism, but a love relationship between siblings, as told by the older, non-autistic sister. In her video (https://vimeo.com/album/4922206; password: 'restorying'), Woods shares memories and feelings about her sister as they move together from childhood to adulthood. She captures how she sees her sister: as a unique, hilarious, and complex person with whom her life is intimately entangled. Woods adopts Bob Flanagan's (2003) format in his poem 'Why' (as performed in the documentary Sick, directed by Kirby Dick), where each stanza starts with the word 'Because...' 'Because' provides Woods a way to express the heady nature of her memory, the kinship bond she has and the systems of discrimination that have interrupted this

connection and organised her sister's life. *Why* is a story about love and heartbreak shared between sisters, but the heartbreak in this story is not about autism but the becoming of autism-as-problem through enactments of oppression.

Starting each line with 'Because' indicates the offering of answers, but because there are no questions that precede them, the viewer doesn't know *what* is being answered—and neither does Woods. Since the answers are providing reasons for unknown subjects, they become both explanations and enigmas—they are index fingers pointing forcefully at open air. The answers are partial yet excessive—they spill, and spill, and spill. Meaning engulfs reason and everything is raw. There is an un-graspability in the knowable, an unanswerability in the answerable. Like the looped volcano imagery Woods uses throughout the film that cycles through, bubbling and exploding and bubbling and exploding, affinity, memory, truth, and 'autism' are represented as animate and uncontained yet somehow doomed to re-inscription. The contradictory format of *Why* is meant to express the emotional landscape of the filmmaker as both certain and lost when it comes to making sense of all that has happened to her sister, how her sister's life has affected her, and what this object called 'autism' really is. Woods further depicts how neither autism, nor the oppression enacted on autistic people is contained within the individual—because of her genetic proximity to her kin, for instance, Woods shares how her life has been folded into these systems of autism oppression too. They have left a mark on both sisters, yet Woods grapples with having much greater amounts of systemic freedom and opportunity than her kin. For Woods, autism, love, heartbreak, and the effects of oppression, can only become known and recited through the queer and unfinished abundance of the poetic.

Reflections for (inclusive) educators

We choose to end this paper with reflections, rather than to offer up conclusions, in order to sustain an analysis through body becoming theory. We are not seeking to replace one

hegemonic narrative of bodies and minds that have traditionally been positioned outside of the typical with another fixed account of difference. While we might stand accused of fixing body becoming theory in the naming of it, we are acutely aware that our understandings are moving and changing, and we do not posit body becoming theory as *the* story of understanding.

More often than not, (inclusive) educators have been exposed only to the cultural narratives of disability as an individual biomedical problem. They are required to be complicit with the pervasive and perpetual demand that difference must be fixed. In good faith, they learn the received scripts of autism and functionalist education systems. They succumb to a view of education as the key mechanism through which relationally autonomous, contained bodies, speaking, rational and entrepreneurial bodies—autism free bodies—are produced. Teachers who wish to disrupt these cultural narratives are marginalised without access to the theoretical and relational resources needed to challenge dominant discourses and practices. This commitment to functionalist and biomedical understandings of difference and accommodation holds true for post-secondary education systems as well (Dolmage 2017).

An acceptance of difference as always and only present in relation with other human and non-human bodies has implications for shifting understandings of inclusive education. If difference can never be fixed or located within bounded body-subjects outside of relationships, then relationships *between us* become the focus of concern, rather than the identification and remediation of atypicality. The cultural scripts and conventional developmental and biomedical theories that locate (autistic) bodies as undesirable, unwanted and in need of urgent remediation lose their grip as it becomes one of many stories that ebb and flow within an assemblage of shifting relationships between us. Inclusive education at the public school and post-secondary level moves from being a question of how to include disordered *individuals* to a question of how *we* build relationships between *us*. These themes

speak back to biomedical diagnostic criteria that describe atypical movement, communication and relationality as autistic deficit. Our approach and the films we present re-story such embodied difference as relational, generative and desirable.

References

Adichie, Chimamanda. 2009. "The Danger of a Single Story." TED talk. https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en

Ahmed, Sara. 2006. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Ahmed, Sara. 2010. *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham: Duke University Press.

American Psychiatric Association (APA). 2013. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th ed.). Arlington: American Psychiatric Association.

Barad, Karen. 2003. "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of how Matter Comes to Matter." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28: 801-31.

Baron-Cohen, Simon. 2002. "The Extreme Male Brain Theory of Autism." *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 6: 248-254.

Baron-Cohen, Simon, Alan Leslie and Uta Frith. 1985. "Does the Autistic Child have a Theory of Mind?" *Cognition* 21: 37-46.

Barton, Len. 2004. "The Politics of Special Education: A Necessary or Irrelevant Approach?" In Ideology and the Politics of (In)exclusion, edited by Linda Ware, 63–75. New York: Peter Lang.

Berlant, Lauren. 2007. "Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency)." *Critical Inquiry* 33: 754-780.

Biklen, Douglas and Jamie Burke. 2006. "Presuming Competence." *Equity and Excellence in Education* 39: 166-175.

Brantlinger, Ellen. 1997. "Using Ideology: Cases of Nonrecognition of the Politics of
Research and Practice in Special Education." *Review of Educational Research* 67: 425–
459.

Brushwood Rose, Chloë. 2009. "The (Im)possibilities of Self Representation: Exploring the
Limits of Storytelling in the Digital Stories of Women and Girls." *Changing English*,
16(2): 211–220.

Dawson, Michelle. 2004. "The Misbehavior of Behaviorists: Ethical Challenges to the
Autism-ABA Industry (Weblog Comment)." *No Autistics Allowed: Explorations in
Discrimination Against Autistics*. http://www.sentex.net/~nexus23/naa_aba.html

Dick, Kirby, dir. 2003. *Sick: The Life and Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist*. Lions
Gate Home Entertainment. DVD.

Dolmage, Jay Timothy. 2017. *Academic Ableism: Disability and Higher Education*. Ann
Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Douglas, Patty. 2010. "'Problematizing' Inclusion: Education and the Question of Autism."
Pedagogy, Culture and Society 18: 105-121.

Douglas, Patty. 2013. "As if You Have a Choice: Autism Mothers and the Remaking of the
Human." *Health, Culture & Society* 5: 167-81. https://doi.org/10.5195/hcs.2013.137

Douglas, Patty. 2014. "Refrigerator Mothers." *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative* 5: 94-114.

Erevelles, Nirmala. 2002. "Voices of Silence: Foucault, Disability and the Question of Self-
Determination." *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 21: 17-35.

Frank, Arthur. W. 2010. *Letting Stories Breathe: A Socio-Narratology*. Chicago: University
of Chicago Press.

Frigerio, Alasandra, Angelo Benozzo, Rachel Holmes and Katherine Runswick-Cole. 2017.
"The Doing and the Undoing of the 'Autistic child': Cutting Together-part Interview-
based Empirical Materials." *Qualitative Inquiry* 24: 390-402.

Gibson, Margaret F. and Patty Douglas. 2018. "Disturbing Behaviours: O Ivar Lovaas and the

    Queer History of Autism Science." *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience* 4(2): 1-

    28. https://doi.org/10.28968/cftt.v4i2.29579

Golan, Ofer and Simon Baron-Cohen. 2006. "Systematizing Empathy: Teaching Adults with

    Asperger Syndrome or High-functioning Autism to Recognize Complex Emotions

    Using Interactive Media." *Developmental Psychopathology* 18(2):591-617.

Goodely, Dan, Rebecca Lawthom and Katherine Runswick-Cole. 2014. "Posthuman

    Disability Studies." *Subjectivity* 7: 342-361.

Greenstein, Anat. 2016. *Radical Inclusive Education: Disability, Teaching and Struggles for*

    Liberation. London: Routledge.

Grosz, Elizabeth. 2005. *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power*. Durham: Duke.

Gruson-Wood, Julia. 2016. "Autism, Expert Discourses, and Subjectification: A Critical

    Examination of Applied Behavioural Therapies." *Studies in Social Justice* 10: 38-58.

Haraway, Donna. 1991. *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. London:

    Free Association Books.

Hirvikoski, Tatja, Ellenor Mittendorfer-Rutz, Marcus Boman, Henrik Larsson, Paul

    Lichtenstein, and Sven Bölte. 2016. "Premature Mortality in Autism Spectrum

    Disorder." *British Journal of Psychiatry* 208: 232-238.

    https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.bp.114.160192

Hodge, Nick. 2016. "Besieged by Behavior Analysis for Autism Spectrum Disorder: A

    Treatise for Comprehensive Educational Approaches." *Disability & Society* 31: 582–

    583. https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2016.1152016

hooks, bell. 1994. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. New York:

    Routledge.

Humphrey, Neil and Wendy Symes. 2009. "Perceptions of Social Support and Experience of

   Bullying Among Pupils with Autistic Spectrum Disorders in Mainstream Secondary

   Schools." *European Journal of Special Needs Education* 25: 77-91.

   https://doi.org/10.1080/08856250903450855

Kanner, Leo. 1943. "Autistic Disturbances of Affective Contact." *Nervous Child* 2: 217-50.

Lovaas, Ole Ivar. 1987. "Behavioral Treatment and Normal Educational and Intellectual

   Functioning in Autistic Children." *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 55:

   3-9.

Mallet, Rebecca and Katherine Runswick-Cole. 2012. "Commodifying Autism: The Cultural

   Contexts of "Disability" in the Academy." In *Disability and Social Theory: New

   Developments and Directions* edited by Dan Goodley, Bill Hughes and Lennard Davis,

   127-142. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

McGuire, Anne. 2016. *War on Autism: On the Cultural Logic of Normative Violence*. Ann

   Arbor University of Michigan Press.

McGuire, Anne. 2017. "De-regulating Disorder: On the Rise of the Spectrum as a Neoliberal

   Metric of Human Value." *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 11: 403-421

McGuire, Anne and Rod Michalko. 2011. "Minds Between Us: Autism, Mindblindness and

   the Uncertainty of Communication." *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 43: 162-177.

Michalko, Rod. 2002. *The Difference that Disability Makes*. Philadelphia: Temple University

   Press.

Murray, Stuart. 2008. *Representing Autism: Culture, Narrative, Fascination*. Liverpool:

   Liverpool University Press.

Nadesan, Majia Holmer. 2005. *Constructing Autism: Unraveling the "Truth" and

   Understanding the Social*. London: Routledge.

Oliver, Michael. 1996. *Understanding Disability: From Theory to Practice*. New York: St.

Martin's Press.

Rice, Carla. 2014. *Becoming Women: The Embodied Self in Image Culture*. Toronto:

University of Toronto Press.

Rice, Carla. Forthcoming, 2018. "The Spectacle of the Child Woman: Troubling Girls in/and

the Science of Early Puberty." *Feminist Studies.*

Rice, Carla, Eliza Chandler, Elisabeth Harrison, Kirsty Liddiard and Manuela Farrari. 2015.

"Project Revision: Disability at the Edges of Representation." *Disability & Society* 30:

513-27.

Rice, Carla, Eliza Chandler, Kirsty Liddiard, Jen Rinaldi, and Elisabeth Harrison. 2016.

"Pedagogical Possibilities for Unruly Bodies." *Gender & Education* 30: 663-82.

Rice, Carla, Eliza Chandler, Jen Rinaldi, Nadine Changfoot, Kirsty Liddiard, Roxanne

Mykitiuk, and Ingrid Mündel. 2017. "Imagining Disability Futurities." *Hypatia,* 32:

213-29.

Rice, Carla, Susan Dion, Ingrid Mündel, and Hannah Fowlie. Forthcoming. "Re/Turning the

Gaze: Unsettling Settler Logics through First-Person Narrative Filmmaking." *Feminist

Studies*.

Rice, Carla, Andrea LaMarre, Nadine Changfoot and Patty Douglas. 2018. "Making Spaces:

Multimedia Storytelling as Reflexive, Creative Praxis." *Qualitative Research in

Psychology*. https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2018.1442694

Rice, Carla and Ingrid Mündel. 2018. "Story-Making as Methodology: Disrupting Dominant

Stories through Multimedia Storytelling." Canadian Review of Sociology, 55: 211-31.

Rice, Carla and Ingrid Mündel. Forthcoming. "Multimedia Storytelling Methodology: Notes

on Access and Inclusion in Neoliberal Times." *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies.*

Rose, Nikolas. 1985. *The Psychological Complex: Psychology, Politics and Society in England*, 1960-1939. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Runswick-Cole, Katherine, Timimi, Sami and Rebecca Mallett. 2016. *Re-thinking Autism: Diagnosis, Identity and Equality*. London: Jessica Kingsley.

Sibley, Kassiane. 2018. Radical Neurodivergence Speaking (Weblog). http://timetolisten.blogspot.ca/

Solomon, Andrew. 2008. "The Autism Rights Movement." *New York Magazine*, May 25th. http://nymag.com/news/features/47225/

Sousa, Amy. 2011. "From Refrigerator Mothers to Warrior-heroes: The Cultural Identity Transformation of Mothers Raising Children with Intellectual Disabilities." *Symbolic Interaction* 34: 220-43.

Stoddart, Kevin, Lillian Burke, Barbara Muskat, Jason Manett, Sarah Duhaime, Claudia Accardi, Priscilla Burnham Riosa and Elspeth Bradley. 2013. *Diversity in Ontario's Youth and Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorders: Complex Needs in Unprepared Systems*. Toronto, ON: The Redpath Centre.

Weiss, Gail. 1999. *Body Images: Embodiment as Intercorporeality*. New York: Routledge.

Wing, Lorna and Judith Gould. 1979. "Severe Impairments of Social Interaction and Associated Abnormalities in Children: Epidemiology and Classification." *Journal of Autism and Childhood Schizophrenia* : 11-29.

Yergeau, Melanie. 2018. *Authoring Autism: On Rhetoric and Neurological Queerness*. Durham: Duke University Press.