Relationalities of Refusal: Neuroqueer Disidentification and Post-Normative Approaches to Narrative Recognition

Christopher Griffin

"Autistic narrative persists"—as Remi Yergeau has recently asserted—defying a long and multidisciplinary tradition of constructing autistic people as lacking the capacity for narration, as "arhetorical and tragically inhuman" (23). Yergeau explains that, despite the ongoing pathologization of their lives and works, autistic writers are more prolific than ever, traversing genres and themes in ways that are irreducible to neurotypical stereotypes (23–24). But to what extent, and in what ways, does the persistence and proliferation of autistic narrative challenge the presuppositions that have produced these discursive norms? How did our narratorial conventions acquire their neuronormativity, and what connections exist between this and other discourses of oppression—those that have generated racialized, gendered, and colonial narratives of desubjectification, for example?[1] In this article, I address these questions by exploring some of the political implications of neuroqueer approaches to the pathologizing misrecognitions of neuronormative narrative. *Neuroqueer* is an emergent movement that uses tactics of disidentification to problematize identity categories, thereby refusing the interpellations of neuronormativity, ableism, heteronormativity, and cisnormativity.[2] Of particular relevance here is the neuroqueer critique of the form of relationality ascribed to autistic people, presenting them as asocial, intersubjectively non-reciprocal, and abnormally withdrawn. Introducing the concept of *allism* to satirize the self-perceptions of non-autistic people, neuroqueer writing deconstructs the dichotomies of neuronormative discourse, opening up a post-normative space for the expression of radically non-dialectical, non-binary experiences of relationality. What becomes apparent, when we view certain moments of the literary archive through the lens of this critique, is that it is the neurotypicality of the dialectic of recognition, as that dialectic has been enshrined in the novel form especially, that has been decisive in making narrative into an apparatus of pathologization.

For this very reason, however, literary texts have ready access to the discursive resources required to challenge the hegemony of the neurologically normative narrative subject. I demonstrate this with *An Unkindness of Ghosts* (2017), by Rivers Solomon, a recent work of speculative fiction that stages a neuroqueer disidentification with storytelling, implicating discursive norms in the maintenance of violent intersections of oppression. Aster, the novel's protagonist, is neurodivergent as well as Black, enslaved, and gender non-conforming. As she struggles to destabilize the authoritarian regime that denies her humanity, Aster also declines to comply with the rules that would allow her to narrate her own story. With this disidentification, Aster extends her anti-assimilationism to any mode of misrecognition that places her outside the frame of personhood, allowing us to trace the narratorial dialectics of what Diana Fuss calls "the *colonization of subjectivity*" (142–43). *Unkindness* thereby alerts us to a structural similarity between the construction of Blackness as an ontological foil for whiteness, and the construction of autism as a standard of disordered sociality that neuronorms can be measured against. In both cases, neither of which is reducible to the other, the colonizing term (whiteness; neurotypicality) can only articulate its supremacy via a comparison with that which it denigrates, and yet it must disavow this dependence at all costs, dependency being inimical to free subjectivity in the liberal humanism that has shaped modern iterations of white supremacy and neuronormativity, not to mention ableism more generally. My reading of *Unkindness* suggests that the extant traditions and techniques of literary narratorship—including such ostensible technicalities as omniscient narration and free indirect speech—are political instruments that, unless repurposed, will continue to disseminate these dispossessive dialectics.

Neuroqueer Post-Normativity

The concept of *allism* provides a way to trace the appearance of narrative recognition. Allism is a term for the condition of being oriented toward the Other, as opposed to being self-absorbed. Developed within the autistic community, allism is based on the Greek *allos*, meaning *other*, in homage, shall we say, to the etymology of *autism*, which deploys *autos* to name a condition of abnormal self-orientation (Yergeau 169-70). Allism/autism thus joins *allos*/*autos* and Other/Self to logically complete a family of binaries. If it seems surprising that autistic people would choose to create a term that reinscribes a stereotype of autistic asociality, then be reassured that allism, like autism, is

not a neutral descriptor. As Yergeau explains, the discourse on allism is intended to ridicule the harmful generalizations that pervade clinical and mainstream writing on autism, while also deliberately pathologizing the forms of cognition that non-autistics take to be normal and natural (168-71). Descriptions of allism are necessary because, often, "the very people who diagnose others' pathology encounter great difficulty in considering their own" (169). Discourse on allism thus mainly consists of the work of neurodivergent bloggers, who produce scathing parodies of the neuronormative texts that have interpellated them as self-enclosed, "mind-blind" enigmas.[3] Following this, we can describe as *allistic* any discourse that portrays autistic people or tendencies as asocial or arelational, thereby positioning itself as neutral arbiter and norm.

As a term of critique, *allism* performs a disidentificatory function: in forming a binary with autism, it simultaneously deconstructs that binary by showing that neuronormative discourse must presuppose a simple and non-porous threshold between Self and Other in order to posit a non-autistic identity. This is not just about refuting the claim that autistic people are self-oriented. Allistic discourse defines Self/Other through its construction of autism as an Other that fails to conform to the norm of Self-Other orientation. Aside from its circularity, this shows that allism treats autism as a foil, the means by which it may grasp its own self-identity, somewhat undermining its characterization of that identity as non-self-oriented. Indeed, "what is an other-centeredness," asks Yergeau, "if that centeredness cannot center the autistic Other?" (39). One answer to this, I would suggest, is to say that it is more accurately described as appropriation in the guise of other-centeredness. The conceptual device of *allism* discloses that neuronormative discourse depends on a hegemonic form of relationality: the dialectic of recognition. As is well known, the ideal subject of this narrative comes to self-awareness through a relationally-symmetrical encounter with the Other, an encounter in which the subject may recognize the Other to be similar enough to itself that it can suppose that the Other also recognizes this resemblance in itself (e.g., Butler, *Undoing Gender* 131-32). Upon consideration of the allistic maneuvers just noted, we can now appreciate what happens when the encounter is asymmetrical: when confronted with an Other who adopts a dissimilar relational style, the subject fails to achieve self-recognition, and the dialectic breaks down. Denied the chance to affirm its identity co-constitutively, the subject resorts to an affirmation of the Self in opposition to the non-reciprocal Other, appropriating it into a fantasy of pathology by constructing it as inscrutable, alien, and withdrawn.[4]

Neuroqueer critiques of allistic discourse can therefore be understood as practices of disidentification that underscore the post-normative dimension of anti-assimilationism. As Justine Egner has shown, borrowing from José Esteban Muñoz, neuroqueer projects not only refuse to identify with oppressive norms, they also reject the alternative counteridentifications that would grant them an oppositional status at the margins but which risk reifying the dominant discourse through acceptance of its terms (8–9). The neuroqueer characterization of normative relationality as allistic is a good example of this disidentificatory tactic. Rather than simply claiming the position of self-orientation, such as to subvert or normalize it, Yergeau and their peers expose the incoherence and coloniality of the operative framework. With targeted precision, the concept of *allism* delves into the existing binary autistic/non-autistic, finding it to contain self-oriented/other-oriented as a silent guiding presupposition. The notion of autism is now bound to that of allism, creating a binary that immediately deconstructs, debordering the threshold of Self and Other, and opening up space for new narratives of relationality and sociality that are unconstrained by reductive schemas like binaries, spectrums, and oppositional dialectics. This special issue provides the opportunity for me to elaborate on the "post-normativity" of this scenario.

Neuroqueer post-normativity does not by necessity entail the disappearance, deactivation, or abolition of norms as such. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine "collective life" without norms, as Lauren Berlant observes (McCabe). Consider the numerous principles that have gained wide acceptance in the neurodiversity movement: the insistence that neurodivergent conditions cannot be "cured," for example; or the rejection of person-first language like "people with autism."[5] These community norms are increasingly adopted by organizations for neurodiversity policies, helping to displace the norms that stigmatize neurodivergent people. However, as many scholars have pointed out, norms do more than supply rules and laws. They also operate in less visibly codified forms to define normalcy itself, building the framework that regulates the legibility of human lives and bodyminds.[6] To disidentify with a process of normalization is to refuse to assume an oppositional stance that would form a dyadic relationship with the norm; it is to deprive hegemonic discourse of an antithesis that could be used to secure the norm's identity. Such a refusal does not amount to a complete disengagement, however. Muñoz stresses that disidentification "tries to transform a cultural logic from within" by "recycling and rethinking encoded meaning," using normative culture as "raw material to make a new world" (11, 31, 196). I take the discourse on *allism* to be exemplary of this strategy. Using the etymology of *autism* as raw mate-

rial, commentators fashion a transformative supplement that decrypts the pathologizing force encoded within the notion of self-orientation. With the logic of the allistic relational style rendered appropriative and incoherent, the theoretical foundations of its normativity are ruptured. Strictly speaking, it no longer makes sense to refer to "normative," "non-normative," and "anti-normative" positions on autism/allism (understood as self-oriented/other-oriented): the conceptual terrain is now post-normative with regards to this binary, allowing a new world to be glimpsed.

Writing Relationality

In order to appreciate the potentialities of such otherwise worlds, however, we must continue to interrogate the contours of the present.[7] How, exactly, did the dialectic of recognition attain its hegemony to become a neuronormative apparatus? In this section, I offer some notes toward a genealogy of narrative neuronormativity, arguing that literary discourse played a crucial role in normalizing and pathologizing particular relationalities. While it goes without saying that narrative texts have always depicted scenes of recognition, what is notable is that texts that closely attend to the movements and moments of dialectical exchanges between characters also powerfully shape the subjectivities of their readers.

Historians of the anglophone novel often credit Samuel Richardson with developing this technique in epistolary works such as *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1748), which show protracted courtships as convoluted struggles, every detail of which we follow through letters that expose the subtle fluctuations of characters' interior lives (Watt 174–77). The extreme emotional responses that these texts inspired in readers of the time has been well-documented; to experience the intimacy of an intersubjective duel on the page was, for many, to gain a connection to the characters that they found unexpectedly personal (Turner 72-73). To do this, to make the novel form into a technology of identification, Richardson built on the innovations of Daniel Defoe (Watt 174–76). For while Defoe had succeeded in writing a character that would fascinate readers for centuries, he depicts Robinson Crusoe in a register that strikes us now as rather odd, especially when compared to the more familiar tenor of Richardson's works. Rather than disclosing his feelings, Crusoe seems far more inclined to tell us about his possessions—the objects and tools that he salvages, collects, and builds—meaning that we relate to him with less affective immediacy than we might today expect. As a result, many readers find it difficult

to avoid pathologizing Crusoe, and, as Julia Miele Rodas explains, the temptation to diagnose Defoe's castaway with autism only increases if we are inclined to stereotype autistic people as isolated, in their own worlds, imprisoned in a fortress of solitude (166–67). Majia Holmer Nadesan's rendering of the stereotype as "an ego shipwrecked on the shores of object relations" attests to the narrative associations between Crusoe and autism that abide in the public imaginary (6). Against this, Rodas reads *Robinson Crusoe* as a site of recursive textual enclosure, "a symbolic acting out of the dynamic relationship between internal and external" (172). The text neither depicts a dialectic, being largely a monologue, nor initiates one with the reader, preferring to build walls and devise inventories, challenging our current ideas of how to inhabit the mind of a literary persona.[8]

What I am suggesting is that the works of Richardson and his followers effectively suppressed the aspects of *Crusoe* that countered or unsettled the fiction of a stable Self-Other binary. In texts like *Pamela*, the norms of narrative relationality were defined in direct counterpoint to the form of relationality in *Crusoe*, which then came to appear non-normative.[9] The autistic disturbances, to use Rodas's phrase, of *Crusoe* thus occurred *avant la lettre*, because they had a hand in building the field of discourse in which they could be registered as disruptive. This is not to argue that Richardson completed the project of inventing the novel that Defoe left unfinished, or that the differences between them constitute an evolution or the necessary procedure of an internal logic.[10] It is obvious, as well, that Defoe's text was not silenced. But it was Othered. The suppression of *Crusoe*'s autistic language articulated a standard of alterity that was appropriable to the dialectic of recognition, facilitating the process by which the latter would assume a hegemonic role in narrative, and thereby installing an instrument of neuronormative regulation within discourse.

Already in Richardson is the concurrence of intersubjective recognition and political recognition apparent. Continuing the work of conduct books—instructive handbooks designed to refine the manners and morality of the emergent American and European middle classes—Richardson's novels aimed to improve readers and set standards of public virtue (Armstrong 108–11). This didacticism would find a more expansive expression in the bildungsroman. Here the dialectic becomes the protagonist's internal struggle in a tale of personal growth that culminates in a moment of self-recognition, the acknowledgement that maturity has been reached and a proper place in society earned (Slaughter 252). It is no exaggeration to say that the purpose of these novels was to teach readers how to be good citizens, to inspire the self-cultivation that was the watchword of the late nineteenth century

(Iser 123). These texts not only fortified the framework of neurotypical recognition by reinscribing the hegemonic relationality enshrined in earlier works, they also added new layers of pathologizing force to the frame by translating the temporality of the dialectic as a narrative of development and independence. The result was to naturalize and disseminate a story of human life as a linear journey of growth guided by the telos of an individuation that coincides with social recognition—and to mark as disordered or unsuccessful any life that failed to meet these standards. The bildungsroman thus became, in Franco Moretti's words, "the symbolic form that more than any other has portrayed and promoted modern socialization" (10).

Allistic norms of sociality made their way, via the bildungsroman, into the scientific discourses that would give rise to the concept of autism. According to Mark Micale, psychiatry took a literary turn at the end of the nineteenth century, resulting in a new clinical narrative that was "a kind of psychiatric *Bildungsroman*." Seeking to depict "individual emotional experience and intrapsychic subjectivity," these texts borrowed the tropes of the coming-of-age story, inheriting its presuppositions (6–7). The obvious case in point is Sigmund Freud, who drew extensively from literary sources, including bildungsromane, for the developmentalism that he brought to child psychology, the field from which autism would emerge.[11] Even more notable in this respect, however, is Jean Piaget, whose influential works on development in the 1920s established the norms of thought and language that defined autism as an "egocentric" cognitive stage that all normal children pass through (Evans 41, 44, 53; Nadesan 69). Like many of his contemporaries, the young Piaget had been captivated by *Jean-Christophe* (1904-1912), Romain Rolland's ten-volume novel that portrayed the entire life of its protagonist alongside didactic commentary on European politics and society (Kohler 39). Indeed, "the origin of Piaget's developmentalism," for Jacques Vonèche, was *Recherche* (1918), the semi-fictional autobiographical bildungsroman Piaget wrote at the age of twenty, the first of several memoirs he would publish during his life (224).

In this way, the novel form played a decisive role in pathologizing styles of relationality and sociality that do not conform to the dialectic of recognition. It enabled the metastasis of allistic norms of identification that reinforced (and were reinforced by) the subjectivations of clinical and juridical frameworks, constructing the field of discourse as a scene of address that made possible the diagnostic interpellations of Kanner and Asperger. It is hardly surprising, then—to return to Yergeau and the opening observations above—that autistic narrative must persistently battle against rubrics that foreclose the portrayal of many lived experiences of neurodiversity. To give an example that

anticipates the forthcoming steps of my argument, the genre of the autobiography, adhering closely to the blueprint of the bildungsro-man, has been a site of exclusion. Being unrecognizable to the stan-dards of the genre, autistic autobiographers have often chosen to tell of their socio-discursive marginalization by interpellating themselves as aliens, hence titles such as *Women From Another Planet?* (2003) by Jean Kearns Miller, and *Through the Eyes of Aliens* (1998) by Jasmine Lee O'Neill (Valente 77). Notwithstanding the heterogeneity of the corpus to which these texts belong, it is clear that neurodivergent writ-ers have no choice but contend with strictures that not only misrec-ognize them as lacking the prerequisites for narratorial participation, but are also conceptually coterminous with clinical practices that have given a scientific imprimatur to dehumanizing neuronormative stereo-types.[12] Critics have not failed to notice that these circumstances bring to mind the problematics examined by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in "Can the Subaltern Speak?"[13] There are also unmistakable resonances with the critiques of political recognition and inclusion to be found in Black, queer, Indigenous, feminist, intersex, and trans scholarship. In these debates, the temptation to request permission to narrate, or demand the right to be acknowledged, is often undercut by an aware-ness that such appeals only modify the operative framework, thereby legitimizing its continued occlusion of the lives that remain beyond its criteria.[14]

Literary texts are thus well-equipped to contribute to the necessary task of investigating the neurotypical valences of both intersubjec-tive recognition and the politics of recognition. If the novel has been the site of a consequential articulation of allistic relational styles, as I have argued, it has also provided, however unwittingly, a platform from which to challenge them. After all, something literature does quite well is play with its own conventions, inverting tropes and suspending rules to thwart readers' expectations. I demonstrate this in what follows by turning to *Unkindness*, explaining how the text stages a neuroqueer disidentification with storytelling to reveal the tacit allism of narra-tive subjectivation. Solomon's text brings together two distinct forms of oppression—neuronormativity and racial slavery—to show how re-lationalities are ontologized to colonize subjectivity. Literary texts may be bound to a certain degree of complicity with the regime of recogni-tion, but in reckoning directly with its politics, as *Unkindness* does, they can show us what the conditions of refusal might look like.

Narrative Citizenship

The story of *An Unkindness of Ghosts* takes place on board the spaceship *Matilda*, a generation ship that has been carrying a self-sufficient population of humans away from Earth in search of a new home for more than 300 years. Matildan society resembles the antebellum American South: a system of plantation slavery condemns all people of color to a life of compulsory unpaid labor. The decks of the ship are organized in a literal representation of the social hierarchy, with powerful ruling whites in the upperdecks, white families and workers in the middecks, and enslaved people of color confined to the lowerdecks, known as the Tarlands. Tarlanders tend to have non-normative genders, sexualities, and kinship arrangements, while "middeckers" and "updeckers" reproduce traditional heteropatriarchal families. Members of the government, known as "the Sovereignty," are all men—the Sovereign himself is a kind of absolute monarch—and "the Guard," a militarized police force and slave patrol, is also entirely male. Aster, a young Tarlander, faces even more oppression than her fellow plantation workers due to her odd behavior: Aster struggles to understand and comply with the rules of deference that are violently imposed by the Sovereignty to maintain discipline. Aster also has an unusual ability to comprehend and retain scientific information, a skill she uses surreptitiously to provide medical services to the often-injured and neglected Tarlanders. Due to her accidental rule-breaking and her clandestine activities, Aster is constantly getting into trouble, eventually coming to the attention of the Sovereign, a ruthless tyrant called "Lieutenant." Perceiving Aster as a disobedient agitator, Lieutenant tries to make an example of her, hoping to restore discipline in the Tarlands by breaking her spirit.

Is Aster autistic? Any answer to this question, I think, should note that the character herself appears to spurn the label. In the following passage, Aster is accosted by a stranger who tries to force a diagnosis on her:

> 'You're a little off, aren't you?' The woman grabbed Aster's chin, turning her face so they were forced eye to eye. 'You're one of those who has to tune the world out and focus on one thing at a time. We have a word for that down here, women like you. *Insiwa*. Inside one. It means you live inside your head and to step out of it hurts like a caning.'
>
> Aster had been called worse: *simple, dumb, defective, half-witted dog, get on all fours and spread. Not all there.*
>
> But Aster was all there. She felt herself existing. (23)

Aster fails to identify with the diagnosis of pathological self-orientation, taking the descriptor "*insiwa*" to be nothing but a variation on the verbal abuse that she frequently suffers. As indicated by her response to the suggestion that she is "not all there," Aster considers these insults to be incorrect descriptions of her intelligence and subjectivity: misrecognitions. A comparable pushback occurs much later in the text, when Aster informs her friend Theo that she is "a boy and a girl and a witch all wrapped into one very strange, flimsy, indecisive body" (308). In both of these examples, Aster refuses a dominant mode of interpellation: firstly to reject the neuronormative claim that she lives inside her head and is unintelligent; secondly to reject the cisnormative notions that gender is dichotomously binary and all bodies can be decisively sexed. Aster's neuroqueer refusal of the *insiwa* diagnosis is a rejection of a relational categorization—"inside one" meaning self-enclosed—which has a striking resemblance to the allistic definition of autism. This is why I have decided not to use that term for her neurodivergence. The diagnosis scene establishes Aster's tendency to disidentify with neurotypical norms, preparing the way for her critique of narratorial conventions.

Unkindness has multiple narrators. As well as the omniscient third-person narrator, who tells most of the story, there are three character-narrators, each of whom are responsible for one chapter. But none of the character-narrators are Aster, which is perhaps surprising, given that she is undoubtedly the protagonist. Rather than allowing Aster to tell her story herself, the third-person narrator uses free indirect speech to mediate her perspective, thereby withholding from Aster a form of recognition and independence that other characters are granted.[15] My suggestion—building on Yergeau's claim that "symbolic orders work to exclude autistic people from rhetorical citizenship" (52)—is that the right to narrate is a kind of recognition that we can call *narrative citizenship*.[16] This also echoes Joseph Slaughter's observation that the character-narrators of first-person bildungsromane only attain the right to tell their stories at the plot's denouement, the moment of dialectical transformation in which they gain both self-recognition and citizen status (252–53). Narrative citizenship thus names a status or a position that is bestowed according to criteria of recognition, some of which, it would appear, Aster does not meet.

Explaining this with a metalepsis—a metafictional breach of narrative levels[17]—the third-person narrator remarks that Aster "wouldn't tell a story" because she finds narrative conventions dishonest and unscientific:

> The precisionist in her hated oral history and memory and that flimsy, haphazard way people spoke about the past.
> *Back then.*
> *A long time ago.*
> *In that land before this great ship* Matilda.
> Aster eschewed these ambiguous prefixal and suffixal phrases because they were an affront to the investigative process. They offered summary and conclusion where there were none, by grouping data that should not necessarily be grouped. *That was the year everything changed*, someone might say—to which Aster asked, *Changed how?* What precise unfolding of events? Was it really *that* year, or the year before? Or one event then, and another event several years later, with 1,018 tiny indications in the in-between? (Solomon 48–49)

> With history, with memory, with retellings, people often settled for the obvious answer . . . Any random assortment of dots could be connected into a picture, whether there was an actual picture there or not. (50)

Aster objects to the elisions, conflations, and fabrications necessary to narrative closure. Demanding scientific rigor and empirical verification, she remains unseduced by the reassuring fiction of a totalizing conclusion, resisting what Peter Brooks calls "narrative desire." For Brooks, one of the propulsive forces that drives a story forward is the desire for recognition (28). This will often take the form of an epiphany for the protagonist, the moment of self-recognition that Aristotle calls "*anagnorisis*" (Brooks 108). We are given a clue that Aster would be skeptical of such a sudden and momentous shift in self-knowledge: her objection to the stock phrase "*That was the year everything changed*." She takes such idioms to contribute to a false epistemology of lived experience, a critique that bears upon another of Brooks's examples. Brooks describes the reader's desire for narrative closure, the promise of the knowledge that will come when we are able to recognize the final significance of the story, "the retrospective illumination that will allow us to grasp the text as total metaphor" (108). Aster refuses to engage in this conclusive kind of "grouping," considering it fallacious to infer generalized meaning from discrete events. In short, she disidentifies with the dialectics of recognition that contribute to narrative's internal dynamics, structural telos, and patterns of interpretation.

Unwilling to comply with the requisite norms of storytelling, Aster disqualifies herself from narrative citizenship. While we can certainly read her position as a queer refusal—by drawing on critics who have

explicated the heteronormativity of traditional narrative features, especially linear and futural temporalities[18]—I want to add to this by exploring the *neuro*queerness of Aster's objection. It is not just that her strict adherence to scientific methods appears extreme by neurotypical standards. In disputing what storytelling presupposes—namely, the assumption that true knowledge may be attained through the desire for recognition, whether in *anagnorisis* or the symbolics of closure—she appears to disavow the mythic scene of intersubjective identification itself, calling into question its ontoepistemological foundations. Putting that mythologem in narratological terms, what I seek in my encounter with the Other is the latter's narration of my Selfhood. The Other constitutes me as a subject by casting me in a story of recognition, a story in which I recognize them to be writing me into a story and thus constitute them as a narrating subject. What motivates me in this encounter is my desire for the affirmation of my power to narrate.[19] Aster will not admit to this desire. Notice that as well as "oral history," Aster distrusts "memory," the very means by which we deploy narration to order our experiences and identities. The ineludible fallibility of memory brings Aster to doubt the veracity of any knowledge gleaned through narrative, thereby suppressing her desire for reciprocal recognition.

Furthermore, it seems very unlikely that Aster would endorse the dialectical model of subject formation anyway, given her disapproval of inferred meaning. To continue the scenography: I cannot know for sure what the Other is thinking, I simply make an assumption based on my own tendencies; but perhaps the Other does not find me to be similar enough to them to make any assumptions about me. Unless I can be certain that the Other is telling themself a story about me (the story of me recognizing them as a storyteller), then I can neither constitute them as a narratorial subject nor gain any knowledge about myself. All of my suppositions are based on my limited perceptions of the Other's behavior and appearance, evidence that Aster might call a "random assortment of dots." Perhaps the picture that I make by joining the dots is a mirage, my faith in the process nothing but an expression of my desire for self-recognition? If we take seriously Aster's neuroqueer disidentification with narrative epistemology, then the implications of her relationality become clear: she resembles the non-reciprocal Other mentioned earlier. During an encounter with a neurotypical subject, she is at risk of being pathologized as asocial, reclusive, or, as we have seen, *insiwa*. By leading us to understand that non-normative relationality disqualifies its protagonist from narrative citizenship, *Unkindness* draws our attention to the neuronormativity of narrative conventions.

To connect my argument more explicitly with a longstanding debate in queer theory, I do not read Aster as a figure of antisociality or anti-relationality.[20] While she is perceived by others as asocial, and while her rejection of storytelling can be understood as an arelational retreat from collective storying practices, the critique of these neuronormative misrecognitions does not necessitate the dismissal of sociality and relationality *in toto*. On the contrary, the text emphasizes how crucial to the success of Aster's uprising are the affective and familial bonds she maintains with friends such as Giselle and Theo, a strategy that also collectivizes the rebellion, heading off the risk of Aster's neuro-divergence being fetishized and individualized as a messianic magical gift. It would also be a mistake to reduce Aster to an emblem of oppositional negativity, as my discussion of post-normative disidentification above will have implied. For while there is no doubt that Aster's refusals resonate with themes of negativity that persist in queer debates[21]—she resists the heteronormative futurism of the ship's coercive reproduction program, for example, by secretly having a hysterectomy (Solomon 43)—she introduces into *Matilda*'s colonial telos a utopian redirection that queers hegemonic temporalities without surrendering to their dichotomous terms. This is not only because she contributes to the project of navigating the ship back to an alien, depopulated Earth—a twist that appears to fulfil the familiar narrative dialectics of closure and return until the uncanniness of the landscape renders any separation of progress and stasis uncomfortably undecidable. What also makes Aster's refusals non-dialectizable is their neuroqueerness. Her position outside the Matildan frame of personhood is not so much a matter of misrecognition as an irresolvable unrecognizability that she exploits, fostering an emergent, insurgent relationality that is indetectable to the ruling order. Let me give an example—Aster's altercation with Lieutenant—and in so doing explain how this is tied to the neuronormativity of narrative conventions.

Colonized Subjectivity, Disavowed Dependency

Indissociable from Aster's aversion to storytelling is her preference for honesty. She is conscious of the social necessity of lying, but struggles to decode the unwritten rules of deference, often failing to lie convincingly. This leads to regular clashes with the authorities, including the Sovereign himself, Lieutenant, who is determined to bring her to heel. Their exchanges are fascinating failures of recognition that further deconstruct the allism of dialectical domination. Lieutenant's misrecognition of Aster stems from the systemic misrecognition that forms the

cornerstone of the sociopolitical order, the idea that all Tarlanders are insufficiently human to attain full personhood. Signaling his adherence to this axiom, Lieutenant describes Tarlanders as "animals" (Solomon 101), before expressly including Aster, calling her "pigeon," "vermin," "animalian," and comparing her to dogs and horses (238–42). He is thus unaware of Aster's non-normativity. Perceiving Tarlanders as an undifferentiated herd, Lieutenant is oblivious to the singularities of individuals, and does not realize, therefore, that Aster has no aptitude for mendacity, insisting that "Your sort can't help but to lie" (239). The irony here—Aster in fact can't help but *not* to lie—highlights how fully Lieutenant has misread her. As well as refusing to recognize her humanity, he fails to recognize Aster's neurodivergence, and so cannot discern the threat she poses.

Being non-reciprocal, this master-slave dynamic is clearly not Hegelian, and yet it does not perfectly correspond with Frantz Fanon's well-known corrective either: it is not the case that the colonizer (Lieutenant) desires nothing by way of recognition from the colonized (Aster), as Fanon asserts (10, 109, 216–222). On the contrary, Lieutenant seems strangely obsessed with Aster: rather than simply imprisoning or executing her, he demands that she acknowledge his authority, flying into a rage when she fails to do so. Complicating the picture, however, is the fact that during these exchanges Aster is little more than a proxy for her mentor Theo, Lieutenant's nephew. Motivated by the illicit, unspoken desire he harbors for Theo, Lieutenant disciplines Aster in order to gain the recognition of his nephew indirectly. Because he attempts to instrumentalize Aster in this way, we could say, with Fanon, that Lieutenant seeks to reduce her to "crushing objecthood" (109). If Aster is not fully consigned to the Fanonian "zone of nonbeing" (10), she remains dangerously ensnared in Lieutenant's fantasy of domination, his perilous attempt at self-constitution brought to the precipice by internalized homophobia, the incest taboo, and his will to power. In misrecognizing Aster, then, Lieutenant does more than underestimate her: he perceives her as nothing but a fragment of himself, an Other that has been fully appropriated into his relational schema.

Commenting on Fanon, Diana Fuss agrees that the colonizer "monopolizes otherness to secure an illusion of unfettered access to subjectivity," a move that she calls "the *colonization of subjectivity*" (142–43). Fuss makes the important point that the construction of a non-reciprocal relation allows the white subject to claim self-sufficiency, denying the dependency that the mutuality of the Hegelian model entails: "'White' operates as its own Other, freed from any dependency on the sign 'Black' for its symbolic constitution" (144). I think we must understand this disavowal of dependency not only as an attempt to further

disempower and dehumanize the colonized subject, but also as an anxious denial of the inescapable fact that the dependency does indeed exist. As numerous studies of colonization and slavery have shown, under such circumstances, dominant populations invariably come to define their own freedom and personhood in direct counterpoint to the condition of the enslaved persons in their midst. Surveying the antebellum South, for example, Saidiya Hartman explains that "the relations of mastery and servitude . . . determined the meaning of white identity, the character of citizenship, and the scope of rights and entitlements" (29). Even more pointedly, she argues that "the rights of the self-possessed individual and the set of property relations that define liberty depend upon, if not require, the black as will-less actant and sublime object" (62). Orlando Patterson puts it like this: slaveholders are parasites dependent for their social status, psychological supremacy, and economic stability on their hosts, the enslaved. To escape the demeaning implications of this, slaveholders "camouflage" their dependence through an "ideological inversion of reality" in which the enslaved are imagined to be the dependent ones (337, 338). In the American South, this took the form of a herrenvolk paternalism in which the plantocracy imagined themselves benevolent caretakers of a population inherently incapable of independence (334-38).[22] More recently, under the aegis of Afropessimism and following the growth of the Movement for Black Lives, the idea of Blackness as an ontological negative ground that sustains white supremacy and non-Black subjectivity in general has gained new currency (see, for example, Wilderson).

Toni Morrison traces the manifestation of this hidden dependence in American literature, showing that the "metaphysical necessity" of Blackness to discourses of freedom is inseparable from literary narrative's "ideological dependence on racialism" (64). Morrison gives the example of *To Have and Have Not* (1937), in which Ernest Hemingway's protagonist Harry flatters his wife Marie by informing her that his experience of sex with a Black woman was like having intercourse with a shark. As Morrison observes, Harry's dehumanization of Black female sexuality is intended and received as an act of kindness, a means for him to reassure Marie that her whiteness secures her natural supremacy and her exclusive dominion over human femininity (85). Unlike the novels that Morrison examines, *An Unkindness of Ghosts* never uses Blackness as an antipode for whiteness. Instead, the interminable dissensus between Aster and Lieutenant exposes the aporia of disavowed dependency that undermines any ideology of domination: as Aster's fugitive agency grows, Lieutenant stakes his authority on the demand that she surrender her claim to volitional life, the impossibility of which imprisons him in an illusion of supremacy.

But to appreciate the full significance of this, we have to see the decisive role that neurological difference plays in the text's treatment of freedom. As I have argued, Aster's behavior suggests a form of relationality that an allistic subject would consider to be hermetically nonreciprocal. She disidentifies with narratorial personhood, refusing to comply with the norms of storytelling that would grant her the recognition of narrative citizenship. What follows from her position challenges the ontoepistemological foundations of the model of subject formation that has narrational recognition as its axiom. This has direct implications for both the pathologizing relationality of allism and the dehumanizing relationality of colonialism—not least that there is a telling similarity between them. The allistic subject finds the autistic Other to contravene its expectations of reciprocity; so, to reaffirm its expectations and secure its identity, the subject constructs the Other as abnormally asocial, too wholly other to be recognized as a full subject, and in an act of self-protection it naturalizes its own relational style, disguising the fact that it defines its own normalcy through comparison with the pathologized Other. Similarly, the colonial "master" prefers an Other that will affirm their own identity, and so constructs the colonized Other as a wholly-other non-subject, disguising their dependence on the Other in order to maintain the myth of inherent supremacy and justify the violent actualization of domination. Needless to say, I hope, the point of this comparison is not to claim some reductive equivalence between two distinct forms of oppression, but to emphasize a structural resemblance that we can call, after Fuss, *colonized subjectivity*. Like whiteness, the condition of non-autistic normalcy aspires to "the exalted position of transcendental signifier" (Fuss 144). From this vantage point, the importance of *allism* in naming and denaturalizing that coloniality becomes apparent, as does the meaning of Fred Moten's delphic claim that neurotypicality is "another name for antiblackness" (Manning, *Minor Gesture* 4).

At the intersection of allism and white supremacy are the discursive resources for the articulation of post-normative narratives of interdependent subjectivity, relationality, and sociality. The reading of *Unkindness* that I have offered here suggests that such narratives could be fostered by close attention to the dispossessive force of literary conventions, some of which are genre-specific. Being a neo-slave narrative, for example, *Unkindness* belongs to a genre in which the protagonist is usually a first-person narrator. By breaking with this tradition and making it clear that Aster's neurodivergence has metaleptically disqualified her from narrative citizenship, the text reminds us of the racist and ableist principles that conditioned the appearance of the original slave narratives. As scholars have shown, a key political aim of

the antebellum texts was to promote the cause of abolition by convincing white readers that enslaved Black people were potential citizens, equal to the challenges of freedom, capable of living independently of their "masters" (Andrews 101). This meant that someone considered to be disabled could not narrate one of these texts, because they were taken to lack the requisite independence for citizenship (Schalk 38). Broaching the ongoing legacy of these violent norms, *Unkindness* suggests that to decolonize the narratorial subject, to make it post-normative with regards to this history, what is required is neurodiverse accounts of relationality that are inappropriable to colonial rubrics. In challenging the prevailing formulations of discursive recognition, neuroqueer literature reworks the conditions of coloniality such that the polyvalence of interdependence becomes impossible either to deny or ignore.

Acknowledgments

Notes

1. I use *neurotypical* to refer to tendencies and characteristics that align with neurological norms, which I sometimes call *neuronorms*. I use *neuronormative* to refer to the oppression, suppression, and pathologization of tendencies and characteristics that diverge from neuronorms.

2. See Egner; Walker and Raymaker; Yergeau 27.

3. See, for example, *Allism Speaks*.

4. For comparable discussions of neurotypical relationality, see Manning, "Not at a Distance" 161-163; Sedgwick; Valente.

5. For a good roundup of these and similar topics, see Bertilsdotter Rosqvist et al.

6. See, for example, Butler, *Undoing Gender* 205–207; Berlant and Warner. On the concept of *bodymind*, see Schalk.

7. I borrow the expression "otherwise worlds" from King et al.

8. The form of domination that Crusoe exerts over Friday is non-dialectical. Crusoe sees Friday as nothing more than a "savage" and a "servant," rescuing him from an altercation purely for the purpose of enslaving him (Defoe 170–71).

9. The autism of Crusoe can be seen as an example of "narrative prosthesis," literature's reliance on characters marked as disabled for the delineation of normalcy, a discursive "crutch" that sets the co-ordinates for symbolic and linguistic innovation (Mitchell and Snyder).

10. This is a crude version of the account often attributed to Watt. While I consider *Rise of the Novel* to contain many important insights, I agree with Deirdre Shauna Lynch that Watt's recourse to teleology is problematic (4, 123–124).

11. Freud alludes to Goethe more than to any other literary writer, and although most of these references are to *Faust*, Freud returns frequently to *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, often considered to be the first bildungsroman. Graham Frankland argues that "developmental narratives are always the ultimate objective of Freud's interpretations . . . If a narrative—internally coherent and comprehensible as a development due to dynamic conflicts—possesses genuine explanatory power, then the facts are of only incidental importance. This explains how Freud managed to construct a detailed narrative of infantile sexual development in 1905, several years before he had ever analysed an infant" (148–49).

12. For readings of autistic memoirs that variously contest and comply with narrative conventions, see Stenning; Cooper; Hacking.

13. See Durbin-Westby; Savarese. This is not to imply that neurodivergence and subalternity are somehow equivalent, a suggestion that would efface the racial dynamics of autism discourse (Hooge n4).

14. The allusion is to Edward Said's "Permission to Narrate," his analysis of the U.S. media's suppression of the Palestinian perspective during the Israel-Lebanon War of 1982. For an example of the legitimization argument see Spade 87.

15. Free indirect speech (FIS) brings the reader into close contact with the character, but under the supervisory authority of the narrator. Something of the character remains covered or "concealed," to borrow the term Bakhtin sometimes used for the effect of FIS (e.g. 305). In line with the metaphor of political subjectivity that I am proposing, we could call FIS a kind of narrative coverture, a condition of subordination through enforced dependency. I am grateful to Cara Gathern for this point. For the politics of FIS, see Mezei; Manning, "Me Lo Dijo un Pajarito."

16. The term *narrative citizenship* is also used in sociological contexts to refer to forms of selfhood and personhood constituted through storytelling (e.g., Baldwin). I use it here as a term of narratology to argue that this dimension of characterization (the criteria determining which characters can also become narrators) discloses the politics of discursive conventions.

17. I follow Genette in using *metalepsis* to describe this technique, which is often used to draw attention to the constructedness of the text (234–37). (Confusingly, the term is used in a different way by Harold Bloom, and differently again by Paul de Man, whom Judith Butler then follows.)

18. For example, Keeling; Hanson.

19. My rendering of the scene here is informed by Adriana Cavarero's work on relationality and narrative, as well as Butler's comments on her work in *Giving an Account of Oneself*.

20. Key texts in this debate include Bersani; Edelman; Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*.

21. For a helpful discussion of recent contributions to this topic, see Nyong'o.

22. The term *herrenvolk* ("master race") refers to the Nazi ideology of racial superiority. For the claim that the antebellum American South was a herrenvolk democracy, see van den Berghe.

Works Cited

Allism Speaks. allism-speaks.tumblr.com. Accessed 12 Dec. 2021.

Andrews, William L. *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865*. U of Illinois P, 1986.

Armstrong, Nancy. *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel*. Oxford UP, 1987.

Bakhtin, Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Edited by Michael Holquist, translated by Caryl Emerson, U of Texas P, 1981.

Baldwin, Clive. "Narrative(,) Citizenship and Dementia: The Personal and the Political." *Journal of Aging Studies*, vol. 22, no. 3, 2008, pp. 222–28.

Berlant, Lauren, and Michael Warner. "Sex in Public." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 24, 1998, pp. 547–66.

Bersani, Leo. *Homos*. Harvard UP, 1995.

Bertilsdotter Rosqvist, Hanna, Nick Chown, and Anna Stenning. Introduction. *Neurodiversity Studies: A New Critical Paradigm*, edited by Bertilsdotter Rosqvist, Chown, and Stenning, Routledge, 2020, pp. 1-11.

Brooks, Peter. *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*. Harvard UP, 1992.

Butler, Judith. *Giving an Account of Oneself*. Fordham UP, 2005.

---. *Undoing Gender*. Routledge, 2006.

Cavarero, Adriana. *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*. Translated by Paul A. Kottman, Routledge, 2000.

Cooper, Tova. "Orbiting the Neurotypical Universe: Aspergian Narratives by Lydia Netzer and John Elder Robison." *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*, vol. 12, no. 4, 2018, pp. 423–39.

Defoe, Daniel. *Robinson Crusoe*. Everyman's, 1992.

Durbin-Westby, Paula C. "'Public Law 109-416 Is Not Just about Scientific Research': Speaking Truth to Power at Interagency Autism Coordinating Committee Meetings." *Disability Studies Quarterly*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2010.

Edelman, Lee. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Duke UP, 2004.

Egner, Justine E. "'The Disability Rights Community Was Never Mine': Neuroqueer Disidentification." *Gender & Society*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2019, pp. 123–47.

Evans, Bonnie. *The Metamorphosis of Autism: A History of Child Development in Britain*. Manchester UP, 2017.

Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Charles Lam Markmann, Pluto Press, 1986.

Frankland, Graham. *Freud's Literary Culture*. Cambridge UP, 2000.

Fuss, Diana. *Identification Papers*. Routledge, 1995.

Genette, Gérard. *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Cornell UP, 1980.

Hacking, Ian. "Autistic Autobiography." *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences*, vol. 364, no. 1522, 2009, pp. 1467–73.

Hanson, Elizabeth Hanna. "Toward an Asexual Narrative Structure." *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives*, edited by Karli June Cerankowski and Megan Milks, Routledge, 2014, pp. 344–74.

Hartman, Saidiya V. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. Oxford UP, 1997.

Hooge, Anna N. de. "Binary Boys: Autism, Aspie Supremacy and Post/Humanist Normativity." *Disability Studies Quarterly*, vol. 39, no. 1, 2019.

Iser, Wolfgang. *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett*. Johns Hopkins UP, 1978.

Keeling, Kara. *Queer Times, Black Futures*. New York UP, 2019.

King, Tiffany Lethabo, et al., editors. *Otherwise Worlds: Against Settler Colonialism and Anti-Blackness*. Duke UP, 2020.

Kohler, Richard. *Jean Piaget*. Bloomsbury, 2014.

Lynch, Deidre Shauna. *The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture, and the Business of Inner Meaning*. U of Chicago P, 1998.

Manning, Erin. "Me Lo Dijo Un Pajarito: Neurodiversity, Black Life, and the University as We Know It." *Social Text*, vol. 36, no. 3, 2018, pp. 1–24.

---. *The Minor Gesture*. Duke UP, 2016.

---. "Not at a Distance: On Touch, Synaesthesia and Other Ways of Knowing." *Touch*, edited by Caterina Nirta et al., U of Westminster P, 2020, pp. 147–93.

McCabe, Earl. "Depressive Realism: An Interview with Lauren Berlant." *The Hypocrite Reader*, no. 5, 2011.

Mezei, Kathy. "Who Is Speaking Here? Free Indirect Discourse, Gender, and Authority in *Emma, Howards End*, and *Mrs. Dalloway*." *Ambiguous Discourse: Feminist Narratology and British Women Writers*, edited by Kathy Mezei, U of North Carolina P, 1996.

Micale, Mark S. "Introduction: The Modernist Mind—A Map." *The Mind of Modernism: Medicine, Psychology, and the Cultural Arts in Europe and America, 1880-1940*, edited by Mark S. Micale, Stanford UP, 2004.

Mitchell, David T., and Sharon L. Snyder. *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*. U of Michigan P, 2001.

Moretti, Franco. *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*. Verso, 1987.

Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Vintage, 1993.

Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York UP, 2009.

---. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. U of Minnesota P, 1999.

Nadesan, Majia Holmer. *Constructing Autism: Unravelling the "Truth" and Understanding the Social*. Routledge, 2005.

Nyong'o, Tavia. "Upheavals in Black Thought: On Critical Negativity." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 27, no. 3, 2021, pp. 473–83.

Patterson, Orlando. *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*. Harvard UP, 1982.

Rodas, Julia Miele. *Autistic Disturbances: Theorizing Autism Poetics from the DSM to Robinson Crusoe*. U of Michigan P, 2018.

Said, Edward. "Permission to Narrate." *Journal of Palestine Studies*, vol. 13, no. 3, 1984, pp. 27–48.

Savarese, Ralph James. "Toward a Postcolonial Neurology: Autism, Tito Mukhopadhyay, and a New Geo-Poetics of the Body." *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*, vol. 4, no. 3, 2010, pp. 273–89.

Schalk, Samantha Dawn. *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)Ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction*. Duke UP, 2018.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. "Affect Theory and Theory of Mind." *The Weather in Proust*, edited by Jonathan Goldberg, Duke UP, 2012.

Slaughter, Joseph R. *Human Rights, Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law*. Fordham UP, 2007.

Solomon, Rivers. *An Unkindness of Ghosts*. Akashic Books, 2017.

Spade, Dean. *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law*. Duke UP, 2015.

Stenning, Anna. "Understanding Empathy through a Study of Autistic Life Writing: On the Importance of Neurodivergent Moral." *Neurodiversity Studies: A New Critical Paradigm*, edited by Hanna Bertilsdotter Rosqvist et al., Routledge, 2020.

Turner, James Grantham. "Novel Panic: Picture and Performance in the Reception of Richardson's *Pamela*." *Representations*, vol. 48, 1994, pp. 70–96.

Valente, Joseph. "Is the AU in Autism the AU in Autonomy?" *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2016, pp. 71–84.

Van den Berghe, Pierre L. *Race and Racism: A Comparative Perspective*. Wiley & Sons, 1967.

Vonèche, Jacques. "Identity and Narrative in Piaget's Autobiographies." *Narrative and Identity: Studies in Autobiography, Self and Culture*, edited by Jens Brockmeier and Donal Carbaugh, John Benjamins, 2001.

Walker, Nick, and Dora M. Raymaker. "Toward a Neuroqueer Future: An Interview with Nick Walker." *Autism in Adulthood*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2021, pp. 5–10.

Watt, Ian. *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding*. Hogarth, 1987.

Wilderson III, Frank B. *Afropessimism*. Liveright, 2020.

Yergeau, Remi [*published as* Melanie Yergeau]. *Authoring Autism: On Rhetoric and Neurological Queerness*. Duke UP, 2018.

About the Author

Christopher Griffin has recently completed a PhD at the University of Brighton. Their work explores narrative speculation, dispossessive citizenship, and ontologies of subjectivation, and has appeared in *Derrida Today* and *Interfere*. Email: c.griffin@brighton.ac.uk.