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Note from the Editors: On Autistic Communities

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Note from the Editors: On Autistic Communities

The theme of this second issue of *Ought* is autistic communities, a pairing of ideas that might seem contradictory, even oxymoronic to those outside of autistic culture. Etymologically, the word autism—from the Greek “auto,” for “self”—denotes isolation, and historically, medical science has reiterated that autistic people live in worlds of their own. The descriptor “withdrawn” is ubiquitous in medical literature about autism and encoded into the diagnostic criteria of the DSM-5. Indeed, social awkwardness has become a kind of shorthand for autism, sometimes even jokingly applied to friends, family members, or colleagues whose faux pas suggest they “might be on the spectrum.”

Many cultural narratives about autism reinforce the idea that autistic individuals live in social isolation. In the graphic memoir *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomedy* by Alison Bechdel (2006), for example, Bechdel uses the term “autistic” as a synonym for socially isolated. In one scene, Bechdel shows a dollhouse view of her family home, the backlit windows showing each family member quarantined in their bedrooms, engaged in their solitary interests, a “mildly autistic colony,” in her language (139).

And yet we know that colonies are by definition communal, and that autistic communities do exist. This issue explores some of the forms that autistic communities take, examining them through critical theory, creative non-fiction, poetry, and fine art. In his analysis of autistic superhero comics, Robert Rozema explores how early online communities claimed fictional characters as autistic, finding versions of themselves in mainstream comics. Morgan Selke investigates the troubled relationship between autistic students and charter schools, suggesting that these schools, typically unregulated, have fewer autistic students than public schools and offer them less support, resulting in an isolated and frustrated autistic population. In “The Things We Talked About,” Angelica Julia Davila reflects on her bond with her autistic sister and the role that her incongruent speech played in their immediate and extended family. The poet Aimee Chor speaks to the importance of her

social media community in “Private Facebook Group,” a short, lyrical tribute to her autistic Facebook friends.

We hope that these and the other pieces in this second issue of *Ought* reveal the resilience of autistic communities, especially during this time of quarantine and isolation. We conclude with a heartening example of an autistic community that is thriving during the pandemic. If the walls of Rob’s house were peeled away, like a Bechdel dollhouse, the upper floor would show one autistic community in action, as a 15-year-old autistic adolescent runs a virtual session of *Dungeons and Dragons* via Zoom. He is the dungeon master, and the party he is guiding consists of two autistic players and two neurotypicals—all told, five friends from school, collectively imagining another world.

—Robert Rozema and Chris Bass

References:

Bechdel, Alison. *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*. Houghton Mifflin, 2006.