

“The ‘Why’ and the ‘Why Not’ of a Yellowing World”: Autism, Literary Writing, and Synesthesia

I work at the intersection of cognitive approaches to literature and disability studies. While there are many scholars in disability studies who adopt a neurodiverse view of autism, they do so strictly by critiquing the discipline of science, by insisting “on the social construction of disability.” For such scholars the current conception of autism as lack, not autism itself, disables autistic lives. Moreover, that conception fails to make room for another way of being in the world. While there are many scholars in cognitive approaches to literature who mention autism in their work, they do so strictly to illuminate typical functioning, to show us what reading literature requires. For example, novelists exploit the reader’s ability to infer what a character is thinking on the basis of what she is doing with her body. Lacking theory of mind, autistics, these scholars maintain, can’t help but struggle with an art form as intensely social and introspective as the novel.

If disability studies frequently over-emphasizes the deterministic effects of human culture, then cognitive science frequently overemphasizes the deterministic effects of human physiology. The former corrects for a kind of biological reductionism and normativity; the latter, for a kind of material obliviousness. As a literary scholar and writer who regularly teaches creative writing workshops to autistics and who adopted a nonspeaking six-year-old boy with autism from foster care, a young man now double-majoring in anthropology and creative writing at Oberlin College, I know what damage stereotypes can do, but I also know that autistics have indisputably distinctive brains. What that distinctiveness *means* and what it can *do* are up for grabs. In my work I thus aim to give the progressive concept of neurodiversity some actual neurological content and, at the same time, to push back against narrow conceptions of autistic possibility.

In my paper I explore the phenomenon of synesthesia, which a recent study found to be at least three times more common in autistics than in nonautistics. Laurent Mottron’s model of “enhanced perceptual functioning” in autism nicely dovetails with how Stephen Farmer has theorized synesthesia. Farmer underscores “the maintenance throughout development of topographic symmetry in brain maps as higher-level cognition is shaped by the biases of lower-level systems.” In autistic cognition, these lower-level systems figure more prominently than they do in non-autistic cognition. “In less extreme ways,” Farmer writes, “all of us are synesthetes.” Recent research on synesthesia reveals that synesthesia is “closely related to normal sensory integration going on in everyone below the level of consciousness.... Clinical forms of synesthesia,” Farmer argues, “simply involve higher than normal activation of synaptic links binding analogical maps in different brain systems.” Synesthetes, in short, retain a “heightened awareness” of these lower-level perceptual maps.” In this way, the trope of synesthesia—for example, “your voice is so smooth”—might be thought of as the conscious transposition of apparently distinct sensory modalities, modalities that are in fact unconsciously and fluidly multi-sensory.

In my paper I relate the case of a radically synesthetic young man with autism whom I mentor: Tito Mukhopadhyay. The author himself of five books, he uses a text-to-voice

synthesizer to communicate. We spent 2012-2013 discussing *Moby Dick*, two chapters a week, by Skype. His synesthesia figured prominently in this enterprise.

Bio: Ralph James Savarese is the author of *Reasonable People: A Memoir of Autism and Adoption*, which *Newsweek* called “a real life love story and an urgent manifesto for the rights of people with neurological disabilities.” It was featured on CNN's "Anderson Cooper 360," ABC's “Nightly News with Charles Gibson,” and NPR's "The Diane Rehm Show." A documentary about his son, DJ, who is Oberlin College's first nonspeaking student with autism, will appear on PBS in late 2016. The author of some twenty-five articles on autism, Savarese is also the co-editor of three collections, including the first devoted to the concept of neurodiversity. In 2012-2013, he received a Humanities-Writ-Large fellowship, which allowed him to join the Neurohumanities Research Group at Duke University’s Institute for Brain Sciences. While on fellowship, he investigated the science of neurodiversity. He teaches American literature, creative writing, and disability studies at Grinnell College in Iowa.