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## Critical Autism Studies: The State of the Field

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# Critical Autism Studies: The State of the Field

Sonya Freeman Loftis

*... the power relations in the field of autism studies remain unbalanced.*

—Damian Milton and Sara Ryan, 2023

*When it comes to policy, parents and clinicians certainly have a say, and deserve a seat at the table, but the table rightly belongs to us. We are autistic people.*

—John Elder Robison, 2020

**W**e need critical autism studies. Some academics might question that need, wondering why the larger field of disability studies or the nascent field of neurodiversity studies might not serve the needs of autistic scholars and activists. Ultimately, I think that issues surrounding public discourses about autism have become so loaded, so volatile, so complex, and so fraught that autistic people, specifically, need our own critical space and theoretical apparatus. The voices of autistic people are often ignored. I could cite a near endless litany of sources to prove it (Loftis, 2015; McGuire, 2016; McGrath, 2017; Yergeau, 2018; Woods et al., 2018; Milton & Ryan, 2023). Although if you are an autistic person, or you have an autistic friend or family member, you probably don't need any convincing.

My own experience as an autistic scholar is that autistic people face a barrage of challenges in making our voices heard in academic spaces: the larger public conversation about autism focuses on the work of neurotypical psychiatrists, psychologists, and educators; neurotypical parent advocates can inadvertently (or sometimes advertently) silence autistic adults; stereotypes and ableist attitudes frequently exclude autistic people from academic (or even public) discourse; and social norms and expectations can discount our voices and marginalize us in ways well-meaning neurotypical people may not even notice. In addition, the socially constructed nature of what is, in many ways, fundamentally a social disability or difference leads autism to become a subject of discussion in some areas of ethics and philosophy. As Joyce Davidson and Michael Orsini (2013) argue, "what

we (think we) know about autism—the so-called facts—are difficult to dislodge or disentangle from the social and discursive worlds in which they are embedded” (p. 14). While that might be true for a variety of disability identities, the pervasive public interest in autism combined with controversy within autism communities and Autistic communities has made it especially true for autistic people. For these reasons and others, critical autism studies serves a specific need that larger and more inclusive fields, such as disability studies and neurodiversity studies, cannot fully meet. Fortuitously, critical autism studies, although a relatively new area of scholarly inquiry, is also a diverse and vibrant one. In this essay, I will attempt to define critical autism studies and to provide a brief survey of some of the major work done in this field so far.

Critical autism studies, or CAS, is an interdisciplinary field of inquiry inaugurated by and led by autistic people that embraces principles of neurodiversity, identity, embodied knowledge, lived experience, disability studies, disability justice, and the social model of disability (Milton & Ryan, 2023, pp. 23-24). Many CAS scholars have a background in the social sciences and/or humanities, and their work challenges medical definitions of autism as deficit, ableist social attitudes, and representational stereotyping of autistic people by approaching the study of autism as diagnosis and/or identity with an emancipatory agenda (Davidson & Orsini, 2013, p. 76; Milton & Ryan, 2023, p. 30). Although CAS includes work published in traditional scholarly venues (monographs, university presses, peer reviewed journals), it also includes work published or circulated in less traditional venues (blogs, online and open access publishing, self-publishing, etc.).

Thus, CAS is an ideological space in which traditional scholarship and contemporary activism meet, sometimes productively and sometimes uncomfortably. Although there can be tension between “academic” and “nonacademic” discourses (and, indeed, the boundary line between the two—if there even is one—is often very blurry—for example, some blogs contain content one would ordinarily find in a peer-reviewed journal article and vice versa), one goal of the field seems to be bringing different kinds of discourses into dialogue with each other and amplifying the voices of autistic people wherever and however they are making themselves heard. As Davidson and Orsini (2013) explain, “academic debates must be integrated into broader discourses about autism that circulate in online autistic communities,

among caregivers, and in a wide variety of other ‘nonacademic’ contexts” (p. 8). The reverse is also true: articles and books published in the field of CAS in “traditional” scholarly venues often include citations to blogs and other online sources that are originating in the Autistic community rather than in academia. In other words, a wide variety of people engage with CAS using a wide variety of approaches in a wide variety of venues. Although CAS overlaps with both disability studies and with neurodiversity studies, it isn’t really either one. It is a field specifically for rethinking autism, in particular, as a disability that has drawn public attention and controversy, as well as a field of study that has drawn a large number of autistic scholars and activists who want to share in the production of knowledge about autism and autistic experience. As Damian Milton and Sara Ryan (2023) explain, “Critical autism studies offer potential and possibilities to continue to seek the emancipation of autistic people, focus on intersectionality and injustices, and for academics who are autistic and non-autistic to work together in producing important scholarship that has reach and impact” (p. 30).

Although the history of the term “critical autism studies” is relatively brief, going back only about a decade, the field’s short history has included controversy over the issues of autistic authorship and voice (Milton & Ryan, 2023, p. 24; Woods, et al., 2018, p. 974). According to Milton and Ryan, “the term ‘critical autism studies’ only started gaining currency in academic studies following a workshop focused on this subdiscipline organized by Joyce Davidson and Michael Orsini in Ottawa, Canada, in 2010” (p. 24). This was around the same time that Larry Arnold began *Autonomy: The Critical Journal of Interdisciplinary Autism Studies* (2012). However, the relatively brief history of CAS as a field has been rife with controversy. For example, autistic scholars have (rightly) objected to books, articles, and conferences that claim to be engaging in CAS while excluding autistic people and autistic voices (Woods et al., 2018, p. 975; Milton & Ryan, 2023, p. 27). As Richard Woods et al. (2018) explain, autistic activists have “challenged CAS scholars who are only interested in talking about autism, in contrast to others (including autistic scholars) who are pursuing the emancipation of the autistic population” (p. 975).

Milton and Ryan (2023) warn that neurotypical scholars working in the area must keep in mind “the importance of critical autism researchers taking seriously a commitment to research that avoids reproducing hierarchical

relations within marginalized groups” (p. 27). K. Bottema-Beutel et al. note that writing about autism should be “Accessible, inclusive of autistic participation and perspectives, reflective of the priorities of the autistic community, of high quality and written in a way that doesn’t contribute to the stigmatisation of autistic people” (as cited by Milton & Ryan, 2023, p. 31). In this article, I consider the field of critical autism studies broadly, approaching works that take a liberatory stance toward autistic rights and social inclusion regardless of the neurotype of the author.

I freely admit that my background as a professor and Shakespeare scholar means that my reading habits gravitate toward books, particularly those published in traditional peer-reviewed venues. Thus, this list is by no means complete and is not intended to be. Even my deep interest in reading doesn’t mean that I have read it all, and my opinions and interpretations are my own and by no means authoritative. I am a human who is learning and growing just like everyone else. Nevertheless, I hope my discussion here gives a sense of the robust strength of this ever-growing field and also a glimpse of some of the key issues being discussed within the field right now. CAS is changing the way academics think about autism in much the same way that the neurodiversity movement is changing the way the larger world thinks about mental disability and mental difference.

## Defining the Field: Further Reading

Joyce Davidson and Michael Orsini’s *Worlds of Autism* (2013) and Damian Milton and Sara Ryan’s *The Routledge International Handbook of Critical Autism Studies* (2023) are probably the best places to begin for general background. Davidson and Orsini identify three main themes in critical autism studies:

Careful attention to the ways in which power relations shape the field of autism. Concern to advance new, enabling narratives of autism that challenge the predominant (deficit-focused and degrading) constructions that influence public opinion, policy, and popular culture. Commitment to develop new analytical frameworks using inclusive and nonreductive methodological and theoretical approaches to study the nature and culture of autism. (p. 12)

The *Routledge International Handbook of Critical Autism Studies* adds to these precepts the tenet of autistic leadership and a focus on an emancipatory agenda. Milton and Ryan (2023) explain their approach as:

. . . draw[ing] on the three core conceptual strands identified by Davidson and Orsini and further develop[ing] them with the addition of a fourth strand to the original conceptualisation of critical autism studies which locates the work of autistic academics, activists, and professionals at the centre of the discipline. (p. 24)

One contributor to the collection, Stephen Connolly, defines “an Emancipatory methodology” as one that “focuses on repositioning the power from the researcher to the community being researched” (as cited by Milton & Ryan, 2023, p. 16). Another book that is useful in providing a basic introduction to issues explored in critical autism studies is Hanna Bertilsdotter Rosqvist, Nick Chown, and Anna Stenning’s *Neurodiversity Studies: A New Critical Paradigm* (2020). Although “neurodiversity” includes a wide variety of different disability labels and identities, there are many autistic authors and chapters focused on autism in this collection. As the authors declare in the introduction, “this book aims to problematize neurotypical domination of the institutions and practices of academic knowledge production” (p. 2).

In addition to these defining and foundational texts, other books and journals can provide further context and historical background. For a history of the neurodiversity movement as written by autistic people, see Steven K. Kapp *Autistic Community and the Neurodiversity Movement* (2020). This lively and highly readable collection summarizes key events and concepts from the neurodiversity movement, providing a historical timeline that helps preserve the history of autistic culture. This edited collection is currently offered as an open access ebook. The two main journals in the field at present are *Autonomy: The Critical Journal of Interdisciplinary Autism Studies* and this journal, *Ought: The Journal of Autistic Culture*. *Autonomy* is autistic-run and freely available online. It appears that the journal published five issues from 2012-2019, all of which are available. It features material ranging from classic autism rights readings by Jim Sinclair to more recent opinion pieces and peer reviewed articles. *Ought* was begun in 2019, with a neurotypical lead editor and a heavily-autistic editorial board. *Ought* includes peer-reviewed articles,

poetry, creative works, and artwork by autistic people and neurotypical family members, caregivers, and educators. It is published bi-annually. Both *Autonomy* and *Ought* have a policy that each peer-reviewed work should have at least one autistic peer-reviewer. Two excellent collections of essays edited by Julia Bascom, *Loud Hands: Autistic People, Speaking* (2012), and *And Straight on Till Morning: Essays on Autism Acceptance* (2013) offer diverse perspectives from autistic authors whose various approaches align with the field of CAS.

I'm only aware of a few books that offer theoretical and intersectional approaches while falling under the larger category of CAS. Anne McGuire's *War on Autism: On the Cultural Logic of Normative Violence* (2016) offers useful theoretical ways of analyzing cultural norms that authorize violence against autistic people. M. Remi Yergeau's *Authoring Autism: On Rhetoric and Neurological Queerness* (2018) provides a queer theory approach to autistic rhetoric. Lydia X. Z. Brown, E. Ashkenazy, and Morénike Giwa Onaiwu's *All the Weight of Our Dreams: On Living Racialized Autism* (2017) is the first edited collection to focus on the intersectionality of autistic identity and race. Clearly, there's room for growth and new work in these under-researched areas.

There has been a strong strand in CAS of scholars who have approached topics of literature, film, popular culture, and representation. Stuart Murray's *Representing Autism: Culture, Narrative, Fascination* (2008) was the first such scholarly monograph and is still a key text in the field. Murray's book was published in the same year as Mark Osteen's edited collection *Autism and Representation* (2008). Both are excellent books. Murray and Osteen could both be said to take a CAS approach before the advent of CAS. I am the author of two books in the area of autism and literary representation: *Imagining Autism: Fiction and Stereotypes on the Spectrum* (2015) and *Shakespeare and Disability Studies* (2021). Julia Miele Rodas's *Autistic Disturbances: Theorizing Autism Poetics from the DSM to Robinson Crusoe* (2018) is an excellent book on autism and literature that theorizes autism as artistry. Finally, James McGrath's *Naming Adult Autism: Culture, Science, Identity* (2017) branches out to consider popular culture alongside literature and also delves into some deep theoretical thinking. It is a highly informative and enjoyable read.

## Conclusion

The work of creating and constructing the field of critical autism studies is ongoing. To return to the two epigraphs that open this essay, if we seek to change the “unbalanced” power relations at work in scholarship about autism, then we will need a critical approach that values and prioritizes autistic perspectives, that critiques the dehumanizing medical model of disability, and that embraces and creates disability justice for all autistic people by fostering new ways of thinking about mental difference. John Elder Robison is right to assert that the metaphorical table at which CAS is discussed belongs to autistic people. I hope that readers of this essay, whatever their neurological make-up, disability identity, or positionality in relation to autism, will find ways to use critical autism studies that are emancipatory and empowering for all of us..

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