

## Neurodivergent Reading: Towards a Theoretical Framework

Neurodiversity as an activist and theoretical concept is no longer new, although in academia, it is still only marginally used outside of Anglo-American contexts. The concept emerged from collective discussions in autistic communities in the mid 1990s, forwarding the idea of neurological diversity.<sup>1</sup> Challenging a pathology perspective that views any deviation from an assumed universal norm as necessitating remedy through curing or treating, the concept of neurodiversity offers a way of valuing subjectivity that in a pathology perspective is perceived as deficient.<sup>2</sup> Neurodivergence, in turn, is a term describing the neurominorities that do not fit the universal norm. Defining the term »neurodivergent«, activist Kassiane Asasumasu emphasized it as a »tool of inclusion«, encompassing »Autistic people. ADHD people. People with learning disabilities. Epileptic people. People with mental illnesses. People with MS or Parkinson's or apraxia or cerebral palsy or dyspraxia or no specific diagnosis but wonky lateralization«.<sup>3</sup>

It is hard to estimate the extent to which these concepts have become influential in non-British European humanities contexts. However, as a Nordic scholar, I have observed a growing interest in Denmark, as evidenced by a special issue of the academic journal *Kultur og Klasse* on neurodiversity in 2025. In Sweden, the cultural journal *Kritiker* dedicated a thematic issue to neuroqueerness in 2023.<sup>4</sup> This issue notably featured a translated essay by UK author Joanne Limburg, who introduced the concept of »weird« as a vehicle to establish connections with historical authors and literary characters

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1 Cf. Monique M. Botha/Robert Chapman/Morénike Giwa Onaiwu/Steven K. Kapp/ Abs. Stannard Ashley/Nick Walker: The Neurodiversity Concept was Developed Collectively: An Overdue Correction on the Origins of Neurodiversity Theory, in: *Autism* 12.3.2024, doi-org.ezproxy.ub.gu.se/10.1177/13623613241237871 (20.4.2024).

2 Cf. Nick Walker: Neuroqueer Heresies. Notes on the Neurodiversity Paradigm, Autistic Empowerment, and Postnormal Possibilities, Fort Worth 2021, pp. 31–46.

3 Kassiane Asasumasu: PSA from the actual coiner of »neurodivergent«, sherlocksflataffect.tumblr.com/post/121295972384/psa-from-the-actual-coiner-of-neurodivergent (20.4.2024).

4 Cf. Elisabeth Hjorth/Anna Nygren: Vi kanske kan prata i kors på egna språk? Det neuroqueera numret, in: *Kritiker* 67 (2023). Moreover, in 2021, the research project »Autistic Writing in a Neuromixed Space: Reclaiming, Reloading Another Mother Tongue« was launched, bringing together scholars from literary composition (Elisabeth Hjorth, Anna Nygren), philosophy (Jonna Bornemark), and sociology (Hanna Bertilsdotter Rosqvist).

with neurodivergent resonances before diagnosis.<sup>5</sup> The endeavor to establish a literary history for neurodivergent individuals that transcends current classifications of subjectivity mirrors the initiatives to construct a queer (literary) history that embraces the subjective experiences of queer individuals; texts that, as Carolyn Dinshaw expresses it, »touch across time.«<sup>6</sup>

In this chapter, I will reflect on what a neurodivergent critical framework for the interpretation of literary texts may look like, in relation to queer and crip theory in particular.<sup>7</sup> I will begin by discussing the theoretical underpinnings of the concepts neurodivergence and neuroqueerness in relation to feminist, queer and crip theory. Positioned as I am as an (undiagnosed neurodivergent) Nordic scholar in the periphery of the US and UK dominated field of literary disability studies, I will also comment on the vital link between linguistic diversity and the theoretical vocabulary we use. Finally, building on queer theory, I will propose methodologies for conducting a neuroqueer textual analysis: through worldmaking, through reparative reading,<sup>8</sup> and through genre and temporality, at the same time also illuminating the differences between a queer and a neuroqueer reading.

### Positioning neurodivergence in theory

Neurodivergence does not align with predefined sets of critical theories. The foundational premise in this discussion is that neurodivergence serves as a vantage point that exposes gaps within existing theoretical frameworks, necessitating the fusion of theories from diverse fields. In Walker's essay »Throw away the Master's Tools: Liberating Ourselves from the Pathology Paradigm«, first published in 2012 and later revised in *Neuroqueer Heresies* (2021), Audre Lorde's seminal speech »The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Mas-

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5 Joanne Limburg: Perspektiv: Problemets form, translated by Ann-Marie Tung Hermelin, in: Kritiker 67 (2023). The essay was originally published as Perspective: The Shape of the Problem in: The Poetry Review 107:1 (2017).

6 Carolyn Dinshaw: Getting Medieval. Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern, Durham 1999, p. 12.

7 I will use both the concepts »neurodivergent« and »neuroqueer«, the latter for practices of neuroqueering, and for overlappings of queer and neurodivergent identities. See Walker, *Neuroqueer Heresies*, pp. 158–163.

8 Cf. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick: Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction Is about You, in: Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky (ed.): *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*, Durham 1997.

ter's House« from 1972 was employed to define a minoritarian stance.<sup>9</sup> Lorde, a black, lesbian feminist, originally used this phrase to deliberate on means and methods for attaining liberation.<sup>10</sup>

Drawing from Lorde's text, Walker critiqued the pathology paradigm and used the concept of »neurominority« to characterize the social experiences of neurodivergent individuals. Emphasizing a minoritarian stance foregrounds issues of oppression and rights; minority groups endure discrimination, marginalization, and share common experiences. Although the forms of oppression experienced by women, racialized individuals, LGBTQ+ individuals, and neurodivergent individuals differ, there exists a collective need for a theoretical paradigm enabling scholars and activists to challenge norms that construct power structures, be they rooted in sexism, racism, homophobia, transphobia, or ableism. For Walker, this transformation is closely tied to the development of a neurodiversity vocabulary to supplant the language of pathology.

Asserting a minority position underscores ethical considerations and positionality, just as Lorde did in her speech. She centered on the subjective experience and on marginalization as a position of knowledge. When researching neurodivergence, it is imperative to consider the position that scholars adopt. This implies a shift from being a scholar merely observing neurodivergence as an object of study to engaging in a neuromixed space that acknowledges neurocognitive privilege.<sup>11</sup> The ethics of research in this domain must encompass these considerations and an openness to experiences different from our own, irrespective of how well we conform to neuronorms. According to Robert Chapman, the concept of neurodiversity not only aids in challenging dehumanizing medical language and practices but also fosters solidarity, resistance, and the development of shared vocabularies for comprehending our experiences within and between neurominorities.<sup>12</sup>

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9 Cf. Walker: *Neuroqueer Heresies*, pp. 16–28.

10 Cf. Audre Lorde: *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House* [1972], in: *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, Berkeley 2007, pp. 110–114.

11 Cf. Hanna Bertilsdotter Rosqvist/ Monique Botha/Kristien Hens/Sarinah O'Donoghue/Amy Pearson/Anna Stenning: *Cutting Our Own Keys: New Possibilities of Neurodivergent Storying in Research*, in: *Autism: The International Journal of Research and Practice* 27:5 (2023), pp. 1235–1244.

12 Cf. Robert Chapman: *Defining Neurodiversity for Research and Practice*, in: Bertilsdotter-Rosqvist, Hanna/Chown, Nick/Stenning, Anna (eds.): *Neurodiversity Studies. A New Critical Paradigm*, London and New York 2020, pp. 218–220, here p. 220.

Feminist thought and intersectional theory have offered critical perspectives for conceptualizing neurodivergence. An inherent challenge in discussing disability in general within an intersectional framework lies in the vast array of differences encapsulated within disability itself – ranging from visible to invisible disabilities, among others. Walker underscores that the social dynamics related to neurodiversity mirror those associated with other forms of human diversity, such as ethnicity, gender, or culture.<sup>13</sup> Ableism conjoins with other systems of oppression, and a central question for neurodivergent critical frameworks is how neurodivergence is intertwined with other dimensions of difference.<sup>14</sup>

The term »queer«, originally denotes something peculiar or unusual, something that »marks a move away from something – a deviation from an otherwise straight path«. <sup>15</sup> This strongly resonates with the neurodivergent experience of being perceived as »weird«, as Limburg expresses it.<sup>16</sup> There are significant intersections between neurodivergence and queerness, a topic explored through the lens of the concept »neuroqueer«. Remi Yergeau has unveiled overlappings between queerness and autism in various contexts. These are for example discernible in associations between cognitive disability and sexual deviance in medical history, in present gender-normalizing objectives of treatments such as applied behavioral analysis (ABA), and in previous assumptions in the theory of mind that autistics possess a male brain.<sup>17</sup> Yergeau claims that »[w]hat autism provides is a backdoor pathologization of queerness, one in which clinicians and lay publics alike seek out deviant behaviors and affectations, and attempt to straighten them«. <sup>18</sup> Experiences of being queer and neuroqueer also overlap in shared experiences of passing and masking. Passing can be defined as presenting oneself as part of a privileged group from a position of discrimination. Masking is used to describe neurodivergent people's temporary adaption to neuronorms to avoid stigma

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13 Cf. Walker: *Neuroqueer Heresies*, pp. 19–20.

14 Cf. Alison Kafer/Eunjung Kim: *Disability and the Edges of Intersectionality*, in: Barker, Clare/ Murray, Stuart (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Disability*, Cambridge 2018, pp. 123–138.

15 Will Stockton: *An Introduction to Queer Literary Studies*. Reading queerly, London 2022, p. 3.

16 Joanne Limburg: *Letters to My Weird Sisters*. On Autism and Feminism, London 2021, p. 11.

17 Remi Yergeau: *Authoring Autism*. On Rhetoric and Neurological Queerness, Durham 2017, pp. 68–73. See also Simon Baron-Cohen: *Essential Difference*. Male and Female Brains and the Truth About Autism, New York 2003, p. 109.

18 Yergeau: *Authoring Autism*, p. 26.

and discrimination.<sup>19</sup> It is akin to the concealment experienced by other marginalized communities, where individuals purposely hide aspects of their identity.<sup>20</sup>

Walker purposefully refrains from precisely defining the term «neuroqueer» in terms of identity. Instead, the concept is employed as a verb – *neuroqueering* – referring to actions enacted and performed by subjects rather than an identity marker.<sup>21</sup> Just as the practice of queering may be described as resisting hetero- and cisnormativity, neuroqueering is the act of liberating oneself from culturally established and compulsory neuronorms concerning cognition, perception, sociality, and emotionality.<sup>22</sup> Neuroqueering starts from the premise that there exists a neuronormativity based on medical discourse and normative social practices, and it aims to reclaim interpretive agency from this normativity. In this sense, neuroqueering aligns closely with the concept of »crip«, which also engages with pathologization while resisting it.<sup>23</sup> Neuroqueering implies a queer and crip response to normative and pathologizing conceptions of gender, sexuality, and ability. As in crip theory, neuroqueering entails a critical perspective on assumptions about ability and autonomy, and how these are created in intersection with other factors. Both queer and crip theoretical perspectives aim to deconstruct and question reductionist interpretations of human experience, and challenge binary distinctions between normality and divergence.<sup>24</sup> As Alison Kafer argues, to »claim crip critically is to recognize the ethical, epistemic, and political responsibilities behind such claims; deconstructing the binary between disabled and able-bodied/able-minded requires *more* attention to how different bodies/minds are treated differently, not less«. <sup>25</sup>

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19 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 123.

20 Cf. Danielle Miller/John Rees/Amy Pearson: »Masking Is Life«: Experiences of Masking in Autistic and Nonautistic Adults, in: *Autism in adulthood: challenges and management 3–4* (2021), pp. 330–338. Research has mainly centered on autistic masking.

21 Walker: *Neuroqueer Heresies*, p. 160.

22 Cf. *ibid.*

23 Cf. Robert McRuer: *Crip theory. Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*, New York 2006.

24 Cf. Justine Egner: *A Messy Trajectory. From Medical Sociology to Crip Theory*, in: Green, Sarah E./Barnartt, Sharon N. (eds.): *Sociology Looking at Disability: What Did We Know and When Did We Know it*, Bingley 2016, pp. 159–192.

25 Alison Kafer: *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, Bloomington 2013, p. 13.

## Extending the vocabulary

All the concepts and theoretical contexts discussed here have their theoretical limitations or complications. Intersectional feminist scholars have explored the social implications of the intersection of gender, race, class, and sexuality, but disability perspectives have remained more limited.<sup>26</sup> Crip perspectives have often centered on physical disability, by focusing on able-bodiedness.<sup>27</sup> However, as Kafer argues, there are »possibilities for cross-movement work, both politically and intellectually«. <sup>28</sup> There are potentialities in bringing queer theorizing in contact with experiences of disability.<sup>29</sup> The Nordic concept ›skev‹ (in Swedish) or ›skeiv‹ (in Norwegian) might be valuable to describe these intersections. This concept was originally used in Denmark and Norway to signify activist dimensions of queer culture.<sup>30</sup> While sometimes used as a translation of queer, its literal meaning conveys something lacking in straight direction, a divergence or deviation from a norm or expectation. In research, it has been employed to denote queerness beyond sexuality, describing deviations from a broad spectrum of norms encompassing not only gender and sexuality, but also behavior, emotions, communication, and thinking. Additionally, analogous to queer as an interpretative framework in literary studies, the concept of ›skev‹ in Nordic literary scholarship has been employed to denote a narrative mode characterized by absences, silences, and anti-climactic structures, as well as a specific kind of reading.<sup>31</sup>

While queer theories challenge the idea of universal heterosexuality and binary gender systems, the purpose of the concept ›skev‹ is comprehending aspects of divergence that are harder to capture. »Skewed theory is not meant to replace queer theory, but rather to grasp the intangible and unnamable aspects of not fitting into norms, including but not limited to norms of gender and sexuality«, Österholm, who has developed the concept in Nordic re-

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26 Cf. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson: *Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory*, in: Hall, Kim Q. (ed.): *Feminist Disability Studies*, Bloomington and Indianapolis 2008, pp. 13–47, here p. 14.

27 Cf. Carrie Sandahl: *Queering the Crip or Crippling the Queer? Intersections of Queer and Crip Identities in Solo Autobiographical Performance*, in: *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 9:1–2 (2003), pp. 25–56.

28 Kafer: *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, p. 149.

29 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 27.

30 Maria Margareta Österholm: *The Pain and the Creeping Feeling*, in: *European Comic Art* 15:1 (2022), pp. 46–65.

31 Cf. Hilda Jakobsson: *Skev*, in: *lambda nordica* 25:1 (2020), pp. 150–154.

search, explains.<sup>32</sup> While queer theories critique the system of norms relating to sexuality, gender, relationality, ›skev‹ might also designate not being seen as ›a proper person‹, or failing to accommodate expectations of normality. In this sense, the concept is similar to Limburg's ›weird‹. However, in Nordic research it has primarily been used to describe »skewed girlhood«, which operates within a gender context.<sup>33</sup>

›Skev‹ cannot substitute ›neuroqueer‹ since the latter is rooted in neurodivergent activism in a way that ›skev‹ is not. However, as this volume bridges European research with the anglophone-dominated field of literature and disability, I think it worthwhile to consider how concepts stemming from various languages can contribute to these dialogues. This may potentially foster greater linguistic diversity in theory development and recognize the varied reception histories that theoretical concepts may have in diverse geographical contexts. Skev/skewed has not hitherto been explicitly utilized to explore neurodivergence. However, it has the advantage of disentangling the spectrum of differences it encompasses from neuroscience. Unlike neuroqueer, which is often linked to autistic experiences specifically,<sup>34</sup> ›skev‹ is not modeled on a specific aspect of neurodivergence. The difference between a skev/skewed reading and a neuroqueer reading lies in the relationship to some form of pathologization. Nevertheless, similar to Limburg's ›weird‹, ›skev‹ might be a position from which it is possible to approach both historical persons and literary characters, without performing simplistic »diagnostic speculation«.<sup>35</sup>

#### Neurodivergence in literature: previous research

Despite the growing interest, there is still a lack of readings of literary texts employing neurodivergence as a critical framework, similar to queer readings of texts. Most of the research performed the last ten or fifteen years instead concerns representation of specific diagnoses, especially of autism, that are often scripted on diagnostic traits. Critical autism studies, and cultural disability studies, which can be seen as foundational for neurodivergent approaches, have been dedicated to making sense of representation in various

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32 Österholm: *The Pain and the Creeping Feeling*, p. 49.

33 Jakobsson: *Skev*, p. 151.

34 Cf. e.g. Yergeau: *Authoring Autism and Julia Miele Rodas: Autistic Disturbances. Theorizing Autism Poetics from the DSM to Robinson*, Ann Arbor 2018.

35 Rodas, *Autistic Disturbances*, p. 11.

contexts: self-representations in ›autiebiographies‹, stereotypes in popular media, and within literature for young adults, among other examples. Stuart Murray's monograph *Representing Autism. Culture, Narrative, Fascination* (2008) stands as a pivotal contribution, not only focusing on representation across diverse media, but also on affective dimensions tied to these.<sup>36</sup> Much effort has been put into critiquing reductive and potentially dehumanizing portrayals of autistic characters, and to suggest more inclusive and less ableist understandings.<sup>37</sup> Neurodivergent readers face some of the same challenges as queer readers: to be confronted with representation in literature is to face an abundance of, on the one hand, objectification, and stigmatization, and on the other, oppression and inequality.

In some research the focus has been to re-read fictional characters that are not explicitly represented as neurodivergent, and in this way allow for a positive potential of identification. Sonya Freeman Loftis' book *Imagining Autism* (2015) is one such effort, setting out to »treat autism as a presence, an identity, a source of agency [...] to explore fictional depictions of the spectrum as signs of disabled presence«, while at the same time discussing problematic and sometimes violent representations of autism.<sup>38</sup> One important point in this critique is that literature not only reflects ideas about autism, but also shapes them: »Suddenly, it is not autistic people who are the interpretative template for the literary character – the public perception of the literary character may reshape and inform how autism is defined as a social construct«.<sup>39</sup>

Recent scholarship has started to shift focus towards language and rhetoric –in Rodas' *Autistic Disturbances* (2018), and Yergeau's *Authoring Autism* (2017), for instance. However, it is important to note that these works, like the work in Critical autism studies previously, concentrate on autism as an analytical lens, rather than encompassing neurodivergence more broadly. Rodas sets out to explore autistic uses of language, and more precisely, to identify an autism poetics. She does this by gathering words from »autism-centred literature« spanning the past seven decades and categorizes them into six groups: silence, ricochet, apostrophe, ejaculation, discretion, and invention. She then uses these categories to analyse the language in a selection of

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

37 Cf. e.g. Mark Osteen (ed.): *Autism and Representation*, New York 2008; Alicia A. Broderick/Ari Ne'eman: *Autism as Metaphor: Narrative and Counter-Narrative*, in: *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 12:5–6 (2008), pp. 459–476.

38 Sonya Freeman Loftis: *Imagining Autism. Fiction and Stereotypes from the Spectrum*, Bloomington and Indianapolis 2015, pp. 154–155.

39 Rodas: *Autistic Disturbances*, pp. 24–25.

diverse but mostly familiar texts: the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, Warhol's *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol*, Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. By »autism-centred literature« Rodas refers to »work by clinicians and therapists, autism bloggers, literary scholars, biographers and memoirists, parents, activists, and cultural scholars, some identifying as autistic, others not«. <sup>40</sup>

The broad selection of texts Rodas uses to generate the categories might be seen as a strength, but by including work by non-autistic clinicians and therapists, there is also a risk that this work includes pathologizing views perpetuated in clinical practice. Although Rodas' mission is to move away from simplifying diagnostic readings of literary characters, and instead focus on autistic language, which manifests in creative and productive readings of a range of canonical texts, there are also problems connected to the idea of an autism poetics. As Rodas points out, the texts included are »only a tiny fragment of the possible texts that might have been addressed«. <sup>41</sup> There are many texts employing the poetics that Rodas discerns as autistic. »If ›catalogue poems‹ by Raymond Carver, David Antin, and George Perec are all examples of an autistic aesthetic, what form of experimental poetry (hell, what form of *list*, beginning with the ships of the *Iliad*) is not?«, asks Michel Berubé in his review of Rodas' book. <sup>42</sup> Efforts to identify a specific poetic style associated with autism might inadvertently result in exclusionary outcomes. Even if not intended, establishing a defined autistic poetics could establish a standard and favor certain expressions of autistic literature over others. Furthermore, this focus on autism could also overshadow the experiences and expressions of other neurodivergent individuals. This prompts the question if there is something uniquely aesthetic about autism, or if there could also be distinct poetics associated with, for example, ADHD or dyslexia.

More and more work has been devoted to studying the works of neurodivergent writers themselves, and work written by neurodivergent scholars, emphasizing lived experience as a source of knowledge. As Anna Stenning argues, narrative agency »consists of the ›ontological‹ dimension of making sense of oneself through time, and the ›political‹ dimension of drawing on

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40 Ibid., p. 4.

41 Ibid., p. 24.

42 Michael Bérubé: Autism Aesthetic, in: Sydney Review of Books, in: Sydney Review of Books, 18.10. 2019, [sydneyreviewofbooks.com/review/autism-aesthetics-rodas-yergeau-savarese/](https://www.sydneyreviewofbooks.com/review/autism-aesthetics-rodas-yergeau-savarese/) (20.4.2024).

one's self-conception to resist normative understandings of one's life«.43 A range of different genres, such as autobiography, poetry and prose fiction may serve as vehicles for such a narrative agency. However, Abs Ashley poses an important question: »[w]hy should it be necessary, in mapping out a critical neurodiversity framework for reading literature, for the author of a given text to have explicitly claimed neurodivergence?«44 Building on José Esteban Muñoz concept ›ephemera‹, signifying often covertly transmitted but traceable embodied queer acts, Ashley instead discusses how neurodivergent ephemera might be identified in texts, through expressions of embodied experiences. Like Yergeau, who introduces Muñoz ephemera concept in a neuroqueer context, they are interested in how it functions to claim »space in a neuronormative environment, like the literary text«.45 Rodas, Yergeau, and Ashley search in language, rhetoric, and literary form to recognize autistic and neurotrans embodied experiences, rather than in representation. However, there are also differences: the literary ephemera Ashley traces, is not tied to a certain autistic poetic, but is instead viewed as part of a range of creative practices that undermine neuronormative and cisheteronormative textual conventions.

Building on these previous contributions, and inspired by queer theory, I will in the following suggest some ways of neuroqueering literary analysis: through the concept of neuroqueer worldmaking, through genre and neuroqueer temporality, and through reparative reading in relation to fictional characters.

### Neuroqueer worldmaking

To identify as neurodivergent or neuroqueer is to experience a lack of history, something that is often addressed in autobiographical writing by neurodivergent authors. In fact, it is a central motivation for Limburg's *Letters to My Weird Sisters*: »It's genealogy, but for my neurotype«, as she writes.46 There are of course, the medical histories of how certain diagnoses were

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43 Anna Stenning: *Narrating the Many Autisms. Identity, Agency, Mattering*, London 2024, p. 22.

44 Abs Ashley: Neuroqueer (a)Socialities. Mapping out Neurotrans Textualities Through Literary Ephemera, in: Bergenmar, Jenny/Creechan, Louise/Stenning, Anna (eds.): *Critical Neurodiversity Studies. Divergent Textualities in Literature and Culture*, London 2025, p. 73.

45 Ibid. See also Yergeau: *Authoring Autism*, pp. 40–45.

46 Limburg: *Letters to My Weird Sisters*, p. 13.

developed, but the diagnoses are new, and medical discourse is in many cases experienced as an authoritative and reductive over-writing of subjective experience. Our descriptions and understandings of neurodivergent identities are constructions that relate to current (ableist) societal conditions, biomedical frameworks, and conceptions of normality and functionality, with the purpose to undermine them. As Wolf-Mayer states, we live in a neurological age with »institutionalized expectations of individual expressions of normalcy«.47 Like for queer people, there is a need to invent history, beyond the identity categories that are tied to the current. This impulse to reach across history to find experiences similar to one's own, and fictions where neurodivergent readers may feel at home, mirrors the simultaneous community making activities in the present. I see both these activities, turning to the past to find traces of neurodivergence, and present community-making, as worldmaking, a term originally conceptualized by Michael Warner and Laurent Berlant to signify transformative practices that generate a sense of belonging and support transformation and inventiveness.48 Queer worldmaking invites us to envision and enact alternative, inclusive and transformative worlds where diverse identities and experiences thrive. Berlant and Warner describe the queer world as »a space of entrances, exits, unsystematized lines of acquaintance, projected horizons, typifying examples, alternate routes, blockages, incommensurate geographies«.49 This prompts the reflection on what spaces literature creates for neurodivergent experiences, and how neurodivergent readers navigate these spaces to foster belonging, recognition, and transformation. Going forward, I aim to illuminate how neuroqueer worldmaking may be enacted in engagement with literature, by looking at a couple of autobiographical texts by autistic writers.

In Sweden, the publication of the book *Autisterna: Kvinnor på spektrat* [The Autistics: Women on the Spectrum] in 2021 sparked a debate. The book was presented as a »personal essay«, investigating autistic women in culture. It unfolds the re-evaluation of one's own experience that the author's diagnosis with autism in adult age prompted. This is presented as a re-organization of the author's own life narrative, one »that overturns everything I thought I

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47 Matthew J. Wolf-Mayer: *Unraveling. Remaking Personhood in a Neurodiverse Age*, Minneapolis and London 2020, p. 6.

48 Cf. Lauren Berlant/Michael Warner: Sex in Public, in: *Critical Inquiry*, 24:2 (1998), pp. 547–566.

49 *Ibid.*, p. 558.

*knew about the protagonists and the plot*«. <sup>50</sup> To make sense of this new life narrative, the author recounts previous experiences, and explains both the autism diagnosis and her own experience of being autistic to wider audiences. She also critiques the male norm inherent in psychological testing and turns to history and to fiction to explore female autistic identity. She discusses Virginia Woolf's half-sister Laura Stephen and autistic traces in Woolf's prose. She interprets Emily Dickinson's poems about her brain as neurodivergent (though without using that precise term), and finds personal autistic resonance with Simone Weil's philosophy, and life.

The reception of the book was mixed. Some reviewers were positive, but some deeply critical to the interpretation of certain canonical authors or texts as neurodivergent, and to the validity of discussing autism spectrum diagnoses in relation to history. <sup>51</sup> The critics voiced opinions that such readings were unproductive, lacked historical context, and amounted to retroactively diagnosing historical individuals. <sup>52</sup> However, in the context of a primarily autobiographical text, this exercise can also be viewed as an attempt to construct a genealogy of neurodivergent authors and thinkers, a space where belonging is possible for a neurodivergent writer. This endeavor serves the purpose of establishing connections between the past and the present, thereby fostering a greater sense of recognition and acknowledgement for neurodivergent individuals.

As already mentioned, a similar approach can be observed in Joanne Limburg's *Letters To My Weird Sisters: On Autism and Feminism* (2021), where the personal address to historical figures is further emphasized through the use of the letter as a literary format. Limburg initially directs herself to the reader to describe how it feels to be in a minority position:

Autistic women are a minority demographic, and when you're in a minority, it can get lonely – your people are scarce and hard to find. The internet has helped many of us to find each other, and allowed us to group together, and to begin to discover that collective voice which any group needs if it's going to be heard. <sup>53</sup>

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50 Clara Törnvall: *Autisterna. Kvinnor på spekrat*, Stockholm 2021, p. 10. My translation.

51 Cf. Mikaela Blomqvist: I hennes värld kan bara den med diagnos bli fri, in: Göteborgs Posten 3.11.2021; Saga Cavallin: Clara Törnvall lägger ett neuropsykologiskt filter över döda geniens verk, in: Dagens Nyheter 26.10.2021; Ulrika Kärnberg: Det finns något religiöst över hennes syn på autism, in: Expressen, 13.10.2021.

52 Cf. *ibid.*

53 Limburg: *Letters to My Weird Sisters*, p. 12.

Thus, underlining the need for community, and belonging, Limburg explains her search for »weird women« in history.<sup>54</sup> This search is not unfamiliar for queer people, similarly searching for queer genealogies. In *Foundlings*, Christopher Nealon describes »the simple but enduring lesbian and gay practice of listing famous homosexuals from history«, and in *Feeling Backward* (2007), Heather Love explores the portrayal of queer individuals in older literature, emphasizing emotions such as loneliness, loss, self-hatred, shame, and failure as affective responses to these portrayals.<sup>55</sup> These same emotions are often used to describe the experiences of neurodivergent individuals navigating through a neuronormative society. Transposed to the context of neurodivergence, Love's model for queer historiography not only allows for the recognition of neuroqueer experiences across time but also enables the identification of such experiences within literary texts, thereby materializing neuroqueer experiences across various temporal settings. Readings of this nature function as a mode of neuroqueer worldmaking through literature. The work that has been done in queer theory urges us to read personal engagements with history, such as Törnvall's and Limburg's, as something other than retrospective diagnosing, namely a neuroqueering of literary and intellectual history serving to establish belonging over time, supporting communities in the present. Furthermore, such worldmaking practices may reappropriate authors and works that have long since been explored from a neuronormative point of view, while their neuroqueer potentialities have been ignored, undervalued, or interpreted in solely aesthetic terms.

### Reparative reading and caring for characters

As medicalized interpretations of identity can feel invasive or even aggressive, and diagnostic frameworks sometimes overshadow personal narratives, literature may function as a sanctuary where neuroqueer individuals find validation and understanding. The practice of forming personal connections with historical figures mirrors processes described in queer studies, where historical texts and figures have been recognized as queer by queer readers, forming attachments and making readers feel »pulled out of the closet and

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54 Ibid., p. 13.

55 Christopher Nealon: *Foundlings*. Lesbian and Gay Historical Emotion Before Stonewall, Durham 2001, p. 5. Cf. Heather Love: *Feeling Backward*. Loss and the Politics of Queer History, Cambridge MA 2007.

into literature«, as Laura K. Wallace expresses it in a text about Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood* as a literary work connecting queer readers.<sup>56</sup> The ways in which readers – queer and neuroqueer alike – use literature as part of »everyday worldmaking projects« is often through a personal response to a text.<sup>57</sup> Within literary history, there exists a multitude of characters who are represented as diverging from ableist norms, enduring suffering, stigma, and are subject to stereotypical depictions. This mirrors the dilemma described by Love: »A central paradox of any transformative criticism is that its dreams for the future are founded on a history of suffering, stigma, and violence«.<sup>58</sup>

Collecting characters that are marked by neurodivergence or have a named diagnosis is a depressing endeavor. One may encounter countless victims of violence, feared or despised outsiders, and savants, whose intellectual abilities are only matched by their social inabilities. In *Feeling Backward*, Love calls attention to »[t]exts or figures that refuse to be redeemed [and] disrupt the progress narrative of queer history«.<sup>59</sup> Presented with stereotypical portrayals of neurodivergent figures, with or without named representation, might trigger a need to scrutinize these critically, and to unveil the simplifying medical or deficiency models they may rely on. This mode of reading is not unlike the »paranoid reading« Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has described, approaching the object of inquiry with suspicion and vigilance.<sup>60</sup> Although such critical scrutiny may be important for neurodivergent readers as a way to talk back to popular misrepresentations, it does not support worldmaking and belonging effectively. To achieve this one needs to move beyond the idea that suspicion is the only way to engage critically with texts. The alternative that Sedgwick presents, a reparative reading instead of a paranoid one, builds not on negative affect, but on allowing for pleasure, and for sustenance. As Robyn Wiegman explains, »[y]ou could say that it is about loving what hurts but instead of using that knowledge to prepare for a vigilant stand against repetition, it responds to the future with affirmative richness«.<sup>61</sup> Reparative reading described in Sedgwick's words is »the many ways in which selves and

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56 Laura K. Wallace: »My History, Finally Invented«. *Nightwood and Its Publics*, in: *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 3:3 (2016), pp. 71–94, here p. 72.

57 *Ibid.*

58 Love: *Feeling Backward*, p. 1.

59 *Ibid.*, p. 8.

60 Cf. Sedgwick: *Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading*, pp. 1–37.

61 Robyn Wiegman: *The Times We're in: Queer Feminist Criticism and the Reparative Turn*, in: *Feminist Theory* 15:1 (2014), pp. 4–25, here p. 11.

communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture – even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them«. <sup>62</sup>

To search for reading methods supporting belonging and care for communities is not in conflict with Love’s call to not flinch from figures that cannot immediately be framed positively. A reparative reading strategy may be to revisit figures that have been condemned, or scorned, to look for pleasurable moments and affinities. Laura Seymour has for example revisited Ben Jonson’s play *Epicoene* (1609), which includes the character Morose, who is mocked and ostracized, but also manages to create what Seymour names an »autistic utopia« where he is free to »explore his selfhood and embody a way of living that offers an alternative to his society’s norms«. <sup>63</sup> While Morose is ostracized by other characters and some readers and audiences, who sees his hatred of noise as a sign that something is wrong with him, Seymour argues that his efforts to reduce noise is in fact a way of taking care of himself, and a prerequisite for him to be able to live on his own terms. <sup>64</sup> Morose is a comical figure, deceived by other characters, and a type recognizable for audiences in that time as a typical misanthrope. However, at the same time, present time readers and audiences may feel an affinity with Morose, through their lived experience of neurodivergence. A paranoid reading might focus on aspects in the play that frames Morose as a ludicrous figure, fooled by others, and unable to function socially, in accordance with stereotypes of autistic people. The need to imagine worlds that may sustain neurodivergent people and allow for their well-being is still urgent, and Seymour’s reading has a reparative focus on these. Although not using Sedgwick’s term specifically, this can be described as one way of performing a neuroqueer reparative reading.

This example shows that new dimensions of literary works may emerge when we give literary characters our attention and empathy. In *Hooked. Art and Attachment* (2020), Rita Felski explores the diverse kinds of attachments that develops between individuals and art, »an aesthetic that is premised on relation rather than separation, on attachment rather than autonomy«. <sup>65</sup> Felski discerns four modes of identification with literary characters, »alignment«, »allegiance«, »recognition« and »empathy«. These categories may cer-

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62 Sedgwick: Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, p. 35.

63 Laura Seymour: »All Discourses But My Own Afflict Me«. Morose’s House as a Seventeenth-century Autistic Utopia (*Epicoene*, 1609), in: Bergenmar, Jenny/Creechan, Louise/Stenning, Anna (eds.): *Critical Neurodiversity Studies. Divergent Textualities in Literature and Culture*, London 2025, p. 110.

64 Ibid.

65 Rita Felski: *Hooked. Art and Attachment*, Chicago 2020, p. viii.

tainly be helpful for the neurodivergent reader searching for experiential resonances in literary characters. However, Felski's examples also showcase the normative assumptions in literary criticism (and postcriticism): she invents yet another category, ›ironic identification‹ to describe the readers relation to characters who are estranging and not inviting identification, such as Meursault, the narrator of Camus' *The Stranger*.<sup>66</sup> Does this mean that a reader associating rather than dissociating with Meursault is impossible to imagine within Felski's critical framework?

In her text »Albert Camus' *L'Étranger*: Reparative Neurodivergent Reading as Provocation« Alice Hagopian argues that it is possible to recognize oneself in Meursault as an autistic reader, not in his deeds, but in his sensory experiences, and experiences of being socially condemned as a consequence of his maladaptation to social norms. Hagopian turns the attention to the social prejudices directed towards Meursault, condemning him even before his crime, and argues that »we can restore Meursault's humanity without absolving him of the responsibility for his crime«,<sup>67</sup> and that this reading is an »act of care« not just directed to the character, but also to other neurodivergent readers identifying with »characters most readers distance themselves from«. <sup>68</sup> Though readers may acknowledge the philosophical and colonial contexts of this particular work, this does not preclude a sense of recognition in Meursault's way of functioning, being tormented by or finding joy in sensory experiences, for example. Hagopian's reading is a reparative reading, and also a reading from a neurominoritarian position, in this way activating new dimensions of this particular work.

Morose is depicted as a misanthrope, while Meursault is infamous for his act of murder. Yet, beneath these surface labels lie complex dimensions to how the characters experience the world that may deeply resonate with neurodivergent readers. Unlike the more commonly cited autistic characters, who often fit into a ›supercrip‹ framework – think of figures like Sherlock Holmes and his numerous savant-like detective successors – Morose and Meursault defy such categorizations. Revisiting these often ridiculed or condemned characters from a neurodivergent perspective – neuroqueering them

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66 Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 111–113.

67 Alice Hagopian: Albert Camus's *L'Étranger*: Reparative Neurodivergent Reading as Provocation, in: Bergenmar, Jenny/Creechan, Louise/Stenning, Anna (eds.): *Critical Neurodiversity Studies. Divergent Textualities in Literature and Culture*, London 2025, p. 172.

68 *Ibid.*, p. 184. Hagopian also sheds new light on the colonial and racist aspects of the text by reading Meursault as a pied-noir working-class man.

– is to look backward, embracing their complexity without forcing them into a narrative of overcoming or linear paths of progress. It means caring for the characters and acknowledging their resonances for neurodivergent readers.

#### (Neuro)queering genre and temporality

Neurodivergence, like queerness, is inextricably tied to non-normative temporalities. This makes literary genres with their inherent temporal trajectories especially interesting to explore from a neurodivergent perspective. For instance, consider the *Bildungsroman* or the novel of formation. Feminist literary studies from the 1980s onward have scrutinized its male-centric origins. They have examined how education, often a central element in the *Bildungsroman*, was not equally accessible to women, and how the typical conclusion, where the individual reconciles with social norms, often took the form of a marriage to a woman. Franco Moretti has emphasized that the *Bildungsroman* inherently strives towards normality, a trajectory that does not align with all life cycles.<sup>69</sup>

Queer people, and I would argue neurodivergent people as well, emerge through different forms of failure in relation to expected life trajectories, and alternative forms of growth. Jack Halberstam, in *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), and Kathryn Stockton, in *The Queer Child, Or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (2009), both employ the notions of failure, regression, and anti-development to investigate queer growth and identity formations that reject or are denied access to the normative development so central to the *Bildungsroman* and the broader novel of formation. Halberstam highlights the productivity of »opting out« from the prescribed life cycle by embracing »failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming«. <sup>70</sup> This critical perspective can be expanded to make visible how neurodivergent characters similarly challenge and navigate the conventions and expectations present in various literary genres.

Stockton's exploration of growth and development as something other than a strictly linear, upward, or forward movement, reveals alternative forms of growth that cannot be solely measured in terms of successful adap-

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69 Cf. Franco Moretti: *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*, London 1987, p. 11.

70 Jack Halberstam: *The Queer Art of Failure*, Durham and London 2011, pp. 2–3.

tation to adult life or continuous progression.<sup>71</sup> These queer and crip (or skeva/skewed) conceptions of temporality can certainly be applied to analyze other genres beyond the *Bildungsroman*. Children's and young adult literature, for instance, frequently operate based on the same notions of growth and progressive development. These genres often carry didactic purposes, particularly concerning diagnostic characterizations of subjects, such as conveying that one can succeed in school even with disabilities.<sup>72</sup>

Divergent temporalities manifest in various forms across narratives. For the purpose of illustration, I will consider a Swedish example: the young adult novel *Jag är ju så jävla easy going* (2013) [I am so damn easy going] by acclaimed Swedish children's and young adult author Jenny Jägerfeld. In this narrative, the protagonist Joanna's ADHD serves as a pivotal element, driving the plot forward. The central conflict arises when Joanna finds herself without medication due to her family's financial struggles. Desperate for funds, she becomes embroiled in a drug deal, which complicates her relationship with her love interest, Audrey. Jägerfeld, who has openly shared her own experiences with ADHD, presents this story with drastic humor, yet with a clear intent to give justice to divergent experiences of attention, sensation, and cognitive functioning. Joanna emerges as a neurodivergent and queer character, navigating social vulnerability stemming from her family's inability to provide for her. Despite these challenges, the narrative foregrounds Joanna's resilience and resourcefulness.

Beyond portraying ADHD, the plot also intricately reflects Joanna's functioning, which hinges on her impulsivity and simultaneously ongoing thought processes. The narrative consistently draws attention to the disrupted timelines: Joanna's mother, trapped in past glories and futile attempts to relive her success as an author; her father, mired in depressive inertia, marked by the repetitive cycle of daily TV quiz shows he listlessly watches; and Joanna herself, likening her mind to a constant flickering between TV channels every second: »Dad, poverty, Mum, medication, Audrey, Audrey, Audrey.«<sup>73</sup>

It becomes evident that though the narrative presents the unfolding of events over time, the narrative chain of cause and effect is disrupted. Instead, Joanna's functioning injects a chaotic and unpredictable element, shaping it

71 Kathryn Bond Stockton: *The Queer Child, Or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*, Durham 2009, p. 13.

72 Cf. Patricia A. Dunn: *Disabling Characters. Representations of Disability in Young Adult Literature*, New York 2015, p. 7.

73 Jenny Jägerfeld: *Jag är ju så jävla easy going*, Stockholm 2013, p. 64. My translation.

into a narrative of dealing with chaos rather than one of conventional development. This trajectory not only diverges from the norm but also embodies a ›crip temporality‹, misaligned with Joanna's neurotypical peers and societal expectations of social behavior and achievements. On the level of representation, Joanna's mind has to adapt to chrononormative clock time, but on the level of narrative, her crip time bends the plot to represent the experience of being out of sync.<sup>74</sup> The result is a narrative that is humorous and messy, creating a hyperactive pace punctuated by Joanna's simultaneous and sometimes vulgar no-filter commentary. While including an ADHD character like Joanna may serve as a didactic choice to foster understanding and promote inclusion, and to some extent does so, there exists a deeper layer beyond representation – a layer that permits Joanna's ›crip time‹ to affect plot structure.

### Concluding remarks

In conclusion, I argue that directing our focus towards neurodivergent readers' engagement with literature, particularly through practices such as world-making and reparative reading, represents a fruitful avenue for advancing neuroqueer and neurodivergent literary studies. Moreover, while representations of neurodivergence can offer valuable insights into how it has been historically conceived, our inquiries should extend beyond traditional character analysis, to include the neurodivergent resonances the characters produce, and the potential for identification in characters that from a normative perspective may be objects of disidentification. There is also a need to explore how neuronorms are both articulated and transgressed in different genres, and with the use of different temporal frameworks, here exemplified with crip time in young adult literature.

In these endeavors, drawing from queer theory's exploration of history and readers' affective responses to texts proves invaluable. While we indeed need examinations of representations of neurodivergence and neurodivergent rhetoric and poetics, establishing an intersectional and inclusive framework for critical neurodiversity in literary studies also necessitates the exploration of neurodivergent reading modes. These modes allow for affective responses and the pursuit of acknowledgment and recognition within literary texts. This approach shifts the spotlight from the texts themselves to how texts acquire neurodivergent significance, or are neuroqueered, through the act of reading.

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74 Cf. Kafer: *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, p. 27.

Such readings facilitate neuroqueer worldmaking and reparative reading, providing a framework for the exercise of neurodivergent agency through the utilization of diverse, and hopefully more and more multilingual vocabularies.

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