

# Ought: The Journal of Autistic Culture

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Volume 2  
Issue 1 *Autism and Neurodiversity*

Article 10

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2020

## I, Too, Sing Neurodiversity

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### Recommended Citation

Giwa Onaiwu, Morénike (2020) "I, Too, Sing Neurodiversity," *Ought: The Journal of Autistic Culture*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 1 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/ought/vol2/iss1/10>

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# I, Too, Sing Neurodiversity

Morénike Giwa Onaiwu

In theory, neurodiversity is a radical and inclusive space, a figurative home for the growing numbers of individuals around the globe who identify as neurodivergent. The term is often (mis)used as being synonymous with autistic, and though the very term “neurodiversity” was coined by an autistic individual (Singer, 1998) and autistic people are indeed neurodiverse, the concept of neurodiversity is much more broader than one singular diagnosis or neurotype.

Instead, neurodiversity is the umbrella under which a myriad of neurological differences fall irrespective of autism (Walker, 2014). It includes non-autistic individuals such as my older brother who has dyslexia, my son who has intellectual disability, my daughter who has ADHD, and my neighbor who has Tourette’s; it includes autistic individuals who might have additional diagnoses such as my daughter who is both autistic and intellectually gifted, and my son who has ADHD in addition to being autistic. While only approximately 2% of the population is estimated to be autistic (Dietz et al., 2020), the collective group of neurodivergent individuals is significantly larger (Walker, 2014).

In his brief yet riveting 1920’s poem “I, Too,” Langston Hughes solemnly acknowledges the reality of how he, as a Black man, is devalued in his own homeland. However, Hughes’ assertive refusal to internalize a negative self-perception combined with projections of a more equitable future leaves the reader with a sense of hope (Hughes, 1926). I felt similarly optimistic several months ago when I was invited to present at a global neurodiversity summit. Though I’d never spoken at nor been invited to this summit before, according to the agenda many important topics were going to be covered throughout the week. I happily accepted the invitation.

As the date of the summit grew closer, various correspondence and meetings were held between the event planners and the presenters to assist with preparation. I found it refreshing as well as encouraging that the summit planning team was neurodiverse and that there was a broad range of ages

and ethnicities involved in summit coordination. Although employment was the theme of the summit, the event planners intentionally incorporated other topics relevant to our community. I was specifically asked, along with my fellow panelists (who were, like me, neurodivergent people of color, or PoC) to discuss the intersection of race and neurodiversity.

Time passed and the opening date for the summit (which was a few weeks ago) arrived. My presentation and subsequent panel was held the afternoon of the summit's first day. Our panel (Figure 1) contained self-advocates, parents, and professionals; men, women, and non-binary individuals whose heritage ranged from Haitian American to African American, Latinx, West African, and West Indian. I was proud to be among such brilliant panelists,



**Figure 1. Top row: Isabelle Morris, Inger Shaye Cozlie, Jamell Mitchell. Bottom row: Morénike Giwa Onaiwu, René Brooks, Maria Davis-Pierre.**

and I had high hopes that our panel would be successful. Similarly, I hoped that the summit itself would be an overall success.

The summit organizers also made noticeable efforts to make the event inclusive. To ensure adequate representation of various neurotypes, several of the invited presenters were neurodiverse and many attendees were as well. Summit registration was free for all, and virtual attendees were welcome to attend via Zoom or to watch a live stream of the summit. A helpful pre-summit packet, including a plain-language accessibility guide, was provided to all presenters and attendees. Multiple breaks were built in to allow people a bit of “down time” throughout the summit. Closed captioning

was present throughout the summit and all sessions were recorded. Additionally, the summit itself was intentionally structured to include weekend and evening sessions to accommodate work and school schedules as well as attendees from various time zones.

The turnout for the neurodiversity summit exceeded the projected attendance: rather than a few hundred attendees, on the first day alone there were over 2,700 registered individuals. To foster a sense of community among such a large number of participants, several mechanisms, including Slack and Discord, were used in addition to other forms of social media (i.e. Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, etc.) to make the summit more interactive. A hashtag was adopted so that attendees and presenters, as well as the general public, could follow the dialogue. The summit hosted several dedicated “networking” hours throughout the week, and attendees could opt in to receive automated email updates. Furthermore, at every session, presenters and panelists were encouraged to interact with the virtual attendees, both in formal Q & A as well as in the chat feature.

With this degree of accessibility and the sheer number of neurodiverse people and allies, this summit should have been more than just fun and informative. It should have felt like a place of belonging, like a neurodiversity family reunion.

It didn't, however. At least not for long. Not even half an hour of our panel had passed before we were bombarded with “white-splaining.” Specifically, a summit attendee (who identified herself as a neurodivergent White woman) began complaining in our online forum that our panel consisted of neurodivergent PoC. Although this information exists in the public domain since the attendee made all of her remarks in an open, online forum, as a courtesy I have redacted the attendee's name as well as identifying information within this article.) Our exchange went as follows:

**WW:** I am surprised that the Neurodiversity Summit does not feature Caucasian females with this group of ladies because this is the experience of ALL girls and women. @adhdwomentribe @ADHDBelgium

**MGO:** The keynote speaker was a Caucasian woman. The person speaking after our panel is a Caucasian woman. There are many, many,

many amazing Caucasian women with ADHD, autism, dyslexia, and other diagnoses in the neurodiversity community, and it's important to uplift them all! This panel, however, was specifically about the intersection of MARGINALIZED racial and gender identities.

Unfortunately, like the larger cross-disability community, the neurodiversity community is plagued with issues that remain embedded in our society at large. One notable problem is its failure to incorporate core tenets of intersectionality, especially with regard to race. Despite being conceptually inclusive of those of us who reside at the margins of the “margins,” the word “neurodiversity” is all too easily substituted for “disability” in Villissa Thompson’s iconic and viral hashtag #DisabilityTooWhite, thus yielding #NeurodiversityTooWhite. But apparently, to some it’s actually not White enough. The same White woman heaped more public criticism on our panel because we dared to highlight some of the challenges endemic to neurodivergent PoC.

**WW:** Will somebody please raise this with the panel that all women and girls are in the same position? Because their ADHD or Autism presents in a much more subtle way than it does for males. Many, many girls and women fall through the cracks. Therefore, Caucasian women should be among this panel too.

**MGO:** Caucasian women absolutely, absolutely fall through the cracks—and are not only frequently misunderstood, but receive much less support and services than their male counterparts. However, race unequivocally plays a HUGE role on top of gender. I did not have time to go into it, but there are a plethora of statistics that demonstrate this. If it was about only gender, then yes, Caucasian women should be on the panel. But we’re talking about race, disability, and gender.

Is neurodiversity really “White?” Depending upon what you mean, the answer is both yes and no.

It’s a resounding no if we are discussing prevalence, since neurodivergence can be found across racial groups. This isn’t to suggest, however, that there aren’t measurable disparities when it comes to identification, diagnosis rates, accessing services, outcomes, etc. of specific neurodivergent conditions

when there clearly are. One illustrative example of many is that even when controlling for determinants such as English proficiency, socioeconomic status, educational attainment, etc., a young White boy has a significantly greater chance of receiving an autism diagnosis than a child of color. Conversely, a young African American or Latinx boy with similar presentation has a higher likelihood of being diagnosed with ADHD and/or Conduct Disorder or Oppositional Defiant Disorder (Davis-Pierre, n.d.)

However, neurodiversity is very heavily “White” in terms of how it is packaged, described, and perceived (Brooks, 2020). And because of that, displaying the same characteristics that a White person with neurodivergent identity might present could result in a less-than-pleasant scenario for me, such as being profiled and injured (like Reginald ‘Neli’ Latson) or killed (like Elijah McClain). Moreover, neurodiversity is so White that a (White) summit attendee felt justified to publicly shame six disabled people of color in a global setting. Our crime? Existing at the intersection of race, gender, and disability.

It is reprehensible that in 2020, the very act of taking a (relatively short) period of time on one day of a nearly week-long conference to talk about neurodiversity and race—during a panel about neurodiversity and race—still evokes White tears and accusations of discrimination. But it’s not surprising.

Because, like in nearly everything else, White is the “default” and everything else is merely Other. White is the foundation upon which neurodiversity rests; White is the standard neurodivergent individuals are measured against; White is the *de facto* status quo. The prominent names and faces associated with this principle, both proponents and opponents of neurodiversity, are White as are the majority of those targeted for and/or enrolled in neurodiversity higher education and neurodiversity employment programs (Different Brains, 2020; Tougaw, 2020).

With Whiteness comes privilege, which equates to power. Power imbalances often fuel oppression, and with oppression comes pain. Equipped with the capacity to scatter broadly as opposed to absorb, the color white retains its appearance by blocking out incoming objects; its most distinct characteristic is its ability to reflect its lack of hue (Rochester Institute of Technology, 2015). Because Whiteness demands that it must be the sole focus at all times, then

naturally White people must also be the sole focus at all times, and anything that does not perpetually center this toxic Whiteness is perceived as a threat, as indicated in the final exchange between the White woman, me, and my co-panelist René Brooks:

**WW:** It is really difficult to listen to this because it is bringing race into something where it does not belong. The only difference might be because the people themselves thought it was their culture.

**MGO:** Race absolutely does belong in discussions about intersectionality and neurodiversity. It's unfortunate that you find our realities difficult to listen to. I would LOVE for race not to be a factor, but respectfully, we are not the ones "bringing race" into this—it has already been "brought" by society without us having any say in the matter. We're just trying to survive.

It's very hurtful to have our very real life experiences—that we did not ask for and frankly, do not want—dismissed and disregarded. I wish that I didn't have to fear double for my children's lives because they are both disabled AND people of color—but I do. Not because I want to, not because it's in my head . . . the statistics themselves are evidence enough beyond the (numerous) personal experiences I have had and have witnessed. It is a privilege to be able to "ignore" race—a privilege that we panelists do not have. No one is dismissing the VERY REAL discrimination White disabled people experience. Why dismiss that of PoC?

**RB:** You have had to bear the discomfort of race as a topic for three hours. We bear the discomfort of living in a world with racial prejudice on a daily basis and will always live with it. To be able to walk away from race and never think about it or be affected by it is a privilege some of us are not afforded, and it was totally inappropriate of you to center yourself and elevate your own desires above the needs and the desires of others in this way. Your experiences are not the only ones to be highlighted, and your preferences are not the only ones to consider. Please reflect on why someone else sharing their life experience distresses you.

“Why are you writing an entire article about one neurodivergent White woman who doesn’t represent the rest of us?” you might be thinking. Or, you might be thinking something more along the lines of: “Really, Morénike? Really? I’m White and neurodivergent and you should see some of the awful things people have said to ME online! Don’t get me wrong . . . I think her comments were inappropriate. But I’ve seen far worse; frankly, that was nothing.”

And if you are thinking either (or both) of these things, I will, in part, concede. Regarding the first point, I absolutely know that all White neurodivergent people do not share her sentiments; in fact, many White allies openly expressed their concern after the fact and made it a point to offer support. And regarding the second point, I can also attest that, though annoying, the remarks that were made here are actually quite tame in terms of microaggressions of this nature.

However, remember I said that I only *partially* concede. Just because not all White neurodivergent people share WW’s sentiments does not exonerate neurodiversity for its failure to address intersectionality as a whole. Moreover, the fact that these specific remarks aren’t laden with profanity and racial epithets (although I, and many neurodivergent PoC, can easily provide them) does not make them less problematic. It’s easy to condemn overt racism, such as that of the Ku Klux Klan and other White supremacists—easy unless you hold the abhorrent view that there are “very fine people” among hate groups. In fact, it makes most White people feel pretty damn good to condemn blatant, obvious acts of racism as well as those who are associated with them.

But when it comes to more subtle forms of racism, the “woke” White performance record is not impressive. The term “microaggressions” exists for a reason. White allies, including those in the neurodiversity community, are great at spotting “big” racism, but struggle to notice, much less take action, against more insidious forms of racism. The everyday racism that neurodivergent PoC contend with daily is what causes the most damage. It erodes away our self-worth, at the very core of our being—and you aren’t here to back us up when that happens. You’re watching from the sidelines as we get ignited from the slow burn of gaslighting and covert racism. Maybe

you don't join in the bonfire, but you certainly aren't dousing the flames, either. So you're there, watching. Not taking action and complicit in our pain.

No, this White woman's words aren't the worst that have been said. People have said far worse things in the past; people will say far worse things in the future. However, her words were still inappropriate, especially considering that these tactless and insensitive words and many others like them aren't coming from outsiders; they are (consistently) being uttered from the mouth(s) of very people we're supposed to be able to trust the most. From our own people—other neurodivergent individuals, who should and do know better.

As a marginalized group who knows the devastation of being discriminated against all too well, we collectively realize there is no justifiable reason for this to occur, but it does. And I have no reason to believe that it will end any time soon. Because, disappointing as it may be, for every White neurodivergent individual who makes disparaging remarks, there are thousands of other White neurodivergent people who will not interfere, even when they vehemently disagree with what is occurring. Though they disapprove of what is occurring, that sense of discomfort is not nearly as important as their own self-interest.

It's not enough for them to inconvenience themselves, and it's certainly it's not enough to demonstrate, through one's actions, that they care. It's not enough for them to actually do anything of substance, such as publishing a post to convey public support and solidarity to the neurodiverse panelists of color who were being disrespected. Instead, they remain silent, and their silence implies consent.

At minimum, the neurodiversity community should refrain from subjugating others. Ideally, the neurodiversity community should be actively engaged in dismantling the oppression that makes such subjugation even possible. In reality, however, experiences like those depicted in this article are the norm, and are unfortunately representative of the erasure, disregard, and dismissal people of color encounter from members of our neurodiversity community on a daily basis. They are, at least in part, the reason why so few of us remain visible and active in the public discourse surrounding neurodiversity.

Because we're tired. Tired of all the people we are fighting.

We have to fight them (neurotypical individuals) for our humanity.

We have to fight our own (people of color without disabilities) because of their ableism.

We have to fight White people (regardless of neurology) because of racism.

We have to fight the larger disability community because of the stigma that is associated with neurodivergence.

We have to fight our loved ones, who mean well, but sometimes just don't get it. We have to fight our employers to be accommodated and respected. We have to fight the media and their frequent misrepresentations of us.

We might even have to fight within ourselves to prevent internalizing the hatred and toxicity that surrounds us at every moment.

And we're supposed to fight you as well? You, who are supposed to be our kin, our neurodivergent brethren, our community? You who are supposed to make us feel at home?

I know the answer. You show me every day that it's yes.

At this moment I am holding on,

Attempting to channel my inner Langston to declare that I, too, sing neurodiversity,

But in order to continue to sing, one needs oxygen, and mine is rapidly depleting.

I just don't know if I have any song left in me. I don't know if I have much more fight left in me.

Because I am choking on the noxious fumes of your indifference, White neurodiversity community. And I cannot breathe.

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