Review Essay

Crip Disruptions: Agency, Anti-Compliance, and Autistext

Affective Disorder and the Writing Life: The Melancholic Muse
Stephanie Stone Horton, editor
New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014

Living Chronic: Agency and Expertise in the Rhetoric of Diabetes
Lora Arduser
Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2017

Crip Times: Disability, Globalization, and Resistance
Robert McRuer
New York: New York UP, 2018

Authoring Autism: On Rhetoric and Neurological Queerness
Melanie Yergeau
Durham: Duke UP, 2018

In 2001, Brenda Jo Brueggemann, Linda Feldmeier White, Patricia Dunn, Barbara Heifferon, and Johnson Cheu published the article “Becoming

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Tara Wood

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Visible: Lessons in Disability” in College Composition and Communication. The publication of this piece marked a kairotic moment for the presence of disability within the discipline of rhetoric and composition. Just two years prior, the Conference on College Composition and Communication (via then program chair Keith Gilyard) featured prominent disability activist and scholar Simi Linton. The 1999 CCCC, along with the publication of “Becoming Visible,” marked a key plot point in the trajectory of disability’s presence within our field. Brueggemann and her coauthors urged readers to “be receptive to disability studies’ powerful exposure of the de-humanizing societal constructions of disability and difference” (371). We are now twenty years from this pivotal moment, and one thing is quite clear: our discipline has responded to this call with verve.

Disability studies (DS) within rhetoric and composition has productively challenged us to reexamine our commonplace assumptions about “normal” students and enabled us to understand the generative capacities of disability as critical lens. Such presence has created more space for more minds and bodies not only in our classrooms but among our faculty ranks as well. In briefly mapping this twenty-year history, I certainly do not intend to suggest that our work is complete or that these dates (1999–2019) mark any sort of neatly packaged container of DS work in our discipline. Rather, I mean to showcase the profound impact of disability in our journals, our hallways, our classrooms. Collectively, the scholars I review here demonstrate how perspectives from a disability standpoint can challenge oppressive and ableist forces, how they can create new meaning, allowing us new ways to think about and understand agency, activism, intention, and resistance.

My goal in this essay is to survey the impact of each book in turn, exploring the ways in which each text challenges readers to reconceptualize the vicissitudes of the ability-disability spectrum. The first book is an edited collection that reads as a meditation on the impact of affective disorders on processes of writing, told mostly from the perspectives of individuals who disclose their experiences of mental illness. The second book engages the discourse of health and wellness, looking closely at the rhetorical practices of diabetics. The third book presents a theoretical examination of crip art and activism and explains how such performances challenge and resist austerity measures across the globe. And finally, the fourth book theorizes autistic rhetoric(s), drawing on stories from the author’s own experiences
in order to critique behavioral traditions of cure and normalization, as well as the rhetorical traditions of intention and diplomacy.

**Affective Disorder and the Writing Life: The Melancholic Muse**

The edited collection *Affective Disorder and the Writing Life: The Melancholic Muse* takes up the intersections of affective disorder and processes of writing and creativity. Editor Stephanie Stone Horton opens the collection by claiming, “It is naïve to think affective difference has nothing to do with writing” (5), and she begins to explore the assumed, lived, and mythical connections between mental illness and the creative impulse. In many ways, Horton’s opening chapter wrestles with the tense correlation between creative writers and mental illness (particularly affective disorders such as depression and bipolar disorder). She showcases an array of evidence to support this correlation such as the high rate of affective disorder among members of the Iowa Writers’ Workshop and the high suicide rates of female poets, dubbed the “Sylvia Plath effect.” Horton discloses her own experience with manic depression and urges composition studies to move beyond psychiatry/anti-psychiatry binaries in their engagement with affective disorders and to instead engage critical analysis of both the “neuroscience of rhetoric” and the “rhetoric of neuroscience” (9). Her resistance to simple binaries, along with her own disclosure of an affective disorder, are moves replicated by almost every other contributor to the collection.

Part one focuses on the impact of affective difference on inspiration, writing processes, and writing production. Each in their own way, the five authors in this opening section work to articulate and make sense of those moments when experiences of disorder either impede or bring forth the urge to connect with others through sharing stories, poetry, fiction, words. Nancer Ballard questions the connection between madness, inspiration, and agentive control. She asks, “The one thing that everyone seems to agree on is that inspiration is beyond conscious control. What then separates inspiration from madness?” (34). Ballard suggests that affective disorders may function as Muse, even when such inspiration and creation may come from darkness, a void of sorts. She writes, “Part of my journey has been learning to see vivid images and dark despair as my body’s inarticulate attempt to help me, rather than as a terrible unchosen affliction” (41).
Lise Bagoley engages this same tension: is the mad writer a myth or a livable truth? Like Ballard, Bagoley emphasizes the desire for connection, for audience. She frames her purpose in writing her chapter to be less about narcissistic “navel-gazing” and more focused on “making sense of how being bipolar shaped [her] life” in the hopes that readers “may begin to understand (or identify with) both the opportunities and the obstacles presented by treatment for those disorders” (46). After describing in vivid detail her experiences of writing during periods of hypomania and psychosis, Bagoley reflects insightfully on the impact of treatment and prescription drugs. She states, “it made for an unproductive streak” (48) and “[l]earning to work without the spark of mania was a challenge” (49). Sifting through the various bits of advice offered to her from mentors and colleagues, Bagoley notes their tendency toward normalizing her behaviors into those of a compliant, productive graduate student. She concludes that moderation and balance work better for her, writing, “In hindsight, my attempts to live and work with bipolar disorder characteristically swing between two poles—between the desire to negate the disorder and the desire to let it pick me up and toss me where it will” (51). She comes to realize that neither a “false discipline” of rigorous time-allocated sessions of writing production or “wild-haired, sleepless genius scribbling” work for her. Her final reflections reveal the most powerful insight of her piece: the imposing and oppressive structures of linear production and normative time are harmful to academics with affective disorders.

Sharon O’Brien echoes this same sentiment in her contribution, “Gaps on the Vita,” wherein she recounts how her experiences with depression have impeded her ability to adhere to the normative timelines and periods of production that are commonly expected in academia. She writes, “Depression . . . can stop productivity in its track; it’s downright un-American, at odds with our Franklin-esque devotion to self-reliance and industry, not to mention contemporary ideologies of optimism” (55). Her invocation of Franklin’s “visible industry” (61) recalls to mind the work of Jay Dolmage, who connects these ideals of productivity to the identity of university life itself: “the university is the place for the very able” (17). Both Bagoley’s and O’Brien’s engagement with notions of time and autonomy echo several key tenets of disability studies: namely crip time and interdependence. That said, the paucity of citation of disability activists and scholars may mark
a missed opportunity in the collection for richer engagement with some conceptual frameworks that have emerged from DS (Petra Kuppers’s crip time, Alison Kafer’s crip futurities, for example).

In part two of the collection, the four contributors focus their attention on affective disorders and the “literary imagination” engaging the work of Anne Sexton, Tim O’Brien, Virginia Woolf, and others. Joann K. Deiudicibus’s analysis of Sexton’s work and life hinges on a resistance to a binaristic and reductive approach to understanding the relationship between Sexton’s creative corpus and her affective maladies. Deiudicibus purposefully resists the notion that writing was a healing exercise for Sexton but acknowledges instead that Sexton “knows well the way her illness could impede her craft. The work, discipline, and self-care make writing possible; moods only propel parts of the process” (95). She concludes with a nod to help: “the achievement of writing with and about affective disorders remains educating others about how to cope with symptoms and how to facilitate a network of support” (96). Again, the value of interdependence is emphasized, not only as a relational way of being but also as a key function of the chapter itself. Deiudicibus expresses a need for readers to find some connective utility in the interpretative work contained in the chapter.

David Bahr draws on his own traumatic experiences to engage Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*, noting, “As a former traumatized child who has struggles with anxiety and low-grade depression, I find the fractured self both comprehensible and identifiable” (103). Essentially, Bahr practices a theoretical positioning that is central in DS work: disability as insight. He connects his own experiences to his ability to understand disability as insight in O’Brien’s creative choices. Like others in the collection, he also actively resists an inclination toward healing and instead ruminates on management: “I find it less interesting to view *The Things They Carried* as a move toward ‘healing’. . . . The emotional ‘payoff’ is Tim’s realization that writing is a means of managing his despair” (113).

Ultimately, this collection showcases the experiences of mentally disabled writers and scholars and challenges some of the rigid and mythical associations often drawn between mental illness and creativity. In that sense, it adheres to one of the most important and significant mantras of both DS and the disability rights movement: nothing about us without us. Rather than having objective (presumably able-bodied) analysis of the impact of mental illness on writers, contributors to this collection...
make sense of their writing, the writing of others, and writing itself as a phenomenon through the lens of disability, through their own embodied experiences with anxiety, mania, depression, and trauma. Moreover, this collection actively resists the push for resolution, overcoming, and healing and instead theorizes how writing practices might be understood not as cause or cure but as impactful in an almost infinite constellation of contexts, genres, audiences, prescriptions, structural ideologies, and personal circumstances. And although Horton’s collection here doesn’t engage as fully as it could or should with disability studies, the presence of DS is felt throughout, particularly in regard to crip time and a resistance to the ableist cure imperative.

**Living Chronic: Agency and Expertise in the Rhetoric of Diabetes**

Lora Arduser’s *Living Chronic: Agency and Expertise in the Rhetoric of Diabetes* takes up the multifaceted and fraught relationship between compliance and expertise in the context of one of the medical field’s “single, non-compliant patient set” (3): people with diabetes. Arduser works to illuminate the complexity of this group, critiquing the rhetoric of singularity and noncompliance and instead arguing for an alternative model of patient agency, a model in which “people with diabetes are viewed as people doing work rather than people being cared for” (7). Arduser is intent throughout the book to engage with the voices and experiences of people with diabetes in an effort to illuminate the rhetorical and material complexity of their lived experiences with chronic conditions. She writes, “A rhetorically informed view of patient agency . . . is useful for resolving a problematic definition in the health work that people with diabetes and medical providers do, which can have a positive impact on health care practices and cultural understanding of diabetes” (8). Arduser’s methodological approach draws on multiple data sources, including interviews with seven medical professionals and fourteen people with diabetes, print documents (e.g., U.S. Diabetes Conversation Maps), and transcripts/posts from two collaborative spaces: group medical educational visits and TuDiabetes (an online social network for patients) (22–23).

Her opening chapter makes easy work of establishing medical literature’s predilection for rhetorics of control and compliance, along with the accompanying privilege of numbers and narratives of progress and jour-
ney. She writes, “The articulation of control, surveillance, subjectivities of spoiled identities, and narratives and metaphors of progress align with the diminished definition of patient agency as a means-to-an-end equation” (50). Her analytical work in this chapter serves as precursor to the work in chapter 2, where she begins to theorize and explore the counternarratives that emerge in the liminal, collaborative spaces in which much diabetes work occurs. Drawing on concepts such as Brueggemann’s “betweenity,” Arduser analyzes the potential for people with diabetes to practice forms of agency in online patient communities due to their liminality. Unlike the one-way model of caretaking so often underpinning doctor-patient relationships (doctor as actively offering care, patient as passive receiver of care), liminal spaces allow for reworking of alternative agencies via the negotiation of multiple overlapping discourses (home, clinic, digital) and an engagement of writing itself as a relational activity. In order to elucidate the latter, Arduser engages Miller’s concept of agency as “kinetic energy of performance that is generated through a process of mutual attribution between rhetor and audience” (qtd. in Arduser 71).

Chapters 3–5 explore the complexity of agentive discourse among patients with diabetes, focusing on performances of agency via content knowledge expertise, attributed and interactional expertise, and finally processes of mimesis, a type of temporary agency in which a patient performs expertise by restating or reenacting speech performed elsewhere. In chapter 3, Arduser distinguishes between specialized knowledge (episteme) and skill (techne) in an effort to expose the ways in which diabetes patients are cast at the bottom of the hierarchy within medical discourse communities: “They carry out actions informed by the knowledge someone else creates” (82). Arduser analyzes patient discourse (from her interviews) and identifies awareness of the power-knowledge nexus (interpreted via Foucault). However, her interview data also revealed that patients often trouble this top-down knowledge by engaging in processes of evaluating information within and among online patient communities. In other words, rather than relying full-stop on doctor’s orders (episteme), patients talk with one another online in order to interpret and make meaning of the knowledge they’ve gained (not only from caretakers/experts but from each other). Arduser also presents a third type of knowledge evident in discourses of diabetes: bodily knowledge (87), or, put more plainly, “finding
what works for you” (88). Bodily knowledge, the lived, embodied sensorial experience of diabetes, is just as valuable as the other types of knowledge and can only be known through the patient. Arduser aims to analyze what types of access patients have to each of these types of knowledge, how they demonstrate that knowledge, and in what contexts. She then draws on metis and wayfinding as means of performing agency “through the act of situational meaning making” (99) and claims that “diabetics thus act much like makers in maker spaces. They are inventors, designers, and tinkerers” (100). This retheorizing of expertise as relational, bodily, and negotiable affords patients with new ways of practicing care and performing agency.

Arduser’s research with patients also revealed how diabetics position themselves relationally, fluidly, and interactionally as experts and that they do so in ways that are contrary to the singularity of expertise suggested in medical literature focused on patients with diabetes. Her analytical context reaches far beyond the one-on-one doctor-patient encounter, looking to patients’ interactions with one another, with different types and documents of content knowledge, and with their own lived/embodied experiences. She is also able to identify a practice of mimesis, or the practice of performing agency through reporting what someone else has said in a different time/place or evaluating and mimicking other experts in an effort to establish one’s scientific ethos (125–27). For example, Arduser quotes a large passage of text from Nikki (a diabetic) in order to demonstrate how Nikki makes an evaluative statement about “site interlopers (i.e. people advertising cures on the website)” and, in doing so, mimics the “same evaluative stance providers use to discuss patients” (139). Nikki establishes her ethos via mimicry; she knows the interloper’s promises are fake; she’s an expert. Arduser’s analysis reveals one step further in Nikki’s practice of mimicry: the moment she co-opts that discourse to express her skepticism about the illusory promises of cure. Arduser further presents examples of mimesis among patients in their practices of peer review processes and their engagement in experiments (trying stuff out in order to figure out what works for them).

Although Arduser focuses her attention quite explicitly on how her work in this book can be helpful in the realm of medicine and health care, it has utility and implications for our discipline writ large. Identifying environments in which agency and expertise are understood reductively (and often as a means to sustain oppressive ideologies and systems) is not difficult,
and her claims could easily translate across contexts. She aims to theorize agency as relational and performative because, in doing so, she unshackles patient agency from its exclusive (and reductive) reliance on compliance.

While it may not be novel to theorize agency in these relational, interactional ways (see, for example, Stephanie Kerschbaum’s work), what makes Arduser’s research significant is the way her rearticulations of agency draw on individuals so often cast as lacking agency. The agents Arduser draws on to elucidate the central argument of her book are those that demonstrate different kinds of agency that challenge, counter, and actively resist the privileged discourses of power (Western biomedicine) that would aim to hinge agency to notions of compliance. Thus, in challenging and presenting new types of expertise, agency, and power-knowledge, the primacy of certain discourses is untethered. People with diabetes make meaning of their experiences not only through what a doctor or medical pamphlet tells them; they also draw on their own bodily knowledge, their interactions with other patients, their online communities, and other bodies of knowledge in order to practice their diabetic identity in their own terms.

Arduser concludes with several suggestions for how this change might continue to manifest (patient-centered pedagogies in patient education; patient-centered texts that resist body-as-machine, war, or business metaphors; and discourses that don’t rely on journey-to-the-cure scripts). Such agential movement requires complex, paradigmatic shifts, and although her book only scratches the surface of these possibilities, the presentation of patient enactments of agency as well as their resistance and countermoves toward some of these oppressive and disempowering structures gives hope. Her final ruminations dwell on these complexities. She states that we need “deep language changes in medicine” rather than “word substitution” (166). Deep language changes, of course, create new realities, new ways of being, new ways of expressing both agency and identity.

**Crip Times: Disability, Globalization, and Resistance**

Robert McRuer’s *Crip Times: Disability, Globalization, and Resistance* is a project that takes up the global economic crisis and positions disability as the most theoretically useful way to understand and resist austerity politics. In describing the central aim of his book, he writes “Crip Times crip this crisis by specifically adding crip and queer perspectives to studies that are seeking to analyze the cultural logic of neoliberalism and the austerity that
is now part and parcel of it” (13). He takes readers across continents and contexts in an effort to explore “cultural locations of disability” (Snyder and Mitchell 3, qtd. in McRuer 6) and offers “cripp ing austerity” as a central tactic. Drawing on the use of *crip* as a verb (a move that is now common practice among many disability theorists and analogous to the use of *queer* in much the same strategic way), McRuer argues that engaging in such work “forges anti-neoliberal coalitions in the interests of a global crip imagination, which can invent new ways of countering oppression” (24).

The signification of the title, *Crip Times*, has paradoxical connotations. On one hand, McRuer is intent on accurately representing the harshness of the current global crisis, the harshness of this new age of neoliberal capitalism that pushes forth austerity politics as the necessary and best way forward. On the other hand, the title also signifies the hope that crip radicalization (disability activism, art, and resistance) may offer in the face of these harsh times. He writes, “A crip affective politics is discernable . . . through various forms of excessive and flamboyant, activist and artistic, crip resistance” (31).

Significantly, McRuer’s method throughout the book crosses various social movements and contexts in order to demonstrate how crip performances of oppositional politics “generate change and resistance to hegemonic forms of globalization in an age of austerity” (49). Put another way, McRuer purposefully avoids focusing on how one social movement addresses the oppressive politics of neoliberalism in a given country; rather, he seeks out overlapping tactics that emerge when disability confronts austerity. He deftly presents similarities in the ways in which artists and activists practice resistance in wide-ranging locations (the UK, Greece, Chile, the United States, Spain, and more). Following Raymond Williams’s understanding of dominant discourses, he adopts a keyword meditation as the frame for each chapter: namely dispossession, resistance, displacement, and aspiration.

One of the most compelling points of analysis seen throughout *Crip Times* is McRuer’s ability to expose the “deployment of disability’s depoliticization as cultural capital” (44). His examination of the first key word, *dispossession*, compares the popularized story (and optimistic meme) of Oscar Pistorious with the concurrent protests against a Paralympic sponsor (Atos, a private company deploying tests to determine eligibility for disability benefits, a screening mechanism of disqualification). McRuer presents this contrast of spectacle and dispossession as “two sides of the
same neoliberal coin” (50). This presentation of benevolent and admiring support for disabled people, analyzed alongside the austerity practices that threaten the very existence of such individuals, is as chilling as it is insidious.

He extends this crip analytic with his theorization of queer/crip tactics of resistance in chapter 2, agreeing with several queer theory and disability scholars (e.g., Benedicto; Termain) that merely pointing out difference or “spotting” resistance can sometimes elide the ways in which even localized acts of resistance and agency can serve to reaffirm the aspirations of hegemonic power and reproduce the center (97). Austerity politics often target disability (vulnerable bodies) as excess that needs to be trimmed. Many of the tactics of resistance McRuer showcases, however, exhibit crip performances as “tactical identification with the wounded insistent” (116). Put another way, McRuer (and the performers he analyzes) subverts the notion of woundedness as being without power and instead demonstrates the rhetorical and political efficacy of vulnerable identifications.

McRuer draws on scholars such as Darieck Scott and Nirmala Erevelles to posit an “excessive crip sociality” and the ways in which extravagant abjection, or “resistance that is legible in brokenness, wounds, and scars,” serves as “active collective resistance that is needed to counter austerity” (101). For example, he looks to the Arnieville activists in California to elucidate the crip tactic of social sculpture. His description of Arnieville as a “crip camp” harkens other such camps (such as the protests at the Puerta del Sol in Madrid or the Occupy Wall Street encampments in New York), but he stresses the explicit focus on disability. Petra Kuppers, an activist at Arnieville, expressed skepticism at the ability of these protests to initiate changes to state policy but nevertheless emphasized the radical sociality made possible via the creative, interdependent, embodied politics of engagement shared at that space (103). Fitting with his theorization of the limits of resistance (or at least the critiques that have been launched against simplistically hopeful analyses of political resistance or “pure” revolution), the crip tactic of encampment/social sculpture might be better understood via its ability to show the revolutionary value of weakness, woundedness, and vulnerability, or the purposeful demonstration of an abject excess (129).

In his meditation on displacement, McRuer provides a close reading of the 2015 context of the “Year of Mexico in the UK and the UK in Mexico” in an effort to reveal “the ways in which the global exchange of neoliberal forms of accessibility works in tandem with ongoing processes of displace-
ment" (52). He presents El Museo de los Desplazados (The Museum of the Displaced) as a means of foregrounding how disability is (and is not) visible in transnational politics. Essentially, at the same time Britain was exporting conceptions of accessibility and inclusion to Mexico, they were simultaneously implementing the spatialized austerity of the “bedroom tax” in the UK (a tax that penalized benefits for individuals with a spare room in their home). McRuer distinguishes between access and neoliberal access and evaluates the resulting displacement experienced by vulnerable bodies.

McRuer notes that such displacements often result in more disability, though he is quick to disclaim any “ableist lament about more disability in the world” (175). However, he calls for increased recognition of these processes and points out that “perhaps paradoxically, crip displacements generate unpredictability and precarity and a generative longing” (175). He devotes his final chapter to locations of such aspiration, most particularly in the work of sculptor and performance artist Liz Crow. Her 2015 project, *Figures*, consisted of 650 mud-sculpted figures meant to represent the edges of austerity (650 is also the number of constituencies in the UK and the total number of Parliament members). McRuer contrasts this crip performance art with the Remembrance Day art installation *Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red*, a dedication to those soldiers who lost their lives in war. This piece was deeply connected to national pride and received copious praise from the highest corners of the UK, including Prime Minister Cameron. McRuer argues that Crow’s work destabilizes the neoliberal unity as presented in *Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red* because it calls into question how much the country actually does practice care for the lives of all its citizens. As Crow puts it, her project questions “what kind of society we want to be” (qtd. in McRuer 53). The chapter demonstrates how Crow’s art serves to “crip austerity.”

McRuer’s book reviews an onslaught of wounded, exploited, displaced, and dispossessed, and yet he also fulfills the paradoxical promise of his title. Alongside these stories of the oppressive neoliberal politics of austerity and its effects on the lives of vulnerable bodies, he also offers a hopeful array of the tactics and performances that aspire toward crip futurities.

**Authoring Autism: On Rhetoric and Neurological Queerness**

Melanie Yergeau opens her book, *Authoring Autism: On Rhetoric and Neurological Queerness*, with a story about shit, or more specifically about her
youngest self in a crib smearing shit. In many ways, shit becomes a motif, a dominant impression, of not only the first chapter but the book itself. She tells readers on the first page that she “was diagnosed with autism,” which she describes as a “discursive framework, a lens through which others could story [her] life” (1). Although the opening story is told via her mother’s memory, Yergeau goes on to examine parent blogs and their shared stories of poop and autism. She decries “parental poop talk” as “shitty narratives,” arguing that “these narratives are shittier than the shit they claim to represent . . . rhetorical commonplaces that author autistic people as victim-captives of a faulty neurology, as rhetorically degraded and rhetorically suspect. In these constructions, our shit holds more rhetorical power than we do” (3). This is only page three of Yergeau’s book, and I need to (want to) read it several times in order to process the many profound, challenging, and delightful layers of her rhetoric on rich display. Literal shit. Figurative shit. Ableist, benevolent shitty rhetorics. She goes on to say that the “medicalizing storying of lack is the crux of [her] book—or rather, subverting this medicalized storying is the crux of this book” (7). This subversion is so brilliantly executed throughout that it comes as no surprise that Authoring Autism recently received the Modern Language Association’s First Book Award.

The methodology of the book is storytelling, and Yergeau makes an early distinction between autism-as-modifier and autistic-as-modifier, explaining, “The former relates to broader discourse on autism that is typically authored by nonautistic people, whereas the latter imparts that which is autistically created” (2). Her methodology suits her purpose to showcase autistic stories (including her own) because these narratives actively resist and run contrary to whatever story a diagnosis may wish to tell. This method also enables Yergeau to elucidate her engagement with a queer theoretical framework. She calls her book a “strategic queering of sorts” and ultimately resolves that “we do need rhetoric, because we cannot afford to be denied it. With rhetoric comes matters of life and death” (88). At times this method almost feels like a type of meta-nonfiction, one in which Yergeau floats above her story and directly engages the reader. She asks, for example, “Are you, dear reader, autistic or nonautistic? Can there ever really be any in-between?” (2). As a nonautistic reader, I am confronted and asked to think about what the in-between may look like. Yergeau draws on Jay Dolmage’s theorization of metis, a “dis-rhetoricity” that is cunning
and clever, during a passage in which she distinguishes between asociality and nonsociality (and clinicians’ frequent inability to tell the difference) (19). She describes a “countersociality” that may produce neurologically queer motioning (18–19). Her storying creates a type of relation between author and audience that is intimate and deeply compelling in its ability to enhance the rhetoricity of the claims she makes throughout her project.

The structure for the book follows a pattern of i-words: *involution, intention, intervention, invitation, invention, and indexicality*. Like many of Yergeau’s rhetorical moves throughout *Authoring Autism*, this prefix conveys a kind of contrariness in its interpretable capacities. The prefix in- can function to convey in, on, or even not. Her chapter on involution takes conceptions of voluntarity and queers them, inverts and invokes them. She critiques the clinical perspectives of autism as involuntary (ticking, flapping, screaming—”non-agency”) and then provides an alternative story of the relationship between involuntarity and autism. She writes, “involuntarity, I am arguing, is not an inherent part of autism as a condition …. [rather] involuntarity’s stories are those of abuse, of disbelief, of suffering and non-agency and pain. Involuntarity is forcibly imposed onto autistic bodies” (9). This inversion serves to frame the central target for Yergeau’s critique in the second chapter: applied behavioral methodologies (ABA), or what has come to be known as the gold standard in autism therapeutic intervention. Practitioners of this intervention “deny the rhetoricity of neuroqueer subjects while concurrently admitting that ABA overwrites its subjects’ rhetoricity with compliance” (33).

While chapters 1 and 2 work to examine clinicians’ strategies for “halving” autistic rhetoricity, chapter 3 turns to “autie-biography” and draws on Margaret Price’s concept of “counter diagnosis” as “one means through which autistic people queer the contours of rhetorical containment” (140). “Invitation” opens with a story about an autistic pride button Yergeau displays on her backpack. She describes the button as an “inerventional site, a relational site” (135) and provides readers with an expansive list of discursive exchanges the button has produced. This story illuminates Yergeau’s contention that “Autism is a profoundly kairotic condition” (136–37), and the chapter works to dissect the various ways disclosures of autism are met with doubt, disbelief, and refutation. She troubles traditions of invitational rhetoric, and foregrounds how autistic people expose the “hidden curriculum” to unearth ableist practices that frame autistic ethos as partial
or nonexistent” (140). Yergeau expresses skepticism about the optimistic promises of invitational rhetoric and exposes the power imbalances that can, do, and will shape the discursive space between autistic and clinician. She questions, “How does one invite discourse when that discourse insists your eradication is to the benefit of nations?” (147). These invitational moments summon a diagnostic gaze that seeks to normalize at best, eradicate at worst. She again draws on queer theory to make the point, arguing that “cisnormativity governs autism’s diagnostic constructions” (159). (The very real connections between gay conversion therapy and ABA are deeply disturbing; see 28–29 or 103–5.) She theorizes a concept of “elliptic discourse” that conveys a “shared rhetoricity” but points out that when “one’s communication isn’t seen as communication, it is hard to build a space in which anything is rhetorically negotiated or shared” (143). Moreover, she notes that any breakdown or failure of communication in these exchanges will, of course, be blamed on autism. Along with troubling invitational rhetoric, she likewise evaluates the premises of diplomatic rhetoric, particularly for its inducements of passing. Yergeau cites autistic author Cynthia Kim and autistic poet N. I. Nicholson to elucidate the consequences of passing. Nicholson states, “My chameleon circuit worked so well it almost killed me” (qtd. in Yergeau 154).

Yergeau’s relationship to rhetoric is fraught throughout the book. In any given passage, she challenges conceptions of rhetorical traditions all the while employing and queering such traditions with cunning technique. She invokes Audre Lorde’s well-known caution that the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house in her effort to make sense of the cacophonous relationship between rhetoric and autism (88). Reflecting on shit, she writes, “In many respects, this is how I feel about the world of rhetoric—it is a steaming pile of competing, ableist theories about distant Others that extend up to my neck,” and she asks, “How to lob rhetoric at the wall? How to smear it on my face?” (31). She continues to wrestle with these provocative questions throughout the book, asking, “How might autism claim rhetoric as it dismantles it?” (173).

By the end, Yergeau has answered this question (queerly) for her readers. Authoring Autism is a masterclass in simultaneously claiming and dismantling rhetoric. Her epilogue leaves readers with the image of a pinwheel, or more specifically, her stimming and swaying in a field of pinwheels. She writes, “The histories of my people hang heavy. I imagine
these clinical stories as a coat of molasses, weighting pinwheels with sticky sorrow” (207). She invokes the spinning pinwheel as a symbol of motion, of inviting gaze, as stimpoint. “Who are we, I wonder. What is autistic community, autistic rhetoric?” (213, original emphasis). As a reminder, the book is entitled Authoring Autism. Are these concluding questions intentional contrariness? A resistance to meaning and fixity? I myself am still inside these questions, trying to make sense, to lose sense, to listen.

**Concluding Thoughts**

As “Becoming Visible” suggested some two decades ago, our field has “a long proud history of making the invisible visible” (370), and thus doing work with disability in composition studies is fitting for the values of our discourse community. However, the projects reviewed throughout this essay mark not only visibility but fundamental shifts in the horizon. Authoring Autism, Crip Times, Living Chronic, and Affective Disorder and the Writing Life all represent the work, words, art, and activism of individuals who identify in some way with disability. The presence of this standpoint, in and of itself, is a worthy visibility of which our discipline (or at least the presses represented here) should be proud. And certainly, much of the content in the monographs focuses on the rhetorical strategies of individuals with disabilities (e.g., rhetorical plasticity and mimesis in Arduser, deminess in Yergeau, extravagant abjection in McRuer). The similarities across the authors/contributors reveal some interesting trends in the work coming through the disability/composition nexus.

One prominent thread, for example, is the interrogation and dismantling of compulsory behaviors. Yergeau’s compulsory sociality (29), McRuer’s compulsory patriotism (216), O’Brien’s compulsory production timelines, and Arduser’s compulsory patient compliance are but a few such sites of analysis. These investigations unearth the obligatory mechanisms that perpetuate ableist practices, paradigms that insist upon the degraded position of disability and the ultimate privilege of the normal, the straight, the tall, the proud, the able.

Another thread is the benevolent masks in which these compulsory practices are often concealed. McRuer often refers to this practice as a “smokescreen,” and Yergeau attends to ABA’s “beloved, hard-won, data-driven, unquestioned good for neurodivergent children” and questions how to “define its rhetorical malevolence” (95). In similar fashion, Arduser’s
rhetorical analysis of texts from the National Diabetes Education Program and the CDC reveals the illusion of patient-doctor “team-work” and argues that such misleading and false rhetorics function to uphold a “compliance framework of care” (31).

Taken together, these threads suggest that disability scholars are interested in not only visibility for disability but also visibility for the discourses of ableism that shape attitudes toward and opportunities for disabled people. In that way, these works seem to follow disability scholar Fiona Kumari Campbell’s call for shifting the “gaze of contemporary scholarship on disability to a more nuanced exploration of epistemologies and ontologies of ableism” (3). This shift has not necessarily been primarily signaled by these books, but they illuminate the powerful potential of such a refocusing. Brueggemann and her coauthors’ prediction of the “disruptions” that disability would bring forth to our discipline certainly rings true.

Works Cited


Tara Wood

Tara Wood is an assistant professor of English and writing program administrator at the University of Northern Colorado. Her work has appeared in several essay collections and journals, including *College Composition and Communication, Composition Studies*, and *Open Words: Access and English Studies*. She is cochair of the Committee on Disability Issues in College Composition and past chair of the Standing Group for Disability Studies within CCCC. She has been honorably recognized by the Coalition of Feminist Scholars in Rhetoric and Composition and by Computers and Composition Digital Press.