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Anna Nygren

Gothenburg University, anna.nygren@gu.se

Hanna Bertilsdotter Rosqvist

Södertörn University, hanna.bertilsdotterrosqvist@sh.se



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Theorizing Autistic Sexualities as Collective Poetic Experiences

Anna Nygren and Hanna Bertilsdotter Rosqvist

This article is a palimpsest emerging as part of a project of collective autoethnographic writing on the theme of sexuality. It draws on the intensification of friendly writing, friendly as in friends with benefits. We write as autistic and neuroqueer subjects, writing until our textualities becomes sexualities. We write until the text becomes a room—call it Earth or call it Body, call it Brain or call it Heart—in which one could crack meanings, but these are not the most important ones. Instead of meanings and positions, we want to write about movements in time. The time it takes to read a body that is never a body of your own but a part of a tiny orchestra. The time it takes to formulate a voice that speaks through mutism. (We write the word “mutism”, as an alternative to non-verbal, not in order to reproduce a stereotype, but because we like the similarity to the mutant, the mutating, the changing, the (in-)voluntary changing, the result of a change, the unstable.) This peculiar collection of letters works with our writing subjects as moments of memories. Reliving sexual moments—renaming sexual moments as sexual moments. Writing becomes an act of embodied and embrained tension and fusing. Maybe the text will revive in your hands—by reading it, you will write another version with us, of you. We are sensory strangers fucking through texts. Come play with us.

A note on Voices: This text is a dialogue. There are two voices (and their sub-voices, the voices they quote and paraphrase, the multitude in their vocalizations). But as a reader you might be confused by them. Because they are not separate. Writing together, we feel, is like, sort of, a t/s-sexual act. Bodies fusing. Brains fusing. The result is: Two is One and One is Many. The effect of blurring is what we aim for. I feel that your experience becomes mine. There might be an ethical problem with this: I might believe that “I” understand “you,” while in fact I violently reduce your being into a part of me. This is a risk we take. Because we believe that the Voices of the I-you-we are many more than those of the I and the You. We believe in confusion as a source of knowledge. I hope you, dear Reader, might feel the same.

Bertilsson Rosqvist and Jackson Perry (2021) call for production of “qualitative research into autistic peoples’ sexual and intimate lives without taking as a starting point an assumption of deficit, or certain non-autistic expectations of what counts as ‘sexual.’” Albeit a bit worried they end their analyses of sexual narrative in an online forum for autistic people, “is deficit so much a part of meanings of both sexual and neurological difference that we are unable to untangle the validity of our own sexual experience from the stories we have been told about it?”

I am thinking of friends with benefits, of sensory strangers (Jackson Perry et al, 2020) fucking through texts. I am thinking of the textual space with you as a sensory amusement park.

At sex, I have never experienced fusing. In text: One Hundred Times. In text I feel elated—the intellectual and emotional in the text is like a sexual pleasure (once I read Marguerite Duras’ book *Emily L* while riding a boat in a storm, thinking it was like taking drugs—thinking about what Madeleine Ryan’s *I in A Room Called Earth* describes as not needing to take drugs, she is already in the sensory amusement park). But sex. I have never understood that while people can come from being close to others, their physical reaction feels incomprehensible. We try to write about the experience called SEX.

I think I get more orgasm-like feelings from texts. It kind of ends up with the same text that becomes sex (or in my case stretch). I think about this with the fact that I do NOT UNDERSTAND the boundary between sex and non-sex. And that the sexual or orgasmic pleasure for me is seldom connected with attraction to another person.

I am thinking about the idea of mutual (couple) sexuality, partnered-arousal sexual practices (Byers and Nichols, 2019), person-oriented sexual behaviors in contrast to “some form of sexual behavior” (Van Bourgondiera et al, 1997). The NT-defined sexuality is partly based “sexual scripts” (Gagnon& Simon, 1973) which is predefined, social norms/expectations that the NT person more or less consciously absorbs and makes their own through the process of “sexual development,” which makes them difficult to break from. Partly personal chemistry. And partly social identity matching (that you fit well with each other for social reasons, you have the right/similar view of who you are/who you hang out with/where you want in life/what you are looking for

right now). So when I read what you write and think about how I function, I think for me, my sexuality is a sensory need.

I think of this with sex as a need rather than a desire—or is there a difference? I think, when I think about it, I do not know the difference? Or that I “know” theoretically but do not UNDERSTAND.

But we write sex as TEXT. We taste the words – they are so similar in our mouths!

Sex.

Text.

There is something with the EX.

We read:

... a text cannot have a stable meaning. Meanings and memory unfold over time and change shape in different contexts; though text presents a permanent trace of ideas and signs, our interpretations of that trace are inexhaustibly complex (Colyar, 2009, p. 434).

We think: sex cannot have a stable meaning. Sex is traces of ideas and signs.

M. Remi Yergeau writes about the autistic neurological position as queer:

I believe in the potentialities of autistic stories and gestures, of neuroqueering what we've come to understand as language and being. I believe that autistic rhetorics complicate what we traditionally hold dear across a plurality of fields. (Yergeau, 2018, 5)

To be autistic is to be neuroqueer, and to be neuroqueer is to be idealizing, desiring, sidling. (Yergeau, 2018, 18)

We read our sex as idealizing, desiring, sidling. By that we mean a way of relating to the world that is based on non-normative desires— i.e. liking different things in different ways—and moving sideways, taking different

paths than the neurotypical norms ask us to do. With this we want to point out how the neuroqueer position does not only recognize the difficulties neurodivergent people experience, but also the pleasures and advantages. We want to untangle the validity of our own sexual experience from the stories we have been told about it.

Because I've had a lot of crushes, people I'm attracted to enormously—usually my teachers (think of the I in my book *Hunger* (Nygren, 2020) who is totally crazy about Helena, but it's kind of intellectual— on a level where Helena's intellectual shortcomings also become sexy—and that the physical comes in as fantasies. It's pretty much the story of my life. I'm attracted to an older woman in some kind of teacher position—I guess in a way it's about a kind of submissive role, the fantasies are in the book (as in my head) often about going into a role where I become submissive, and that this role play takes the form of a teacher-student). When I am so attracted to a person, EVERYTHING becomes sexual for me. I remember a very clear occasion when I was in love with Anne-Marie, and we had coffee together. I went home and when I got home to my little student room it was as if the whole room was alive (note, it was like very sad, not a single flower, because I would only live there for three months, and a corner was cordoned off because there was Louise's double bass that she kept there while she was in South America and I was not allowed to touch it because it was expensive), I had to walk around the room and touch all the things, to feel that the surfaces were still there, and I felt how things made my body kind of dissolve, and just walking around the room and feeling made me really dizzy. The feeling was not entirely different from anxiety, as I also often feel that the room seems to break into me. Similar experiences have happened in other contexts. I have a crush and I experience enormous sexual tension - and the person who is the subject of my crush most likely knows nothing at all.

I think again about the love/desire for the world versus the love/desire for a person. The person-oriented sexual behaviors present a contrast to “some form of sexual behavior”. A bounded versus boundless desire.

For me, these probably merge anyway. It can start with a desire for a person, but this arouses a desire for the world. Rarely the opposite, that is, a desire for the world is manifested in a desire for a person, but I understand how this can happen.

I'm thinking of a man I'm having a sexual affair with right now.

How does it feel to reflect on an ongoing thing? Does it make the thing more or less sexual? Do you usually think a lot about your sex stuff? Thinking about what we have written elsewhere, which comes from my chat with Theo: autism as compulsive analyzing. And I think that the compulsive is sometimes also a pleasure in itself. (Like my sex experience is close to anxiety.) And that the analyzing can contribute to a deepening. And that it can cause the sex experience to leak into other parts of life.

Yes, I'm definitely doing the compulsive analyzing. Until I have finished some kind of puzzle. It's again like two parallel tracks. The head is doing a compulsive analyzing. The body is doing a compulsive analyzing but not in an intellectual way, it is not about conceptualizing the experiences. More like the body getting to know the other's body, learns how to dance with the other's body. Back to the sexual scripts again. The absence of them means that the body must be with the other body and develop a fusing (Shore, 2003), over and over again. Over and over again. Over and over again. The monotropic (Murray et al, 2005), focused experience of the other's body. He says to me, be silent so I can focus on my experience of your pussy. Focus on your pussy. Focus on your pussy. Focus. I got silent. In a good way. It turned me on. Not as in being silenced. It made the sense of fusing growing stronger. He is so intense. He pours his horniness through his skin into my skin, into my body. Through his breath. He pours his horniness through his breath into my breath, into my body.

This means that the head's compulsive analyzing in a way does not interfere with the body's process. It is again as if it is the body that has got a new partner, someone told me when I told them about him. You are in love. I needed to process that. I got silent. In a good way. Not as in being silenced. Turning back to the mutism, the non-verbal. A space inhabited, by choice or just, because. The someone didn't expect me to tell right away, to know. Am I in love? And the head does its best to grasp, understand. Sometimes I think of it as a kind of big sisterly love. That the body gives itself up, is swallowed up, is in the sound of a thousand tiny voices, in some form of non-verbal holistic formation that ends with me knowing the other's body (but still perhaps knowing very little about who "the person" is, no social identity match-making, not another head). And the head goes next to it, gathers

details and creates an intellectual pattern (i.e. more of who the other is as a “person,” as a head, but perhaps also details. Such as how much the other really wants to invest in the “us.” What does s/he really want and feel. Where will “us” lead to. Can s/he be talked with. Is it interesting to talk to her/him. What do I really want, what do I feel. Am I in love?

I think of what you describe, about the body and the head. And I think about the other person’s place. There is so much self-care or self-love in desire. And I think about how I am afraid of being close to the one I am attracted to because I am afraid of what the desire does to the other. My problem when I have had romantic relationships, is that the other demands something of me that I do not manage to live up to. I think I only have had such relationships with NTs, but that was before I was diagnosed and I did not think about it at all. They have wanted me to talk on the phone for a long time and often. They have wanted me to want a future with a shared housing. This has effectively killed the affection I have felt, and I have begun to feel reluctance, but have not been able to express my reluctance (which is expressed in the way that I disappear a bit). It is more about an NT sociality and norms around partnership, than about them as individuals. I would like to have these people in my life, but I do not want us to want to move together. I want a relationship where I can trust the other person to put their desire before mine, so that I can do the same.

Yes, in that aspect, I recognized myself very much in Ryan’s character. Her enjoyment of the world as just self-care, self-love.

Earlier this evening I couldn’t figure out how to connect the new speaker system, so I’m listening to a Spice Girls CD, and relishing in the sound of the first album I ever bought, while dressing up like the kid I was when I bought it. I loved wearing Mum’s kimonos and dancing in the mirror when I was a child. It’s like I knew I would be this person eventually and tonight she’s so much fun. Oh my goddess, I can’t think of anything better. It’s the moment before the moment and I can breathe. Anything can happen from here, and I’m in love with myself. (Ryan, *A Room Called Earth*, pp. 33-34)

I think of my feeling of being “whole” and at the same time being “the sound of a thousand tiny voices” “Like a little orchestra”. I thought a while ago that

I have been “single” for too long to really want something other than what I have now. But now I think in relation to what you write that it is more about someone who “puts their desire before mine, so that I can do the same”, who is whole in her/himself, who does not have to be, become whole together. When I was less “whole,” I was looking for someone to be intense with, to fuse with, to become symbiotic with, to become one with. Now I mostly want to fuse for a few hours, then I want to be myself again. After being alone, with myself, for a while, I get the urge to fuse again for a few hours. It’s like writing texts. I want to write intensely and symbiotically for a few hours then I want to be alone, with myself, for a while. After being alone, with myself, for a while, I get the urge to be symbiotic again for a few hours. I think I was partly attracted to my former partner’s “whole.” He was “whole in himself.” But at the same time, it became an inequality, that I wanted to fuse, become one, and he probably just wanted to be intense and symbiotic for a few hours, then he wanted to be himself again. After that intense moment, he wanted to do something else.

Oh, that’s what I definitely decided is my motto in life: SHORT & INTENSIVE. (note, does not mean it as suicidal, as it has been interpreted as) I want theater to be short and intense. I want my writing to be that.

Wężniejewska et al. writes:

Our writing as a pedagogy of asylum (Włodarczyk, 2016) A space and an association where one can develop the language of hope, a space for combating capitalism in everyday relationships, and for creating community, friendship (Giroux, 2013)? Is it just a shelter? A form of withdrawal in the guise of commitment? But do we not exist in words and through words? Are we not instituted by them to be the subject, injured by them, repressed (Butler, 1997)

We ask ourselves: What does writing this sex-thing mean to our needs and desires? We think in terms of a neuroqueer pedagogy, a neuroqueer sexual education:

UNLEARNING, RELEARNING.

Our desires, or our ideas of desiring, are constructed through neurotypical,

patriarchal, capitalistic, Western structures. Following the Rules creates Pleasure. Breaking the Rules creates another kind of Pleasure.

Writing means capitulating for the Power of Language. But coming to the Language with an autistic mind means neuroqueering the World of Words.

Yergeau points to autism being a rhetorical thing.

Our autistic sexualities are rhetorical.

Miele Rodas writes in *Autistic Disturbances. Theorizing Autism Poetics from DSM to Robinson Crusoe* (2018)—the title borrowed from Leo Kanners “Autistic Disturbances of Affective Contact” (1943).

In particular, this book recognizes echoes, tones, patterns, and confluences between autistic language, which is typically pathologized and devalued, and language used in culturally valued literary texts. Gertrude Stein’s “If I Told Him, a Complete Portrait of Picasso” offers a cue for the kinds of possible resonances:

Exact resemblance to exact resemblance the exact resemblance as exact resemblance, exactly as resembling, exactly resembling, exactly in resemblance exactly and resemblance. For this is so. Because. (190)

Here, the cascading repetitions tease and question, like Elaine C’s words, disrupting ordinary cadences and rhetoric, thwarting intuitive communication, ordinary expectations of transparent and transactional language. Exactly resembling, exactly in resemblance exactly and resemblance. The fragmentary nature of the language, the prismatic repetitions, phrases angled with slight differences create dense concentrations of sound and potential meaning.

There is a pleasure in the text: exact resemblance, there is so much desire in the words. For a nonspeaking person, the words are precious and disturbing. They are forbidden fruit and the pleasure of stealing them is like having sex

with someone you're not supposed to have sex with, in a way and in a place you are not supposed to.

The fragmentary nature of the language, mirrors a fragmentary feeling of being sexual.

Hannah Emerson (2022) writes about the peripheral:

Yes I prefer the peripheral

because it limits the vision.

It does focus my attention.

Direct looking just is too

much killing of the moment.

Looking oblique littles

the moment into many

helpful moments.

We read the fragmented in line with *limits & oblique littles & into many*, and as a contrast and resistance to the direct looking killing the moment, we want to, not-kill, we want to help in helpful ways, read the little sex-ways-places.

I remember Thomas playing the clarinet in the orchestra where I played the flute when I was 14. I was ABSOLUTELY NOT attracted to him. But sometimes he put his hand on my shoulder (it happened maybe three times in total), and I felt something in that touch. As *Magical Hands*. I had a relationship with a girl I read as an autistic. She was my bestie's girlfriend. We never had sex. I massaged her and she said I had these, *Magical Hands*. We had stimulating intellectual and emotional conversations. I got my diagnosis while we were. I said that she might also have a bout of autism—she broke away violently. Noo. I did not know how to handle it. I felt that I was made the patient in the

relationship— because she accepted that I was autistic, became as relieved, because it explained problems we had with intensity and my behavior, but she refused to see herself as atypical. It felt like she denied our belonging, declared me crazy and declared that she was the Real Person in the relationship. After that we slipped apart.

My strongest sexual memory from a short relationship was when we stood opposite each other in a door frame. It's so long ago so I was mostly just queer then. But now in retrospect, maybe I could describe it as a neurodivergent moment. The air, the atmosphere between us that was so condensed, intense, monotropically focused, as we stood there.

“as one of us puts it ‘it is as though the air between us thickens and conducts our thoughts, emotions, and needs without passing via language or cognition,’” (Jackson Perry et al, 2020, p 136)

That shared social flow (Jackson Perry et al, 2020). We just looked at each other. I do not remember if it was direct eye contact or if it was with flickering eyes. I could feel the intensity of the focus. When the focus is mutual, perfect, with everything one has (body, mind), one directs one's focus towards the other and feels the other's focus directed towards oneself. I think we started shaking, that the breathing became heavier. But it was mostly like superficial signs. The important thing was that mutual focus. To be locked in a way, like a kind of mental bondage. Not being able/willing to tear oneself out of focus.

Oh. I wonder about the superficial signs. I feel the signs on my skin. Tasting: Sigh-sign. Breathing: Superficial and heavy. Yergeau writes:

Moreover, the horrors that attend a rhetorical logics cannot be separated from logics purposed to subjugate and tame the queer. Autistic people have long identified with or as the queer—whether by means of sexuality or gender identity, or by means of a queer asociality that fucks norms. Neuroqueer rhetorics recoup the logics of symptoms and transform them into logics of (non) practice—orienting, moving, sidling, crippling, verbing that which is beside. (2018, 92)

The superficial (non)practice of signs in a skin-brain. To be: Beside, next to, near and non-touching. I read about the air between the bodies. I touch the air between my skin and the text-skin. Touch-non-touch. Can't tame the air. No. Can't tame the yes.

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Anna Nygren is an autistic PhD student in literary criticism at Åbo Akademi University, Finland; a lecturer in Literary composition at HDK-Valand Academy of Art and Design (Gothenburg university, Sweden); a writer, poet, playwright, and textile artist.

Hanna Bertilsdotter Rosqvist is an autistic associate professor in Sociology and a senior lecturer in Social work at Södertörn university, Sweden.