



A Cyborg Autobiography:
Autism & the Posthuman

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After the Rain

*The sun - like a ripening
White fruit, blossomed
Somewhere overhead.*

*It hung from the hairy
Branches of clouds,
Smelling of sunshine*

*Ripening through air,
Enough to dry the
Rain soaked streets.*

*A puddle reflecting
The shifting clouds
-Just a memory of rain.*

-
Tito

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Introduction The Autistic: Cyborg Monster of the Posthuman Era

There is no such thing as either man or nature now, only a process that produces the one within the other and couples the machines together. Producing-machines, desiring-machines everywhere, schizophrenic machines, all of species life: the self and the non-self, outside and inside, no longer have any meaning whatsoever.

(Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus 2*)

Autism is omnipresent in contemporary Western society. Cultural representations of the condition have evolved from the 1988 hit film *Rain Man* to the 2003 bestselling novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime* and the person with Asperger-like characteristics as a source of comedy on well-watched American sitcoms like *The Big Bang Theory* and *Community*. Media report frantically on the ‘epidemic’ of autism and new findings in neurological and genetic research. Parents and carers of autistic people have published dozens of memoirs on their autistic charges, while an entire industry of autism ‘self-help’ books has sprung up intended to aid those baffled by the condition. Most importantly, people with autism themselves have started to speak up about their experiences as autistic individuals. ‘High-functioning’ autistic people produce autobiographies and weblogs, while several ‘low-functioning,’ non-verbal autistics have unexpectedly proven themselves to be capable of communication in the written word too and have become media sensations, appearing in television documentaries and on high profile talk shows. Autism is so much present as an object of fascination and anxiety that it could arguably be considered “the zeitgeist condition” (Murray, *Autism 72*).

As such, autism offers a position from which to regard this zeitgeist which it is said to characterise. In its stereotypical conception, autism conjures up images of a near-future or already-present posthuman era in which those living in affluence are irredeemably merged with the technologies they use, privileging disembodied digital communication over face-to-face interaction, and supposedly losing the ability to relate to others in ‘real’ life in the process. The triad of

impairments that medical experts use to define autism as a disorder thus presumably becomes a triad of impairments shared by all: impairments in communication (e.g. on-screen language impacting on off-screen language abilities); difficulties with social interaction (e.g. obliviousness to other people's feelings); and obsessive and repetitive behaviours (e.g. obsessively checking social media for updates). Alternatively, these 'impairments' are revalued as common human traits: "we are all a little autistic," meaning, we all have moments of social awkwardness, anti-sociality and obsessive compulsiveness (cf. Murray, *Autism* 35).

However, both the notion of autism and of the posthuman that these images call forth, and that account for much of the anxiety and elation that both 'conditions' occasion, are highly circumscribed. Seen from a broader perspective, the posthuman calls into question the traditional, humanist image of man and the distinctions it establishes between human and animal on the one hand, and human and machine on the other. Assuming these ever were valid, recent developments have made such distinctions undeniably tenuous: issues and practices such as climate change and genetic engineering demonstrate the vulnerability of all species both to the threat to sustainability presented by the excesses of modern-day market forces, as well as to the "capitalization of living matter" itself by "bio-genetic" capitalism (Braidotti, *Posthuman* 61, 63). Rather than offering prospects of a disembodied and deeply anti-social future for human beings, critical theorists of the posthuman see potential for new conceptions of subjectivity that instead place emphasis on the material embodiment, social embeddedness and intersubjective relationality inherent to human beings throughout history, as well as to animals, organisms, and technology, implicating each category with the other. In a final analysis, it is matter itself that constantly facilitates new relationships between heterogeneous entities, without any of the terms of these couplings ever acquiring a fixed, independent identity. Such notions can, I argue, not only shed light on autism as a manner of being-in-the-world, but, more importantly, can themselves greatly be illuminated by autism as an example of such a posthuman subjectivity, escaping the confines of humanism.

However, despite its recent elevation to either an acceptable trait or deplorable condition

shared by all, autism is in the first place considered a disability, and as such departs from the norm. In his oft-cited study *Enforcing Normalcy*, Lennard Davis lays out how, ever since modernity, disability has functioned as a foil to normalcy. The qualifier 'disabled' is absolute, argues Davis, and as such institutes a binary between disability and non-disability that leaves no room for gradations (1). However, the concept of normalcy cannot exist except in relation to abnormalcy: like in the conceptualisations and practices of race and gender, it is disability as the 'Other' to the norm that establishes this norm (2). Likewise, humanism, as the ideology that propounds the liberal humanist subject, places the human, unified, autonomous and rational, in opposition to the nonhuman. Where 'the human' and 'normalcy' intersect, the first term turning an ideal into a required norm, the latter turning the statistical norm into the ideal, so do 'abnormalcy' and 'the nonhuman.' Questions concerning the construction of disability, then, easily move into considerations about the human and its others.

The nonhuman, as we saw above, stretches out in two directions from the human norm: to nature on the one hand, and to the mechanic and technological on the other. However, as John Rajchman notes, "a given society or culture is never exhausted by its constitutive relations or distinctive divisions. On the contrary, it is always 'leaking'" (98). This leaking necessitates an "ontological hygiene" that polices the boundaries between human, animal and machine (Graham 11), producing in the process figures that display an "ontological liminality," not lending themselves easily to incorporation in one of the categories (Cohen 6). These figures are, in effect, the monsters of the age, inciting fear and wonder. Monsters, Donna Haraway reminds her readers, "have the same root as to demonstrate; monsters signify" ("Promises," note 16).¹ As such, they reveal something of the zeitgeist of an era.

While humanist thought constructs a human norm by opposing it to its others, reassuring itself with this "metaphysical dialectic of identity" of its ability to control this otherness (Herbrechter 87), a 'philosophy of difference,' precisely, attends to this "indigestible remainder or ... necessary

¹ Monster comes from Latin *monstrum*, 'divine omen, abnormal shape, monster,' from *monere*, 'warn.' Demonstrate comes from *monstrare*, 'to point out, show,' from *monstrum*.

'outside,' which constantly returns to haunt self-identity as a threatening but at the same time fascinating '*monstrous*' other" (86, emphasis added). As such, the "engine" of the dialectic of self and other, of normalcy and abnormalcy, "is made to stall" (Herbrechter 87), "empowering ... human 'others' to emancipate themselves" (Braidotti, *Posthuman* 66) and "refuse the ideological resources of victimization so as to have a real life," in Haraway's words ("Cyborg" 177).

Donna Haraway's cyborg, hero(ine) of her 1985 essay "A Cyborg Manifesto," is such a liminal figure, a product of the "border war" between organism and machine ("Cyborg" 150). As "a cybernetic organism," a creature "simultaneously animal and machine – who populate[s] worlds ambiguously natural and crafted" (Haraway, "Cyborg" 149), the figure of the cyborg offers an opportunity to come to terms with the conjunction of organisms and technology and to envisage new narratives for a posthuman, cyborgian world.² It is important to note that Haraway's cyborg, a "hybrid" (149), is not disembodied. Rather, "as a fiction mapping our social and bodily reality" (150), it points to a new conception and experience of embodiment, where the boundaries between the body and its prostheses become blurred. Admittedly, the relationship between the cyborg, both an "imaginative resource" (150) and a posthuman reality, and disability is rather fraught: on the one hand, the cyborg seems to be the offspring of "a fully functioning human and a fully functioning machine" and as such disregards impairment (Quinlan and Bates, qtd. in Reeve 91); on the other hand, technological enhancements for the disabled are most often a tool for normalisation (Reeve 91). Nevertheless, the cyborg offers potential for an analysis of the conceivability of disability as escaping humanism's grip. Adapting Haraway's vision for feminism, "there are ... great riches [for disability studies and the disabled] in explicitly embracing the possibilities inherent in the breakdown of clean distinctions between organism and machine and similar distinctions structuring the Western self" ("Cyborg" 174). The posthuman body, Stuart Murray argues, "might be a disabled body, and if –

² Haraway has distanced herself from the term posthuman and posthumanism, but mainly in response to transhumanists who wish to "find our next teleological evolutionary stage" and in regard to what she perceives as the limitations of the term when it comes to relationality between species (Gane 140). However, since I wish to use the term posthuman in an embodied, non-teleological and post-anthropocentric sense, I feel justified in utilising the cyborg as a figure of the posthuman.

as some assert – we live in a posthuman world, then that world can be one where disability is central and not peripheral” (*Autism* 103). Asking who will be cyborgs is, then, indeed “a radical question” (Haraway, “Cyborg” 153).

This thesis argues that the autistic can be productively imagined as a cyborg: a posthuman figure, a monster of the age, “the autism monster,” as Carly Fleischmann’s father lets slip (Fleischmann and Fleischmann 96). Instead of confining itself to “the allure of potentially unquantifiable human difference and the nightmare of not somehow being ‘fully’ human” (Murray, *Representing* 5), such an approach attempts to deal with autism sincerely and responsibly, thus creating a space for a richer understanding and appreciation of autistic subjectivities. Aware of the implications for autism of a humanist discourse, I use the noun ‘autistic’ rather than ‘autistic person’ or ‘person with autism,’ because it is precisely the humanity and personhood of the autistic that seem in no way guaranteed in mainstream views on the condition.³ If ‘the cyborg’ in popular parlance evokes images of a disembodied, resolutely autonomous existence, “an ultimate self untied at last from all dependency, a man in space” (Haraway, “Cyborg” 151), that is belied by the actual content of Haraway’s cyborg manifesto, so does ‘the autistic’ suggest a stereotype of the autistic as insensible, unempathetic automaton that is severely undermined by the texts that this thesis considers. Moreover, despite my acknowledgement that autism is a spectrum condition, I agree with Ian Hacking that “[o]nce we have agreed that autism is polymorphic in its manifestations, it is better to speak simply of autism” (“Alien” 49) and thus of the autistic. Nevertheless, the focus here is on ‘low-functioning,’ non-verbal or semi-non-verbal autism. The reason for these persistent inverted commas, or rather scare quotes, around the medical term ‘low-functioning’ will become clear in the course of this thesis.

In its medical form, autism discourse focuses on a deficiency in normative brain make up and

³ There is a continuous debate in disability studies and in the field of social work, healthcare and education about the preferred term for an individual diagnosed with autism. ‘Autistic person’ is thought to suggest that the individual is defined by their autism, which is supposedly stigmatising. ‘Person with autism,’ instead, suggests that the person and their autism should be separated. Precisely because of this reason, however, many with the condition do call themselves ‘autistic,’ as they experience their autism as integral to their existence. (cf. Murray, *Autism* xiv).

functioning, causing behaviour that is lacking in social normativity, and reduces the autistic to, on the one hand, the status of object of quantitative research, and on the other hand, a social anomaly that has merely negative characteristics relative to the norm. This focus on autism as a deficit obscures any positive conception of the autistic: the autistic is merely 'high-functioning' or 'low-functioning' relative to the non-autistic norm. The medical discourse thus loses sight of autism as a personal, lived, everyday reality (Murray, *Autism* 9), as well as of any aspects of autism that could potentially have a value in themselves. When a reconstruction of the day-to-day, embodied experience of autism *is* attempted, and autism's containment within a discourse of normativity disrupted, however, it soon becomes clear that both 'humanity' and 'personhood' are normative constructions, inherently condoned by medical discourse. While conventional autism discourse implicitly questions autistics' personhood and humanity, then, it is these constructions themselves that are called into question by the condition.

As such, autism, Stuart Murray conjectures, "gestures toward a beyond, or a 'post,' that represents a space of cultural enactment and possibly agency, separate from any configuration of a human norm" ("*Posthuman*" 54). The posthuman condition that this 'post' indicates, Murray concedes, offers "a potentially radically productive space for autism" (55), in which autism arguably presents a 'new,' posthuman subjectivity of the kind that Rosi Braidotti wishes to explore (*Posthuman* 12). In addition to the "negative bond of ... vulnerability" that the posthuman condition occasions, she states, a more positive and affirmative understanding of posthumanism is possible that instead "start[s] from ... differences of location and ... experiment[s] with different modes of posthuman subjectivity" (Braidotti, *Posthuman* 141). Such experiments offer opportunities to envisage a posthuman future and "a cyborg world" that is not about an ultimate "grid of control," but about "lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints" (Haraway, "*Cyborg*" 154). It is the figure of the monster, the 'indigestible remainder' of a discourse of normativity, in the work of Jacques Derrida, that "embodies a means of thinking otherwise – a

means of passing ‘beyond man and humanism’ and reaching for other posthuman futures” (Millburn, qtd. in Herbrechter 86).

However, while the posthuman may become in future, may already be for autistic people, or may always have been a reality for all humankind, the question is, to speak with Haraway, not only “[h]ow can humanity have a figure outside the narratives of humanism [?],” but also “what language would such a figure speak?” (qtd. in Herbrechter 100). Or, considering the pivotal position of autobiography in a humanist discourse, what kind of language would this figure use to represent itself in text? If “the posthuman predicament” offers “an opportunity to empower the pursuit of alternative schemes of thought, knowledge and,” importantly, “self-representation,” as Braidotti argues (*Posthuman* 12), autistic autobiography, as I will call autobiographies written by autistic authors, may provide examples of such new directions. The question that this thesis considers, then, is how autism, as represented in autistic autobiographies, can be thought most productively in conjunction with posthumanism.

Both the posthuman and autism, as has become evident, are still very much contested spaces: in as far as autism can be considered an epidemic, it is in the first place an “epidemic of signification,” in which multiple narratives and discourses of the condition, ever increasing in number, compete for domination (Treichler, qtd. in Orsini and Davidson 4). The parameters and desirability of the posthuman as (post)human condition and posthumanism as academic discourse, meanwhile, are still being debated. This thesis positions itself as an instance both of a critical posthumanism and of critical disability studies. Stefan Herbrechter states that critical posthumanism “stands for a postanthropocentric (post)anthropology with its promise of a non-normative description of the human and its others” (196). While “the commonplace subjects” of posthuman theory are animals, objects and machines (cf. animal studies, object oriented ontology, system theory, and technology studies) and their relation to the human (Wendel 120), this thesis, instead, takes disability as its subject. Dan Goodley defines critical disability studies as the contestation of “dis/ablism,” the discrimination of those who are not ‘able-bodied’ against a norm of ‘ablism,’ and

notes that while critical disability studies “might start with disability, it never ends with it, remaining ever vigilant of political, ontological and theoretical complexity” (157). As recently as 2008, however, Stuart Murray, who has published an interdisciplinary introduction to autism, as well as a study into its cultural representations, decried the near-complete absence of autism as a topic of interest in disability studies, as well as a general evasiveness with regard to cognitive disability (*Representing* 8). Since then, attempts have been made to establish critical autism studies as a subcategory of critical disability studies that “imagines the ‘academic’ study of autism as a site of action and resistance, to be read in tandem with autistic and non-autistic forms of expression” (Orsini and Davidson 15). As such, critical autism studies is “a form of ‘empathetic scholarship’ ... that is concerned with inclusion and accommodation as well as with autistic difference and personhood” (15).

The chapters that follow make use of a “nomadic methodology” whose aim it is to arrive at “affirmative differences or creative repetitions, which means retelling, reconfiguring, and revisiting a concept, phenomenon, event, or location from different angles” (Braidotti and Roets 168, emphasis removed). Such a methodology offers “a qualitative leap of perspective that can generate a hybrid mixture of interpretations of the phenomenon in question” (168). While there is a narrative to the succession of chapters, its ultimate aim is not to arrive at a single theory representative of autism and autistic autobiography, but to produce a “many-headed monster” (Haraway, “Cyborg” 154) that affirms that while the ‘ultimate’ narrative of autism is still hotly debated, in reality autism subverts the very idea of any unity of meaning. The thesis moves from a narrow understanding of the autistic as posthuman, defined by the autistic’s interrelation with technology, to a broader understanding of the posthuman as emphasising humanity’s varied embodiments and the multiple relations in which the human moves. It seeks to leave behind a liberal humanist narrative of the self as unified, autonomous and independent and move towards a new understanding of the human subject in this difference and relationality. Chapter 1 examines the rather facile equation of the autistic with the posthuman as a disembodied, virtual existence that is devoid of empathy. While this characterisation leaves ample scope to analyse contemporary culture, it does not provide an

adequate 'map' of autistic experience or its potential for conceptions of a posthuman future. In the first place, it is not at all clear that autistic people themselves are willing to let go of a humanist narrative that could offer the empowerment and personhood that they have been denied. A distrust of the cyborg figure is implicated even here, as non-verbal autistic people's written words are regarded with scepticism and their authors' personhood contested. Derrida's analysis of phonocentrism in Western society proves to be relevant still, as will be discussed in Chapter 2. In the second place, as N. Katherine Hayles argues, a critical posthumanism should offer resistance to an "erasure of embodiment" in posthuman thought (xi): the posthuman condition does not do away with the body but emphasises both primordial and new aspects of human embodiment. It should therefore be acknowledged that the autistic's voice, despite its emerging in writing rather than speech, is not disembodied, but grounded in a very particular experience of embodiment. Such an approach pays attention to autism as a lived, material reality, rather than a discursive or social construct. Of interest here is Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception, the potential of which for the study of disability and autism is examined in Chapter 3. Nevertheless, a Merleau-Pontian phenomenology of autism still hinges on humanism's pet qualities, control and mastery, namely of the mind over the body. Chapter 4 examines the possibilities of an approach to the autistic's experience of disorder within her body, her environment and her self informed by the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Such disorder may not be solely lamentable, but may also offer an avenue for rich relations between the autistic and her surroundings outside of established categories, among which those of language. Together, Chapter 2, Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 aim to "destabilise the monolithic master narrative" (Braidotti and Roets 169) of autism. Finally, Chapter 5 returns to the question of autistic autobiography and asks what form posthuman autobiography can take, bound as it is to a language that has to serve the purpose of intelligible communication. To what extent does the autistic autobiographer create language and self-narrative anew?

Throughout, this thesis considers autobiographies written by 'verbal' and, in particular, non-verbal people diagnosed with autism. Temple Grandin's 1986 co-authored autobiography

Emergence: Labeled Autistic was the first autobiography by a 'high-functioning' autistic to gain wide recognition. In 2000, Tito Rajarshi Mukhopadhyay's first book, consisting of autobiographical texts written at age eight and eleven, two fictional stories and a number of poems, under the title, chosen by the UK's National Autistic Society, *Beyond the Silence: My Life, the World and Autism*, played that same role for non-verbal autism.⁴ It was republished in the US in 2003 as *The Mind Tree: A Miraculous Child Breaks the Silence of Autism*. At age 17, Mukhopadhyay published a second collection of autobiographical texts, interspersed with poetry, entitled *How Can I Talk if my Lips Don't Move? Inside my Autistic Mind*. He has also published two collections of poetry and one collection of short stories, and continues to write poems, which he publishes on his Facebook page. In recent years, Mukhopadhyay's example in autobiography has been followed by several others. In 2007, semi-non-verbal autistic Naoki Higashida, thirteen at the time, published a book on autism in Japanese, which was translated into English in 2013, entitled *The Reason I Jump*, and greeted with much fanfare in both the UK and the US. A similar reception was given, in the US, to a book by Arthur Fleischmann on his autistic daughter Carly, in which her acquisition of the means to communicate through typing plays a large role. *Carly's Voice* includes a chapter written by Carly herself, then sixteen years old, as well as many samples of her typing. Meanwhile, fifteen-year-old Ido Kedar self-published his journal and weblog entries compiled in *Ido in Autismland*, also in 2012. Finally, semi-non-verbal autistic Amanda Baggs published a video on YouTube in 2007 entitled *In My Language* and continues to write weblog entries and responses to issues within the autism community.⁵ While these are not by any means the only texts written by non-verbal autistics, they

⁴ Mukhopadhyay is not fully non-verbal. He is able to speak, but his speech sounds distorted and is therefore not easily understood.

⁵ There is some controversy surrounding Baggs's claim that she is a functionally non-verbal autistic, as reports from former classmates have circulated that suggest that in previous years Baggs was anything but non-verbal, and that her autistic-like behaviour is the result of teenage experiments with LSD. She herself claims she is cognitively, developmentally and psychiatrically disabled ("About"), but has been autistic from birth, and that although she was able to speak previously, she lost that ability after adolescence (Williams). Her case reveals once again that autism is a behavioural diagnosis, not a biological one, and that it may be better to talk about an autistic manner of being-in-the-world and to analyse that style on the basis of 'autistic' people's descriptions of their experiences than to consider autism a discrete condition. Baggs's authority as a non-

are the ones that are most well-known and readily available, and as such have made most impact on how autism is perceived. Their potential to change established opinions on autism, however, is far from exhausted, as I will argue throughout.

I end this introduction with a disclaimer: I am not myself autistic, nor am I particularly close to anyone (self-)diagnosed with autism. I have, and this is my only claim to direct experience with severely autistic people, spent one year as a live-in co-worker in a residential school for children with special needs, where I took care of one non-verbal autistic girl in particular. Were I to have the chance to meet her again, I would offer her my sincerest apologies for misunderstanding her on so many occasions. I fully agree with Michael Orsini and Joyce Davidson in their injunction that “[n]onautistics and researchers purporting to reflect or even represent autistic experience need to bring all possible humility to the task of speaking for and about autistic persons” (25). Indeed, it is my aim to refrain from any ‘speaking for’ and instead allow these autistic autobiographers to be heard. Thus, I attempt to convey my “deep appreciation for what individuals living on the spectrum have to say about what it means to be autistic” (24), and will try, hard as it is, to refrain from unwarranted generalisations and celebrations of autistic experience. With Donna Haraway, I propose a hybrid “diminutive theory [that is] set to produce not effects of distance, but effects of connection, of embodiment, and of responsibility for an imagined elsewhere that we may yet learn to see and build here” (“Promises” 295).

verbal autistic has been accepted by disability studies scholars, as shown by her appearance in articles and books, as well as an author for *Disability Studies Quarterly*, and is accepted by me in light of the similarities between her descriptions and those of the other authors here discussed.

Chapter 1 **Autism and the Posthuman**

Rosi Braidotti opens her book on the posthuman as follows: “At the start of it all there is He: the classical ideal of ‘Man’” (*Posthuman* 13). This ‘He,’ Haraway notes, is “the ‘West’s’ highest product – the one who is not animal, barbarian, or woman; man, that is, the author of a cosmos called history” (“Cyborg” 156). This thesis, too, takes off from the oft-questioned yet stubbornly persistent notion of ‘the human.’

1.1 *Autism and the Human*

In a humanist discourse ‘the human’ is located firmly between animality on the one hand and technology on the other: although the human may share some characteristics with animals, notably sociability, he⁶ moves on an entirely different plane, formed by rationality and language; although technology may bring forth machines that ‘think’ faster than humans and in some sense have language, these machines presumably lack consciousness, autonomy and empathy. ‘Humanity’ is guaranteed, then, not only by the human body, in its upright position, but by the combination of consciousness, reason and emotion that humans display. Consequently, ‘humanity’ is the one shape subjectivity takes, if subjectivity “is equated with consciousness, universal rationality, and self-regulating ethical behaviour” (Braidotti, *Posthuman* 15).

The humanist image of man is decidedly ‘speciesist’: it attests to the superiority of man over his fellow species, whether animal or machine, let alone inanimate objects, and posits man as ruler of all. As such, this image allows for the instrumental use made by man of animals as well as of machines. However, a speciesism which propagates one specific image of the human, also relegates some ‘species’ within humankind to an effectively subhuman status: non-white, racialised others were long thought to be closer to animals than to man, while women during large stretches of Western history were not granted full humanity because of a similar perceived ontological proximity

⁶ Throughout, I will use male pronouns for humanist ‘Man’ and female pronouns for the autistic, in order to emphasise the autistic’s subversive potential for normative humanity.

to nature. What is more, as N. Katherine Hayles notes, the humanist conception of man in reality, in the past as well as in the present, applied only, “at best, to that fraction of humanity who had the wealth, power, and leisure to conceptualize themselves as autonomous beings exercising their will through individual agency and choice” (286). While humanism claims to strive towards the emancipation of all humankind, its normative idea of the human in effect denies respect for any differences from the norm, as Cary Wolfe, Hayles and Braidotti, who have each written on posthumanism, in their turn note: the ideal of equality does not in any way equal a celebration of diversity. Humanist emancipation, instead, is very much *emancipation* with room for just one ideal of ‘the human.’ As Rosi Braidotti observes: “The human is a normative convention: it spells out a systematized standard of recognizability – of sameness – by which all others can be assessed, regulated and allotted to a designated social location” (*Posthuman* 26).

Aside from the common human ‘others’ of humanism, those who are “sexualized and racialized” (Braidotti, *Posthuman* 66), the disabled present ‘Man’ with similar challenges: the adage *mens sana in corpore sano* leads to a questionable status for those who present either a body that lacks health, wholeness, aesthetic conformity or the ability to perform acceptable behaviour, or a mind that is held to be deviant or to lack reason. Stuart Murray notes: “[t]he medical framework[‘s] ... model of presumed physical or neurological integrity [that posits impairment as a lack or deficit] is taken as orthodox in the public consciousness: bodies and minds either work or they contain flaws that prevent such function,” thus producing a binary between the abled and the disabled (*Representing* xvi). If race is the discursive construction of physical differences between ethnic groups and gender the construction of differences in sex, disability is the social construction of impairment: in the social model of disability studies, scholars hold that it is society and the unaccommodating environment it creates that ‘disables’ those who are in any way impaired (Goodley 8). As in the cases of race and gender, it was the lack that disability represented that allowed for the formulation of a human ideal. The consequently effectively nonhuman status of the disabled led, since the Enlightenment, to their incarceration in institutions, where many were left to

die without proper care. Their deaths were, in Judith Butler's words, not "grievable," because as 'subhumans' they were not considered actual persons who lived a life that was regarded as such (*Frames* 15). Their bodies were, in effect, "disposable" (Braidotti, *Posthuman* 15).

Autism is an interesting case in this respect. While a conclusive biological marker of the condition has not (yet) been found, and the diagnosis autism, in existence since the 1940s, is therefore merely a name given to an observed set of behavioural 'symptoms,' it is likely that there always has been a portion of the population that displayed autistic characteristics. Autism can be said to present both a lack and an excess of normative humanity. Murray quotes Paul Collins, author of a history of autism, as saying: "autism is *an ability and a disability*: it is as much about what is abundant as what is missing, an overexpression of the very traits that make our species unique. Other animals are social, but only humans are capable of abstract logic. The autistic outhumans the humans, and we can scarcely recognize the result" (qtd. in Murray, "Posthuman" 53, emphasis in original). Some autistics appear to resemble intelligent robots: they have abilities that approximate mechanic capacities, such as the ability to recognise patterns, to repeat certain actions indefinitely, to count objects, or to memorise information. Their behaviour, moreover, has been described as machinic: autistic people's repetitive movements appear mechanic, as does their preference for routine, and their intonation is sometimes described as robotic. Indeed, Bruno Bettelheim⁷ once published an article on "Joe: The Mechanical Boy." Like machines and robots, however, 'high-functioning' autistics, some of whom diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome⁸, may appear to lack empathy. They do not participate 'naturally' in conversations with others and fail to pick up on body language. Other, 'low-functioning,' autistic people, rather resemble scared animals: they withdraw from their environment, avoiding eye contact and touch, lashing out when disturbed (cf. Grandin

⁷ The controversial autism expert who was responsible for propagating the notion that autism is caused by so-called 'refrigerator mothers' who withhold their children appropriate affection.

⁸ Asperger's Syndrome has been removed as a diagnosis from the *DSM-V*, the latest instalment of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* used to diagnose developmental and mental conditions. The symptoms of the syndrome now fall under the broader umbrella term 'Autism Spectrum Disorder.' However, since Asperger's Syndrome has made quite a name for itself in popular conceptions of autism, I will continue to use the term in this thesis.

172). They perform ritualistic, self-stimulating motions, which may be described as mechanic, suggesting that the 'low-functioning' autistic at the same time resembles an insensible automaton. Like animals and machines, they often lack functional speech: if able to speak at all, 'low-functioning' autistics often display echolalia, repeating the words spoken to them, or merely repeat memorised phrases. The autistic, it is often said, 'lives in a world of her own.'

The autistic, then, whether perceived as mechanic or animalistic in her functioning, superhuman or subhuman, is not quite human. The condition presents a difference to the norm that is enticing and frightening precisely because of the supreme otherness it represents, which, despite ongoing medical investigation, remains first and foremost an enigma. It invites interpretation and incorporation in a variety of narratives precisely because its nature is still contested (Murray, *Autism* xiii). As "a peculiarly *silent* and pernicious version of [the disruption of the majority worldview that disability presents]" (Murray, *Representing* 3, emphasis added), the autistic offers a vantage point from which to regard both 'the human' and 'the person' in their normative conceptions. While Chapter 2 focuses on the autistic as (non)person, I first turn to the challenges presented by the present era to the idea of the human.

1.2 *Posthumanism*

It is humanism and the traditions it engendered, summed up by Haraway as (racist, male-centred, but in addition also ableist) capitalism, the idea of progress, humans' appropriation of nature, and the "reproduction of the self from the reflections of the other," that caused the "border war" between (human) organism and machine ("Cyborg" 150). New developments, however, make it less and less feasible to conceive of the human as firmly positioned as the superior of beast and machine. The concept of the posthuman, which has been in use for about two decades, complicates the formerly ostensibly strict divisions between the categories. The posthuman refers in the first place to an ontological state where the human body is increasingly modified by (bio)technology as prosthesis, thus turning the human, in time, into the posthuman or a veritable cyborg (Nayar 3).

Meanwhile, artificial intelligence is acquiring 'humanlike' characteristics, organic life is created in laboratories, and animals are genetically modified to produce tissue suitable for incorporation in human bodies. In the second place, however, the concept of the posthuman refers to the fact that the human has always been “an assemblage, co-evolving with other forms of life, enmeshed with the environment and technology” (Nayar 4). This idea is also sometimes called ‘originary prostheticity’ and emphasises that the human crafts its existence in relation to and in dependency on its technologies (Sharon 79). Thus, the posthuman extends in both directions from the classical humanist notion of the human and in fact subsumes that notion in its relationality. As such, ‘the posthuman’ refers both to a ‘before’ and an ‘after’ the humanist conception of man, to paraphrase Cary Wolfe: ‘before’ in the sense that posthuman theory insists that humans have always lived and developed themselves in conjunction with nature and technology; ‘after’ in view of current and future developments in technology which implicate all three terms of the triad with each other (xv). The contemporary era has merely allowed humans to recognise their imbrications with their nonhuman others by ensuring a new equality among humans, animals and machines in their vulnerability to the excesses of recent ecological and capitalist developments (Braidotti, *Posthuman* 63). The posthuman age, therefore, is not merely posthuman but postanthropocentric.

The term ‘posthuman’ would appear to imply a posthumanism. On the one hand, *posthumanism* could simply be defined as the study of the posthuman, demoting the human from “the sole hero of a history of emancipation” to “a (rather improbable but important) stage within the evolution of complex life forms” (Herbrechter 9), which may make room for a newer stage. However, as Braidotti notes, “the political economy of bio-genetic capitalism is post-anthropocentric but not necessarily post-humanistic” (*Posthuman* 65). A *posthumanism*, instead, recognises that “[a]s soon as some form of *humanitas* begins to characterize the species as a whole, nonhuman (un-, in-, pre- or posthuman) others start proliferating” (57). It not only pays attention to the cultural materialist foundations of the concept of the human, which have become “untenable if not irrelevant” under current conditions (10-1), but focuses on these nonhuman others, among whom

others born with a human body, that humanism tried to contain as dialectical to the norm. Rather than merely focusing on those others in themselves, however, such a posthumanism not only deconstructs but moves beyond the 'Same-Other' binaries of humanism in a rejection of the dialectics of identity in which difference "fulfilled a mirror function that confirmed the Same in His superior position" (Braidotti, *Posthuman* 27-8). A critical posthumanism, therefore, leaves behind classical humanist conceptions of the human as an agent in control of itself, its others, and its environment, and instead reveals how this control has always been an illusion (Hayles 288) and has always implied an 'ableism' that left no room for difference, except as "pejoration" (Braidotti, *Posthuman* 68). Critical posthumanism therefore builds on insights from those academic approaches that have taken "variant bodies" as their subject: animal studies, monster studies and cybernetics, and most importantly for this thesis, disability studies (Nayar 3).

However, while posthumanism has seen all this and more in the current age, thereby developing the antihumanism of poststructuralism in new and more positive directions, the popular conception of the posthuman and the cyborg is primarily the futuristic, ontological one of the human body enhanced with technology. As Habermas notes, this posthuman "evokes elation but also anxiety" (qtd. in Braidotti, *Posthuman* 2). Transhumanism is the term reserved for those, within and without the academy, who respond with glee to current technological developments and seek to overcome the imperfections of the human body not merely by incorporating prostheses but by leaving behind the frailty of the body entirely and uploading human consciousness onto a computer. In more modest form, the elation of transhumanists corresponds to common celebrations of the infinite possibilities of modern technology, which allows people to connect, through the 'virtual reality' that is the internet, to vast amounts of information and to others similarly connected all over the world. Anxiety is visible in concerns about what might be lost in current and future "posthumanization[s]" (Herbrechter 20). Indeed, Francis Fukuyama's *Our Posthuman Future*, responsible for popularising the term, locates the posthuman in a loss of a human *Factor X* that guarantees justice, morality and universal rights (149) and as such appears to rely primarily on a

quality that has indeed been argued to be uniquely human, namely empathy. Empathy, one could extrapolate from Fukuyama's assertions, is supposedly only guaranteed by 'real life' interaction. While 'the cyborg,' as a figure in popular culture and the media, is on the one hand welcomed as a superhuman, then, on the other hand such a cyborg seems to offer a fearful picture of humanity and artificial intelligence moving in unempathetic, disembodied virtuality, thus removed from authenticity and embodied 'reality' and supposedly incapable of human emotions that form the basis for said humanist values of justice, morality and rights.

1.3 *The Autistic and the Posthuman*

Significantly, the areas in which the autistic is considered to be not-quite-human, and in that sense monstrous, are the areas in which the posthuman is seen to reside. Once a qualification of the autistic as either subhuman or superhuman is abandoned, it becomes possible to regard the autistic as a figure of this posthuman. Here, too, however, this figuration is accompanied by elation as well as anxiety, in society, popular culture and academia alike. Popular culture emphasises the proximity between autism and the mechanic. "Rain man," i.e. Dustin Hoffman's character in the film by that name, may have been unable to live independently, but displayed savant abilities that would seem to be the area of expertise of technology instead of the human. This image of the autistic as savant⁹ dominated the common perception of autism from the appearance of the film in 1988 (Murray, *Representing* 89). Recently, the face of autism in popular culture and the media has come to be the more unequivocally 'high-functioning' autistic, likely to be (self-)diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome. The qualities of those displaying Asperger-like characteristics, such as perseverance, an eye for pattern, and skill at systematisation, it has been argued, are precisely those that are of supreme value in the information economy; qualities that as of yet have not been sufficiently replicated in computers and that are coveted by non-autistics who equally desire to 'thrive and survive' in cutthroat economic competition (cf. Cowen, qtd. in Orsini and Davidson 7). In their co-

⁹ It must be remembered that the term 'savant' was until recently accompanied by the term 'idiot': the 'idiot savant.'

operation with computer technology, these autistics are among the real-life cyborgs that modern society values the most.

Common metaphors, moreover, place the autistic herself in relation to computer technology: these metaphors have it that the autistic brain is 'wired' differently or resembles a computer's hard drive, storing all matter of information. Temple Grandin, for example, writes that differences among autistic people can be explained by the differences "in where the 'computer cables' hook up" (55). She compares her frontal cortex to the office of the CEO of a corporation, which in her case "has poor 'computer' connections" (30). Kim Peek, the man on whom the *Rain Man* character was modelled, has been described as a "living Google" (Murray, "Sentimental"). Murray links these metaphors to recent neurological research that conceives of autism in terms of brain connectivity: brain scanning and imaging have revealed that relative to non-autistic people, the brains of those diagnosed with autism are frequently shaped differently and build differently, and, moreover, function differently (*Autism* 5). Further research is hoped to reveal how these difference are related in the autistic brain and produce either underconnectivity or overconnectivity. In response to these and other developments in neurology, which allow for a new conception of the human being, the neurodiversity movement argues that the differences that autism presents in terms of brain make-up deserve to be respected and celebrated, rather than merely deplored.

Non-verbal autistic people who communicate through text, whether spelled out on a letterboard, written on paper or typed on an electronic device, offer a more controversial image of the autistic as cyborg, as will be explained in the next chapter. The non-verbal autistic's body, which appears unable to produce (functional) speech, incorporates text materials as prostheses to achieve communication. Electronic devices with a vocalising option allow the non-verbal autistic to spell her answers and have them read out in an electronic voice.

In academia, it is Stuart Murray who has investigated the relationship between these conceptions of the posthuman and autism. The autistic as posthuman would appear to connect intimately to N. Katherine Hayles's understanding of the posthuman as an "information-processing

[machine] with fundamental similarities to other kinds of information-processing machines, especially intelligent computers” (246). The autistic, then, could be seen to personify the technology-enhanced cyborg, who, writes Murray, “might suggest a kind of autistic-being-in-the-world” (“Posthuman” 64), in which, presumably, technology mediates the autistic’s experience of her environment. At the same time, presenting the autistic’s incorporation of technology as prosthesis as an exceptional, posthuman occurrence paradoxically reveals the supreme commonness of such incorporations, since, as mentioned above, human beings have always used ‘technics’ to facilitate their inhabiting of this planet. If D.S. Halacy notes in his 1965 *Cyborg: Evolution of the Superhuman* that the “new frontier” of the cyborg is “the relationship between ‘inner space’ and ‘outer space’ – a bridge ... between mind and matter” (7), and if Haraway writes that by the end of the twentieth century, “we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs” (“Cyborg” 150), Chapter 3 will discuss how a bridge between the mind and materiality is always already established through the hybridity of the human body, the tools it incorporates and the environment it lays out around itself. Here, again, the posthuman is both anterior, posterior and simultaneous to the humanist human in his professed independence, and autism is both unique and nonhuman, as well as profoundly and primordially human in character.

However, these associations between the autistic and the posthuman are not unequivocally regarded as positive. In the first place, while recognition of the contemporary omnipresence of computer technology means that “our own historical moment values autism as never before” (Murray, *Autism* 71, 73, emphasis removed), the posthuman era exhibits at the same time eugenic tendencies, which may lead to practices that seek to eliminate autism, such as genetic engineering and embryo selection. Indeed, Amanda Baggs has argued, a validation of ‘high-functioning’ autistics’ creative potential suggests that ‘low-functioning’ autistics are merely tolerated as a useless corollary of the more economically productive members on the autistic spectrum, in a response to Temple Grandin whom she quotes as saying: “you get to a point where a person [with autism] cannot talk, they’re self injuring themselves, and they cannot live independently. That [is something] you would

want to eliminate, if possible, but you would not want to get rid of all the autism genes because you wouldn't have any computers – you wouldn't have any scientists” (qtd. in Baggs “Grandin”).

Moreover, as suggested, with technology decidedly omnipresent in contemporary society, anxieties and criticism in the face of such developments are intimately connected to anxieties and critique in response to autism, and vice versa. It is in the first place the perceived lack of empathy in autistic people that causes many to regard autism with suspicion. The fear seems to be that the ever-increasing amount of time spent on the internet, in front of the television or playing videogames, leads, if not directly to more cases of autism, to a predominance of autistic-like characteristics, as stereotypically conceived of, in contemporary humankind. A link between violent films and video games and a lack of empathy is often suggested in reports on mass shootings by lone individuals. Often too, a further connection between virtual violence, actual violence and autism is discursively established when the perpetrators of such shootings are either revealed or speculated to be autistic (Murray, *Representing* 28). Speculations about the humanity of those considered to lack empathy position these persons, whether autistic or not, as “a contrast group of outsiders” whose task it is to confirm the levels of empathy inherent in the human as norm (McDonagh 47). A preference for engaging in a virtual over the ‘real’ world, then, is equated with a lack of fellow-feeling and thus with a lack of humanity, which may or may not in this absence imply a presence of something decidedly inhuman, namely ‘evil.’

However, as Patrick McDonagh notes, the anxiety that accompanies such speculations, especially as brought into relation with the omnipresence of modern technology, may suggest that “the current cultural anxiety about autism [is] a response fed in part by a sense of cultural alienation, disengagement, or disempowerment” (47): through traditional and new media, the world is ever closer, but many may feel themselves becoming uninterested in, emotionally immune to, or overcome with a sense of powerlessness in the face of news and images of horrors elsewhere. It appears, then, that a ‘cordon sanitaire’ around those perceived to be lacking in empathy is untenable in current times, which corroborates the assertion that autism is very much a zeitgeist

condition. Indeed, autism can be seen to function as a metaphor in contemporary culture that surpasses its metaphorical weight in relation to people actually diagnosed with the condition (Murray, *Representing* 9). To give an example, a recent opinion piece in Dutch newspaper *De Volkskrant* used 'autistic' as an adjective that suggested that the politicians to whom the term was applied were narcissistic, arrogant and intent on the acquisition of power (Von der Dunk).

Furthermore, the debate about autism, MMR-vaccinations and other environmental factors suggests anxieties about the influence of our contemporary environment, filled with toxins, on human beings (Murray, *Autism* 80). While the MMR-scare has been scientifically debunked, the controversy has not fully abated yet, as numerous stories circulate of parents who saw their child regress into autism shortly after having received the vaccine. Recent research suggests that other environmental factors in the womb and in early childhood may indeed have an effect on the occurrence of autism (cf. Rzhetsky et al.). Such influences offer an example of the paradoxical vulnerability that besets modern day human bodies despite transhumanist hopes.

Despite his conception of a cyborgian 'autistic-being-in-the-world' and its revolutionary potential, Murray himself, too, has some serious reservations about envisioning autism in the light of the posthuman. He warns that "a posthuman conception of autism might involve languages and structures that are dangerous precisely because, in that move to a space of beyond, the material links to the experience of a lived life, the day-to-day business of being autistic, could be lost" ("Posthuman" 55). This is because, according to Murray, posthumanist thinking "seeks to leave human embodiment behind" (58). However, with this description of the field he reveals that his conception of the posthuman is closer to transhumanism and to the popular, futuristic perception of the posthuman than to the more critical and affirmative branches of posthumanism that I would like to discuss. Moreover, the above understanding of the autistic as posthuman applies to 'high-functioning,' verbal autistics more than it does to 'low-functioning,' non-verbal autistics.

In the face of these negative conceptions of the autistic as posthuman, which appear to mirror common anxieties directed at 'our posthuman future' where humanity as we know it is lost,

then, the challenge is to envisage the autistic as posthuman otherwise. I propose that critical posthumanism offers the opportunity to conceive of autistic subjectivities and the posthuman in a more fruitful context than the autistic or posthuman as disembodied, unfeeling 'cyborg,' giving rise to ideas that broaden the view on human embodiment and subjectivity in *all* its differences, moving away from normativity in new directions more amenable to Haraway's cyborg vision. Such ideas may help "advancing a more nuanced understanding of personhood that makes space for the full spectrum of human experience," as the editors of *Worlds of Autism* state as one of their aims (Orsini and Davidson 16). In order to move towards such an understanding, it is necessary to first revisit traditional conceptions of personhood and their relation to autism, especially in the light of autobiography.

Chapter 2 Autistic Authorship: (Post)humanist Anxieties

Any attempt to approach autism from the vantage point of posthumanism has to take into account that autistic people in many regards have not yet been granted full humanity, as shown in the first chapter. A move to posthumanity may appear to bypass concerns about an appreciation of autistic humanity and personhood per se. In the past few decades, autistic autobiographies have filled in the void of an autistic interiority that was assumed to be non-existent. Autobiography is the genre that appears to exemplify humanism, as its aim is commonly perceived to be the authentic representation of a single, unique individual whose development is self-reflectively narrated. As such, autobiography guarantees that its author possesses a self and is a person, and thus human. Nevertheless, the claim to full, authentic personhood put forward by the autobiographer has to be met by a willingness to grant that claim on the part of her audience. Autistic autobiography, then, seems in the first place destined for a position in a humanist, disability rights and identity politics framework of emancipation. 'Voice' has been the keyword here. However, despite an autism-narrative boom that has certainly helped make strides in the 'emancipation' of autistic people, the issue of the posthuman and posthumanism cannot even here be avoided. In the first place, self-narrative is a social requirement and comes with a number of preferred scripts, reflective of humanism rather than posthumanism. In the second place, Jacques Derrida's notion of Western society's phonocentrism is of particular relevance in an analysis of the reception of autobiographies by non-verbal autistic people whose 'voice' is expressed in writing, which, Haraway argues, is "pre-eminently the technology of cyborgs" ("Cyborg" 176). Indeed, writing, as the supposedly artificial counterpart of 'natural' speech, says Derrida, "engenders monsters" (*Grammatology* 38).

2.1 *A Humanist Intervention*

Autobiography has a long history, but the popular understanding of the genre is arguably fairly stable. Karl Weintraub writes: "We are captivated by an uncanny sense that each one of us constitutes one irreplaceable human form, and we perceive a noble task in the cultivation of our

individuality, our ineffable self" (qtd. in Anderson 4). The genre of autobiography is commonly considered uniquely suitable for the representation of this self: realising the self and representing the self, Linda Anderson remarks, is considered to amount to the same thing (4). In autobiography's narrativising of the author's self-development and the resulting structural unity, it is the summit of self-cultivation: assuming authorship over one's life story equals claiming authority over one's self, and agency in one's self-representation. It thus supposedly establishes this self as unified, independent and autonomous and as such could be regarded as the preferred genre of a wholly different kind of cyborg than Haraway's, namely the cyborg as "the awful apocalyptic telos of the 'West's' escalating dominations of abstract individuation, an ultimate self untied at last from all dependency, a man in space" (Haraway, "Cyborg" 150-1). In its basic definition, however, autobiography posits "identity between the author, the narrator, and the protagonist" (Lejeune qtd. in Anderson 2, italics removed), the validity of which is guaranteed by the "autobiographical pact" that the author closes with his reader (3). Authority, then, is not only assumed by the author, but, importantly, bestowed by his audience: despite its appeal to independence and autonomy, autobiography does not exist in a vacuum, because it always presumes a reader, if only the author himself.

Narrative psychology states that narrative is the form that appears to come natural to representations of the self in text because it forms the very content of that selfhood: self-narrative and identity show so much overlap that it is hard to determine which comes first (Eakin 100). In narrative psychology, the consensus is that the self comes into existence with the acquisition of language, as it enables the child to enter society's discourse of feelings and thoughts and to use this discourse to reflect on itself (104). Equally important is the child's burgeoning alertness to narrative, which allows the child to participate in "memory talk" with its caregiver(s) (115). Memory talk teaches children "to 'narrativize' their experiences:" spurred on by carers, children form coherent narratives out of fragmented memories, out of which episodic memory emerges (115). Eventually, children learn to organise their sense of self around their autobiographical memories (111). They

come to consider themselves as defined by this story of the self: “I know that I have a story and that I consist in this story” (Cavarero 35). Autobiography, in this view, is “an integral part of a lifelong process of identity formation in which acts of self-narration play a major part” (Eakin 101). Again, this process does not occur in a vacuum.

In the case of autistic people, however, there is a paradox. On the one hand, autistic people are per definition constructed as preoccupied with themselves to the exclusion of everything and everyone else: the term ‘autism’ comes from Greek *autos*, ‘self,’ as do ‘autonomy’ and ‘authenticity.’ The autistic would, then, be fully thrown back upon herself, uncontaminated by contact with the world, and would thus be the ideal subject for humanist autobiography. On the other hand, because the autistic appears to resist participation in dialogue, and thus also memory talk, for decades after the condition was first named, it was medical dogma that “there is no ‘inside,’ no inner life, in the autistic” (Sacks, Foreword xiii), thus making autistic autobiography an impossibility. In non-medical accounts of the condition, moreover, severe autism is often portrayed as a thief who takes children away, leaving in their place an empty shell (Murray, *Autism* 27). Carly Fleischmann’s father, for example, writes: “[Autism] was stealing our daughter, bit by bit” (Fleischmann and Fleischmann 83). This theme is common in charity fundraiser campaigns. Alternatively, the child’s true non-autistic self is believed to be imprisoned by the condition, but with education may be able to be truly ‘led out’ (*educare*, related to *educere*: to lead forth) of “the dark tunnel of silence” into the light of verbal communication (Fleischmann and Fleischmann 123). Here, “the idea [is] that language as the model of human-to-human interaction is the passport to a human life worth living” (Manning, *More* 162).

From all these viewpoints, the autistic resembles, to adopt Derrida's thoughts on animals, an “animal-machine,” “an automaton ... deprived of a ‘me’ or ‘self,’ and even more of any capacity for reflection, indeed of any mark or autobiographical impression of [her] own life” (Derrida, *The Animal* 76). Ido Kedar notes: “[experts] assume we are some autistic, retarded stim-machine” (43).¹⁰ Diagnosed with autism, the autistic is assigned a biographical script (Smith 231). Her behaviour is left

¹⁰ ‘Stim’ refers to bodily self-stimulation or ‘stimming.’

open to interpretation in the absence of any unequivocal knowledge on the condition. Consigned to the position of an object to be described, primarily in experts' accounts, the autistic herself is indeed voiceless and, as a subaltern, cannot be heard (cf. Spivak). She is not considered a person, but merely an enigmatic existence in human shape. She needs others to speak *for* her, defending her rights. However, as Derrida and others have noted, speaking *for* an other is as violent as speaking *on* an other: "The misfortune of the mad [or autistic], the interminable misfortune of their silence, is that their best spokesmen are those who betray them best" (Derrida, "Cogito" 42).

There is merit, then, in people with autism and other developmental, cognitive disabilities assuming authorship and authority in writing their own stories. In this, they demand a voice for a minority that is figuratively, as well as in many cases literally, mute, as, regardless of its members' ability to write an autobiography, they are commonly denied "rhetoricability": the socially constructed 'ability' to be perceived as a 'speaking' subject (Prendergast 57). However, through self-authorship, the autistic autobiographer claims not only, to speak with Haraway, "access to the power to signify" by "seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other" ("Cyborg" 175), but in the first place a self. Self-narratives by autistic people, philosopher Ian Hacking writes, turn the "thin man," or woman, of carers' and experts' narratives into a "thick man," with feelings, thoughts and motives ("Autobiography" 1467). Michael Bérubé notes that self-authorship "establishes the writer as, at bare minimum, someone capable of self-reflection and self-representation, someone capable of life-writing" (341).

It appears to be this bare minimum that is required to be eligible to be considered a person, and with that a full-fledged human, a 'thick man,' who has both agency and autonomy. That is precisely the value that disability studies scholars are apt to ascribe to autobiographies such as these: in demanding to be heard, disabled autobiographers exert an agency that they were previously denied (Wolfe 138). William Chaloupka notes that constituting people as autobiographical subjects has become "an important practice in the tactical ... field of power" (qtd. in Smith 232), while G. Thomas Couser, an authority in the field of disability non-fiction narrative, remarks that

autobiography has functioned repeatedly as a “threshold genre for ... marginalized groups” (“Empire” 305). Michael Bérubé compares autobiographical texts by developmentally disabled people to slave narratives, whose authors also claimed self-authorship and, following that, human rights (341). Self-authorship, he argues, is “a meta-claim from which all other claims follow” (341). Indeed, the “ethical appeal” of autobiography is normally seen to lie in “[t]he agency of autobiographical personhood ..., [which] enhance[s] the humanity of those who write and read it, ... and [promotes] a view of the autobiographer as one who can shape his life through its representation” (Gilmore 91). Autobiography is thus not merely a ‘self-centred’ practice of self-cultivation, but an answer to a demand made by society to all those who wish to be recognised as persons.

In the case of autism, however, recognition for the ‘authority’ of autistic people has been slow. ‘Medical anthropologist’ Oliver Sacks’s first reaction to the 1986 autobiography of Temple Grandin was one of disbelief and suspicion: “How *could* an autistic person write an autobiography? It seemed a contradiction in terms” (*Anthropologist* 253). Not only were autistic people thought to be lacking in interiority, despite being supposedly locked-in in themselves, it is also commonly assumed that they lack any narrative ability. Impaired episodic and autobiographical memory in people with autism resulting in a “reduced awareness of past states of self” is thought to suggest that people with autism have a diminished sense of both a self and a self-narrative developing over time (Roth and Rezaie 323, 326, 327). As Sidonie Smith notes in an essay on autism and autobiography, “the very materiality of the body [i.e. neurological ‘defects’] ... interrupts an autistic person’s efforts to assemble meaning through narratives. In effect, the neurophysiological model consigns the autistic to an unautobiographical life” (231). This leads Matthew K. Belmonte to posit those autistic people who do manage to write an autobiography as “‘human, but more so’,” in effect superhuman: “confronted by the same fundamental problems of organizing perceptual experience into coherent stories that confronts all of us, they must overcome greater fragmentation of perceptual and cognitive experience to solve this problem” (173), an issue to which I will return.

In the years since the publication of Grandin's first, co-authored, autobiographical text, the many self-narratives and weblogs that are available written by 'high-functioning' autistics, some of whom identify with the label of Asperger's Syndrome, have come a long way in changing the way 'high-functioning' autism is perceived, 'humanising' those with the condition. The autobiography of Dawn Prince-Hughes, a "national bestseller" according to its US cover, is a case in point. Nevertheless, with the social demand for self-narrative come certain scripts that are more readily accepted than others. In the case of disabilities, these scripts often hinge on 'overcoming' the disability. A script of overcoming is so common to disability narratives, both by disabled authors themselves and by caregivers, that, Stuart Murray observes, "it almost seems that there is no alternative" (*Representing* xvi). However, while in the case of an illness narrative such a script may reasonably yield a "recovery story," as Simi Linton emphasises, it is impossible to recover from a disability (17). Overcoming, then, must mean something else: either that "sheer strength or willpower" have allowed the person to overcome the hindrances of his or her impairment; or that the person exceeds society's expectations for someone 'suffering' from this disability (17). What is overcome, then, is "the social stigma of having a disability" (17), and what is achieved appears to be an approximation of 'normality.'

Some of the earliest autism autobiographies did indeed present themselves as stories of people who were now cured of their autism: in her two-part autobiography, *Nobody Nowhere* and *Somebody Somewhere*, Donna Williams, another high-profile autistic, presents her partial 'recovery' from autism, while Temple Grandin, in her first book 'emerges' from autism (*Emergence: Labeled Autistic*). Nevertheless, both Williams and Grandin present their autism as something that is an integral part of who they are and what they have achieved: as Mark Osteen has it, "Temple Grandin didn't emerge from autism so much as merge with it, crafting a self from within autism" ("Narrating" 273). If, as Murray notes, "Grandin's position as a subject [who has either overcome her disability or celebrates it] is contested[, it is] because the meaning and value of autism are themselves contested" (*Representing* 40). Thus, while the success of these and other autobiographies has

granted personhood to 'high-functioning' autistic people, the content of this personhood is still in danger of being conceived mainly in humanist terms of a development towards normality.

Nevertheless, it is often possible to read posthumanist elements in these texts, as I will do cursorily in Chapter 4.

2.2 *Posthuman Anxieties*

For non-verbal autistic people, the hurdles to being perceived as full-fledged persons are even greater. Phonocentrism, the traditional privileging of speech over both speechlessness and writing with which Derrida diagnoses Western culture, appears to rear its head, discrediting autobiographical content produced. In a humanist discourse, it is speech which is the harbinger of man's unique stature among his fellow inhabitants of the earth: speech brought forth by the body, uniting reason, emotion and will. In her critical overview of 'what it means to be human,' Joanna Bourke begins her discussion with speech. Aristotle admitted that some animals have voice, while others merely produce sound, but insisted that only humans have language and the power of speech (Bourke 30). Technology makes use of code and mechanics, and therefore lacks the bodily authenticity and immediacy of speech. Indeed, Descartes maintained that speech ought not to be confused "with the natural movements which express passions and which can be imitated by machines as well as by animals" (qtd. in Bourke 31). For John Stuart Mill, 'man' was distinct from 'animal and machine' in "the ability to choose, reason, discriminate, decide, exercise self-control and display 'vigorous reason'," all guaranteed by man's possession of language (Bourke 31).

Commentators in the nineteenth century, Bourke notes, operated from a notion of a hierarchy of language ranking humans and animals (44). In this hierarchy, primitive people were expected to possess less intricate languages. However, European deaf-mutes posed a problem. While aphasics were merely considered lesser humans, deaf-mutes were supposedly closer to animals, because they lacked language both as a means of access to God and as a sign of their possession of reason (46). In the twentieth century, speech comes to be considered first and foremost as a vehicle for

self-expression. Cary Wolfe notes that the shibboleth ““where there is reason, there is a subject”” changed to ““where there is *language*, there is a subject”” (129).

In *Of Grammatology*, Jacques Derrida discusses how “an entire epoch” of human history was dominated by “[t]he system of ‘hearing (understanding)-oneself-speak’” (8, 7). During this epoch, writing appeared to be merely “translator of a full speech that was fully *present*” (8, emphasis in original). Aristotle, for example, was of the opinion that “spoken words are the symbols of mental experience and written words are the symbols of spoken words” (qtd. in Derrida, *Grammatology* 11). Phonocentrism, then, entails an “absolute proximity of voice and being, of voice and the meaning of being” (12). Consequently, ‘hearing-oneself-speak’ is a system by which the subject is fully present to himself in a process of auto-affection (12): ‘hearing-oneself-speak’ is predicated on the interiority of meaning, whereas writing is “a fall into the exteriority of meaning” (13). Writing, then, is a supplement to speech: it is a surplus added to speech.

Autobiography, in phonocentrism, has a paradoxical character. On the one hand, it claims to make the author as subject singularly present in the text, both to itself and to its reader: it substitutes writing for the auto-affection of direct speech. On the other hand, writing, as supplement to self-presence, equals “*non-self-presence*” (Derrida, *Grammatology* 17, emphasis added): autobiography accomplishes not the presence, but the absence of the speaking subject, its constant deferral by the written word. The ineffability of the self of which Weintraub spoke, does indeed appear to make the genuine reflection of the self in text impossible, despite humanism’s particularity to the form. Writing is, after all, a medium. Nevertheless, the speaking subject supposedly guarantees the authenticity of the text, however much it may be corrupted. However, Derrida notes that the premise of autobiography as a written copy of a subject that establishes its presence in speech, is undermined by what is considered a classic in the genre: Rousseau’s *Confessions*. Like his fellow-Romantics, Rousseau places speech above writing. However, according to Derrida, Rousseau describes speech not as it is, but “as it should be or *should have been*” (Derrida, *Grammatology* 141, emphasis in original). Writing, then, is not “simply added to the positivity of a

presence” as a surplus, but as substitute “intervenes and insinuates itself *in-the-place-of*; if it fills, it is as if one fills a void” (145, emphasis in original). Autobiography, then, does not only fail to make the speaking subject fully present; it also reveals that the written autobiographical subject is in any case specular, predicated on “the anterior default of a presence” (145).

Moreover, as Derrida discusses in *Speech and Phenomena*, speech itself already introduces an originating difference within self-presence, namely the distance between self as addressor and the self as addressee (cf. 82). Thus, “[h]earing oneself speak is not the inwardness of an inside that is closed in upon itself” (86). Instead, “it is the irreducible openness of the inside” (86): auto-affection in speech, whether inwardly in thought (the silent speaking of the self to the self) or outwardly, using the voice, is never closed off from “space, the outside, the world, the body, etc.” (82). Consequently, neither is autobiography. As noted, if self-narration appears to come naturally and as such establishes the self, it is nevertheless in the first place mediated through the social demand for self-narrative, and, I will add now, through language.

In light of Derrida’s diagnosis of the mistaken cult of phonocentrism, one could argue that the non-verbal autistic, unlike the speaking subject, does live in the closed inwardness of the self, as the etymology of the term ‘autism’ indeed suggests. The non-verbal autistic could be thought to personify an immediate self-presence that does not require a detour into language to express this self to others or indeed to itself. In practice, however, the absence of speech is more commonly perceived to denote an absence of self per se. The non-verbal autistic, supposedly, does not have a self *to speak of*, both literally and figuratively, and thus cannot answer to the social demand for self-narrative, which is to be fulfilled in dialogue. While the qualifier ‘non-verbal’ denotes that the non-verbal autistic person cannot speak, since ‘verbal’ pertains to the spoken word, then, the word carries its older meaning derived from Latin *verbum*, word, pertaining to all language, whether written or spoken. Consequently, the non-verbal person is considered to be languageless, non-*wordy*. Should she have language, nothing changes, as communicative speech remains absent. Indeed, adapting Derrida’s statement on animals, “it is always as if [non-autistic] humans were less

interested in emphasizing the fact that the [non-verbal autistic] is deprived of the ability to speak ... than the fact that [in as far as the autistic has language] it is private and deprives [non-autistic] humans of a response" (*Animal* 53). Oliver Sacks's quote on the back of *The Mind Tree* reveals how deep-seated the tendency to equate the absence of linguistic self-expression with an absence of self is: "The book is indeed amazing, shocking too, for it has usually been assumed that deeply autistic people are scarcely capable of introspection or deep thought ... - or, if they are, that they are incapable of communicating these thoughts to us'."

Derrida explores the issue of the equation of speech, selfhood and rationality in his discussion of three pages from Michel Foucault's *History of Madness* in "Cogito and the History of Madness." Foucault's stated purpose in writing this book is to allow madness to speak its silence, which he defines as an "obstinate murmur of a language that speaks by itself, without speaker or interlocutor, piled up upon itself, strangulated, collapsing before reaching the stage of formulation, quietly returning to the silence from which it never departed" (qtd. in Derrida, "Cogito" 41). These are, then, words "without language" or "the voice of a subject" (qtd. in Derrida, "Cogito" 40): lacking the ability to use language meaningfully, madness is, according to Foucault, without a subject. The same could be said for the non-verbal autistic, who is considered 'self-less.' This means that the non-verbal autistic is at the same time implicated in the binary reason-unreason that posits the silence of madness as "the other of a language [that has] been confused with logos itself" (Foucault, qtd. in Derrida "Cogito" 39). According to Descartes, "the dullest of men" can "produce different arrangements of words so as to give appropriately meaningful answer to whatever is said in its presence" (qtd. in Derrida, *Animal* 84), but as was just pointed out, it is this ability that the madman or the autistic appears to lack, even if they, like "a perfected machine," have speech, for example in the form of echolalia (84). What is more, the fact that non-verbal autistics do not resort to self-invented sign systems to communicate, contrary to those who are born deaf and dumb, for Descartes and others would appear to put them, in terms of rationality, on a par with the "beasts," whose failure to invent signs "witnesses not merely to the fact that the beasts have less reason than

men, but that they have no reason at all" (Descartes qtd. in Derrida, *Animal* 76, emphasis removed). An absence of speech, then, is conventionally equated with an absence of any ability to communicate using language, of self-reflection and by extension a self, of 'deep thought' and therefore of normative rationality. When asked why she is so certain that Ido is mentally retarded and whether it could not be possible that he is incapable of showing what he knows, one of Kedar's speech therapists answers bluntly: "It's the same thing" (Kedar 26).

In Foucault's and Descartes's discussions on madness, then, it becomes apparent how subjectivity or selfhood is conventionally staked on the ability to speak, and not merely to speak, but to speak meaningfully to an interlocutor, and thus to give evidence of one's humanity.¹¹ Indeed, whereas Derrida notes that the madman can at least utter or think Descartes's Cogito, the 'I think therefore I am,' even if his thoughts are in fact mad ("Cogito" 67), the non-verbal autistic supposedly lacks any ability to do so. Like an animal, she cannot utter the "I think" and, indeed, cannot utter an "I" at all (Derrida, *Animal* 86). Because the non-verbal autistic does not appear to have language, reason or a self, she is perhaps considered more than non-wordy. She is also presumably non-*worthy*: not-quite-human.

Against this background, the appearance of autobiographies by non-verbal autistic people caused a great shock. On the one hand, apart from the fact that the non-verbal autistic supposedly lacks both reason and language, autobiographies call into question the autistic person's self-sufficiency and unmediated self-presence: clearly, the autistic autobiographer sees a need to use language to reflect on, express and affirm the self, and is therefore subjected to the same self-alienating effect of language as are all autobiographers. Still, autistic self-narrative may be said to epitomise the genre of autobiography, i.e. "the writing of the self as living, the trace of the living for itself" (Derrida, *Animal* 47), as its contents "basically revolve around [the autistic] [her]self and [her]

¹¹ All this despite the criterium that Derrida discerns in Descartes and the discourses on animality that follow him concerning the incommensurability of a lack in animals and automata with any lack or imperfection in humans (*Animal* 81-2), even in "the most senseless of men" (82).

personal experiences,” presumably characteristic of both autistic as well as non-autistic autobiography (Wing xii). In this understanding, autistic autobiography excludes others as other selves or as audience from this self-narrative. Indeed, writing would seem to escape the demand for dialogue made of speech that both Foucault and Descartes emphasise. As such, autistic autobiography may be considered a pure form of linguistic auto-affection: language leaving the autistic only to return to her.

However, auto-affection in speech or writing does indeed always open itself to other-infection, and most often does so intentionally. Instead of being turned inwards, most autistic autobiographies explicitly welcome the voyeuristic gaze of the non-autistic. Its authors are not just caught in the act of autobiographising but consciously address an audience: they wish to give non-autistic others insights into life with autism. As discussed above, the very act of self-narrating is at least in part a response to a demand made of all human beings, recognised as such, and thus demands a susceptibility to such a demand. In his first book, severely autistic Tito Mukhopadhyay often directly addresses his readers with “Dear readers” (cf. *Mind Tree* 20). While he is careful to hedge his authority, he states he wants to speak for other autistics who do not have the opportunity to write or publish their own books (89). His writings, then, are aimed at others in an act of *testimonio*, “an affirmation of the individual self in a collective mode” (Couser, “Conflicting” 97), as well as at himself. Mukhopadhyay writes with “a hope for a concrete dream of this book to reach those who would like to understand us through me” (*Mind Tree* 89), with ‘us’ meaning “the autistic hearts” that Mukhopadhyay fears are misunderstood (88). Naoki Higashida is more apt to claim authority on autistic experience and generally answers the questions that serve to structure his book in the first person plural: “Q24 Would You Like to Be ‘Normal’? What would we do if there was some way that we could be ‘normal’?” (72, emphasis added). Ido Kedar’s purpose in writing his book, too, is “to show what autism is like from the inside” in the hopes that other non-verbal autistic children will be given the same opportunities to learn that he was (156). Carly Fleischmann’s catch phrase is that she delivers the truth about autism, “straight from the horse’s mouth” (Fleischmann and

Fleischmann 341).

Moreover, as these authors' engagement with their prospective audiences, as well as with their fellow autistics, implies, these autistics are not as self-centred and insulated as the stereotype has it. They do not lack empathy or openness towards others. Instead, like all people, they develop in conjunction with other people who support and stimulate them. Despite Lorna Wing's comment in the preface of *The Mind Tree*, Tito Mukhopadhyay often takes his mother as his subject of writing, and sometimes gives her perspective on happenings as he imagines it: "There was his mother weeping for a very uncertain future" (*Mind Tree* 10). Ido Kedar is disappointed when his classmates do not appear to be interested in being his friend (99), while Carly Fleischmann not only craves friends but enjoys flirting with boys (Fleischmann and Fleischmann 130). Her father notes: "Unable to feel or share emotions? Nothing could be further from the truth" (277).

Autistic autobiographies, then, reveal a self that was previously deemed absent: autistic autobiography presents an "I say that I think therefore I am" (Derrida, *The Animal* 89) that seemed to be outside the autistic's reach. Parents of non-verbal autistic children greet autistic autobiographers as miracles: the subtitle of *The Mind Tree* is *A Miraculous Child Breaks the Silence of Autism*, while author David Mitchell, co-translator of Higashida's *The Reason I Jump* and father of an autistic child, calls the book "a revelatory godsend" (blurb). These autobiographies suggest that it is possible that medical dogma has been mistaken and there is a subject 'behind' or 'beyond' the silence of non-verbal autism. By learning to communicate in language, the autistic seemingly becomes more 'human,' as Carly Fleischmann's sister remarks (Fleischmann and Fleischmann 172).

Unsurprisingly, 'voice' is an important theme in the manner these books are presented to a general audience. Where Tito Mukhopadhyay "breaks the silence of autism" with his "voice of silence," and Ido Kedar is "climbing out of autism's silent prison," Naoki Higashida in his turn offers "one boy's voice from the silence of autism," while *Carly's Voice* is "breaking through autism," as the subtitles to these books have it. Adopted as a "poster child" by autism foundation *Cure Autism Now* (Murray, *Representing* 148), Mukhopadhyay was to give credit to the claim that a solution for the

'problem' of autism has to and can be found: the abductor autism can be forced to return its hostages from their silence.

However, there is the rub. As noted, Oliver Sacks's first reaction to the autobiography of Temple Grandin was disbelief. But Temple Grandin can speak. Despite the fact that by medical dogma she was not supposed to have an inner life to speak of, logically it is unremarkable that she was able to produce an autobiographical text. Although writing in phonocentrism is one step removed from self-presence in speech, the self-presence of Grandin in her text is ensured by the fact that she is indeed, literally, a speaking subject. Tito Mukhopadhyay, Ido Kedar, Naoki Higashida, Carly Fleischmann, and Amanda Baggs, however, are functionally non-verbal. Their 'voices of silence,' then, are 'disembodied' because they are unaccompanied by speech. Writing is, for these authors, quite literally a supplement substituting for a lack. It comes as no surprise, then, that these writings raise suspicions as to the presence of their selves in these texts. Have they acquired language without being able to speak? This flies in the face of standard theories of first language acquisition. Are they able to demonstrate their knowledge of language in a research set up? Their sensory sensitivity, OCD, and awkwardness in unfamiliar situations often prevent their meeting the researcher's expectations (cf. *How Can I Talk* 200-1, Fleischmann and Fleischmann 124, Kedar 32). Most importantly, when they communicate through pointing at letters on an alphabet board, thus forming words and sentences, is the transcription of these sentences by their carers and others actually authentic? A search online for any of these authors inevitably brings up opinion pieces that reject their success in writing as a hoax. Below I will examine the issue of Facilitated Communication, closely related to these suspicions, in depth.

2.3 *Facilitated Communication*

Tito Mukhopadhyay has managed to evade suspicion as to the authenticity of his writings by learning how to write with a pencil and type without help. His writings demonstrate his language skills, his powers of reasoning, his deftness at writing poetry and his considerable imagination, as

well as his acuity in self-reflection, all previously deemed unattainable by non-verbal, supposedly 'low-functioning' autistic people. As such, Mukhopadhyay seemed the pinnacle of what was possible through Facilitated Communication.¹²

Facilitated Communication (FC) was developed in the early 1990s as a method to give non-verbal autistic people the means to communicate in language. The method consists in teaching non-verbal people to spell words and sentences by pointing at letters on an alphabet board or typing on a keyboard. The facilitator holds the individual's hand or wrist, ensuring that she has control over her movements and helping her focus on the task at hand. With time, the person often only needs the facilitator to hold her elbow or to place a hand on her shoulder. Soon, non-verbal autistic people started to communicate through FC, despite not having shown any language ability previously. Hailed as a miracle method by carers, medical experts were suspicious and subjected FC to clinical research. This research showed that the facilitator often has a higher degree of influence over the writings resulting from this method than he or she is conscious of, and thus invalidated the authenticity of communications arrived at through FC (American Psychological Association): the autistic herself was shown to be absent from these writings. Parents who thought they could finally communicate with their child were supposedly the victims of wishful thinking. Following these results, FC was abandoned by mainstream autism care. FC's proponents, however, point out that it is often only during the first phase of learning to point to letters or to type that the non-verbal autistic needs a facilitator to actually hold her hand (Rubin). Moreover, a significant number of non-verbal people eventually learned to communicate through typing without any facilitation. While it is not clearly understood why FC works, although I will offer a hypothesis in Chapter 3, these cases show that FC can have its use on the way to independent communication.

Unsurprisingly, both sides of the FC debate point to violence afflicted on the non-verbal

¹² Technically, Mukhopadhyay did not learn to communicate through Facilitated Communication, but the method his mother used bears great similarities to FC: she held his hand while he learned how to point to letters on an alphabet board and while he learned to write by pencil, moving her hand higher up his arm as he became proficient.

autistic person by proponents of the other side. Opponents of FC point out that in facilitators' literally but unconsciously speaking for non-verbal autistic people, families have been broken up by spurious accusations of incest and, in general, autistic people's autonomy has been violated (Kasari). Proponents, on the other hand, claim that wilfully denying non-verbal autistic people the opportunity to speak out from their silence is as big a violation of integrity, as is discarding all communications that are the product of FC (Syracuse University School of Education). Following the FC controversy, Tito Mukhopadhyay's writings have been discredited by mainstream autism advocacy, despite his independence in writing. A page dedicated to his story on the *Cure Autism Now* website, since then incorporated in autism advocacy organisation *Autism Speaks*, where he was called "a special person ... whose unique set of characteristics shed light upon an entire disorder" (Murray, *Representing* 147), has been deleted. While assistive communication technologies are now awarded a tentative mention on its website, it remains ironic that an autism advocacy organisation that calls itself *Autism Speaks* (tagline: "It's time to listen") does not do more to encourage parents and carers to provide their autistic children with the means to learn to communicate in writing.

In the debate surrounding FC, it becomes apparent that writing whose authenticity is not 'guaranteed' by speech is regarded with deep suspicion. Mukhopadhyay points out: "I knew very early on in life that if you happen to be born with autism, you will need to give plenty of proofs to doctors, psychologists, teachers, therapists, disbelieving uncles and neighbors, and who knows who else?" (*How Can I Talk* 157). Consequently, the need he felt to learn how to write with pencil on paper was prompted by both personal desire and an awareness of society's demand for evidence that his writings were his own (157). "How did writing help me?" he asks in an interview, "[w]ell it proved to the world that it was I who was doing it and not mother" (Biklen 130). The title of Mukhopadhyay's second autobiographical book reflects both his personal struggle to acquire the means of verbal communication and the questions that his speechlessness raises: *How Can I Talk If My Lips Don't Move?* For Ido Kedar, too, the fact that he frequently encounters suspicion as to his mental and writing abilities is a recurrent theme in his writings. His behaviour, in what he calls his

worst moments, answers to stereotypical ideas of autistic behaviour, which causes people to “assume I’m not smart or something” (120): “It’s the struggle of the silent to prove that still waters run deep,” he notes (118). Arthur Fleischmann reports on the resistance he and his family encountered when they insisted to the authorities that his daughter Carly was far more intelligent than her behaviour suggested and that in fact she could communicate through typing: “The ... phantom that would haunt her for the next few years would be a handful of skeptics who didn't believe that Carly could in fact write for herself ... [A] number of psychologists had staked their careers on the false conclusions that those without speech and with severe autism could not possess advanced intellect, creativity, and ‘theory of mind’” (Fleischmann and Fleischmann 245).¹³ In order to be believed, Fleischmann had to type on her own while being filmed, no mean feat in view of the anxieties that accompanied such pressure to perform (232). What is more, these autistic autobiographers often consciously refuse to perform on demand (cf. Mukhopadhyay, *Mind Tree* 32). Ido Kedar notes: “I won’t write with someone who is skeptical or treating me with idiotic patronizing baby language. Too bad because that’s most autism experts” (61). Thus, while suspicion towards facilitated writings by non-verbal autistics may be justified in some instances, it also threatens to reject all communications in the written word by those who lack speech.

In as far as Mukhopadhyay's writings *were* accepted as authentic by the medical establishment, they conceived of him as a linguistic autistic savant: a ‘one in a million’ genius who gave insights into autism that no one else could possibly give. However, in claiming that Mukhopadhyay and other non-verbal autistic authors are remarkable exceptions, or even that these authors must not be autistic at all in light of their diagnostic-criteria-defying abilities to communicate (cf. Kedar 15-6), the medical establishment seems intent on keeping its view on the intellectual and communicative abilities of severely autistic people in general much as it was (cf. Kedar 54).

Indeed, while to give or to claim ‘voice’ has been a central aim of subaltern identity politics, among which the disability rights movement, it is precisely this privileging of the literal voice over

¹³ Theory of mind is the notion that a child at a certain age learns to see other people as being endowed with a mind of their own, whose contents he can guess at through analogy with his own situation and memories.

the written 'voice' that acquires major importance in the issue of non-verbal autism and non-verbality in general. Just as deaf people were only able to achieve the ability to communicate to a satisfactory degree when the project of teaching them how to speak was abandoned in favour of the recognition that sign language was itself an acceptable means of communication (Bourke 53), so, argue the authors just discussed, should the project of teaching non-verbal autistic children to communicate through the spoken word be abandoned, when unsuccessful, in favour of other methods more suitable to these children's abilities. Although not all non-verbal autistic people may have the capacity to learn to communicate through typing, so far the "prodigious" labour involved in teaching these people literacy skills, which involves remediating other challenges of which this thesis will come to speak in due course, in Ralph Savarese's words, "threatens rendering the relatively few who do get what they need, outliers forever" (Savarese and Zunshine 29). Carly Fleischmann believes that "[w]e [non-verbal autistics] all have an inner voice that needs to come out and we just need some one to believe in us and push us to get it out" (Fleischmann and Fleischmann 374). Ido Kedar, too, firmly believes in the capacities for communication of fellow non-verbal autistics, and like Fleischmann, calls for medical experts to change their beliefs about their charges: "I really pray that one day all non-verbal autistic people will have the opportunity to learn communication and show the world that lack of speech is not the same as lack of understanding" (156).

2.4 *Posthuman Autobiography?*

There are, then, several movements in the discourse concerning non-verbal autism. The non-verbal autistic is either supposedly singularly present to herself, does not have a self whatsoever, or has a self that is withheld by autism. Autobiographies by autistic people therefore reveal both that the autistic is not as self-sufficient as the term 'autism' suggests and that she does have the ability to narrate a self when given the opportunity to (learn and) use language. In the absence of speech and in the adoption of prostheses for communication (i.e. alphabet boards, pencils, typing equipment), these non-verbal authors are, as suggested in Chapter 1, posthuman cyborgs, closer to the

technologies of writing than to the 'natural authenticity' of speech. However, because writing is one step removed from speech, writings by non-verbal autistics are subject to suspicion. The case of non-verbal autism, then, reveals that speech is indeed privileged over writing as a sign of self-presence. Moreover, it further illuminates the nature that is ascribed to the human self: capable of expressing itself meaningfully in a dialogue with an interlocutor, it has to be able to narrate a story of the self. In this sense, autistic autobiography lays a claim to authority, autonomy and agency on behalf of its author, thus 'humanising' the not-quite-human autistic.

However, as this suggests, while non-verbal autistic autobiography may go some way in stretching the limits of both the autistic and the human, conventionally equated with the ability to speak, it is likely to be taken as staking its claim in a humanist, rather than a posthumanist discourse. Autistic autobiography is put forward as an argument for the extension of humanist values and demands to the non-verbal autistic, but in that process the singularity of the autistic is ignored, as in order to be granted 'humanity,' she has to conform to scripts for normative personhood circulating in her society. Carly Fleischmann, for example, mentions that her ability to communicate "would open a world for me I really wasn't sure I wanted to be in. ... with great abilities come greater expectations" (Fleischmann and Fleischmann 367). At the same time, carers' hopes to find a supposedly non-autistic "intact mind" in their child's autistic body, makes it harder to accept the situation if their child, despite an acquired ability to communicate, does not appear to have the intelligence that Mukhopadhyay and others display (Lutz). Indeed, some developmentally disabled people may truly constitutionally be unable to claim self-representation in text, let alone in a full-grown autobiography, as G. Thomas Couser remarks ("Empire" 307). It is dangerous, then, to place the burden of resistance to dominant discourses and practices of disability on autobiography alone. Autistic autobiographies that *are* written, and published, should therefore not be regarded as representative of all autistics. There is a danger that such texts lead to the conclusion that autistic or otherwise developmentally disabled people do have inner lives and *therefore* have a claim to rights that are conventionally reserved to 'fully-fledged,' i.e. 'humanist,' human beings. As Cary Wolfe

notes: “a fundamental problem with the liberal humanist model is not so much what it wants as the price it pays for what it wants: that in its attempt to recognize the uniqueness of the other, it reinstates the normative model of subjectivity that it insists is the problem in the first place” (136), thus again taking this uniqueness or singularity from view. Posthumanism, instead, “[interrogates] [t]he compulsory humanity of the human ... by drawing attention to the constructed nature of the human ‘person’” (Nayar 2), as I have summarily tried to do.

Moreover, while the production of non-verbal autistic autobiography is a posthumanist affair that “challenges assumptions about what constitutes ‘normal’ forms of communication,” as the editors of *Worlds of Autism* note (Orsini and Davidson 6), its reception, when positive, does not pay further attention to other challenges to humanist conventions that might be found within these narratives. As Stuart Murray argues, a preoccupation with the sheer existence of autistic autobiography per se does not lead to an engagement with the content of these texts: “The autism poster child version of Tito [Mukhopadhyay] is an empty signifier of a declared achievement, ... his writing is read not as an account of living with autism, but rather as a *product*, an uninterrogated (and in fact *unread*) achievement of someone who should not be able to write in the first place” (*Representing* 148-9). As such, Mukhopadhyay’s ‘voice’ remains without a body. Indeed, the humanist, Cartesian subject of autobiography itself appears to be disembodied: if the body plays any role at all, it is as instrument to the mind, which in its self-aware unicity is set apart from its environment. The self, in narrative psychology too, is in the first place a linguistic construct. However, the autistic’s cyborg voice and sense of self, or lack thereof, originate in a body that interacts with its environment. It is to this embodiment that the next chapter turns.

Chapter 3 **Autistic Embodiment: A Merleau-Pontian Phenomenology**

My autism is the dynamic experience of my relationship to the world, with its many aspects of place, people, climate, and their own interactions. I sometimes pick up on one component; other times I pick up on several components in assimilation, constantly finding how each component relates to the others, so that every situation is valued in the right way, as it is supposed to ideally be, through the challenges of my fragmented sensory experiences. (Mukhopadhyay, *How Can I Talk* 212)

Despite non-verbal autistic autobiographers' seemingly disembodied written voices, those voices are rooted in and tell about autistic bodies. A deconstructive approach to disability, as attempted in the last chapter, as well as the social model of disability studies, in its focus on the discursive and social construction of disability, are in danger of ignoring the embodiment of impairment. Simi Linton notes, "One research domain that is yet to be fully explored from the perspectives of disabled people is the kinaesthetic, sensory and cognitive experiences of people with an array of impairments" (qtd. in Goodley 119). "We are missing," she says, "the constructs and theoretical material needed to articulate the ways in which impairment shapes disabled people's versions of the world" (qtd. in Goodley 119). I will argue that a Merleau-Pontian phenomenology of embodiment offers precisely such constructs and material, and as such can deepen an understanding of autism as it is experienced. Indeed, as Stuart Murray observes, "the way the autistic body functions in space is part and parcel of what autism is and how it works" (*Representing* 9). Moreover, such an approach recognises the embodied nature of all experience, and thus manages to evade the confinement of a disembodied conception of the posthuman that Murray himself appears to fear.

3.1 *A Phenomenology of Difference*

If for Rosemarie Garland-Thompson disability is situated in a "disability/ability system [that] produces subjects by differentiating and marking bodies" (5), Anita Ghai emphasises that in this

process these bodies in effect “get dis(embodied) because of constructions that create a total invisibility of the disabled [individual]” (147). However, this is not only true for disability as it functions in society, but also for disability studies itself, as Paterson and Hughes (598), as well as Braidotti and Roets, argue (162). A deconstructive approach to disability seems to posit the body as an abstract, passive recipient of discursive inscription: the body is reduced to discourse and representation (Williams, qtd. in Vehmas and Mäkelä 45). The name given to the turn to poststructuralism and deconstruction, ‘the linguistic turn,’ already suggests that this move prioritises discourse over matter. Indeed, while poststructuralism set out to deconstruct the binaries that Western culture is ridden with, in its reversal of biological essentialism and scientific positivism, it focused on the ‘othered’ term of the binary, while failing to overcome the original dialectic: gender, for example, may be a discursive and social construct, but it is established on differences in materiality that do genuinely affect how men, women, and those whose bodies fall in between experience their environment. Clearly, however, this does not mean that there is a biological essence to being a woman that can be defined as such (cf. Haraway, “Cyborg” 155): materiality and discourse, nature and culture, are irrevocably interwoven. The social model of disability, too, in prioritising disability as a social construction over impairment as a ‘fact’ of biology, evades both questions of the actual lived experience of impairment as well as the intertwining of nature and culture within the body (Paterson and Hughes 597). Both approaches, then, are in danger, paradoxically, of implicitly conforming to a humanist and medical view of the body as an “inert, physical object, as discrete, palpable and separate from the self” (Hughes and Paterson 329), leaving it to medicine to study this body. A social constructivist approach, despite its intention to regard disability as mere difference rather than as pejoration, then, “work[s] to eliminate the terms under which these differences become worthy of discussion” (Osteen, “Representation” 3). Indeed, it appears to put forward a neo-Cartesian dualism of mind and body, human and world.

A cultural model of disability, that sees disability as questioning “the materiality of the body and the social formulations that are used to interpret bodily and cognitive differences [and] views

biology and culture as impinging on one another” (Goodley 14), is clearly a step in the right direction. Nevertheless, in its emphasis on “the saturation of bodies with cultural meaning” (14), such a model is arguably still in danger of ignoring the actual experience of embodiment, when this meaning is seen as imposed on the body. Instead, I argue, cultural meaning and the body co-constitute each other in its owner’s experience of embodiment. This co-constitution determines what possibilities and impossibilities present themselves to an individual both physically and culturally. In this sense, “a non-reductionist materialist ontology of the body and of impairment,” as Carol Thomas notes, has “to overcome the dualisms that beset our thinking, especially essentialism/constructionism, biology/society, nature/culture” (qtd. in Goodley 116), as it is impossible to define where the influence of one ends and that of the other starts.

Since a humanist, Cartesian dualism of mind and body sees the body as “the unambiguous locus of the self, ... a vessel occupied by and at the disposal of an animating, willful subjectivity” (Sharon 136) and human subjectivity thus as “separate and fundamentally different from the objective world of matter and bodies” (Goodley 68), humanist autobiography does not habitually award the body much attention, except as an appendix to the self whose frailties may have to be overcome. A phenomenological approach, on the contrary, recognises that the body is intimately implicated in the life of the mind. Phenomenology is a movement in philosophy that originated in the work of Edmund Husserl, in the early twentieth century. Following Husserl, phenomenology was expanded by, amongst others, Martin Heidegger, from whose work the phrase ‘being-in-the-world’ derives, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. It was Merleau-Ponty who focused most directly on the experience of human embodiment. His first major work, *Phenomenology of Perception*, appeared in 1945, but continues to influence research fields as diverse as cognitive science and ecology. According to Merleau-Ponty, perception, grounded in the body and its senses, takes in fully-formed wholes, supplying a ‘Gestalt’ to fill in what is not directly perceived: while visual perception only yields one aspect of an object, the gaze supplies the perceiver’s awareness of the object with the aspects, both visual and material, that are missing from this initial perception (11). A book perceived

from the side is thus already taken as having five other aspects to it, as well as a certain weight and a distinct tactile character. Moreover, objects have a motor signification: depending on their use, they invite, or 'afford,' certain actions and discourage others. A book in a bookcase invites an avid reader to take it from the shelf, open it, and start reading. However, in another context, a book may invite other actions: if one is looking for something to prop up a projector, it suddenly invites to be used as such. Meaning, then, is both found and created, by the body.

Perception, Merleau-Ponty notes, "is not a science of the world ...; it is the background against which all acts stand out and is thus presupposed by them" (xxiv). Thus, human beings perceive their environment not by regarding it from a distance, as an exercise in synthesis of sensory input (16), but by being fundamentally engaged both with and in it in an 'intentional' relation that takes this environment as its object of consciousness: "all consciousness is consciousness of something" (xxx). 'Intentionality,' here, then, denotes that awareness is always directed at something. Conversely, the mind is not a distinct entity that controls the body and responds autonomously to the world, but is always embodied and oriented through the body towards its environment. This environment is both "natural" and "constructed" (195) ('natureculture'). Merleau-Ponty notes that "[i]t is impossible to superimpose upon man both a primary layer of behaviors that could be called 'natural' and a constructed cultural or spiritual world [because] [a]lready the mere presence of a living being transforms the physical world, ... and gives to 'stimuli' a sense that they did not have" (195). The environment structures itself around the human being on the basis of his perceptions and the meaning he attaches to these perceptions, a process which is, usually, immediate and indivisible. The human being reaches out to the contents of his environment through a proprioceptive body schema that provides an unreflective awareness of the situational position of the body, as well as the skills, flexible and adaptable, it has incorporated through time (cf. 102). In taking up tools and accessories, the body schema expands through practice and habit to incorporate these items, ensuring a smooth, pre-reflective co-operation.

Because phenomenology regards scientific knowledge as an unwarranted abstraction of the

fullness of human experience, it always starts from a first-person perspective. Phenomenology, following Husserl, then, is concerned with the *Leib*, the living, feeling and sensing body, instead of the *Körper* that is the material body as object (Carman 209), although an experience of *Leib* clearly depends on the material *Körper*. With regard to impairment, one could say that it is the *Körper* that is impaired, as relative to a norm or ideal set by society and medicine, and that it is this notion of impairment that 'disables' the disabled: the *Leib*, on the other hand, is the individual's manner of being-in-the-world which by virtue of this 'impairment' gains an idiosyncratic style. A "sociology of impairment" (Paterson and Hughes 598) is therefore most certainly possible, as social practices and discourses influence how the impaired person experiences her world and her impairment. The term 'impairment' itself is, clearly, a social construct. True enough, if the body is always simply the body in its world, as shaped by the body's capacities, then it is impossible to arrive at the corporeal 'essence' of impairment, i.e. at a biological reality of disability that does not come accompanied by judgments and a history of diagnosis and social myth. However, it *is* possible to pay attention to the disabled's 'style' of being-in-the-world, as afforded by the unique constitution of her body and its senses. Impairment, then, is a distinct manner of engaging with the world, a prism through which the world is experienced. It is not merely a performance in response to demands made by society, through diagnosis and myth; it is also an intimate 'production' directed by the body's idiosyncrasies.

One could argue that despite its best intentions, disability studies has focused its attention on the *Körper* as object of social and discursive disadvantage and ignored the *Leib*. Thus, as of yet, first-person perspectives are relatively absent from disability studies. Indeed, while disability autobiographies may have been influential in claiming recognition for the personhood and humanity of disabled people, "impairment talk" has been regarded with suspicion within disability studies because, in its focus on individual experience, it appears to place out of view the disabling effects of the societal environment and thus distracts attention from the politics of disability rights (Goodley 28, 56). Lennard Davis, for example, notes that in "narrativizing an impairment, one tends to sentimentalize it and link it to the bourgeois sensibility of individualism" (4). While there may indeed

be grounds for such a critique of many autism narratives, especially in as much as they present a narrative of overcoming and conform to social expectations regarding the 'person,' as discussed in the previous chapter, again, the actual content of these texts is overlooked. Phenomenology, however, recognises "the body as *the* place where self and society interact" (Goodley 56). Disability autobiography, when considered an exercise in phenomenological description of the disabled body, provides a position from which to regard the co-implication of impairment, disability and subjectivity, or *Leib* and *Körper*.

However, phenomenology itself has also to a great extent overlooked disability and illness as phenomena worthy of attention in themselves. In striving to produce adequate descriptions of experiences through a first-person perspective, it hopes to arrive at universally valid "essences" of experiences, Husserl's "the things themselves" (Merleau-Ponty xx). In its focus on achieving 'universally valid' descriptions of the essences of experiences, however, differences between the experiences of different people have arguably been ignored in favour of their similarities. The subject of phenomenology, then, is likewise in danger of being stripped of its differences and thus turning into a normative subject whose properties remain unquestioned: in name sexless, classless, raceless and undefined as to ability or disability, or sexual orientation, if no effort is made to mitigate the effect of a normative conception of the experiencing 'human,' this subject is in fact male, middle class, white, heterosexual and able-bodied. Indeed, although Merleau-Ponty concedes that "[m]an is a historical idea, not a natural species" (174), he also rather dubiously claims that "man would be different from what he is, *and would thus no longer be a man*, if he were missing a single one of the relational systems that he actually possesses" (173, emphasis added).

While disability and illness traditionally have a place in phenomenology, it is merely as a foil to come to an understanding of such 'normal' experience: throughout *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty offers descriptions of the experiences of individuals with certain impairments as abnormal cases that serve to illuminate typical human experience. In fact, because the body, when fully functioning, 'disappears' in people's everyday encounters with the world, not making itself

known through pain or dysfunction, it is necessary to regard instances where the body's functioning breaks down in order to recognise the manner in which it functions inconspicuously and unobtrusively in healthy and nondisabled people's experience (Diedrich 212). However, such practice again makes use of disability as an other to the norm, while leaving the concept of such a norm unquestioned.

I would like to argue that the co-implication of mind, body and environment¹⁴ mean that there is no norm, because all terms of the triad subtly influence the experiences that this co-implication results in, thus making generalisations difficult if not uncalled for. 'The human' does not exist. Neither do universal essences of experience exist, despite society's and language's reliance on a certain commensurability between the experiences of its members. If sex, class, sexuality and race influence how the body and the world are experienced, then so, obviously, does impairment, in all its shapes. Indeed, Shildrick and Price argue, "our strong contention is that disability affects every one of us whatever our personal corporeal form, because our mode of embodiment is one – if not the major – organising principle by which we make sense of the world" (2). What is needed, then, is a phenomenology of difference, instead of a phenomenology of sameness. Posthumanism, Levi Bryant argues, despite its postanthropocentric tendencies, "is not the rejection or eradication of human perspectives on the world, but is a *pluralization* of perspectives. [It complicates] our ability to speak univocally and universally about something called the human. It recognizes that there are a variety of different phenomenologies of human experience" (n.p.). Cary Wolfe, too, states that posthumanism "requires us to attend to that thing called 'human' with greater specificity, greater attention to its embodiment, embeddedness and materiality, and how these in turn shape and are shaped by consciousness, mind, and so on" (120). A critical new materialism, of which more in the next chapter, Diana Coole and Samantha Frost argue, "calls for a detailed phenomenology of diverse

¹⁴ As noted, environment includes both the material world and the opportunities for action it 'affords' the body as well as the social and cultural world and its norms and ideas which shape the manner in which the person interacts with his surroundings.

lives as they are actually lived” (27).

Recent decades have certainly seen a proliferation of phenomenologies of experiences such as pain, disease and mental illness, although most often within areas of study other than disability studies. If phenomenologies of impairment lag slightly behind, that may once again suggest that as of yet disability is not considered a common experience, unlike, for example, pain. However, disability, too, deserves attention as a manner of experiencing one’s body and the world that is indeed ‘different,’ but is a style of embodiment in and of itself that surmounts its commonplace usage as the other in a binary of normalcy and abnormalcy. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty himself states that “[i]llness [or disability TP] is a complete form of existence” (110). The problem with phenomenology’s traditional treatment of disability, then, is not so much its content as the purpose it serves. This being the case, Merleau-Ponty’s ideas still have explanatory potential for the study of autism. A preliminary phenomenology of autism, drawing on Merleau-Ponty, was attempted by Anna Thiemann and Annette Kern-Stähler in an article published in the German *REAL: Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature*. However, a more systematic phenomenological analysis of diverse experiences of autism is required. The following delivers one such analysis, as suited to the purposes of this thesis.

3.2 A Phenomenology of Autism

Autism is both, but not only, a social construct that either disables (e.g. in a refusal to enable seemingly non-verbal autistics to learn language) or enables people diagnosed with the condition (e.g. in recent celebrations of the usefulness of autistic abilities to the information economy), as well as a cultural and discursive construct that is propagated in fiction and non-fiction, film and media. These constructions certainly impact on how the autistic experiences her world and the opportunities offered by her environment. What in Western society is deemed abnormal behaviour that needs to be corrected may in other societies be the norm: a refusal to make eye contact is in many Asian societies a sign of respect, instead of disrespect. However, autism is first of all a certain

way of being-in-the-world that is directed by the body and its idiosyncrasies. I take issue with a view on disability that states that “without the *prior* existence of language, such ‘psychological’ things as ‘intellectual (dis)abilities,’ ‘syndromes’ ... can, quite literally, not sensibly be talked of” (Goodley and Rapley, qtd. in Vehmas and Mäkelä 44). Instead, despite the blurry boundaries of the spectrum, autism is a ‘natural kind:’ it existed as a style of embodiment long before it was established as a medical diagnosis. Despite the prevalence of the notion that ‘we are all a little autistic,’ autism does not entail merely a quantitatively different experience, determined by one’s position on or just outside the autism spectrum; it is also a qualitatively different experience of the body, the mind and the world. With Braidotti and Roets, I ask: “can we return impaired bodies to their material roots[?]” (161). That is: can we conceive of the disabled body as a material entity that determines how the disabled experiences her world?

When it comes to a phenomenology of autism, the temptation may at first be to attempt to arrive at a universal ‘essence’ of autistic experience. However, the character of autism as a spectrum condition, encompassing a whole range of experiences, makes it impossible to achieve anything like this, even if one ignores the argument I just made with regard to the unwarrantedness of generalisations in general. The following, then, is not a phenomenology of “The Autistic Experience®,” as Amanda Baggs disparagingly calls it (“Clouds” n.p.). Nevertheless, an engagement with the self-descriptive texts of autistic people may bring out aspects of autistic experience that are underdeveloped in medical and social constructivist discussions of the condition, as well as in the facile conjunction of autism and the technological posthuman that was discussed in Chapter 1. Whereas medical expertise mainly focuses on the aspects of autistic behaviour that are most obvious to an outside observer, i.e. the so-called triad of impairments which encompasses deficits in social interaction and language acquisition, as well as a limited imagination as demonstrated in repetitive behaviours and obsessive interests, many autobiographical texts by autistic people emphasise entirely different aspects of their experience, while offering new explanations for the behaviours that are marked as characteristically autistic. Although autism research has in the

previous decade acknowledged that sensory integration and ‘executive function’¹⁵ difficulties deserve attention, a bias against texts written by non-verbal autistic people has until now occluded the insights into the condition that these texts offer. Disregard for these insights, moreover, leads to the continuation of therapeutic practices that may not be particularly helpful to an inestimable number of (non-verbal) autistic persons, and disrespect for therapeutic innovations that possibly are, among which one could perhaps count Facilitated Communication, to which I will return below.

With Merleau-Ponty, I would argue that phenomenological description reveals a disability’s (highly individual) “concrete essence,” i.e. the “structure ... that expresses both its generality and its particularity” in disability as a lived experience (127). A Merleau-Pontian phenomenology of autism would “correctly [read] phenomena, in grasping their sense, that is in treating them as modalities and variations of the subject’s total being” (110) and thus recognise autism as disability as a “distinctive way of articulating the world” (173). One could therefore re-write Merleau-Ponty’s view on ‘the world’ as follows: “Seeking the essence of [autism] is not to seek what it is as an idea, after having reduced it to a theme of discourse; rather, it is to seek what it in fact is for [autistics], prior to every thematization” (xxix). In the following paragraphs, I will offer an attempt to arrive at a description and understanding of non-verbal autism as a lived experience. I will focus mainly on Tito Mukhopadhyay’s autobiographical texts, but will also point to similarities between his accounts and those of Ido Kedar, Carly Fleischmann, and Naoki Higashida. Although Merleau-Ponty never wrote on autism, the case study that forms his main source for insights in and examples of (ab)normal perception in *Phenomenology of Perception*, the case of a certain Schneider, appears to show a degree of overlay with autism.¹⁶ I will thus be able to use some of Merleau-Ponty’s comments on

¹⁵ Executive function proposes that autistic people have difficulties planning and performing action sequences.

¹⁶ This Schneider was a war veteran who had suffered brain damage. He was examined by psychologists Adhemar Gelb and Professor Kurt Goldstein in 1915 and was found to be a perfect example of their ideas on the influence of brain damage on perception and reasoning. However, this perfect accordance led to scepticism amongst Gelb and Goldstein’s colleagues and it is now received knowledge that their enthusiasm led them to “fantastical embellishments” (Goldenberg 282). A contemporary psychologist wrote that Schneider “seemed more like the platonic idea of a brain-injured patient than a patient himself” (qtd. in Goldenberg 282). In light of this, Merleau-Ponty’s extensive theoretical use of Schneider’s case emphasises his disinterest in disability as a lived experience as opposed to disability as a theoretical construct to illuminate

this case for clarification. Moreover, while it is certainly possible to contrast autistic experience to non-autistic experience and while this is to some extent necessary in order to describe autism in a language that is not tailored to autistic experience, this analysis does not enlist autism as a foil to illuminate 'normal experience.' Instead, the texts discussed here create a space within communal language, which in some cases proves to be a truly literary space, to describe experiences that are anything but communal. I will return to the issue of (literary) language in the final chapter. Finally, it has to be emphasised that the actual work of phenomenological description takes place in the autobiographies, whereas this chapter can only attempt an analysis of these descriptions from the viewpoint of Merleau-Ponty's ideas on perception. While all aspects of Tito Mukhopadhyay's manner of relating to the world are intimately interrelated, this section will investigate them in the following order, explaining each of these terms in its turn: perception, body schema, intentionality, horizon, and memory.

A. *Perception*

Mukhopadhyay's way of perceiving the world is in no way ordinary. First of all, he deals with 'pathological' synaesthesia. Merleau-Ponty notes that synaesthesia is an inextricable aspect of ordinary perception, as no sense perception comes unaccompanied by others (238). Mukhopadhyay, however, sees sounds as colours spreading around him (*How Can I Talk* 4-5, 200) and tastes voices (110). Merleau-Ponty's explanation of such synesthetic experiences is relevant here: "When I say that I see a sound, I mean that I echo the vibration of the sound with my entire sensory being, and in particular with that sector of myself that is capable of seeing colors" (243). Mukhopadhyay associates his experience of colour with his emotional responses: "Sometimes the emotional aspect of my surroundings takes the foreground, making me see everything in one particular color" (*How Can I Talk* 203).

Secondly, Mukhopadhyay's senses are very much selective: he is only able to pay full

non-disabled experience. Nevertheless, Merleau-Ponty's philosophical ideas hold up despite the spurious nature of Schneider's case.

attention to one sense at a time (*How Can I Talk* 6, 112). This makes eye contact actually uncondusive to his participation in communication. Naoki Higashida, too, says that when he avoids making eye contact, he is actually “trying to listen ... with all of [my] sense organs,” while his functional sense of sight “sort of zones out” (43, 44). These selective senses bring their own possibilities for relief from stress: Mukhopadhyay stops himself from seeing things that make him anxious by screaming, often without conscious intention (*How Can I Talk* 7). At other moments, he “imagined to hear a constant hum that kept him occupied whenever he felt like switching off” (*Mind Tree* 49).¹⁷ In such moments of distress, Mukhopadhyay in a sense “coincide[s] absolutely with an impression or with a quality” (Merleau-Ponty 13), whereas this normally does not happen in perception because the impression or quality is always perceived as pertaining to a specific object. Often, autistic people ‘stim,’ meaning that they self-stimulate by creating auditory, visual or motion sensations. Carly Fleischmann notes: “Flapping and humming and rocking does not calm me down it helps me cope with stuff around me” (Fleischmann and Fleischmann 375). Medical experts, she says, “have the definition of stimming wrong. Stims are when you make or create output to block sensory input or over load” (376), “[i]t's a way 2 shut down all my other senses and just focus on one” (376).

Mukhopadhyay’s senses, moreover, are extremely sensitive. His “selective vision,” he writes, means that “[t]hings that calmed my senses were easier to see, while things that stressed my vision were not easy to look at” (*How Can I Talk* 13). Carly Fleischmann explains that “[w]hen I was young I couldnt stare directly at things. I was looked out of the corner of my eyes” (Fleischmann and Fleischmann 376). Mukhopadhyay's sense of touch, too, is oversensitive and raises a “tactile defense” against any new experiences of touch (*How Can I Talk* 71). His main difficulty in learning to write, he notes, was that holding a new object “was a real pain ... My senses were strained by practicing holding the pencil, resulting in discomfort, the kind you feel when the hair of your legs are stroked in the opposite direction of their growth” (159). He prefers long-sleeved shirts because

¹⁷ Mukhopadhyay writes the first part of his first autobiography in the third person.

“[t]he skin of my arms never felt comfortable ... exposed, as they are more sensitive” (82).

Fleischmann notes that “[s]ticking a brush through my hair felt like someone was ripping my hair out strand by strand” (Fleischmann and Fleischmann 361) and that she “hated the feeling of taking off my clothes and the feeling of putting on cold clothes” (361-2). Nigashida believes that it is the despair autistics feel that “has nowhere to go and fills up our entire bodies, making our senses more and more confused” (86).

Because of his selective and oversensitive senses, Mukhopadhyay needs to become familiar with a situation before “the real image or picture [of the situation] starts forming” (*How Can I Talk* 115). Until his vision has received enough exposure, over several occasions, an object “remains a symbol, like a sound, smell, color, taste, or some combination of two or more senses” (115) and thus does not take immediate shape for him as a ‘Gestalt.’ His manner of perceiving, Mukhopadhyay notes, is “tangential” rather than direct (203). This also means that he is often unable to consistently focus on the input that will help him comprehend his environment. Being in a room in which “[t]he intensity of the energy ... was very strong,” he feels “like a small raft floating in the midst of the energy. The energy bounced across the room ... Every corner demanded my attention ... Voices competed with voices. The colors of the clothes and dresses worn by people competed with each other ... What do I hear and where do I look?” (195-6). Such moments present a “sensory battle ... taking place within [his] nervous system” (6). It may be said that the sensory qualities surrounding him are fighting to become figures delineated by his gaze or his hearing against a background (cf. Merleau-Ponty 4). Fleischmann, too, observes how “[w]ith more scents to smell, more overwhelming visual input coming in from the coffee shop, and more audio conversation from people talking at other tables in the room, I find myself only hearing the odd word the person in front of me has said” (Fleischmann and Fleischmann 362).

Whereas for most human beings “the unity of the world, prior to being posited by knowledge through an explicit act of identification, is lived as already accomplished or as already there” (Merleau-Ponty xxxi), unsurprisingly, to Mukhopadhyay, the world seems to fall apart in

pieces so much that he has to consciously “combine them into a complete picture of the real environment” (*How Can I Talk* 54). *The Mind Tree* includes a poem that brings out the anxiety Mukhopadhyay’s fragmented sensory awareness causes him:

The fragmented world needed unification.

Fragmented world of fear and pieces,

Beyond ‘our’ understanding and reaches,

Broken into bits and parts,

With the cause of our escaping hearts! (88)

While the world appears less scattered to Mukhopadhyay in the familiarity of his own home, a new environment will cause him great anxiety, as “[h]e could not find any association between things that changed places” (*Mind Tree* 9). This requires him to consciously label every aspect of a new environment anew: when passing through a specific door for the first time, he is first distracted by its colour, which calls into memory all objects in the same colour he has previously come across¹⁸; he then notices the levers and remembers everything he knows about their functions; and finally, focusing his attention on the entire rectangular object, he answers his own question as to why it is in this place: “It has allowed me to come inside that room, and can be opened or closed. And what else can that be, other than a door” (*How Can I Talk* 95).¹⁹

Things, then, do not have a distinct “physiognomy” (Merleau-Ponty 134) for Mukhopadhyay: they do not appear as a fully-formed ‘Gestalt.’ Mukhopadhyay’s perceptual experiences present a picture of what perception is like according to science. Science, Merleau-Ponty notes, “introduces sensations, as things, precisely where experience shows there to already be meaningful wholes”

¹⁸ Cf. Merleau-Ponty: “a perceived thing, if it were composed of sensations and memories,” as it appears to be for Mukhopadhyay, “could only be determined through the contribution of memories, it would thus have nothing in itself that could limit the invasion of memories” (22). This, Merleau-Ponty claims, is not how ordinary perception takes place.

¹⁹ Granted, seeing as Mukhopadhyay did enter the room through the doorway, one could say his body did grasp the motor signification of the doorway previous to his consciously labelling the door as such and thus recognised the action that the doorway afforded. His sensory awareness, however, does have to move through a linguistic process in order to arrive at a sense of the door as a distinct object. He recognises the levers as wholes, but purely because he has been educated to recognise particular levers and apparently has been able to generalise this knowledge to all levers.

(11), but in Mukhopadhyay's experience such wholes do not show themselves until he synthesises their sensory and memorised characteristics into an "[object]...that [is] cleansed of all equivocation" (11). Moreover, because of his 'overassociative,' synesthetic sense perceptions, it is true that for Mukhopadhyay "true, actual, and explicit perception is gradually distinguished from phantasm through a work of critique" (Merleau-Ponty 12). With attention, the yellow colour of the door takes its place as a figure against a background: his gaze "glances over [the contour or the patch of colour] or dominates them" (14) and to pay attention in these instances is indeed "not merely to further clarify some pre-existing givens; rather, it is to realize in them a new articulation by taking them as *figures*" (32). Moreover, he comes to his conclusion by using information he has memorised. What Mukhopadhyay's description of determining the appropriate label for the yellow, rectangular object through which he entered the room reveals, is that for him, as for Schneider, "[l]anguage clearly intervenes in each phase of the recognition by providing possible significations for what is actually seen" (132-3).

B. *Body Schema*

Not only does the world appear fragmented to Mukhopadhyay, so does his own body. As a young boy, "[h]e felt that his body was scattered and it was difficult to collect it together. He saw himself as a hand or as a leg and would turn around to assemble the parts to the whole" (*Mind Tree* 28). New environments make it even harder for him "to find his body" (28): "Only if he ran fast or flapped his hands he was able to find his presence," he notes (28). Nigashida, referring to the title of his book, *The Reason I Jump*, writes: "When I'm jumping, I can feel my body parts really well, ... and that makes me feel so, so good" (76). Before Mukhopadhyay spent extensive time practising to be aware of his body, he was unable to locate pain or a point where he was touched (*How Can I Talk* 209-10). Whereas a human being usually "has no need to look for his hands or his fingers," then, for Mukhopadhyay they actually *are* "objects to be found in objective space" (Merleau-Ponty 108): in order to 'find his body' he has to resort to visual input or to kinaesthetic sensations (cf. Merleau-

Ponty on Schneider 112), or consciously direct his attention (cf. Merleau-Ponty 31). Nigashida, too, says “I have no clear sensation of where my arms and legs are attached” (83).

Mukhopadhyay, then, lacks a fully functioning proprioceptive body schema. Nigashida notes that “we [autistics] never really feel that our bodies are our own” (68). This has consequences for their skill body schema, as implicitly having one’s body “as a system of current positions” is the condition for having it “as an open system of an infinity of equivalent positions in different orientations,” e.g. as having it as a system open to the acquisition of new skills (Merleau-Ponty 142). Mukhopadhyay writes, on the contrary, in near-Merleau-Pontian terms, “[a]ny new activity is resisted by the body system” (*How Can I Talk* 113). Although he presumably learned to walk and run without difficulty, Mukhopadhyay cannot acquire basic skills (such as dressing, doing a somersault and cycling) without extensive practice (cf. *Mind Tree* 87). Most often the process of learning involves his mother or helper taking his hands to help them perform their task until Mukhopadhyay feels confident that his hands can do their work by themselves (74).²⁰ Seeing someone else perform a task, then, is not enough to “[sketch] out [the space through which imitation moves] in the structure of [his] body,” as Merleau-Ponty describes the process of imitation (143). Instead of moving through a space of imitation that aligns the body of the imitator with the body of the original performer, imitation for Mukhopadhyay really does require “a ‘space of representation’ founded upon an act of thought” (143) and therefore upon a process of the intellect, such as when he manages to imitate his instructor’s simple hand movements because they are performed in a repeated order (*How Can I Talk* 62). “[I]mitating movement,” Higashida observes, “is difficult for people with autism” (57). After his first steps in acquiring a skill that makes more strenuous demands on his fine or gross motor skills, and thus requires his carer to take his hands and perform the task with him, it is still important, notes Mukhopadhyay, that someone places their hand on the body part that is required to perform the task (72). This helping hand “does the work as the ‘relating’ ability [of body and mind] develops slowly through practice” (*Mind Tree* 48): a sense of physical

²⁰ Cf. Merleau-Ponty: “[habit] is a question of a knowledge in our hands” (45)

pressure, supposedly, helps Mukhopadhyay to find his body and use it in the way required. “On our own,” writes Higashida, “we simply don't know how to get things done” (69).

His problem with acquiring skills, Mukhopadhyay explicitly notes, is “‘how’ to do it and not what to do,” as he knows very well what is expected from him (*Mind Tree* 61). Like for Schneider, while “instructions have for him an *intellectual signification*, they do not have a *motor signification*” (Merleau-Ponty 113, emphasis in original). When learning a task, Mukhopadhyay needs to “plan” the actions required meticulously (*How Can I Talk* 43) until his body, in effect, has “[caught]’ and ‘[understood]’ the movement” (Merleau-Ponty 144). Unfortunately, once Mukhopadhyay has mastered a task he is often unable to transfer this ability to similar tasks or to other environments, as his capacity to perform a task is limited to the situation in which he learned it (*Mind Tree* 37). His skills, then, are inflexible. His learning process corresponds to a mechanistic theory of skill acquisition by which every step has to be thought through in order to set the body in motion, rather than to what Merleau-Ponty calls a systematic process by which the task is taken up immediately by the body, perfecting its performance through repetition (cf. 143).

C. *Intentionality*

In phenomenology, the concept of intentionality refers to the fact that consciousness is never consciousness as such, empty of content, but is always directed at something. This directedness can be intellectual, but bodily consciousness, and Merleau-Ponty maintains that a fully disembodied consciousness is never possible, is also always directed at something in its environment, in what one could call projects: e.g. the relatively passive project of sitting on a chair, but also the active projects of dressing oneself or making a meal. Mukhopadhyay desperately wants to master such active skills. His very first task, however, is to “learn ‘how to try’” (*How Can I Talk* 61). After his speech therapist teaches him to imitate some structured hand movements he concludes: “So this is what they called trying was ... the wanting to do an activity by using your body” (62). Once he has mastered a certain skill, however, Mukhopadhyay often has difficulty setting his body in motion at the required

moment. If he decides he wants to write but the writing equipment is not in his field of vision, he cannot conceive how to reach his goal. Only when his mother helps him, is he able to map out the required actions (126-7). For Mukhopadhyay, then, as for Schneider, “the field of the actual is limited to what is encountered in real contact” (Merleau-Ponty 112): “the virtual,” consisting of objects and situations which are not present yet within reach, has no place in his immediate existence (111), despite his ambitions for the future. Instead, circumstances have to be just right for him to perform his intentions. He writes: “I wish I could initiate my wishes more than I could initiate my impulses. I wish I could write and communicate in every circumstance” (*How Can I Talk* 81). Higashida reflects: “There are times when I can't do what I want to ... I just can't get it all together, somehow. ... I can't get started as smoothly as you can” (67). Like Mukhopadhyay, he needs to consciously plan his actions: “Here's how I have to go about things: 1. I think about what I'm going to do. 2. I visualize how I'm going to do it. 3. I encourage myself to get going” (67). There are times, however, he observes, “when my body is beyond my control” (68).

Objects that are not familiar to Mukhopadhyay do not invite him to any action: “I was not interested in things I did not know how to use” (*How Can I Talk* 26). Such objects do not carry a potential motor signification for Mukhopadhyay. Once he has learned the function of an object, however, he feels this object calling him to perform the required action whenever he encounters it: “Whenever or wherever I saw staircases, I thought they were meant for me to climb” (36). In fact, his body's pre-personal intentionality is sometimes too insistent for his conscious mind to control. “He would pick up any object that attracted his physical self,” he writes: “Once a table fan had attracted him and he went to touch it. He cut his fingers, of course, but could not caution himself, though he had full knowledge of current, electricity and the dangers involved with it” (*Mind Tree* 78). When he has hurt his mother as his body is overcome with the experience of heat, he writes: “I began to fear my own self. I could not trust myself anymore” (*How Can I Talk* 68). His body in these cases merely responds to impulses of attraction and repulsion, and a need to release frustration.

Carly Fleischmann, too, comments on her difficulties in controlling her body. On the one

hand, her OCD does not allow her to extrapolate skills acquired in one situation to other situations: for a long time, she is only able to type in the presence of two of her therapists (Fleischmann and Fleischmann 124). On the other hand, she cannot stop her body from performing unwanted behaviours (cf. 141). Naoki Higashida notes that he sometimes talks in a weird voice which is “almost impossible to hold ... back – and if I try, it actually hurts, almost as if I’m strangling my own throat” (22). “We don’t even have proper control over our own bodies,” he notes (39): “It’s this impulse kids with autism have to dart off to anything that looks remotely interesting: this is what we have to tackle” (46).

D. *Horizon*

A stable experiential horizon of one’s sensory and intentional world presupposes a stable background formed by the proprioceptive and the skill body schema. Lacking these to a certain extent, Mukhopadhyay has to resort to other measures to order his world. He lives in the “phenomenal field” of sensory impressions (Merleau-Ponty 57) rather than in a stable *Lebenswelt* in which these impressions render objects as immediately delineated in their material dimensions and their uses: as mentioned, in any environment with which he is not intimately familiar, he perceives sensations, rather than things, which he subsequently needs to gather into wholes and label. The world, then, does not immediately speak to Mukhopadhyay in a conventionally meaningful way, inviting him to action. Instead, he creates his own horizon by imbuing objects with meaning in the form of definitions, learned from his mother. His mother’s teachings encourage Mukhopadhyay to leave his dreamlike, phenomenal world where the boundaries between reality, synesthetic experience and imagination are fragile, indeed permeable. He also, however, makes use of stories, of his own creation (cf. *Mind Tree* 30). “All I do,” he says in an interview, “is put a personality on things to make their existence meaningful in my eyes” (Savarese, “More”). The light from a lamp above the table and the air from a fan, both “interacting” with the page on which he is writing, for example, become their own story, which allows him to translate his experience into words: “As my

mind goes beyond the physical definition of light and air, I can easily transfer my thoughts to some other observation, far from physical interpretation. So it is very natural for me to feel that the air from the table fan is trying to blow away some of the intensity of the light from the surface of this page. Although it is not physically happening, it is the story my mind has formed" (*How Can I Talk* 198-9).

Unsurprisingly, Mukhopadhyay's horizon is far from stable. Besides labelling the objects in his direct environment, he consciously maps it out spatially (*Mind Tree* 5). He also attempts to map out situations temporally. He memorises action sequences and concurrent events: "Every experience settled in my mind as an example of a natural phenomenon, which laid down the rules of the world" (*How Can I Talk* 7), "[o]therwise, moments could get out of control, when they became unpredictable and too large for my senses to accumulate all that they involved within their field" (52). Obsessive interests give him a sense of stability: in the first place, he finds a sense of security in his knowledge of these objects' use function; in the second place, these activities often help him to either feel his entire body as a unity (e.g. spinning under a fan) or order his perception of his surroundings (e.g. switching the lights in a room on and off so he can focus on the visual aspects of the room). When deprived of them, his sense of unity disintegrates: "I felt as if my whole existence depended on those staircases" (40-41). In an interview, Mukhopadhyay notes that 'rules,' i.e. expectations of concurrent events, and obsessive interests help autistic people to achieve a sense of security: "Rules are formed by an Autistic person to simplify the ongoing uncertainty which is taking place around him. The uncertainty may lead the Autistic person to lose his identity. ... Rules are somewhat the very proof to an Autistic person that he exists" (Biklen 126). "We feel obliged," says Nigashida, "to do everything we can to protect ourselves against uncertainty" (94).

E. Memory

Clearly, memory comes into play in imbuing one's surroundings with meaning. Mukhopadhyay's factual memory is extremely good (cf. *Mind Tree* 28): he can recall what his mother has taught him

whenever he needs to interpret an environment in which he finds himself. He notes: “I feel [safe] with stored answers from my factual memory because they are based on natural laws” (*How Can I Talk* 204). Carly Fleischmann has a photographic memory, as well as perfect auditory recall, which means that she takes in much of the information available to her in her surroundings without having to focus on it. She stores these memories unprocessed, however. Actual learning happens when at a later moment her mind replays this information (Fleischmann and Fleischmann 322). In this manner, she has acquired quite extensive knowledge. Ido Kedar notes that his short term memory is rather “lousy,” while his memory for details in books and conversation is exceptionally good, “fill[ing] my head up with things it doesn't need” (88).

Language learning in these authors also occurred through factual memory. Mukhopadhyay recalls a time when he expressed himself not through speech but through temper tantrums: “The language was known,” he notes, “but it did not relate to anything” (*Mind Tree* 1). The process of relating words first to images in books, then to actual objects and creatures, he recalls, “took years, and a lot of practice by him and the patience of his mother who kept on asking him questions” (9). Fleischmann learned language through the written word, stored by her photographic memory. Guided by her teachers and therapists, she first started using picture symbols to express her wishes, but simultaneously took in the words printed above them, which then allowed her to successfully work with a computer programme that taught her spelling (Fleischmann and Fleischmann 364-6). Kedar, meanwhile, tried to teach himself reading through an alphabet poster in his bedroom (25).

However, episodic memory, the memory of the episodes of one's life, may be less well-developed in these authors. In *The Mind Tree*, Mukhopadhyay notes a discovery he made as a young boy, when he noticed that he could perceive sights, sounds and smells that in reality belonged to the past: “‘I can see the past,’ thought the boy. He began to recall ... the happenings that had occurred around him and was glad to find out that he could replay the acts over and over again. In fact he could actually ‘feel’ the previous incidents around him. ‘I can time travel,’ concluded the boy” (8). However, he reflects, this merely meant that he had started to lose control over the “images that

formed around him” (8), his daydreams (7): “He got lost in a situation that was unreal or super real” (8). This tendency to perceive illusions as real forms a central concern in those sections in his second autobiographical book where he explains how his memory works. Mukhopadhyay is very much concerned with not misrepresenting the past by not including any memories originating in “an overindulgence, partial indulgence, selective indulgence, or underindulgence of [his] senses” (*How Can I Talk* 204). “When it comes to narrating an episodic memory,” he notes, “I dare to do it only when I am very sure of my experience” (204). Naoki Higashida mentions that his memories “are all scattershot and never connected in the right order” (62). This also means that he sometimes experiences “flashback memories,” when something bad that happened in the past suddenly comes back to him as if it had only just happened, including the emotions originally felt (62). Nevertheless, although memory may work differently for these autistic autobiographers than for non-autistic people, there seems no reason to suppose that they thoroughly lack episodic and autobiographical memory, as autism experts often do. Neither are these autistics “bound” to the present, which according to Merleau-Ponty is typical of people with a motor intentionality disorder (137). They are both capable of “survey[ing]” their past (137) and of relating themselves to their future.

F. Discussion

It can be concluded that Mukhopadhyay’s autistic manner of experiencing the world includes synesthetic, selective and oversensitive senses, a dysfunctional proprioceptive body schema that impairs a relatively effortless expansion of his skill body schema, and a lack of motor- or operative intentionality accompanying conscious act intentionality, i.e. the ability to perform the tasks one wishes to perform. All of these significantly affect Mukhopadhyay’s capacity to project a stable but flexible horizon around him in which objects have immediate signification and he automatically performs culturally appropriate behaviour. Instead, he lives in a world of phenomena settling into loose wholes yet to be defined, whose sensory qualities compete for his attention, distracting him from the task at hand. Lacking the requisite flexible skills, his motor intentionality goes out into his

environment in a flow of attraction and repulsion, instead of in a vector of projects that would allow Mukhopadhyay to respond spontaneously to his environment while keeping his goal in mind.

Instead, his rules and stories help him form a horizon around him that is closer to the horizons, i.e. the *Lebenswelt* of 'natureculture' that others in his culture form, and thus to communicate with "the world, the body, and others, to be with them rather than beside them" (Merleau-Ponty 99) in the manner favoured by society.

Despite the lack of implicit and immediate organisation of his environment that characterises Mukhopadhyay's experience of the world, as well as the importance of storytelling to Mukhopadhyay's ordering of his world, however, I wish to argue against Matthew K. Belmonte's idea that autism presents first and foremost a lack of *narrative* organisation (168). As mentioned in Chapter 2, Belmonte argues that the autistic autobiographer is "more-than-human," because she manages to distil narrative unity from experiential material that is highly fragmented while lacking the ability to do so easily (173). Belmonte expands his notion of narrative to include bodily types of organisation, such as proprioception (172). However, such a view still hinges on language rather than embodiment itself: autism does not present primarily a lack in narrative organisation, but a lack in bodily organisation, that only in the second place impairs the autistic's ability to step into the domain of language and shared meanings. The self, it appears from the above investigation, is in the first instance *not* a linguistic construct. Instead, this narrative construct centres on a proprioceptive experience of the body in its environment. The self springs forth as an extension of this perceiving body, which is at one with its world but at the same time, ideally, ensured of its pivotal position within this world that structures itself around him: "if one perceives with his body, then the body is a natural myself" (213). For autistic people, the preceding analysis suggests, this proprioception is likely to be relatively unstable. They will, then, indeed have difficulties coming to a stable experience of the self, and are always in danger of momentarily losing a sense of identity, as Mukhopadhyay attests (Biklen 126).

Finally, a Merleau-Pontian understanding of non-verbal autistic people's embodiment could

offer an answer to the question of why Facilitated Communication appears to work. While Carly Fleischmann's carers, aware of her OCD and of the controversy around Facilitated Communication, have taken care not to allow her to become dependent on the touch of her carers in typing (Fleischmann and Fleischmann 124), Ido Kedar's mother notes in her foreword to his book that providing him "with very light support under his arm ... seemed to unstick him somehow" (28). His fine motor problems mean that she has to place her hand over his in order to help him guide his hand, which, however, she is convinced he does independently (30-1). It would appear, then, that the touch of a trusted carer, or even simply their physical presence, helps the autistic person to 'find' her body and set it in motion: just as Mukhopadhyay needs his mother's help to acquire the habit of pushing down his feet on the pedals in order to learn how to cycle, some non-verbal autistic people need help to acquire the dexterity to point to letters or to type.

3.3 *A Phenomenology of the Posthuman*

This chapter proposed that an engagement with Merleau-Pontian phenomenology could offer the theoretical material needed to come to adequate descriptions and analyses of how disabled, in this case autistic, people experience their bodies and their environments. However, instead of defying Cartesianism, the account above could lead to a reinvigoration of such a viewpoint, because it suggests a distance between the autistic's body and mind: the autistic has no 'control' over her body and needs to consciously 'master' it. As Drew Leder notes in *The Absent Body*, the "dys-appearance" of the body in illness and disability, causing it to appear prominently in its owner's experience precisely because of its dysfunction, "rend[s] [the experienced self] in two as one's own corporeality exhibits a foreign will" and thus serves "as one phenomenological basis for dualist metaphysics" (87). Ido Kedar, for example, sees himself as an "intact mind and soul" in a dysfunctioning body: "My body isn't bad. It's just disconnected" (111, 85). Mukhopadhyay experiences himself "as two different selves": "the thinking self – which was filled with learnings and feelings" and "the acting self that behaved and had no self-control" (*Mind Tree* 77-8). In a dualist metaphysics, as in the

dominant cultural idea, the self is, ideally, “a totalitarian state,” in whom “order and coherence are achieved by means of personal control and mastery” (Goodley 73). Despite Merleau-Ponty's intention to overcome Cartesianism, then, his phenomenology of perception arguably still proposes an ideal of a mind in control of its body.

Still, the autistic's consciousness, despite its lack of directing power over its body, is very much dependent on its body and is shaped by it and its interactions with the world. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty did emphatically *not* intend his phenomenology to be read through a dualist humanism. Phenomenology, instead, “strives to describe the presubjective, primordial processes that *yield* and *sustain* reflective consciousness” (Coole 101, emphasis added). Merleau-Ponty notes: “we must no longer conceive of [consciousness] as a constituting consciousness and as a pure being-for-itself, but rather as a perceptual consciousness, as the subject of a behavior, as being in the world of existence” (367) and thus constantly in flux. In defiance of Cartesianism, Merleau-Ponty says: “there is no ‘inner man,’ man is in and toward the world, and it is in the world that he knows himself” (367). “I experience my body as the power for certain behaviors and for a certain world, and I am only given to myself as a certain hold upon the world,” he concludes (370). Thus, all human beings are cyborgs, “enfleshed and extended,” “embodied and embedded” (Braidotti, *Posthuman* 90, 51): embodiment is the experience of being-in-the-world as a mind-body that takes up tools as prostheses where needed, and is embedded in the social relations and cultural structures that form its environment.²¹

The autistic's hold upon the world, as communally lived by non-autistic others, however, is particularly tenuous, making her self-identity, too, a tenuous construct. However, I contend, neither do non-autistics simply have a self as a stable essence: their sense of self, too, is highly contingent.

²¹ What is more, unlike those either overly anxious or overly enthusiastic about humanity's current and future ‘posthumanisations’ seem to suggest, embodiment does not disappear when one moves in a virtual environment, but is rather expanded. In the first place, such technology always has to be set in motion by actual physical input, thus ensuring the primacy of the physical body, e.g. in using the trackpad of a laptop. In the second place, however, a virtual environment is merely a new environment which the human learns to navigate. (cf. Hansen).

The experience of control and mastery over one's self and one's environment, and the subsequent experience of order, is a privileged one. As a manner of being-in-the-world, it is, at least partly, unattainable for those who are in any respect 'other' to the norm, and can be thrown off balance at any moment by a major or minor change to one's constitution or situation. Margrit Shildrick writes: "The implication is not that the corporeality of people with disabilities is uniquely unstable or vulnerable, but rather that the condition signals overtly what is more easily repressed in those whose embodiment satisfies normative standards" (n.p.). Merleau-Ponty himself notes that moments of disorientation give "not merely the intellectual experience of disorder, but also the living experience of vertigo and nausea, which is the consciousness of, and the horror caused by, our contingency" (265). As such, a phenomenology of autism as just attempted consolidates a posthumanist view that claims that "conscious agency has never been 'in control.' The very illusion of control bespeaks a fundamental ignorance about the nature of the emergent processes through which consciousness ... [is] constituted" (Hayles 288).

Autism, I conclude, is not merely a discursive and social construct. Rather, it is a name for a spectrum of differences that hugely influence the way autistic people, whether diagnosed or not, project a world around them in which to move with greater or lesser difficulty. However, while the autistic may have difficulty gaining access to the structured reality that seems to be lived by the people around her, her autism presents her with a reality of her own. She is not a disembodied brain in a vat: the cyborgian 'autistic-being-in-the-world' that Murray envisions does not transcend the body. Even more than emphasising that the mind is always embodied and needs this embodiment to 'become' mind, making a distinction between the two untenable, autism reveals something of the flow of chaotic materiality underneath the world of order. Whereas a Merleau-Pontian perspective on autism arguably still tends to hinge on such concepts as 'control' and 'mastery,' and in the autistic's lack thereof on the difficulties her autism presents her with, a new materialist approach to the body and to autism offers a truly posthumanist perspective that leaves room for the positive aspects of autism, as will be examined in the next chapter.

Chapter 4 Autistic Relationality: A Deleuzo-Guattarian Perspective

If in a Merleau-Pontian phenomenology of embodiment bodies “structure or stylize their perceptual milieus, where they discover, organize and respond to patterns that are corporeally significant” (Coole and Frost 20), the autistic body, as we have seen, to a greater or lesser extent fails to enter the world of meaningful wholes that invite or discourage action. This world is also the world of shared material and discursive, and therefore of social and linguistic, human meaning, to which the autistic does not have immediate access. Her perceptual milieu does not order itself pre-reflectively: instead, order has to be imposed in a conscious effort. However, as I argued, any sense of order is contingent and therefore a privileged experience, which humanism and phenomenology nonetheless elevate to their norm. Mukhopadhyay's descriptions of perception, on the other hand, reveal that underneath this order, lies resilient matter that has a life of its own. This materiality is accessible to a perception that is not centred in a pre-defined subject that imposes order on his perceptions, and thus ‘discovers’ meaning in his environment that is always ‘human’ meaning, but instead engages in the relations and fluctuations of matter. These create singular moments or events in which there are no stable wholes, but only constant and ever-changing interactions which, indeed, make it eminently impossible to speak of things as having an independent identity.

In *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, which will inform this chapter, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari define matter as “the unformed, unorganized, nonstratified, or destratified body and all its flows” (49), which will be further explained below. For new materialism, too, materiality “is always something more than ‘mere’ matter: an excess, force, vitality, relationality, or difference that renders matter active, self-creative, productive, unpredictable,” as Coole and Frost assert (9). Where phenomenology promotes a notion of “organisation” in a “corporeal unity and integration,” a Deleuzo-Guattarian, new materialist perspective on disability instead opens a view on the body as a “dis-organ-isation that will open up a myriad unpredictable and temporary lines of connection and encounter” (Shildrick and Price 13), or a ‘Body without

Organs,' of which more below. Interaction, subjectivity, and language may be considered anew from such a perspective, offering new avenues for the posthumanist potential of autistic subjectivity.

4.1 *New Materialism, Posthumanism and Disability*

New materialism is an emerging body of theory that in large part takes up Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's challenge not to take their theories as given but to put them to work in all manner of directions. In its focus on "pressing ethical and political concerns that accompany the scientific and technological advances predicated on new scientific models of matter" (Coole and Frost 5), Deleuzo-Guattarian new materialism could very well be said to be the body of theory that is most amenable to critical posthumanism. Critical posthumanism wishes to move beyond a humanism that posits 'Man' as a unified, independent, rational standard for humanity, and an anthropocentrism that puts this Man in central position amongst the other inhabitants of the earth. Likewise, new materialism criticises the illusory character of this control and instead focuses on the agential character of matter and the material interdependency of all beings, whether organic or inorganic, animate or inanimate. Like the phenomenological approach that I suggested in the previous chapter as a move away from the dogmas of social and discursive constructivism toward a genuine appreciation of the materiality of embodiment, new materialism nevertheless recognises that a distinction between 'pure' materiality and social construction is impossible: there is no such things as pure nature, at most there can be said to be a "nature-culture continuum" (Braidotti, *Posthuman* 62). However, this is not, as it is in phenomenology, in the first place because matter always already carries significance for the human body as it discovers order and meaning in its environment, but because matter continually enters into relationships that change its being, in which distinctions between organism and non-organism, human, machine and animal, become irrelevant: "It is not that there is no distinction to be made between one corporeal element and the next, between one human body and others, or ... between human and animal, or human and machine, but rather that becoming is a process of ever-new and always provisional points of coming together" (Shildrick and Price 14).

Matter, then, is resilient: it has a life of its own outside the meaning human beings attach to the objects formed of it. Whereas human practices of assigning meaning start from the assumption that there are such things as stable objects, Deleuzo-Guattarian materialism has it that all matter is constantly undergoing becoming and therefore never simply *is*. This is the plane, not of separate bodies, individualities, personalities and concepts, “a person, subject, thing, or substance” (Deleuze and Guattari, *Plateaus* 287), but that of particulars entering into assemblage with each other, such as microbes and the human body. Some of these assemblages or becomings are more distinct than others and thus form ‘individuations’ that can be recognised in their particularity and as such give rise to the illusion of material and conceptual stability. However, according to Deleuze and Guattari there are no unchanging universals: there are only ever singular instances of individuation. These are what Deleuze and Guattari call ‘haecceities.’ They state: “It is the entire assemblage in its individuated aggregate that is a haecceity; ... It is the wolf itself, and the horse, and the child, that cease to be subjects to become events, in assemblages that are inseparable from an hour, a season, an atmosphere, an air, a life” (Deleuze and Guattari, *Plateaus* 289). ‘A life,’ concludes Rajchman, “is always singular. It is made up of ‘singularities’ that are ‘preindividual’ or ‘subindividual,’ which are then linked to others in a plan or ‘plane’ that is impersonal, like the ‘it’ in ‘it’s raining’ which is the condition of a singularity of a life” (84). Becomings, haecceities, ‘a life,’ then, are ‘destratified’ or ‘deterritorialised’: they resist capture on each of the three ‘strata’ that humans institute in order to manage the apparent chaotic nature of matter. These strata are the organism, subjectification and ‘signifiante’ (Deleuze and Guattari, *Plateaus* 176), of which the following sections will come to speak further.

While a Deleuzo-Guattarian perspective, despite not offering an explicit theory of the human body, with its concepts of assemblages, haecceities, strata and the Body without Organs, discussed below, nevertheless opens up possibilities to theorise the body anew (Hughes 1), bodily disability is mostly absent as an explicit theme both in Deleuze and Guattari's work and in Deleuze studies, as demonstrated by the conspicuous absence of the term in a recent anthology of essays on Deleuze

and the body (Buchanan and Guillaume). Neither has disability been taken up to any great extent as a subject of interest by new materialism, as the few anthologies of new materialism that have yet appeared show (Coole and Frost, Dolphijn and van der Tuin, despite mention by Braidotti of disability as an axis of identity in the latter publication). This offers a chance for disability studies to step in and embrace the potential of Deleuze and Guattari and new materialism for disability theory. As of yet, this has only happened incidentally, albeit a special issue of the *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies* was devoted to the theme, and chapters proposing Deleuzo-Guattarian theory's usefulness have appeared in a recent anthology on disability and social theory (cf. Braidotti and Roets, Overboe "Theory"). Margrit Shildrick, who has written on the subject, and Janet Price conclude that among the few disability theorists who are particularly concerned with the body as such, many have misread Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the Body without Organs as "reject[ing] not only the materiality of the body, but also the specificity of particular forms of embodiment" (13).

With regard to autism, an exception has to be made: Deleuze and Guattari themselves discuss autism in its relation to their conception of schizophrenia as the 'limit condition' of capitalism in *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. However, their characterisation of the autistic as "the autistic rag – separated from the real and cut off from life" (Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus* 19-20) is based on the common stereotypes that I wish to refute.²² There are only a handful of exceptions to the general lack of scholarship on autism's possible conjunction with Deleuzian theory. Ralph James Savarese writes on autism, literature and neurology. His work can be seen as aligned with Deleuze and Guattari. They feature more prominently in the work of Erin Manning and her collaborative work with Brian Massumi.²³ Manning's work envisions autism as an

²² In a recent article in *Deleuze Studies*, Hans A. Skott-Myhre and Christina Taylor propose to regard autism as capitalism's new limit condition (42). It falls outside of the scope and focus of this thesis to discuss Deleuze and Guattari's ideas on schizophrenia and capitalism, and Skott-Myhre and Taylor's response to those ideas. Nevertheless, in their article, Skott-Myhre and Taylor do discuss Amanda Baggs's *In My Language* (although they erroneously render her name as Mary Baggs), and claim, as I do, that autism has a subversive potential in that it "signals the immanent possibility of an impersonal subject extending finally beyond the bounded shell of humanity into an encounter with life itself" (47). This chapter can be regarded as a broader exploration of that claim.

²³ Massumi translated *A Thousand Plateaus* into English.

entrance to new conceptions of movement and relationality (cf. *More*). *Thought in the Act: Passages in the Ecology of Experience*, co-written with Massumi, explores autistic perception as a distinct manner of 'thinking in the act' that is amenable to process philosophy.²⁴ Their work, however, has as of yet not found definite entrance to the disability studies universe. The potential of Deleuzo-Guattarian and new materialist thought for critical autism studies, which I hope to reveal to be extensive, remains therefore largely untapped. In what follows, I do not pretend to be exhaustive, but nevertheless offer initial suggestions for a fruitful interaction between the two areas of theory.

4.2 *Autistic Relationality*

In many cases, as we saw in the previous chapter, the autistic has difficulty perceiving the boundaries of her own body and experiencing herself as the centre of her perceptions. For many autistics, Erin Manning writes, "there is no clear separation between the world and the body. World and body are startlingly, painfully, exquisitely, processually one" (*More* 154): the autistic's body is not experienced primarily as a whole amongst wholes from which experience originates, but on the level of a materiality where such unified wholes are, rather, abstractions of an inherent relationality. Rather than being a stable unity, the body is constantly changing in these interactions with everything it encounters, and is thus always in the process of becoming. The autistic's body, I therefore propose, is not experienced as 'organised' into an 'organism': it is not "a centralised, hierarchised, self-directed body" (Protevi 200), but rather approaches an unorganised, multirelational "Body without Organs" (BwO) (Deleuze and Guattari, *Plateaus* 166).

The organism, Deleuze and Guattari argue, "is not at all the body, the BwO; rather, it is a stratum of the BwO, ... a phenomenon of accumulation, coagulation, and sedimentation that, in order to extract useful labor from the BwO, imposes upon it forms, functions, bonds, dominant and hierarchized organizations" (176). The Body without Organs, on the other hand, "[opens] the body

²⁴ Process philosophers are those philosophers who are interested in processes rather than stable identities. As such, they are philosophers of Deleuzo-Guattarian becoming. Major figures who can be read in this tradition, many of whom influenced Deleuze in his thinking, are Leibniz, Spinoza, Nietzsche, Henri Bergson, Gilbert Simondon and Alfred Whitehead.

to connections that presuppose an entire assemblage, circuits, conjunctions, levels and thresholds, passages and distributions of intensities” (177). To speak with Haraway: while ‘people,’ perceived as such, are not at all very “fluid, being both material and opaque,” cyborgs are, in a sense, “ether, quintessence” (“Cyborg” 153), made up of fluctuating ‘intensities’ rather than seemingly dense, stable matter. The autistic’s body, as a surface on which such intensities pass without immediate incorporation within a bodily organisation, like the Body without Organs, “swings between two poles, the surfaces of stratification into which it is recoiled, on which it submits to the judgment, and the plane of consistency in which it unfurls and opens to experimentation” (Deleuze and Guattari, *Plateaus* 176). Like Haraway’s cyborg, the BwO, however, ultimately “has no truck with ... seductions to organic wholeness through a final appropriation of all the powers of the parts into a higher unity” (Haraway, “Cyborg” 150).

The ‘plane of consistency,’ however, is not one universal location or dimension. Rather, consistency is what happens when through a process of intensification the particulars of an assemblage merge: “heterogeneities that were formerly content to coexist or succeed one another become bound up with one another,” without, however, losing their heterogeneity (Deleuze and Guattari, *Plateaus* 364, 363). The plane of consistency is therefore always a particular plane of consistency that has to be constructed in this process, as is the Body without Organs, which is also not a destination one can be confident to reach. All one can do, Deleuze and Guattari insist, is create favourable circumstances that could possibly facilitate this construction (178). They strongly urge their readers to try, on occasion, to disrupt the ‘plane of organisation’ by finding “lines of flight” and thus potential “movements of deterritorialization” (178). The two poles, of the strata on the one hand and of such processes of destratification on the other, each have their advantages and disadvantages, one providing a sense of order within apparent chaos, the other providing the means of destabilising said order, which limits free movement. The body of the (non-verbal) autistic, however, appears to tip over to the pole of destratification.

The body, then, is not in the first place an organism, an ‘organised,’ well-defined whole,

recognised as such by culture and science. Rather, it is a Body without Organs that is continually engaged in processes of individuation. This allows for a very different relationship of the body to the world than what is deemed normal. In autistic perception, it appears, things are not yet clearly delineated, but appear in their sensory qualities, sometimes perceived synesthetically, and their relations amongst each other. In Erin Manning's words, the autistic may see and hear "a smile-breath greening" instead of a person in a field ("Enthusiasm" 106): the autistic perceives individuations in process, instead of wholes that appear to be always already constituted. "I don't have many buffers," writes Amanda Baggs. "To me the world comes in such great detail that it is hard for me to put the easy interpretations on it that most people use; the way they divide it into pieces and make it abstract is foreign to me" (qtd. in Manning, *More* 153). "Where neurotypical perception tends to quickly parse the object from the field of resonance, autistic perception tends to dwell in the shaping," Erin Manning concludes (*More* 177). This 'field of resonance' provides patterns of sense impressions, rather than distinct objects (Manning and Massumi 18). Ido Kedar describes his experience as follows: "I am attracted to visually harmonious sights like water in the sun or lights blinking. These light my senses. I have to stop and look, it's so artistically awesome ... I see woven patterns of shapes and colors. No one who sees this isn't amazed at the lovely details of the lights" (44). Savarese quotes Donna Williams, another famous autistic autobiographer, who notes: "At every level, the sensing creature is different from the interpretative one ... [The latter] filter[s] out information by tuning in only to what is considers self-significant; [the former] tunes into pattern, having the feel of this wash over ..., mapping it out without the discrimination of interpretation" (qtd. in Savarese "Poetry," n.p.).

This dwelling in the shaping, as noted, allows the autistic to perceive relations within these compounds of sensations. Mukhopadhyay, for example, describes how before he learned verbal language, he could perceive a different kind of communication between the sensory elements in his environment, reflected in the mirror in his room. He writes: "I believed that the mirror wanted to tell me a story ... I believed that if you cared enough to listen, you could hear the sky and the earth

speaking to each other in the language of blue and brown" (*How Can I Talk* 1); "[a] language of white and red. The white of the walls and the red of the painted cement floor ... Stories with sounds of blue, white, red, or brown" (2). He writes: "I could see the night jasmines wet with morning dew, lit with fresh sunshine, trying to form a story in white with their jasmine-petal smell. I would see the story spread in the air" (22). Manning and Massumi note that in this "trying to form a story," the jasmine flower appears not as "a discrete object," but "as a function of this striving" (4). In his stims, Mukhopadhyay interacts with these strivings and stories: "Stories of the wall, stories covered with smells coming from the kitchen, and stories of nothing ... began to play in-and-out games with the fingers of my flapping hands" (*How Can I Talk* 23).

Because the world and the body do not appear as ordered to the autistic, she neither has a firm sense of an ordered self that controls and masters this body in its world. Instead, the autistic's body is very much the expressive vehicle of 'a life.' This life is impersonal, in the sense that it precedes, both in time and in ontology, a persona, a circumscribed individuality. The consciousness that accompanies this life is distinct from the consciousness that derives from a sense of self. Deleuze describes it as "a pure stream of a-subjective consciousness, a pre-reflective impersonal consciousness, a qualitative duration of consciousness without a self" (*Pure Immanence: Essays on a Life* 25, qtd. in Overboe, "Affirming" 247). Nevertheless, despite its impersonality, a life is not *the* life, and therefore has a quality of its own. Deleuze writes:

a singular life might do without any individuality, without any other concomitant that individualises it. For example, very small children all resemble one another and have hardly any individuality, but they have singularities: a smile, a gesture, a funny face – not subjective qualities. Small children, through all their sufferings and weakness, are infused with an immanent life that is pure and even bliss. (*Pure Immanence: Essays on a Life* 30, qtd. in Overboe, "Affirming" 244).

While I do not wish to say that any autistic lacks individuality in this sense per se, she does seem to dwell nearer to the realm of individuations and haecceities that precedes stratification on the three

strata. In this realm, she can 'do without' a personality. Ido Kedar, for example, describes how his 'stims' are "like a drug" that allow him to "lose [him]self" in "a sensory world of big soaring feelings and wow, it's awesome" (42). He writes: "I love the ocean ... I watch the waves and I am transported into a sense of nature" (110). Naoki Higashida, too, experiences a becoming in nature that relegates his conscious self to the background: "Nature is always there at hand to wrap us up, gently: glowing, swaying, bubbling, rustling ... I feel as if I'm being swallowed up into it, and in that moment I get the sensation that my body is now a speck ..., a speck that is melting into nature herself. The sensation is so amazing that I forget that I'm a human being" (123-4).

In these interactions with her environment, moreover, the autistic is wont to experience everything in her surroundings as equally alive. In an interview with Ralph Savarese, Mukhopadhyay proposes the idea of pan-psychism: all matter, he believes, is a "manifestation of the greater Being," is made up of the same atoms, and, most importantly, possesses a mind ("More," n.p.). "Can anyone prove that have the right kind of instrument to detect it, it does not mean that [this mind] cannot exist" (n.p.). Autistic Daina Kruminis notes that to her, "[t]here was little difference in meaning between the children next to the lake that I was playing with and the turtle sitting on the log. It seems that when most people think of something being alive they really mean, human" (qtd. in Manning and Massumi 3). "I attend to everything the same way with no discrimination, so that the caw of the crow in the tree is as clear and important to me as the voice of the person I'm walking with," Kruminis notes (4). Similarly, Mukhopadhyay notes that when told a news story of coalminers trapped in a mine, his empathy goes out not exclusively to the miners but to their dying flashlights with whose eyes he would watch "the utter hopelessness" of the miners, as well as to the trapped air around them (qtd. in Savarese, "More" n.p.). To these autistics, everything in their environment has a subjectivity that expresses itself in relation to its environment and is equally worthy of attention, which severely undermines the common stereotype of autistics' incapacity for empathy.

The autistic, then, could be said to live in a world of singular individuations, instead of habitual appraisings of objects and organisms. This world is not predicated on a stable self that

directs the body, but on a “becoming-with” in which “provisional and asymmetric hybridities” make this self irrelevant: “it is not the agency of a self embodied in a complete and integrated organic unity that is the driving force, but the flows of energy that bring together part objects ... to create surprising new assemblages” (Shildrick and Price 13, 19). The autistic moves in a world not of beings, where I can “mark my body ‘here’ from your body ‘over there’” (15), but a world of becomings, where “the ‘here’ of place [turns] onto itself in an intensive orienting of the associated milieu of relation” (Manning, “Enthusiasm” 93). Tito Mukhopadhyay describes something resembling a becoming-wind when he notes:

When I see or think about the wind, I am the wind ... I see flying leaves around me, as I hear a powerful wuthering noise, which can invite those dark pirate clouds to fly and fight each other for territorial expansion across the sky. Sometimes I am the wind blowing across the desert of the Sahara, gathering bowls of dust in order to build a huge crescent-shaped dune in the heart of nowhere for the stars of night to see. Sometimes I am the wind in the mountains, where the snow leopards roam in search of the blue mountain sheep. How do I perceive that? I do not need to perceive that because *I am that when I think of that*. Alive and all-powerful. (*How Can I Talk* 118)

It is not so much, however, that the autistic is unique in her capacity to forego the familiarity of the self or the organisation of the body and to approach a plane of consistency with aspects of her environment. Rather, because the self and this bodily organisation are not as self-evident to the autistic, her body tends to be ‘tipped’ more towards the side of destratification that is the province of these experiences.

In this world of becomings and destratification, finally, desire is not that which makes one wish to possess something one does not have, because such possession presupposes a self who desires as an incomplete whole that awaits its completion. According to Deleuze and Guattari, desire does not signify lack, but is productive. It engages in experimentation with ‘lines of flight’ leading away from stratification to a plane of consistency (Deleuze and Guattari, *Plateaus* 170). As this

vocabulary suggests, desire is the province of the Body without Organs, which itself opens onto such planes (170). It is “a process of production without reference to any exterior agency, whether it be a lack that hollows it out or a pleasure that fills it” (170-1). Desire, then, “is not an element of any ... subject; it is not pre-given; it is neither possessed nor controlled; and nor does it flow directly from one individual to another. Instead it comes into being through what Deleuze and Guattari call ‘desiring machines,’ assemblages that cannot be said to exist outside of their linkages and interconnections,” as Margrit Shildrick explains (n.p.). Significantly, in such a view, the autistic is not disabled, because she does not lack anything, but arguably moves instead in a “field of immanence” where desire is both positive and productive (Deleuze and Guattari, *Plateaus* 173).

In the end, claims Braidotti, the body's ‘flesh’ “states with every single breath that the life in you is not marked by any master signifier and ... most certainly does not bear your name” (*Posthuman* 138). However, while the experience of this impersonal life that opens itself to its surroundings may indeed be blissful, it can also be disturbing to be confronted with the immanence of a life that does not allow itself to be controlled or to be pre-empted definitively in a circumscribed identity, as was noted in the last chapter. That the autistic’s body appears to facilitate the autistic’s being swept up in destratification, entering becomings, reaching a plane of consistency, does not mean that this is where the autistic per definition moves or wishes to move. Nevertheless, James Overboe, who has cerebral palsy, suggests that rather than striving to endure or overcome the body’s incontrollability, one can also attempt to find joy in its vitality (246). Ido Kedar, who often denounces his ‘stim world’ as a “self-soothing hallucinatory escape from reality” (117), nevertheless appreciates the fact that autism has given him “a way of seeing life” (119). He writes: “Nature isn’t neat or orderly ... I fit in so well. I am so at home in the messy beauty of nature. I relate to it. I see the system is messy, but it works and it is WOW. I see my illness this way. It’s not pretty. It is messy ... But it is part of nature in the same way” (119).

4.3 *Becoming-animal: The Autistic as Postanthropocentric Posthuman*

In a Deleuzo-Guattarian vocabulary, 'becoming' in the first place refers to the inherent instability of all matter: everything constantly proceeds to differ from itself, "continually mov[ing] through states without heading towards any particular outcome" (Stagoll 26). However, as noted above, this becoming is never a becoming of a clearly delineated thing that somehow floats through space unaffected. Rather, becoming is always a 'becoming-with,' "a unique confluence of forces," "a constantly changing assemblage" (26, 27), which like Haraway's vision of the cyborg takes "pleasure in the confusion of boundaries" ("Cyborg" 150): "my cyborg myth," she notes, "is about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities" (154), as is becoming.²⁵ In a well-known example, Deleuze and Guattari note that the wasp and the orchid, which depends on the wasp to fertilise it, come into alliance or symbiosis, creating a "block of becoming" or assemblage which produces an affinity between the two that changes both (*Plateaus* 263).

Similarly, Deleuze and Guattari state that they "believe in the existence of very special becomings-animal traversing human beings and sweeping them away, affecting the animal no less than the human" (*Plateaus* 261). This becoming is not "a resemblance, an imitation, or, at the limit, an identification," nor does it "occur in the imagination" (262). Such (imaginary) becomings would approach the animal as either the "individuated" animal, "'my' cat, 'my' dog," to whom its owner ascribes a personality, or the animal as a genus or archetype (265). Instead, becoming-animal sees the human entering into an alliance with the animal as a pack, a band, a herd, or a population that knows "affects and powers, involutions that grip every animal in a becoming" (266): where the first two approaches to the animal perceive of the animal as a stable entity, i.e. supplied with an individuality or fixed characteristics, the third affirms that the animal is part of a pack that is constantly affected by that with which it comes into contact, changing its being and function in every

²⁵ In *When Species Meet*, Haraway explains her anger at Deleuze and Guattari's concept of becoming-animal. She notes that in *A Thousand Plateaus*, she finds "little but the two writers' scorn at everything that is mundane and ordinary and the profound absence of curiosity about or respect for and with actual animals" (27). Indeed, Amanda Baggs's quote later in this section about her relationship with her cat may reveal Haraway's 'becoming with' rather than Deleuze and Guattari's becoming-animal.

moment. Thus, becoming-animal does not represent the politics of the family (i.e. the animal as the pet, which moreover receives a special status in psychoanalysis) or the State (i.e. the animal as well-defined but subordinate creature), but rather “takes the form of a Temptation, and of *monsters* aroused in the imagination ... because it is accompanied ... by a rupture with the central institutions” (272-3, emphasis added). Becoming-animal, then, is one of the ways in which the normative boundaries between animal and human are crossed, in a coming-together that is more productive than a realisation of shared vulnerability. Instead of a relationship to the animal that ‘puts it in its place,’ either in the family or in systems of classification, becoming-animal is rather the province of an encounter with the animal as anomaly. In order to reach such an encounter, it is necessary for the human to, temporarily, lose something of his identity that seems to place him so clearly above the animal.

That is why it seems possible to discern such becomings-animal in some autistic people’s relationships with animals. Indeed, in his study of posthumanism, Cary Wolfe locates disability studies’ posthumanist potential in analyses of the coming-together of disabled people and animals and takes the autistic as his example. Autistic (verbal) authors such as Temple Grandin and Dawn Prince-Hughes have profiled themselves as ‘animal whisperers’ who thanks to their condition are enabled to have a special empathy for and interaction with animals. Grandin describes how her visual style of thought enables her to envision the sensory input that either calms or disturbs cattle (168). She writes: “When I put myself in a cow’s place, I really have to be that cow and not a person in a cow costume” (168). Although she calls her method one of visualisation and imagination (178, 168) and in that sense performs a phenomenological exercise in imaginatively inhabiting another creature’s body, she also notes that she often experiences the same affects as the cattle with which she is engaged: “[w]hen I see somebody squeeze an animal too hard in a squeeze chute, it makes me hurt all over” (178). All this may in some manner denote a becoming-cow of Grandin. Prince-Hughes notes the similarities between herself and the gorillas she comes to love (94), but describes a reciprocal affinity between herself and these creatures that in its intensity approaches a gorilla-

becoming. As an erotic dancer, she performs in animal skins and body paint, performing tribal dances and animal movements (73). She notes: “I often *lost myself* in my secret animal universe and forgot that customers came to see me as a dancer and not as an endangered species” (73, emphasis added). Her imitation of animals, then, at certain moments, allows her to move away from a sense of identity into something approaching a becoming-animal.

Amanda Baggs seems to approach something like becoming-cat in the following quote, despite a use of language that would sooner suggest a familial relationship to ‘her’ cat. Nevertheless, she talks of ‘a cat,’ and indeed has a number of cats for pets, who somehow form the pack with whom she here enters into relationship. She notes:

I love the way a cat loves. When she takes every blank place my memory won’t fill in. And she sits at the center. In a big bold cattish way. And fills in all the blankness with layers and layers of catness. And somehow curls up in my arms, curls around my whole mind, at the same time, keeping everything in. *Her love replaces blankness with catness* and terror with love and sobbing with purring and I love her for all of it. And loving her back makes a circle.

(“Cats” n.p., emphasis added)

Despite these instances of the autistic in some manner becoming the animal, however, to Deleuze and Guattari this would not suggest that humans and animals in these becomings hark back to a primordial past in which they were one. Such a unity presupposes sameness, i.e. identity, and would thus, after the fact, merely allow for the identification of the human with the animal instead of a veritable becoming which undoes identity. Indeed, this is where Haraway’s cyborg again comes in: the cyborg, she argues, “skips the step of original unity, of identification with nature” (“Cyborg” 151). It is, instead, “completely without innocence” (151).

4.4 *The Language of the Subject*

The autistic’s body, I argued above, could be considered to approach a deterritorialised body, a Body without Organs, that is engaged in processes of assemblage, consistency and therefore

individuation, as are all bodies underneath the order imposed on them in the form of the organism. However, as mentioned, the organism is not the only surface of stratification that binds the BwO. The two others that Deleuze and Guattari discuss are “signifiante” and “subjectification” (*Plateaus* 176). Together they form the “strata” on which human life in capitalist societies is organised (Lorraine 153). It is to the first of these ‘surfaces of stratification’ that language as the language of the ‘majority’ belongs, that determines “[w]hat counts as meaningful speech ..., what makes sense in a given situation” (153), and thus limits the expressiveness of the language that any person can use, including, of course, the autistic autobiographer, since “naming” inevitably entails “exclusion” (Haraway, “Cyborg” 155). Meanwhile, the second surface determines “[w]hat counts as a recognisable subject (to oneself as well as to others)”: it “distribute[s] subjects of enunciation and subjects of the statement – that is, subjects who are speakers, and subjects of what is spoken about” (Lorraine 153). This stratification, then, is not voluntary: it structures any individual’s entry into society’s domain. Deleuze and Guattari enumerate the injunctions implicit in these strata: “You will be organized, you will be an organism, you will articulate your body – otherwise you're just depraved. You will be signifier and signified, interpreter and interpreted – otherwise you're just a deviant. You will be a subject, nailed down as one, a subject of the enunciation recoiled into a subject of the statement – otherwise you're just a tramp” (*Plateaus* 177).

This, then, is “the world of the articulating, self-defining and enclosed subject” (Message 37). This subject, however, is not a natural occurrence, but is called for/forth by the collective. Persons and identities, Rajchman notes following Deleuze, are merely a “‘second nature’” imposed on “a life” consisting of singularities (81): “singularities should not be confused with the personality of the one expressing herself in discourse,” Deleuze notes in *The Logic of Sense* (52). This means that “the individuation of a life is not the same as the individuation of the subject that leads it or serves as its support. It is not the same Plane: in the first case, it is the plane of consistency or of composition of haecceities, which knows only speeds and affects; and in the second case, it is the altogether different plane of forms, substances, and subjects” (Deleuze and Guattari, *Plateaus* 289).

Humanist subjectivity, then, is a construction and a fiction. It is not given, but rather derives from “relations of habit and memory and hence from the ‘conventions’ of a society – ... from the habits of saying ‘I’” (Rajchman 102). It is one of the strata on which the BwO finds itself lodged. Rajchman writes: “identity is violent as such – there is a violence ... in our very constitution as ‘subjects’ or ‘selves’” (103) as this constitution denies all experience that falls outside the boundaries of the humanist subject any value. James Overboe connects this violence to the social constructivist distinction between disability and impairment, which, he says, is “an illusion to solve the problem of what to do with the messiness of our bodies, minds and sensibilities that detract from our being considered worthy of being a person, a citizen, or for that matter being fully human” (“Theory” 114-5). This ‘messiness,’ which Ido Kedar also mentioned, however, is precisely the sphere of the BwO. A more ‘nomadic,’ as opposed to sedentary, conception and experience of subjectivity arises when one dares to strive for “desubjectification” (Deleuze and Guattari, *Plateaus* 177) instead of ‘personification,’ which entails letting go of fixed ideas about the self and dissolving its boundaries. Instead, the self is in constant movement as it comes into contact with different forces, which therefore depends on chance rather than on any unfolding principle or essence of the self (Stagoll 27): the self is, rather, “the ‘non-unitary,’ split, in-process, knotted, rhizomatic, transitional, nomadic subject” (Braidotti, *Metamorphoses* 5). Rather than having any content of its own, Deleuze and Guattari say, “the self is only a threshold, a door, a becoming” (*Plateaus* 275). Haraway's cyborg, too, is a nomadic subject: “the cyborg as an embodied and socially embedded human subject ... is not a unitary subject position. The cyborg is rather a multi-layered, complex and internally differentiated subject” (“Cyborg” 17).

In order to be perceived as a subject, the autistic, as we saw in Chapter 2, has to conform to the notion of (humanist) subjectivity that reigns in the society to which she marginally belongs. This means that the subjectivity she presents in her writing is not the ‘a-subjective’ consciousness she may have experienced in her interactions with her environment, but a subjectivity that, like all normative subjectivities, was called forward by the norms of a society that demands that one says

'I.' Moreover, in order to be heard, she has to learn and use the language of the 'majority,' the group who functions as the norm in any given society (Deleuze and Guattari, *Plateaus* 320). Although she is said to have found *her* voice, the voice she has actually found is a 'majoritarian' voice which has to be used in circumscribed ways in order to count as communication. Baggs appears to agree with Judith Butler, who writes: "Subjection [i.e. subjectification TP] consists precisely in this fundamental dependency upon a discourse we never chose but that, paradoxically, initiates and sustains our agency" (qtd. In Overboe, "Affirming" 241). Language, Baggs notes in an essay in *Disability Studies Quarterly*, "was built mostly by non-autistic people ... and my biggest frustration is this: the most important things about the way I perceive and interact with the world around me can only be expressed in terms [of lack]. The absence of speech. The absence of language. The absence of thought. The absence of movement. The absence of comprehension. The absence of feeling. The absence of perception" ("Clouds" n.p.). "[W]e have few words," she says, "to describe the ways in which so many autistic people's minds interact with the world" (n.p.).

Rather than things that demand to be sorted into categories, Baggs perceives "things fitting together in certain ways" ("Clouds" n.p.), in what one could call haecceities: "Colors. Sounds. Textures. Flavors. Smells. Shapes. Tones. These are short words, but the meaning of them is long, involved and complex," she notes (n.p.). Her video *In My Language* shows her touching, smelling, licking, and listening to objects around her. Whereas autism experts would classify her behaviour as self-stimulation, she herself claims that what she calls her native language "is about being in a constant conversation with every aspects of my environment, reacting physically to all parts of my surroundings" (*Language* 3.40-9). She states: "Far from being purposeless, the way that I move is an ongoing response to what is around me. Ironically, the way that I move when responding to everything around me is described as 'being in a world of my own,' whereas if I interact with a much more limited set of responses and only react to a much more limited part of my surroundings people claim that I am 'opening up to true interaction with the world'" (*Language* 4.00-26). Conventional language, however, derives from categories instead of sensory patterns, she concludes, making her

not so much “a speaker of a foreign language,” but “a speaker with a foreign brain” (“Clouds” n.p.). In conclusion, adapting Derrida’s comments on animals, thinking the possibility of a resolute non-verbality in autism, then, “would not be a matter of ‘giving speech back’ to [autistics] but perhaps of acceding to a thinking, however fabulous and chimerical it might be, that thinks the absence of the name and of the word otherwise, and as something other than a privation” (*Animal* 48). Tito Mukhopadhyay writes in a recent poem:

One can turn one's eyes at the tiny shapes
of red and orange or green and escape
the real world – fluid with complicated
relationships of sight and sound and social demands.

New relationships create in that static world
with new language between the mind
and those enhanced red and orange or green.

And who cares what personal language
was exchanged between them? (*Facebook* 23 March 2014)

Chapter 5 Posthuman(ist) Autobiography

If the autistic is posthuman, is her autobiography also posthuman? In Chapter 1, I argued that the image of the autistic as disembodied 'cyborg,' in the popular sense of the word, whose brain is 'wired' differently limits the subversive posthumanist potential of the (non-verbal) autistic as 'monster of the age.' Chapter 2 examined how despite the etymology of the term 'autism,' the autistic was nevertheless traditionally considered to be without a self to narrate. A humanist effort to claim a self and thus personhood and humanity through autobiography is further complicated in those instances where the written self goes unaccompanied by a self put forward in speech, turning the writing non-verbal autistic into a veritable technology-enhanced cyborg with what appears to be a disembodied voice. Chapter 3, however, argued that the autistic's cyborg voice, like Haraway's cyborg herself, is pre-eminently embodied: not only does the autistic's body incorporate writing technologies as prostheses, it also features heavily in the texts thus produced. An engagement with autistic autobiography as phenomenological description gives insights into autistic embodiment, revealing that the body and the self as experienced by the autistic are often not stable and unified entities. Rather, as Chapter 4 explored, a non-normatively functioning body schema and perception provide the autistic with a body and consciousness that, in Deleuzo-Guattarian terms, tips over to the side of disorganisation, designification and desubjectification. This enables the autistic to entertain a truly posthuman and postanthropocentric relation to her environment, as the human as distinct organism and subject, both products of the surfaces of stratification, disappears from view.

As noted, autobiography is intimately implicated in the history of the humanist self and as such is firmly located on the surfaces of stratification. Humanist self-narrative privileges unity over fragmentation and envisions the self as independent and autonomous. It is precisely because autobiography as a genre is so invested in a humanist, normative idea of the human, however, that "it is persistently haunted by its non-, in-, and sub-human other: the monstrous, the animal, the dead, the irrational, the primitive, the mechanical," as Gillian Whitlock notes in a special issue on

posthuman autobiography of *Biography* (vi). The autistic autobiographer is one such a ghost.

As we saw in Chapters 1 and 2, the autistic and the autistic autobiographer stretch the limits of the human by their mere existence. However, unless one truly engages with autistic autobiography, the autistic remains ‘the autistic’: the individual autistic as representative of the category, and thus the stereotypical autistic who is framed in humanist narratives of a lack of social conformity. But it is precisely the autistic who demonstrates that “we never wholly divide up into any ‘pure’ species, races, even genders – that our lives in fact can never be reduced to the ‘individualization’ of any such pure class or type” (Rajchman 81), because there is no pure type of autistic. Indeed, as Murray notes, “[o]ne possibility that always seems to provide unease is that the spectrum of autistic subjectivity might be as wide as the spectrum of non-autistic subjectivity” (*Representing* 3). Autism makes it abundantly clear that any limited concept of the condition has to be set aside if one wishes to truly engage with any autistic individual or any autistic autobiography: it is difference rather than sameness that demands readers’ full attention.

The autistic, as autistic, also has potential to stretch the limits of autobiography. Indeed, while as a genre autobiography demands that “one must respect a norm, one must not cross a line of demarcation, one must not risk impurity, anomaly or *monstrosity*” (Derrida, qtd. in Anderson 9, emphasis added), a genre cannot but create space for transgression also: the text cannot escape invasion from the multiple discourses that mark it (Anderson 9). Neither the text, nor the subject it represents, then, are stable, enclosed entities, as was also noted in Chapter 2. In fact, Paul de Man argues in his influential essay “Autobiography as De-Facement,” it is impossible to decide whether the entity that is the self in autobiography is fiction or non-fiction (921): it is called into being by figurative language that ‘gives a face to’ or personifies the subject in the text (926). This linguistic practice of ‘prosopopeia’ is, then, at the same time a process of “defacement” (930), because it never quite succeeds in overcoming its fictional, metaphorical character and convincing reader and author that the mask it presents is the real thing. Consequently, autobiography is always a literary practice, to a greater or lesser extent, and the humanist self always a fiction. As such,

autobiography's form and language have to be subjected to analysis. In the light of the previous chapters, the question becomes who the (posthuman) subject of autistic autobiography is, and what language she uses.

5.1 *A Sense of Unity*

Poststructuralist theory on the subject and autobiography has made it impossible to take for granted that the 'I' in autobiography is an authentic reflection of an 'I' that precedes this constitution in narrative. The autobiographical subject is a construction: it takes work and it performs work. Self-narration brings the disparate parts of one's being and one's life into a narrative structure that as such establishes a unity in time and character where in reality there are only singular moments. The self of self-narration, then, does not precede this narration. This entails that the self of self-narration is always a specular self: it introduces a distance between an immediate experience of the self and its constitution in language, which makes both this unmediated self unreachable for linguistic self-reflection and the narrated self a copy without original. However, with Merleau-Ponty and others, one has to say that the self that is the self of language, whether in silent reflection or in written autobiography, is predicated on the experience of the body as an entity that pre-reflectively knows its position in space and that has a world around it in which it is engaged. Any sense of unity of the self, then, is facilitated by a sense of unity within one's own body. This 'wholesome' bodily self is, I argue, the stratified body of Deleuze and Guattari that recognises itself as organism amongst organisms, a whole amongst other wholes, and functions accordingly. However, as suggested earlier, 'normative' functioning is always a contingency. A lasting sense of order and unity is never guaranteed: the body can become destratified through a myriad of occurrences, either pleasurable, painful, or both.

The autistic, as we saw, is never automatically assured of 'organisation' in her body. On the one hand, she experiences moments of disorder, or destratification, that may have a beauty and value in themselves, but can also be unpleasant or painful; on the other hand, she strives towards a

sense of identity and thus towards some kind of order, either in her environment, her body, or, importantly, her life story, and therefore finds herself pulled in the direction of stratification, or restratification. Like in the case of trauma, reaching the order and unity that humanist autobiography prescribes is, however, radically complicated. This is the province of what Belmonte calls the “more-than-human”-ness of the autistic autobiographer: her overcoming extreme fragmentation to arrive at a coherent story of the self (173). While subjectification is one of the surfaces of stratification that Deleuze and Guattari appear to want to undo, they admit that this is both a difficult process, as well as something that has to be approached with great caution: “How can we unhook ourselves from the points of subjectification that secure us, nail us down to a dominant reality?” when “in slipping away from signifiacance and subjectification one [at the same time] courts falsehoods, illusion and hallucination and psychic death,” they ask (*Plateaus* 177). Autobiographical writing and story, then, are not only political weapons to claim personhood and humanity, which come with a set of norms to which one has to conform. They are also tools to arrive at a more circumscribed sense of self that is facilitating in its limitedness, an anchor in the chaos. The unity of the self in narrative is an illusion, but one that is difficult and even dangerous to abandon, and indeed, for many people, whether autistic or not, one to consciously strive for.

This goes for many of the autistic autobiographers here examined. Disoriented within their environment, these authors make use of writing to gather themselves into a semblance of coherence that helps them navigate a reality they can share with non-autistic others. Ido Kedar makes a distinction between his “inner world of stims” to which he can escape in times of stress but which he regards as his prison, and “the real world,” where he has to work to remain “present” and to stop himself from taking recourse to his “behaviors” (97). ‘Reality’ is the world where he “can try to make a normal life for [him]self” (97). Physical exercise, playing piano, communicating with others and writing help him to “stay focused”: “It’s good to know I need to write about my feelings to have more self autonomy and self awareness ... now I see that writing heals me,” he notes (97). Writing, moreover, helps Kedar to understand himself and his “symptoms” (41). His texts, then, are products

of the three surfaces of stratification and as such help Kedar 'organise' his body, place the 'correct' signification on his behaviour (albeit incorrect in many autism experts' eyes), and provide him with a subject position to inhabit. For him, writing is part of a psychological healing process where he comes to accept his "illness" and his past spent in silence and frustration (41).

Writing, for Kedar, is an ongoing practice. He does not strive towards the authoritative unity of autobiography, but uses his writing to take stock of the moment. His texts are journal entries, grouped in his book under his age at the time of writing, preceded by a reflection on that particular year as well as the decisions he made in editing. In terms of form, then, it is these short reflections that form the autobiography, as they reflect on the past and frame the story of Kedar's life as developing in a certain direction. The chapters are headed by the overarching theme or topic Kedar discerns in his writings: "Age 12, The Year of Anger and Sorrow;" "Age 13, Starting to Let Go of the Past;" "Age 14, Motivation;" "Age 15, High School, for Bad and Good." The separate entries, headed by a title and the month of writing, form diary entries and reflections on specific topics related to Kedar's autism. He continues this practice in his online weblog.

As noted in the Chapter 3, Tito Mukhopadhyay uses stories and definitions to make sense of the objects in his environment by imbuing them with a meaning that is consciously linguistic rather than pre-consciously motor-sensory, to the latter of which he does not always have immediate access. In the same way, he keeps track of himself by writing a traditional autobiography, in his first book, and by devising shorter, thematic stories, in his second autobiographical book. The first part of *The Mind Tree* reads like a Victorian novel: there is a narrator who writes authoritatively about his character, the 'he' in the story, and who occasionally intersperses his chronological narrative with injunctions to his "dear readers" (32). Mukhopadhyay's use of the third person in describing his past experiences can be interpreted in multiple ways. He may be claiming authority by adopting the narrative voice of a Victorian (semi-)omniscient narrator, to which he was introduced by his mother's reading the English classics to him, or, alternatively, the objective tone of clinical reports. Philip Lejeune suggests that using a third person focalisor in autobiography allows the author to

“[pretend] to speak about himself as someone else might” (27), changing the “autobiographical pact” (“this is me”) into a “phantasmal pact [*pacte fastasmatique*] (“this conveys something about me, but is not me”))” (29). Nevertheless, Mukhopadhyay makes it clear that “the boy,” as he calls his protagonist throughout this section, should be considered to represent a written version of himself: “My story, through the boy of the story” (*Mind Tree* 88). At the same time, Mukhopadhyay may be describing his previous situation, when he did not yet feel like a subject centred somewhere, and thus was not an ‘I,’ but an anonymous, ‘unsubjectified’ boy in whose experience things simply happened. Indeed, at the start of the second part of *The Mind Tree*, Mukhopadhyay notes that “the boy” “definitely reached somewhere,” as opposed to the “nowhere-feeling” he was used to (93, Biklen 142), but still suffers from a “buried past [that] comes as a ghost of painful memories to mock the present moment” (*Mind Tree* 93), leading him to conclude: “[s]o I have to continue my Voice of Silence with my own voice and try my best to bury the past into a self dug grave, so that I can analyse my own self into the exactness of my stand in that place called ‘somewhere’” (93). Describing himself as a character, one could conclude, has helped him construct a subject position for himself. In assuming the first person voice in the remainder of his self-narrative, Mukhopadhyay hopes to come closer to an understanding of his identity in the present (94).

Despite the role that autobiography plays for Mukhopadhyay’s self-awareness, however, he is in the first place concerned with his readers and their expectations regarding a self-reflective story. At a certain point, for example, he remarks: “My readers must be tired of the phrases ‘using the body,’ and ‘feeling the body,’ since I repeatedly use them” (*Mind Tree* 62). There are some narrative quirks, however, that suggest that narrative coherence does not come naturally to Mukhopadhyay. In the first part of *The Mind Tree*, transitions between different episodes are sometimes awkward and causal relations between events obscure, as when he remarks “she [his mother] had her appendix operated and then his endless journey to the various doctors began!” (5-6). Moreover, he needs to consciously keep himself on track when he is drifting off topic. For example, after he has interposed his story of how he learned how to recognise the letters of the

alphabet with an exposition on his fragmented awareness of his own body, he notes: “But as I was continuing with the eventful month of April 1992, the topic should not be interrupted by the weirdness of a mental delusion” (29).

Mukhopadhyay’s second book has a less traditional structure: it appears that in the years between the publication of the two books, he has found a preferred strategy for writing that enables him to ‘feel his identity.’ Unlike in Kedar’s book, Mukhopadhyay’s many short chapters do not read like diary entries, as they do not in the first place reflect on the present, are not accompanied by the date of writing and in their order do not always follow a clear chronology. Instead, the chapters, each centred on a theme that lends it its title, form micro-narratives that on their own or in conjunction with previous and later chapters relate one aspect of Mukhopadhyay’s biography. Like *The Mind Tree, How Can I Talk If My Lips Don’t Move?* is, moreover, interspersed with poetry, a topic to which I will return below. The text opens with an “Author’s Note,” of which the first sentence reads: “There are times in everyone’s life when there is a need to tell a story” (xv), again confirming that (autobiographical) storytelling may be as much part of autistics’ lives as of non-autistics’. Mukhopadhyay emphasises his love for story throughout the text in remarks such as “The story behind an object is far more important to me than the object. That is why a description of a situation becomes more important to me than the situation itself” (xv). It also reveals something of the fictional and literary character of all autobiography: if the description becomes more important than the original situation, to what extent can the description be claimed to be ‘authentic’?

Naoki Higashida, in his turn, neither writes a journal nor a traditional or fragmented autobiography, but responds in short sections to questions he has either received or imagines non-autistic people to have, interspersed with short fictional stories, personal anecdotes and general reflections. His book ends with a story called “I’m right here,” centred on a boy who discovers he has died. Higashida answers the questions that form the titles of the relevant sections in his own voice, offering anecdotes about his own life, but often switches to a first person plural perspective (‘we autistics’). His book does not read so much as an autobiography of his (autistic) self, but as a first

person representation of 'the autistic,' as interpreted and voiced by Nigashida. Nevertheless, he notes that being able to use language has equipped him to "express [his] true self" by voicing his feelings and thoughts (19).

Carly Fleischmann appears as the central character in Arthur Fleischmann's memoir of his family's struggle to navigate the waters of autism and its enveloping discourses, first by gaining access to the resources that promise to lift some of the burdens non-verbal autism places both on his daughter and on their family, and then by helping Carly in her quest to make herself be heard. In the final chapter, whose spelling and grammar were edited for clarity, unlike most of the quotes by her hand that appear throughout the book, Carly Fleischmann provides her reader with a short autobiography and explains her view on her autism and its challenges. She jokes that she does not believe that her reader has made it through all her father's "boring writing" (Fleischmann and Fleischmann 359) and ends her chapter by saying: "Thank you for reading my dad's book about my life, and I promise my book, written by me, will come out soon so you don't have to read my dad's chapters. Just joking. Or am I?" (370). Her writing expresses her humour and gregariousness, and thus has enabled Fleischmann to claim a personality that she was unable to claim through her behaviour. Like in the case of Nigashida, however, it is not entirely clear whether Fleischmann values autobiographical writing in itself as a means to gain a sense of self. Rather, writing enables her to spread her view on autism and to come into contact with thousands of people via her Facebook page, which she regularly updates with new thoughts.

Finally, Amanda Baggs produced her video *In My Language* and maintains a weblog in which she documents her life and responds to news and opinions within the autism and disability communities, called *Ballastexistenz*, a title which for her reflects common opinion on the (cognitively) disabled ("About"). She appears to write her blog mainly in an attempt to counter established opinion on autism and various other disabilities and illnesses she claims to have. Significantly, in the introductory page to her blog, she does not present her reader with a short autobiography of her life, but with a list of the "tools" she uses as an ill and disabled person

("About").

It is Mukhopadhyay's and Kedar's texts that show most clearly a striving for unity within story and self. Nevertheless, Mukhopadhyay's *How Can I Talk If My Lips Don't Move?*, as well as Ido Kedar's, Naoki Higashida's and Amanda Baggs's texts, are each examples of a strategy of "local coherence" rather than 'global' coherence (Osteen, "Narrating" 272): while traditional autobiography has privileged global coherence that ensures that the story of the self is one developing story, thematically unified, with beginning, middle, and end, local coherence may be a more genuine reflection of autistic experience and creativity, producing many shorter narratives that do not necessarily combine into a seamless whole. Indeed, apart from the first part of Mukhopadhyay's *The Mind Tree*, none of the other texts follow traditional genre rules for autobiography, despite taking the self as subject. If global coherence is the organic unity that Haraway's cyborg opposes (cf. "Cyborg" 150), local coherence may instead represent "cyborg unities [that] are monstrous and illegitimate" (154) and that defy the quest for a single "origin story" (150).

Indeed, where the texts appear to be the products of a process of bricolage, so do these authors' identities. 'Subjectification' is not a straightforward process: if developing a self that is recognisable as such is a struggle for most people, especially in adolescence, it is even more so for the autistic. This identity, then, too, tends to display a local rather than a global coherence, as Mukhopadhyay's multiple mini-histories suggest: in many cases, Mark Osteen claims, autistic authors "resort to strategies of bricolage – echolalia, imitation, fixations, alter egos – to construct a self by assembling spare parts" (274). Mukhopadhyay's Victorian authorial voice in *The Mind Tree* is one example; Carly Fleischmann's adopting the "cadence" and comic timing of her hero Ellen Degeneres for her bat mitzvah speech, read out by Degeneres on camera, is another (Fleischmann and Fleischmann 219).

Local coherence and bricolage, however, are hardly confined to autistic autobiography: the weblog and the Facebook page, as well as other internet-based resources for self-expression such as Instagram and Pinterest, all represent autobiographical practices that bring together 'spare parts,'

either self-produced or taken from a source, in order to produce a certain self-image. As in autobiography, the perceived authenticity of such self-images rests on a pact between producer and beholder, but is, in the final instances, inherent to its mediation, and thus does, again, not pre-exist the image's creation. Moreover, while autobiographical practices that appear to thrive on fragmentation and a continuously developing self-representation rather than on the unity that autobiography finds within its author's life story as seen from a distance to the past, may appear in a sense de-stratifying, or deterritorialising, it can be argued that they ultimately re-stratify or re-territorialise textual and visual self-representation: weblog, Facebook profile, Instagram and Pinterest page each suggest that its fragments add up to a whole that is the author of the page. The final aim, then, remains a sense of unity that is brought across to the reader or page viewer.²⁶ In the same way, autistic autobiographies that adopt an untraditional form do not necessarily escape the surfaces of stratification, although they do stretch the limits of the genre of autobiography, as well as of language, to which I will now turn.

5.2 *The Language of Embodiment*

Stepping into language always means stepping into a system that precedes the author and thus facilitates but also limits meaningful expression, as language is language only when it conveys meaning, and thus complies with conventions. Autistic authors, moreover, need to step into a system that was not devised to mirror their unique manner of perceiving their environment, as Amanda Baggs remarked in the previous chapter. Within this system, the autistic who is intent on sharing her experiences with her audience needs to find a manner of bringing across her unique perspective while remaining intelligible. However, 'corporeal literacy,' to take a concept developed by Maaïke Bleeker, is never straightforward. Bleeker uses the term to refer to "the corporeal dimensions of the condition of literacy," which has hugely influenced human cognition (6). Taken as a broader term that denotes both the language(s) of embodiment and the skill of reading body

²⁶ Deleuze and Guattari note their dissatisfaction with William Burrough's cut-up method and James Joyce's adoption of multiple languages in one text: each still aims to represent an overarching unity (*Plateaus* 6).

language, it is usable to my purposes in two senses: autistic autobiographers have to acquire a linguistic corporeal literacy to describe their bodily experiences in such a way as to be understood by their audience; at the same time, however, they appear to lack the practical corporeal literacy necessary to read other people's body language. Conversely, non-autistic people lack the literacy to read autistic behaviour. Metaphor steps in to ensure an alliance between body and language, which may look differently for autistic people than for non-autistic people.

However, in the light of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception, the notion of a communal or idiosyncratic body language that has to be read, translated or interpreted represents an exception rather than a rule. The sense of behaviour, Merleau-Ponty claims, is grasped immediately within the body and does not require a process of intellectual translation or inference (368). It is only when this bodily capacity for making sense breaks down that one has to resort to a conscious attempt at reading behaviour and construct a 'theory of mind,' e.g. when one is among people from a different culture. It is in this context, too, that when Temple Grandin remarks that she feels like an anthropologist on Mars (Sacks, *Anthropologist* 259), she describes an experience that is indeed alien to most other people within the confines of their own culture and social milieu. Merleau-Ponty describes how young children will respond immediately to their carers and their actions (368). The autistic child, on the other hand, does not have the capacity to imitate without hesitation and thus to take up the meaning of her carers' behaviour in her own body. Therefore, just as the world of objects does not make immediate sense to autistics, so do they often fail to grasp bodily cues, or are distracted by sensory input from the effort it takes them to consciously 'read' the other. Nevertheless, this description may be more appropriate for 'high-functioning' autistics than for 'low-functioning' autistics, who may indeed feel immediate empathy, still without, however, the motor ability to respond (cf. Savarese, "What" n.p., Kedar 63). Tito Mukhopadhyay, for example, writes how on an occasion when he saw his mother cry, "[t]he boy was sad too but could not show any feeling of pain ... But had he spoken, he would have given a very touching speech about it" (*Mind Tree* 10). Indeed, Savarese suggests, non-verbal autistic people may feel intense "emotional

empathy,” rather than “cognitive” or “motor empathy” (“What” n.p.): the autistic is more open to her environment, including humans, animals, and objects, precisely because she lacks the proprioception and the immediate sensory parsing that would allow her to feel like a distinct entity. Savarese notes that what a mindblindness or theory of mind test “actually gauges is the ability to read a highly particular kind of mind, a mind that has put itself at the center of the universe – above all other organisms and entities” (Savarese and Zunshine 25), which is evidently not the mind of the autistic or the human mind as perceived by the autistic.

Conversely, non-autistic people have difficulty grasping the meaning of autistic behaviour. Autistic behaviour represents either a lack or an excess: either the severely autistic person seems apathetic and thus unresponsive, or her behaviour is explosive and unpredictable. Whatever the situation, the non-autistic does not have immediate access to what this behaviour means. Carly Fleischmann’s father notes: “[Carly’s] body fails to communicate what her brain thinks” (Fleischmann and Fleischmann 207). Indeed, the stereotype of the ‘mindblind’ autistic is at least as much, if not more, reflective of the mindblindness of non-autistic people when faced with this incommunicability. Autistic Lucy Blackman notes: “We often use the term ‘communication’ when really we mean that we have observed in another human being a behavior from which we derive meaning” (qtd. in Savarese and Zunshine 23). Faced with the apparent impossibility of asking the (non-verbal) autistic for an explanation of her behaviour, the impetus to interpret and translate autistic behaviour becomes so great that Stuart Murray feels obliged to note that, like any behaviour, autistic behaviour can be spontaneous and is not a form of code to be meticulously decoded: “Too often we assume that autistic behavior comes laden with meaning,” he writes (*Autism* xii).

Nevertheless, in the autobiographies under discussion, it is the autobiographers themselves who do the interpreting and translating. It is important to note that Mukhopadhyay, Kedar, Fleischmann, Higashida and Baggs have all come to their descriptions by a process that asked them to differentiate between their own ‘abnormal’ experiences and ‘normal’ perception. Higashida

notes: “Always lurking at the back of my mind is an anxiety about whether or not I’m perceiving things in the same way that people without autism do ... I’m constantly learning about how ordinary people are supposed to feel in given situations” (114). These perceived differences invite them to come to their own theories of their experience, either in conjunction with or defiance of medical theories, in order to explain their autistic behaviour to themselves and to others. To do so, they need to find a manner to enlist language both to describe a manner of perceiving to which this language is not inherently adapted and to describe it in such a way that her audience can catch her meaning (Osteen, “Narrating” 272). Baggs emphasises the first part of this dilemma when she notes that language was designed by non-autistics, while the many analogies that the other authors here discussed use emphasise the second. Philosopher Ian Hacking believes that autistic people should not be held accountable to “pre-existing criteria for describing experiences and sensibilities” and are perhaps “helping to create a language about what was hitherto unknown” (“Autobiography” 1467), escaping the conventions of the medical discourse on autism. He acknowledges, however, that this implies that language is simply a transparent medium while the real question is whether “autobiographies [are] less telling what it is like to be autistic than constituting it” (1467): creating a language of autism means creating autism as a specific discursive construct that may influence what language other people, autistic and non-autistic, use to describe autism, just as the *DSM* constructs autism anew with each new edition of the diagnosis handbook.

In the absence of an ‘insider’ language of autism, which if conceivable at all would hardly lend itself to subverting common stereotypes of autism, autistic autobiographers make use of metaphors and similes to convey their meaning to their audience. Carly Fleischmann’s father notes: “We were astonished by how articulate Carly was – using simple metaphors to help us *neurotypicals* understand her condition” (Fleischmann and Fleischmann 185).²⁷ She creates her own term and explanation for self-stimulation or ‘stimming,’ calling it “audio filtering,” by which she means that while stimming the autistic person is replaying some of the sensory input which she received

²⁷ ‘Neurotypicals’ are those whose brain make-up is typical rather than in any particular sense different.

unfiltered and thus unstructured at some earlier moment in order to make sense of it in retrospect (184). Ido Kedar compares himself to Helen Keller and Stephen Hawking, wondering whether Keller's "noises and too visible disability" would have been resented at his new school where he is not made to feel welcome, and whether Hawking, too, would have been considered "an expensive burden" (148). Nigashida conveys his sense of being constrained within his body by comparing himself to a bird who can do no more than "tweet-tweet, flap [my] wings and hop around in a cage," while really he wants to "soar away, into the big blue yonder, over the hills and far away!" (77). He uses two similes to make his point: "People with autism can be restless and fidgety all the time, almost to the point of it looking comical. It's as if it's summer for us the whole year round. Most people look pretty relaxed when they're not doing anything in particular, but we're always zooming off madly like a kid who's late for school" (100).

Ralph Savarese analyses Tito Mukhopadhyay's use of the preposition 'around' and comes to the conclusion that it conveys "a very different experience of relational embodiment" because Mukhopadhyay experiences things happening somewhere around him, without being able to locate them more definitively ("Postcolonial" 282). Savarese draws on cognitive scientist George Lakoff's embodied cognition thesis, which claims that "[w]e cannot just think anything – only what our embodied brains permit" (qtd. in Savarese, "Postcolonial" 275): metaphor is embodied, and embodiment is metaphorical (279). In *Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson analyse "orientational metaphors," by which they mean words that express position or direction, such as "up-down, in-out, front-back, on-off, deep-shallow, central-peripheral" (qtd. in Savarese, "Postcolonial" 279). These words are taken from human beings' perception of their environment, relative to their position in it, and are then applied as metaphors to more abstract concepts of thought and feeling (279). Because of his problems with proprioception, however, Mukhopadhyay cannot perceive direction and position in the same way a non-autistic person usually can, which his writing reflects in his use of the preposition 'around' and the concomitant anxiety. Savarese quotes Mukhopadhyay, who writes: "My boundary between imagining and experiencing something was a

very delicate one. Perhaps it still is. So many times I need to cross-check with Mother, or someone who can understand my voice now, whether an incident really happened around my body” (*How Can I Talk* 23, qtd. in Savarese, “Postcolonial” 282).

It is nevertheless clear that, in order to be understood, autistic autobiographers need to some extent to enter “the domain of cultural intelligibility” (Butler, *Bodies* 2). If to be human conventionally means to be in language, as we saw in Chapter 2, this means that autistics must learn to “articulate” their experiences in words that denote clearly delineated objects and recognisable events (Manning, *More* 189). In this, they become susceptible to not only the practices but also the discourse of the particular autism community to which they belong, as well as the Western discourse of embodiment. Autistic authors are not creating a new language for autism, but negotiating existing language to suit their experiences, a process which may be heavily influenced by a humanist emphasis on control and mastery, as for example in Ido Kedar's account. His metaphors are, indeed, mostly conventional: autism is “like a deep pit filled with sand that is blocking your way out,” from which he needs to climb out with a “ladder” built by the hard work he does to learn to control his body (84, 156). ‘Pure’ phenomenological description, then, may in any case be an illusion, as language always precedes the author and shapes her account.

Moreover, as Judith Butler argues, the body can never be fully thematised in language. “There is a bodily referent here,” she notes, “a condition of me that I can point to, but that I cannot narrate precisely ... To be a body is, in some sense, to be deprived of having a full recollection of one's life. There is a history to my body of which I can have no recollection” (*Account* 38). Merleau-Ponty, too, notes that memory “opens me up to an absolutely new future in which I will be able to reflect upon what is opaque in my present; [but] from the perspective of that future I will never grasp the present that I am living with an apodictic certainty, since the lived is never fully comprehensible in this way” (362). Although the autistic may be aware of the history of her body to a much higher degree than a non-autistic person with a normatively functioning body precisely because her body ‘stands out’ in her experience to a much greater extent, there is still a sense that

the experience of autism cannot be fully conveyed within language, no matter how skilled the autistic author is at negotiating conventional language through metaphor and simile. Mark Osteen makes an argument for autistic expression by visual means, arguing that film is more suitable to the autistic autobiographer's purposes ("Narrating" 275). Besides Baggs's video, a number of clips have appeared online that are meant to convey some sense of how sensory input is received, unfiltered, by the autistic (Petronzio). Carly Fleischmann, meanwhile, hopes to convince the directors of the Ontario Science Centre to install a simulator that allows visitors to experience something of autistic perception ("Will You Come").²⁸

5.3 *The Autobiography of the Body without Organs*

If language is not especially suited to describe the autistic's bodily experiences, perhaps she can go further than similes and common-language metaphors to stretch the boundaries of language. Indeed, similes and metaphors, in the neat one-to-one relationships they suggest, perhaps suggest an order and ordinariness to autistic experience that belies reality. It suggests, moreover, a subject who is doing the relating and thus places herself above the language that she uses as a tool for representation. Within the context of an impaired proprioception and sensory parsing that allow the autistic to enter into becomings with other entities with little to no effort, language itself, however, can possibly be experienced differently: not as "the matrix of representation, the structure of our world, and the root of this specific belief that we need a 'me' in order to exist" (Deligny qtd. in Manning, *More* 193), but as "language not of syllables but of shapes, the language within language before language that is a field of resonance, an intensive enjoyment of enthusiasm with and in a world that speaks not in the name of 'I' but in the interval" (Manning, *More* 185). Such language, that carries the pleasures of sound and image with it, fusing both with the speaker, can be found in poetry and literary language.

Indeed, because of their synaesthesia, many autistics have a very different relationship to

²⁸ Intriguing as this sounds, she does not provide examples of what experiences the simulator would produce in participants.

language because they can ‘sense’ words not (only) in their cognitive content, but in their shape, taste, colour, or tone.²⁹ Mukhopadhyay, for example, describes how he perceives a certain person’s voice as “long apple green and yellow strings” (*How Can I Talk* 200). It is poetry that seems to offer a medium for such experiences: poetry not as, in the first place, the language of an ‘I,’ but as a pre-individual language of patterns of words in their sensory qualities. To function as communication, language has to be parsed immediately in terms of its content. Autistics, however, have been shown to be more attuned to perceptual processing of speech sounds than to semantic processing (Savarese and Zunshine 26). Thus, in some cases, language production by autistics, too, is more attentive to the “sensuous materiality” of language (26). Erin Manning notes: “In the poetic language of classical autism, language is a sensing practice in its own right – a field of affective tonality activated in rhythms and tones, in speeds and intensities. Here, the turn toward expression does not cut itself off from the experiential vastness of sensation and perception but writes with them” (*More* 156). Savarese emphasises that such a language is not unique to autistics: young children and illiterate people experience the same kind of ‘thinking’ in patterns of sounds, which, however, is relegated to the background once (written) language with its fixed categories starts to order experience differently (“What” n.p.). Poetry, however, is situated between sensing and interpreting, because it “purposefully favors concrete diction so as to evoke, and not merely describe, experience” (n.p.). A poem by Mukhopadhyay, very much the poet among the autobiographers here discussed, illustrates the phenomenon of synaesthesia, his intimate communication with his environment and his efforts at translating this communication into language:

²⁹ Neil Harbisson, “the world’s first cyborg artist,” has had an antenna implanted in his skull which allows him to perceive colours as sounds (Jeffries). While he is technically not synesthetic, because he is actually colour blind, the connection between synaesthesia and the image of the cyborg is interesting in this context. He claims that humans should transcend their original senses by incorporating technology and in this way transform their experience of the world (Jeffries). In the same way, the synesthetic autistic, as the ‘original’ cyborg has, I claim, a relationship to her environment that transcends the confines humans usually place upon their sensory awareness.

“Lights: the Language”

Light: Its abstract language, almost seemed maim,
Blurred words, waves from its voice, unsensed by brain,
Understood suddenly, but gone again.

Eyes were like windows, but heavily curtained,
Light from outside said something, knocking again -
Abstract taps senses; un-comprehended by brain.

Morning split left and right across that curtain
Incoming thoughts suddenly there, gone again,
Splitting imagination, turning the mind insane.

Waves of green, then blue, sometimes yellow, red and orange,
Coloured words – suddenly there, Gone away again!
Familiar shapes floating in colours, strangely turning quaint.

The language of light, remained darkened. Suddenly

Abstract words surfaced, then drowned once again. (*Facebook* 26 February 2014)

Poetry, then, seems to allow for the more-than-content of words to come into play as well as for a reflection of a sensory mode of experience that is unfiltered instead of immediately (linguistically) categorised into abstract relations. Like William Carlos Williams's poetry shows (“a red wheel barrow glazed with rain water beside the white chickens”), poetic language allows for a recreation of haecceities in language, which, as ever with Deleuze, is not merely a repetition or representation but instantiates something new in itself. One could compare another recent poem by Mukhopadhyay, for example, with a typical passage in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, one among those which Deleuze

and Guattari describe as “a meditation on an aspect of the waves, on one of their hours, on one of their becomings” (278):

Mist was insidious
Wiping the solid shapes,
Distancing tree from tree,
Smudging their outlines,
Mixing ground with air,
Insipid yet mysterious

Mist floated lethargically -
Delaying the morning

Reluctant to evaporate. (Mukhopadhyay, *Facebook* 10 February 2014)

“The sun rose higher. Blue waves, green waves swept a quick fan over the beach, circling the spike of sea-holly and leaving shallow pools of light here and there on the sand. A faint black rim was left behind them. The rocks which had been misty and soft hardened and were marked with red clefts.”

(Woolf 15, italics in original)

In the poem, while the mist “distanc[es] tree from tree” and thus makes them separate entities, it nevertheless enters itself into a relationship with the trees that changes them momentarily by mixing matter with air: one could perhaps say that the intensification caused by the mist produces a becoming-air of ground and a becoming-ground of air in the eyes of the beholder. The mist creates an atmosphere, both literally and figuratively: it expresses, in Mukhopadhyay’s experience, lethargy and reluctance to leave. The poem does perhaps posit an ‘I’ who perceives this singular moment. However, the ‘I’ is anonymous and perhaps through this perception and the poem instantiates a becoming with the perceptual content of the moment. This is, like Woolf’s description of the waves,

one of the aspects of the trees, one of their hours, one of their becomings.

Poetry, Savarese suggests, “seems to remember an earlier set of cognitive proclivities, swimming conspicuously against the current of literacy’s ‘abstractifying’ effects” (“What” n.p.). Whereas opinions and neat explanations, through this abstractification, form “a sort of ‘umbrella,’ which protects us from chaos,” art, science and philosophy, Deleuze and Guattari note in *What Is Philosophy?*, “want us to tear open the firmament and plunge into the chaos” (202). Artists and poets return from this encounter with chaos with art “that no longer constitute[s] a reproduction of the sensory in the organ but set[s] up a being of the sensory, a being of sensation” (202-3): more than reproducing the world in language, they create something new that has its own sensory being. Poets and artists, then, “make a slit in the umbrella, they tear open the firmament itself, to let in a bit of free and windy chaos and to frame in a sudden light a vision that appears through the rent” (203). This is, I claim, what Mukhopadhyay does in his poems and in some of his prose writing. Here, it is not the ‘I’ of autobiography that is the subject, but an impersonal self that perceives a vision of the chaos underneath abstract language’s neat categories that are meant to keep this chaos at abeyance. Autistic autobiography, then, is not necessarily the autobiography of a self, but can also be the autobiography of a self swept up in its becomings with its environment: a posthuman(ist) self.

5.4 *Becoming-autistic*

The autistic autobiographers here discussed each move in their own way in a posthuman field, if only by their manner of communication that, contrary to Western tradition, privileges writing over speech, and their insistence on the impact of their non-conventional embodiment on their experience of life. Nevertheless, as noted in Chapter 2, many autistics are concerned with claiming humanity rather than posthumanity. Naoki Higashida notes that he kept himself focused on the task of learning to communicate through pointing at letters by “the thought that to live my life as a human being, nothing is more important than being able to express myself” (20). Ido Kedar strives to be “a self-sufficient human being” (117). Carly Fleischmann wants to be perceived as any other

teenage girl (Fleischmann and Fleischmann 127, 202). Tito Mukhopadhyay notes in an interview with Douglas Biklen: “Communication is a very primordial urge of human beings. Being an Autistic person does not give me any other definition and I am still a human being” (124). He speaks of “[t]he constant guilt of not being able to be a proper and normal human being” (*Mind Tree* 62).

In claiming humanity for non-verbal autistics, these autistics appear to some extent to champion the construction of an autistic counteridentity with which to claim access to rights. Autism, Ido Kedar writes, “gave me a goal in life to help others like me to break free of theories that trap us” (113). However, another approach might be possible. While the term ‘neurodiversity’ has been co-opted primarily by autistic people, and among them primarily by people previously (self-)diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome, its appeal to diversity offers potential to create not one counteridentity for all autistics, which would be highly suspect given that autism is a spectrum condition, but to open a space where respect is distributed equally to all human beings in all their differences. Higashida notes: “so long as we learn to love ourselves, I'm not sure how much it matters whether we're normal or autistic” (73) and “[i]f autism was regarded simply as a personality type, things would be so much easier and happier for us” (16). Kedar writes: “I don't need to be normal to make my life meaningful” (104). “The world,” he says, “will have to meet me halfway” (111). Carly Fleischmann writes in a speech: “we are not all the same and why would we want to be?” (Fleischmann and Fleischmann 217). Finally, Tito Mukhopadhyay notes: “One day I dream that we can grow in a matured society where nobody would be ‘normal or abnormal’ but just human beings, accepting any other human being – ready to grow together” (*Mind Tree* 90).

With Deleuze and Guattari, we could call such a position ‘becoming-autistic.’ “Becoming-minoritarian,” for Deleuze and Guattari, is a moving away from either majoritarian identity positions or essentialistic counteridentities (*Plateaus* 320). While identity politics, to adapt Deleuze and Guattari's words on feminism, may be necessary for autistics “to [win] back their own organism, their own history, their own subjectivity,” it is nevertheless “dangerous to confine oneself to such a subject [of enunciation: ‘we as autistics...’ TP], which does not function without drying up a spring or

stopping a flow” (304), because in this case ‘the autistic’ represents a fixed state (cf. 321), an “essential unity” among autistics (cf. Haraway, “Cyborg” 155). Instead, belonging to a minority, which is not necessarily a quantitative minority but a minority relative to the majoritarian norm, is not in itself sufficient to undo the major-minor binary (Deleuze and Guattari, *Plateaus* 321). What needs to occur is a becoming-autistic of the autistic, as well as a becoming-autistic of all non-autistics: becoming-autistic is a becoming, not a state, which undoes identity and counteridentity and instead instantiates “a block of alliance” between the two, in the middle, but always in the direction of the minoritarian (cf. 321). Becoming-autistic is not a move towards normality and normativity on the autistic’s part. Instead, it is the embrace of the disorder with which the condition confronts the autistic. This is where the autistic’s posthumanist potential really unfolds, as it is here that the autistic registers and develops affinities and affectivities that are not limited to any norm of personhood or humanity, as well as where she invites non-autistics to join her. It is, thus, not the domain where the autistic is ‘less-than-human.’ Rather, it is the domain where ‘humanity’ reveals itself to be a limiting category that does not correspond to the inherent relationality of matter. As Haraway notes, “to recognize ‘oneself’ as fully implicated in the world, frees us of the need to root politics in identification, vanguard parties [and] purity” (“Cyborg” 176).

It is not so much, then, that the autistic has to adapt herself to the norms of the majority, or, conversely, has to install herself in a fortress of an oppositional identity, but that an “encounter” or a “coexistence” (Deleuze and Guattari, *Plateaus* 322) between the autistic and the non-autistic has to take place that dislodges the majoritarian position. Mark Osteen, for example, notes how carers’ memoirs often show how these family members “‘become autistic’ and are forced to learn empathy – the ability to perceive the world as another sees it – in order to inhabit the worlds their autistic loved ones create” (“Narrating” 271-2). Again, however, identification and the empathy it calls forth are not enough. Instead, becoming-autistic demands a hybridity between the autistic and the non-autistic that does not resolve itself into a new whole (cf. Haraway, “Cyborg” 150): in Haraway’s words, it is not holism that the cyborg desires, but connection (151) or becoming-with; a coalition

based on “affinity” rather than identity (155). Indeed, while some participants of the neurodiversity movement may be tempted to construct a shared, neurodiverse identity, the very presence of the term ‘diversity’ holds out for the recognition that all human beings, even those deemed ‘neurotypical,’ are different in their neurological make-up, and that what should be facilitated is fruitful interactions between people of different abilities, while recognising that those abilities themselves are changeable over time and in different situations. Kamran Nazeer, another autistic who has written a book on the condition, for example, in Osteen’s words, “discovers his own hybrid adult identity, one that is sometimes autistic, sometimes neurotypical” (“Narrating” 274). His identity is not stable, but evolves in his encounters with other autistics and non-autistics: “Rather than reifying autism, Nazeer proves that it can be many different things and that an autistic person may be just as contradictory as any other human” (274). Becoming-autistic, then, as much destabilises the common conception of the (non-autistic) human, as it does the conventional image of the autistic. The autobiographies above may provide one entrance for a becoming-autistic of the non-autistic reader.

There are, one can conclude, three movements visible in the autistic autobiographies here discussed: firstly, its authors wish to move towards normality and thus normativity and be accepted as such; secondly, they wish to construct a counteridentity from within their ‘abnormality’ to claim humanist rights; but thirdly, they call for respect for diversity in all its ways. With Rosi Braidotti, I would claim that “[p]olitical agency need not be critical in the negative sense of oppositional and thus may not be aimed solely/primarily at the production of countersubjectivities” (*Posthuman* 35). Rather, autism as an other, as a ‘monster of the age’ offers the opportunity to move away from either a striving towards the norm, or a reactionary response that leaves the oppositional dialectic between the normal/non-autistic and the abnormal/autistic in place. The autistic autobiographer moves instead toward a becoming-minoritarian in which she implicates her reader: a becoming-autistic. To conclude, if the cyborg is a creature “[f]rom which we can learn from our fusions with animals and machines how not to be Man, the embodiment of Western logos” (Haraway, “Cyborg”

173), the autistic may be just such a creature. Here, I concur with Stuart Murray, who states:

Because of its difference, autism has the potential to renegotiate the terms of the human. As a condition, it is human in every aspect of its manifestation; as an example of the *diversity* of humankind, it possesses the ability to offer a critique of those lazy assertions of, and appeals to, a 'shared humanity,' to replace that strand of humanist thought that in its totalizing ideologies created the disabled subject, and to counter it with a radical notion of human difference and potential. ... the potential identified here is also a space of negotiation between our present and our future, a process that faces forward precisely because it opens up the category of 'the human.' (*Autism* 104)

Conclusion

This thesis has attempted to establish several points of convergence between autism, autobiography and the posthuman. Autism is a condition that destabilises the traditional confines of humanist 'Man.' The autistic, blessed with a human body, appears to be both subhuman and superhuman. She either, seemingly, presents a deficit or an excess of rationality, with this deficit supposedly demonstrated by a lack of functional speech, while the excess is capitalised in the current information economy. Nevertheless, even the 'high-functioning' autistic's 'superhumanity' in the area of abstract reason does not appear to guarantee that she is regarded as fully human, as autistics across the autistic spectrum are construed as lacking empathy and self-consciousness, two qualities that are perceived as essential to the human. The autistic, then, is not-quite-human.

The posthuman condition, too, appears to leave 'Man' behind. Technologies would appear to provide the human with a cyborg body, merging the organic and inorganic. Sometime in the future, humans may even be able to transcend their bodies and entrust their consciousness to computers, transhumanists hope. Empathy, it is feared by others, may however be lost in the process. Nevertheless, the human body has always incorporated its tools and technologies. The current and future posthuman condition, I argue, will not do away with the human body, but will merely further change human embodiment. Neither will it occasion a loss of empathy, but rather, will call for new, more expansive notions of subjectivity and relationality.

The autistic, too, does not escape her embodiment. Indeed, her non-normative perception of her own body and her environment ensures that her body is singularly present in her experience. The autistic's body appears to resist 'organisation.' Her dis-organ-ised awareness of her own body, and with that a disrupted awareness of her self, entails a non-structured consciousness of her environment, in which particulars are perceived in their relations to other particulars, implicated in a process of singular individuation, imbued with a non-personal subjectivity. Empathy is here a diffuse awareness of relations, not limited to humans or anthropomorphic figures. This awareness, then,

appears to some extent to resist stratification on the strata of the organism, signifiante and subjectification. As such, the autistic is in another sense a posthuman figure: she moves in a space beyond the humanist conception of 'Man' where control over body and self, ensuring its boundaries, is irrelevant, and particulars refuse to be caught in the fixed meanings imposed on them.

Nevertheless, the autistic may strive for the order promised by the strata, as the seeming chaos of destratification is profoundly disorienting. Developing practical habits, to ensure a measure of control over the body, i.e. 'organising' it, and learning language and definitions, providing entrance to the stratum of signifiante, i.e. the meanings circulating within the autistic's culture, may help the autistic create a semblance of order within her world. Autobiographical practice, moreover, provides the autistic with a tool for subjectification to stabilise her self-awareness, as well as a means to claim personhood and humanity in defiance of the common stereotype that the autistic lacks self-consciousness. Autobiography, indeed, is a profoundly humanist practice.

However, content and language of autistic autobiography may point in a different direction: instead of presenting global unity and stability, autistic autobiography in some instances may present merely local coherence and thus fragmentation, as well as an inescapable relationality to the autistic's surroundings. Its language, moreover, stretches the boundaries of language's inherent normativity: in autistic autobiography's metaphors and similes, it opens language to descriptions of bodily experiences that fall outside its ordinary scope; and in its poetry, it reminds its readers that language itself is material and thus sensuous, and can be used to creatively re-create singular haecceities. Autistic autobiography, then, is as much a tool for (re)stratification as it is an art that opens up language to destratification.

In order to accommodate difference, language has to be stretched to its limits: in Deleuze and Guattari's words, language has to become minoritarian. From within this minor language, new subjectivities are created that do not represent the majoritarian, humanist subject position but invite a becoming-minoritarian. Becoming-autistic is not a process that leads to one stable outcome, 'the autistic.' Indeed, precisely because a circumscribed sense and story of the self is often lacking in

the autistic, she invites attention to her presence as a singular mode of existence that is constantly subject to change. Autistic autobiography, then, cannot be read as creating one stable autistic subject represented in an authentic language of autism, Baggs's 'Autistic Experience®.' Indeed, the aim of any minoritarian politics, Donna Haraway notes, can never be to arrive at "a common language, ... a perfectly true language, [a] perfectly faithful naming of experience" ("Cyborg" 173). Such a "dream," she says, "is a totalizing and imperialist one" (173). Instead, the cyborg dream, to which, I have argued, autistics make an important contribution, is "a dream not of a common language, but of a powerful infidel heteroglossia" (181).

To conclude, this thesis has attempted to counter common stereotypes of autism that either, in a humanist discourse, invoke the autistic as sub- and therefore nonhuman, or, in a posthuman(ist) discourse, portray the autistic as bane or boon in the era of information technology. It has done so by attending to the words of verbal and non-verbal autistic people who, in spite of seemingly tremendous odds, have written autobiographical texts and have seen these published. While their texts are slowly starting to be recognised for their value in the (post)humanities, the social sciences and in medical autism research, more work is necessary to ensure that the (written) voices of autistic people are heard within and without the academy. In the case of non-verbal autism, however, what is needed first of all is recognition for the potential cognitive and linguistic abilities in people who are traditionally assumed to lack reason and language. Nevertheless, the aim should not be to normalise these autistic people, but rather to recognise the unique experiences they bring to 'humanity,' which as such loses its normativity and instead becomes merely a name for an immense variety of experiences in relation to the world and all its inhabitants.

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