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Essays

Gender Copia: Feminist Rhetorical Perspectives on an Autistic Concept of Sex/Gender

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The prevalence of nontraditional gender identities in many autistic people raises provocative questions for feminist scholars. In particular, autistic writers often invite alternative understandings of sex/gender as a multiple, rhetorical phenomenon. Autobiographies, blogs, and Internet posts show how autistic individuals view gender as a copia, or tool for inventing multiple possibilities through available sex/gender discourses. Four particular discourses emerge through which autistic people understand gender: identification, neurodiversity, performance, and queer identity.

Keywords autism, disability, gender, identification, queer, rhetoric

As a child, Jane Meyerding found girls confusing. She simply did not understand “girl talk”—the giggling, gossiping, and secret sharing that marks young girls’ socializing (158). “I was sailing blind,”¹ Meyerding writes, “through a world full of gender signals invisible to my genderless self” (164). While she did not desire to be a boy, Meyerding did not readily identify as a girl either.

A biological male named Shiva writes, similarly: “When i see ‘gender’ as a tick-box category on a form, i feel similarly to if, on a form asking for details of a vehicle, it asked for ‘miles per gallon’ when my vehicle was powered by something completely different (and that can’t be measured in gallons), like say solar electricity—i just don’t really consider myself to belong to the category of beings that have gender.”

These views, written by two autistic individuals, raise provocative questions about the concept of gender. Although sometimes portrayed stereotypically as a devastating disorder of communication and social interaction, autism is increasingly recognized as part of the spectrum of human neurological conditions. Drawing on social models of disability, activists and practitioners argue that autism is best understood as a neurological difference, one that becomes apparent due to social norms

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requiring certain kinds of communication and behavior that may be difficult for those who process information differently (Brownlow). Autistic individuals describe a range of differences they experience navigating the world, which may range from sensory differences (such as high sensitivity to light or sound), synesthesia (the blending of one or more senses, such as colors with sounds), difficulty processing multiple inputs (such as speech and vision), or trouble recognizing faces. Some autistic people also point to a greater attention to detail, an ability to focus intently on a subject or topic, or the ability to remember visual and aural information. Due both to their ability to denaturalize social norms and to their neurological differences, autistic individuals can offer novel insights into gender as a social process. Examining gender from an autistic perspective highlights some elements as socially constructed that may otherwise seem natural and supports an understanding of gender as fluid and multidimensional.

As Kristin Bumiller has noted, a surprising number of autistic people identify themselves as gender neutral, androgynous, or otherwise nontraditional in their sense of gendered identity. In her article “Quirky Citizens,” Bumiller mentions this fact in her discussion of the neurodiversity movement, which draws on other social movements, especially disability rights, to argue for the self-determination of autistic people. Yet Bumiller argues that the neurodiverse position “falls short of advancing a feminist critique of gender stereotyping or challenging the gendered organization of reproduction, labor, education, and citizenship,” and that the neurodiversity movement “would indeed benefit from incorporating a broader-based feminist critique given the enormous pressure for forced gender identification and other forms of normalization” (967). Certainly, feminist insights have much to add to neurodiversity as a movement, such as critique of discourses of “fitting in” that often encourage stereotypical gender performances for teens seeking to muddle through the high school years, or the pathologization of nonconforming gender presentations such as gender identity disorder (GID) in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* published by the American Psychiatric Association. In this article, though, I argue that the opposite case is also true: feminist and gender theorists can benefit from an autistic critique of gender.

In particular, an autistic perspective points to the usefulness of a rhetorical model for understanding gender, one that considers gender as providing a range of available discourses through which individuals make sense of, model, and perform a gendered identity. While communication scholars have focused heavily on how gender identities are disciplined (Sloop), performed in oratory (see Buchanan; Mattingly), or constrained by cultural discourses (Johnson), we have fewer accounts of how the formation of gender identities themselves, especially nontraditional ones, constitutes a rhetorical process.

As Joanne Meyerowitz points out in her study of the history of transsexuality, *How Sex Changed*, individuals “[articulate] their sense of self with the language and cultural forms available to them,” using available “labels, stories, and theories to understand [one]self” (12, 37). These components form part of what Aristotle would call the “available means” of rhetoric, the source materials rhetors consult in constructing an argument (I.2). In the case of contemporary gender forms, these available means include scientific, feminist, social constructionist, and transgender/transsexual theories, along with public representations of gender through images, fashions, media, and the like. Autistic understandings of gender support this multiple, rhetorical model in which individuals draw upon available discourses in order to understand and present themselves.

Of course, not all autistic individuals identify according to a nontraditional category; many individuals with autism identify unproblematically as male or female. I do not mean to suggest that the examples considered here are in any way representative of the entire population of autistic people. Some scientific studies posit a slightly higher than average percentage of autistic people have nontraditional gender identifications and sexual preferences (see, for instance, de Vries et al., Kraemer et al., and Mukkades). However, the data drawn from these studies make conclusions problematic, in part because each uses different categories (sexual identification, gender identity, etc.) and sometimes employs problematic discourses—as in studies of GID or “gender dysphoria”—which pathologize alternative gender presentations or identities.

To better understand how autistic individuals draw upon gender discourses as tools for self-understanding, I culled accounts from Internet forums, blogs, and published memoirs. This research stems from a larger, book-length project that draws on memoirs, scientific articles, reports, blogs, and Internet sites. For this article, I drew on those sites where authors discussed gender identity from a personal perspective (rather than reports about someone else’s gender identity). Because this might be considered an accidental sample, it should not be taken as representative of the autistic population as a whole. Nonetheless, these voluntary discussions of gender might yield less scripted responses than those gathered from an interview or survey methodology, where participants might respond in more stereotypical ways to the (non-autistic) researcher’s questions or methods.² While a stereotypical view might suggest that autistic persons would be oblivious to social cues, my reading of texts written by autistic people suggests that many carefully monitor and study social norms, including gendered behaviors. For this reason, examining how individuals discuss gender outside of an interview or survey setting seems appropriate.

The sources considered here imply not a binary model (masculine/feminine) or even a view of gender as a continuum, but something more like a *copia*, the rhetorical term Erasmus used to describe the practice of selecting “certain expressions and mak[ing] as many variations of them as possible” (17). *Copia* provides a strategy of invention, a rhetorical term for the process of generating ideas. To be specific, *copia* involves proliferation, multiplying possibilities so as to locate the range of persuasive options available to a rhetor. I find the concept of invention fitting to describe the kind of rhetoric in which many autistic individuals engage when they discuss sex and gender, a rhetoric we might consider, following Mary Hawkesworth, a feminist rhetoric, insofar as it seeks to “call worlds into being, inscribe new orders of possibility, validate frames of reference and forms of explanation, and reconstitute histories serviceable for present and future projects” (1988).

Individuals who find themselves engaged in this rhetorical search for terms with which to understand themselves can draw on a wide array of terms or representations, such as *genderqueer*, *transgendered*, *femme*, *butch*, *boi*, *neutrois*, *androgynous*, *bi-* or *tri-gender*, *third gender*, and even *geek*. In addition to gender categories, individuals may also employ terms related to sexuality, such as *straight*, *gay*, *lesbian*, *pansexual*, *bisexual*, and so on, or terms related to sexual identity, such as *male*, *female*, *male-to-female (MTF) transsexual*, *female-to-male (FTM) transsexual*, *intersex*, and so forth. These terms, along with theories that inform our understandings of gender itself, form part of the available means for gender identity that all individuals (including autistic people) may use. Each of these terms embeds a discursive history or genealogy

and provides rhetorical options for self-expression. In this article, I examine some of the ways gender serves an inventive purpose for autistic individuals: as disidentification, as a social code, as a role performance, and as an idiosyncratic identity.

A Note about Autism and Rhetoric

In official discourse, autism is currently diagnosed according to a set of criteria in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* of the American Psychiatric Association, which include impaired social interaction, communication problems, and restricted or repetitive behaviors.

Experts now consider autism a spectrum disorder, with individuals falling along a scale on any of these measures. It is important to recognize that how autism is defined depends on the cultural context. In her work on intellectual disabilities, Licia Carlson notes that “the etiology and treatment for it have depended as much on social trends, stereotypes, and discriminatory practices and assumptions as they have on hard science” (93). We can say the same for autism, which has been constructed in different time periods and by different interest groups as a childhood psychosis, as vaccine injury, as a disorder of empathy or theory of mind, and as “Silicon Valley syndrome” (or an effect of geek inbreeding).³

However, many individuals who identify as autistic (or according to related identifications, such as “Aspie” or a “person with Asperger’s syndrome”) have contested this scientific definition for its portrayal of autism in the medicalized language of deficit and impairment. Drawing on insights from disability studies, these individuals argue that autism is better understood as difference, rather than disability; as an alternative way of thinking, communicating, and interacting in the world. In rhetorical studies, for instance, Paul Heilker and Melanie Yergeau have argued that autism should be understood as a rhetoric: “a way of being in the world through language, a rhetoric we may not have encountered or recognized frequently in the past nor value highly in academic contexts, but a rhetoric nonetheless” (487). Understanding autism as a rhetoric draws attention to autistic thinking and communication as valuable and potentially transformative of our rhetorical theories and assumptions, as opposed to the deficit model in the DSM definition, which assumes autism represents impaired communication and that autistic people are therefore in need of remediation.⁴ For instance, Heilker and Yergeau explain that echolalia, or repetitive speech, is often seen as a marker of autistic impairment. From a rhetorical viewpoint, though, “this repeated use of stock material starts sounding more like a traditional and valued kind of invention” (490).

It is in this spirit that I would like to consider gender and autism, as well. Autistic enactments of gender do not simply represent disordered identifications or symptoms of autistic impairment, as psychiatric experts might have it, but may be understood as rhetorical acts, part of what Jim Corder describes as the “rhetorical creation” in which we all engage: “Out of an inventive world (a past, a set of capacities, a way of thinking) [. . . we are] always creating structures of meaning and generating a style, a way of being in the world” (152).

Gender Identification and Disidentification

Autistic individuals may understand gender as a process of disidentification. From this perspective, one might relate one’s own sense of gender identity to observations

of available gender roles or performances and find a lack of coherence. Such a perspective challenges rhetorical theorist Kenneth Burke's notion that "identity is not individual . . . a man [*sic*] 'identifies himself' with all sorts of manifestations beyond himself" (*Attitudes Toward History* 263). Gender provides one of these manifestations. Traditionally, "proper" gender identification has been considered a marker of a person's social development, and children were expected to identify unproblematically with their biological sex by the time they reached school age, although attention to alternative gender identities has lessened this expectation somewhat. We now understand that gender identification is a rhetorical process that happens incrementally and not always without conflict. The experiences of some autistic individuals highlight the rhetorical and fragmented nature of this process.

For some autistic people, gender does not easily serve as an available resource for identity. In "Growing up Genderless," Meyerding describes her "inability to identify with other women" (157). Rather than identifying as a man, as some might assume, or as a lesbian (a position Meyerding tried out in the 1970s), she argues instead that she finds gender incomprehensible and inapplicable to her experience. Another autistic woman, Amanda Baggs, writes on her blog that "gender is a concept that, while I understand intellectually that it is greatly important for other people, is entirely absent and incomprehensible to me." Meyerding and Baggs both note a general "gender-blindness," a tendency that shapes not only their perceptions of others but their own identities. Autistic men sometimes write about similar experiences. For one poster on a transgender forum, being male "feels a bit like wearing the wrong sizes clothes" ("Transgender People on the Autistic Spectrum"). Online forums of this sort include autistic men who present a range of gendered self-concepts, ranging from male-to-female transsexuals, nongendered individuals, to gay, straight, geek, and more.

These understandings of gender—the notion of living in a nongendered way—might strike some as a utopian condition, especially feminist and gender scholars who have long argued for a more flexible system. Without a sense of gender, one cannot be susceptible to gender stereotypes or discrimination. One might conceivably feel a sense of freedom to style oneself, physically and emotionally, according to preferences not dictated by gender.

Yet not everyone finds gender-blindness utopic. For some individuals, gender disorientation can be emotionally painful. Amanda Forrest Vivian writes in one post: "I'm upset because I feel like there's no word to describe my gender expression and the gender expression I'm attracted to. It's probably silly to be upset about not having a word for something, but because I don't feel represented in either straight or queer communities, I do have a desire to articulate what it is that I am" ("I'm So Butch I Wear Nightgowns"). While academics spend significant time deconstructing terms and questioning their usefulness, for individuals, having a term to describe oneself can be tremendously important. Vivian finds the lack of such a term problematic, perhaps in part because a term might provide resources for identification. When she writes that she does not feel respected in "either queer or straight communities," Vivian may be implying that there's a lack of identification or consubstantiality that would make it possible for her to feel accepted within those groups.

In a similar vein, the potential loss of an identificatory term can be equally troubling. One forum poster, SleepingChrysalid, writes that she was diagnosed with Asperger's as a child but has come to identify herself primarily as someone who is transgendered. Upon learning of a possible connection between the two, SleepingChrysalid panicked:

I am constantly plagued by the thought that my identity crisis may just be a result of aspergers [*sic*]. . . . It is crushing to hear that aspergers is characteristic of the male brain. My brain has many other female characteristics [*sic*]. I can think about my feelings. I can write beautiful essays and I am doing just as well in english as I am doing in math. I was doing better in english than in math last year.

This passage illustrates that SleepingChrysalid had built up an identity around the notion that she possessed a brain with “female characteristics.” She sorted a number of her abilities into that category, such as her writing and English skills (gendered female) as opposed to math skills (gendered male). The possibility of disrupting this orientation was frightening, since it would mean reshaping an orientation built up through rhetorical resources and now broken. Reorienting an identity around Asperger’s syndrome would require SleepingChrysalid to pick up the pieces and find new connections, new resources of identification.

Despite the difficulties of orienting oneself around a stable gender category, the topic of gender provides a point of identification for autistic individuals with nontraditional gender identities. On message boards and blogs, individuals share experiences with alternative gender self-concepts in ways that might be confirmatory. Rhetoric scholar Bryan Crable notes that this kind of interactional rhetoric can be crucial to establishing a secure identity. Internet communication can provide a source for interactional rhetoric or “discourse aimed at gaining another’s cooperation in the creation or defense of the rhetor’s desired identity” that is not otherwise available to individuals who might be isolated from others like them (1). Posts on one popular Internet site for autistic people, WrongPlanet.net, often take the form of identity confirmation, starting with a question like, “Is anyone else here . . . ?” (transsexual, a “girly girl,” etc.). The string of responses usually tends to second this identity. For instance, when one participant posted the question, “Does anyone else here have Aspergers and are gay?” he received the response, “We have an entire LGBT subforum” (Angelik). Or, more simply, when one poster asked, “Anyone else here not interested in relationships?” she received the simple response, “You are not alone” (Catster29). In short, online fora can offer resources and support for alternative self-identities that might be lacking elsewhere. These Web sites provide opportunities for interactional rhetoric that confirms and validates identities.

While many autistic individuals find gender itself confusing, a point of disidentification as much as identification, that does not necessarily mean that they identify with the opposite sex. Indeed, women who write about their experiences with gender often protest against the assumption that they are “male brained,” an assumption that follows from Simon Baron-Cohen’s “extreme male brain” theory of autism, which posits that autistic individuals demonstrate hyperdeveloped male attributes, such as a propensity for systems thinking, computers, and numbers, and a lack of female attributes, identified as social and empathizing skills. For example, while women identify a number of perseverations, or intense interests, they do not always connect those to a male brain. In an online discussion published in *Women from Another Planet*, Jane and Mary Margaret noted their ongoing relationship with animals; Diane and Wendy talked about their interest in cats; Kalen revealed her passion for computers; and Coa and Toni described their love for reading novels (Miller, “Differences” 45–46). None of these (except computers) captures the kinds of male-associated systemizing activities listed in the extreme male brain theory; in

fact, many of them could be seen as examples of empathizing activities, depending on one's perspective.

Indeed, the writers argue that they “are fully capable of empathy,” a skill they express by listening and observing carefully, by the ability to overlook social categories and stereotypes, and by the ability to apply empathy not just to humans but to animals, plants, and inanimate objects. Mary Margaret writes, for instance, that she finds “Most of humanity is ignorant for not hearing and seeing what is around them”—the rocks and trees, machines, and other people “without voices,” such as the Alzheimer's patients she works with (Miller, “Differences” 54). In her book, *Songs of the Gorilla Nation*, anthropologist and autistic self-advocate Dawn Prince-Hughes describes her “gorilla family” with an uncommon depth of compassion and sympathy. “These gorillas,” she writes, “so sensitive and so trapped, were mirrors for my soul . . . Because the gorillas were so like me in so many ways, I was able to see myself in them, and in turn I saw them—and eventually myself—in other human people.” She writes passionately about how gorillas are “misunderstood,” portrayed as savage murderers or “caricatures of fully formed humanity,” denied the empathic understanding traditionally accorded only to humans (3). Indeed, these writers offer an expanded notion of empathy, one that addresses the broader spiritual concerns that are often lost in the neurotypical world (or sought out in high-priced yoga classes or mindfulness retreats): an empathic connection with nature, animals, and even objects, not just other people.

Gender as Resource of Ambiguity

For some individuals, gender ambiguities are not necessarily negative; instead, they offer resources for thinking about gender in new ways. Autistic experiences with gender offer what Burke calls “resources of ambiguity,” heuristics for thinking about gender as something other than a binary. As Burke writes, “it is in the areas of ambiguity that transformations take place” (*A Grammar of Motives* xix).

Writers who feel ambiguously about their gender sometimes situate themselves between terms. Shiva writes that, while he looks “unambiguously male” because of his facial hair, he also has long hair and self-identifies as a “third gender,” somewhere in between male and female. Jeanne Miller notes that she doesn't “have much of a sense of gender at all. I myself live a somewhat femme life but it feels in some sense detachable, a costume. I was an androgynous kid and most clearly perceive the world in a non-gendered way” (“Differences” 38). While Shiva situates himself as a “third gender” between male and female, Miller positions herself between “femme” and “androgynous” or “non-gendered.” Both of these writers find an alternative, ambiguous position from which to understand themselves.

Similarly, Lindsay, who maintains a blog called *Autist's Corner*, sees her “persona and self-concept” as more masculine than her clothing and appearance might indicate. For Lindsay, the distinction between her “persona” and her “appearance” offers a way to understand one's gender as both masculine and feminine, not one or the other. For Lindsay, feminized items of clothing and jewelry do not necessarily symbolize femininity either: “I've got a particular fascination with shiny objects, so when I wear lots and lots of gaudy jewelry, especially rings (which I often do), I often hypnotize myself looking at them as my hands move through the air. I also like to wear long, trailing skirts, the movement of which I find soothing.”

Yet Lindsay recognizes that her clothing choices might be read as feminine even if her persona is not.

Reflections written by autistic women who have become mothers also provide resources for ambiguity. While Miller never expected to become a mother, finding that she did not identify with that socially constructed role, upon conceiving she soon found that her “maternal pessimism gave way to wonder and ecstasy” (“Mommie Wyrdest” 192). She encountered difficulties in the first few weeks of caring for her son, Adrian, because she found it difficult to assume the gendered role of “mother” given her own sensory and emotional needs. Yet she also recounts how she and her son “came to an understanding” as she learned to interpret his needs (some of which she attributes to her son’s reactions to overstimulation) (194). Family relationships, like gender roles, provide another resource for ambiguity.

In addition, autistic women find points of ambiguity between the culturally constructed identity of an autistic person—stereotypically a male—and their own interests and identities. Women often point out differences they’ve noticed between themselves and males with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD). One poster on the Web site *AspieGirls.com* writes:

I love computers, but where a male aspie would be more into programming and internal workings of the computer, I am more into graphic design and web design. With the sciences, I am more interested in human science like biology, medicine, psychology, sociology where a male aspie may be more inclined towards technology, computer programming, etymology, etc. I also have intense interests that fall under Tony Attwoods assessment of female interests (animals, poetry, etc). A few of my intense interest are penguins, language and linguistics, knitting/crafting, art and art history. (Gimpyzebra)

Other commenters on this thread pointed out that they felt *Aspie* women were better at connecting with children (especially their own), that they tended to be interested in “figuring out the world,” and so on. While they found their experiences different from male *Aspies* they knew, these women also pointed out that they were “tomboyish”—not quite like other girls either. In short, these women found points of ambiguity within two dominant depictions: that of the autistic male and the neurotypical female. Yet through interactional rhetoric, they seem to find resources for forging alternative gender identities together.

Gender as Social Code

Other individuals tend to argue for gender as an in-built condition or capability to recognize gendered social codes. In particular, some rely on neurological explanations grounded in metaphors of circuitry and wiring common to contemporary discourses about the brain. “My nervous system seems to be configured differently,” Susan Golubock writes in her poem, “Different on the Inside” (63). Meyerding writes that her “wiring” didn’t allow her to identify with other girls, that she lacked “the social code capacity programmed into their brains.” Here, Meyerding describes social interaction as a “basic operating system”—one that women and girls are expected to be especially good at operating (158–59). For these writers, gender forms

part of a built-in mental computer, an “operating system” one either has or does not have that allows one to understand, interpret, and perform gender appropriately.

At first glance, this language seems to echo the approach offered by Baron-Cohen and others who posit differences between male and female brains, who similarly rely on informatic metaphors of “wiring” and “code.” Further, such understandings may seem to contradict feminist views of gender as social construction or stylized repetition. Yet Golubock and Meyerding do not claim that they possess male brains. It is not a “female brain” that they lack, but the “social code capacity” to recognize gender as an important variable. This view actually calls into question the notion that gendered behavior is necessarily connected to sex. If femininity were naturally connected to femaleness, women like Golubock and Meyerding would not find it so hard to perform correctly. Their ways of talking about gender signify, rather, that gender is a sociorhetorical system into which individuals are interpellated, but not without some requisite neurological orientation (whether innate or acquired). By recognizing gender (and being taught to do so), we become individuals who embody, embrain, and inhabit gender. Individuals with autism may not recognize gender in the first place or may learn to do so later in life.

One reason for this may be linguistic. While not all autistic people have language delays as children, some do. Since gender depends on rhetorical and linguistic factors, language delays may also delay a developing sense of how boy and girl, blue and pink, trucks and dolls are typically aligned in discourse as well as social acts. Without words for “boy” and “girl,” one might not develop a gendered sense of “appropriate” behaviors. Alternatively, the sensory processing differences many autistic individuals describe may similarly inhibit a sense of gender—which essentially involves grouping individuals into two categories based on assumptions about what lies beneath their clothing. Autistic individuals may focus on other elements, or they may focus primarily on minor details (the color or texture of someone’s clothing or hair rather than the general category of “boy clothes” or “girl clothes”), ignoring the forest for the trees, so to speak. For this reason, they may not completely participate in the sociorhetorical system that produces (and often mandates) binary sex/gender roles.

Rather than incorporating gendered norms reflexively or automatically into their identities, these writers had to carefully study gender as a set of codes or signals. Autistic women often describe how they gradually learned about the social expectations tied up with femaleness and femininity. Judy Singer notes that “it is women who are more often the social gatekeepers who scrutinize our manners, care more for them than for our minds, and want to keep us out of the club.” She attributes a range of social roles to the average or neurotypical woman, such as “taking a precise reading of all the social currents of a given moment . . . sniffing out the exact social dress code that precisely fits the moment in history . . . or reading all the social cues in a group” (xii). By identifying gender expectations as socially constructed roles, Singer develops an explanatory framework that helps them interpret their difficulties identifying with a gender. One might argue that Singer stereotypes neurotypical women here—certainly, not all women of any kind are adept at reading social cues or spotting the latest fashion trends. However, Singer’s statements point out that, in the aggregate, these skills are socially assigned to the female role (rather than located in their brains). Any woman who fails to develop these skills might be read as less feminine or may be excluded from female groups.

On her blog, Vivian writes that the term *women* is a code for a range of attributes that she does not find applicable to herself: “attracted to men, mostly spends time

with other women, socially sensitive, emotional in a particular way . . . People use the word ‘women’ as a code word when they are talking about abortion and birth control, which are things I support, but which are *not* things that personally affect me. I’m not against the people the word ‘women’ stands for, but I don’t feel particularly attached to them either” (“Geekazoid”). As a signifier, *women* evokes a range of associated behaviors, concepts, beliefs, and debates—a representational system with which biological women are meant to identify. For Vivian, her own confusion about gender identity means that she does not identify with the symbol *woman* in discourse any more than the identity position.

Finding an appropriate term with which to identify may seem a futile project if one does not fit into the traditional (and limited) categories available for gender expressions. Yet naming, Burke notes, is important for self-identity as a rhetorical project. Indeed, he writes: “The mere failure of a vocabulary to draw all lines to the right places is to a degree malignly persuasive (and all vocabularies naming social and political relations in the large must err somewhat in this respect)” (*Attitudes* 336). The “malign persuasion” in question here might be the fact that lacking a term or word with which to identify might persuade people that they do not fit, that they are anomalous, or that they lack a gender identity. Hence, it is understandable that people like Vivian may continue to search for terms with which to identify, even temporarily.

Gender as Performance

For autistic individuals, gender may also constitute a performance in a rather literal sense. In current gender theory, we often understand gender as a performance in a more metaphorical sense or as performativity. Feminist theorist Judith Butler has described gender as performativity or as “an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (140, emphasis in original). For Butler, this performance is not simply voluntary, like taking on a new role in a play, but an embodied effect of continued acting according to social norms. Sometimes, autistic women write about their gender identity in this vein. In an online comment, Lindsay states her own hypothesis is that “gender is essentially a continuous improvised performance of a role whose nature is never explicitly communicated to you, and whose script you have to pick up from subtle social cues, starting in childhood. It’s probably the single most intensively-socialized thing humans do, and the one whose ‘rules’ are the least explicit. Since autistic people are notoriously resistant to socialization, it just makes sense that we wouldn’t pick up as much of the gender programming as NTs [neurotypicals] do.” Lindsay’s understanding of gender echoes Butler’s argument that gender can be understood as a performance—not one that can be simply turned on or off, but one that is embedded in mental and bodily habits driven by social representations.

Notably, though, some autistic women write about gender as quite literally a performance. Butler insists that one cannot take on or off gender as though it were simply a costume or role. Yet conscious gender performance can become a coping strategy, an attempt to get along in social situations that feel false to the performer, even if they can “pass” as real to others. For example, Vivian describes her favored gender role as “Manic Pixie Dream Girl. My voice is kind of soft and little-girl-ish, I am solicitous to the point of sometimes going too far, I interject, I tease” (“I’m a Fake Person”). Nathan Rabin, who coined the term *Manic Pixie Dream Girl*,

describes this stock film character as existing “solely in the fevered imaginations of sensitive writer-directors to teach broodingly soulful young men to embrace life and its infinite mysteries and adventures” (Rabin). We might identify “Manic Pixie Dream Girl” as the type of gender role taken by the female leads in *Almost Famous* (Penny Lane, played by Kate Hudson), *(500) Days of Summer* (Summer Finn, played by Zooey Deschanel), *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Clementine Kruczynski, played by Kate Winslet), and *50 First Dates* (Lucy Whitmore, played by Drew Barrymore). The female lead, in each case, plays a quirky, unusual, provocative woman—a free spirit who transforms the male lead’s life. She may have some kind of neurological condition—in *50 First Dates*, Drew Barrymore plays an amnesiac that Adam Sandler must woo, from scratch, each day. In short, the Manic Pixie Dream Girl is a stock character used as a vector for a male character’s personal development.

Yet this culturally available role provides Vivian with a culturally legible performance of gender. Vivian recognizes this performance as precisely that: “I know I act like a silly little kid, but I couldn’t talk in class or make friends without it. *I need someone to be*” (“I’m a Fake Person”). This role does not seem like one Vivian has “made up” out of nowhere; instead, it seems to be an amalgam of her observations of others (in life and in film), and of the expectations required of women in different social situations. Her language shows that she does not view her chosen role fully as embodied, a product of repeated stylized acts that she has imbibed since childhood. Instead, she views Manic Pixie Dream Girl much more as a performance, a rhetorical device and a coping mechanism: Manic Pixie Dream Girl offers “the only acceptable way for a girl to be weird” and “the only way of synthesizing my AS [Asperger’s syndrome] into a reasonably acceptable personality” (“From June 2009”).

Donna Williams describes performing roles as a similar coping mechanism in *Nobody Nowhere*. As a child, Williams developed two different roles, Willie and Carol, which allowed her to interact with others. Willie, who emerged by the time Williams was three, was a pugnacious, impish boy, and her defense mechanism against perceived threats: “Willie became the self I directed at the outside world, complete with hateful, glaring eyes, a pinched-up mouth, a rigid corpselike stance, and clenched fists” (11). Shortly thereafter, Carol emerged. A bubbly, bouncy flirt, Carol was her tool for interacting with classmates, adults, and later, boyfriends: “Carol was everything that people liked. Carol laughed a lot. Carol made friends... Carol could act relatively normal. Smiling, sociable, giggly, she made the perfect dancing doll” (19). Williams did not exactly choose these roles consciously; instead, they emerged as personalities forged out of scraps of people she had observed, real and imaginary. These characters were called into play in different rhetorical situations. When Williams felt called to present herself as a “good girl,” to interact cheerfully with others, Carol might be called into play; when threatened, Willie might emerge. Both characters are “stylized repetitions,” in Butler’s sense, but they seem to be experienced as performances and not as entirely incorporated into a “self.”

It is notable, as well, that Williams drew on both female and male characters to allow her to make her way in the world. Williams does not comment on her understanding of gender in *Nobody Nowhere*, but she has reflected on her gender identity more recently on her personal blog. Here, she notes that because she grew up “face blind” (meaning she had difficulty seeing and remembering faces) and “meaning deaf” (meaning she had trouble interpreting what others were saying) her gender

identity was delayed. Carol and Willie were roles she developed on top of what she describes as a “neuter” self-concept (“Face Blindness in Autism and Beyond”).

For some writers, these kinds of gendered performances are enacted in part through clothing choices. Women often commented on how, on one hand, they were put off by the dress codes mandated by mainstream gender roles but how, on the other hand, they enjoyed using clothing to perform alternate roles. Scholars in rhetoric have examined how dress can serve as a rhetoric directed at outside audiences, as was the case with early women suffragists examined by Carol Mattingly in *Appropriate[ing] Dress*, or the carefully articulated and repurposed gang colors Ralph Cintrón identifies in *Angels in Chero Town*. What is at stake in the case of autistic self-identity and dress, though, seems to be something more like the kinds of personal, material rhetorics identified in Karen A. Foss and Sonja K. Foss’s *Women Speak*. Foss and Foss locate rhetorical acts in a wide range of women’s activities, including needlework, photography, graffiti, interior design, and baking.

Individuals who post on WrongPlanet.net’s discussions of fashion often identify with particular styles, such as HarraArial, who recounts her “unhealthy delight for high-quality clothing, and outlandish things,” as well as her “huge interest in alternative fashion (Victorian Gothic, Steampunk, and Lolita all come to mind.)” Another poster, CockneyRebel, prefers “Vintage, unisex Mod fashions,” while Pinkbowtiepumps describes her style as “mod, victorian and 50s housewife” combined. We might note that the screen names these participants adopt also reflect a rhetorical, interactional impulse; each one seems chosen to convey a particular identity or performance thereof, such as “50s housewife” or “mod.” (CockneyRebel might reflect the British origin of the 1960s’ mod subculture.)

Clothing can also help readers perform roles to themselves, not just to outside audiences. In *Nobody Nowhere*, Donna Williams describes how she “lived” in her large, heavy, duffel coat, which she wore for comfort and protection and called her “mobile home” (73). This heavy coat helped Williams perform toughness and resilience during a time in which she was drifting between friends’ houses and the streets, finding her own home too inhospitable to live in. Similarly, Dawn Prince-Hughes describes her 1980s-era wardrobe as follows: “I wore leather jackets because their weight and thickness calmed me; dark glasses, sometimes even at night, because they cut out some of the stimulation to my nervous system; and heavy boots that made me feel secure and grounded as a I clomped around in them” (79). While others might have read Prince-Hughes as performing a punk identity, for Prince-Hughes the performance was more embodied; she was performing and experiencing security through her clothing. All of these individuals have found clothing to serve a range of purposes, sometimes connected to a gender identity and in other cases connected to sensory or emotional performances.

These examples both confirm and challenge a feminist understanding of gender as performance, as Butler proposes, or as something one does rather than something one is, a view advanced by Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman. On one hand, Vivian and Williams both view gender as a sort of stylized performance, which seems to confirm these feminist understandings of gender. On the other hand, neither Vivian nor Williams seems to view gender as fully incorporated into their identities, bodies, or minds—unlike the feminist perspectives arguing that ritualized performances of gender materialize as layers of embodied habits and actions. Instead, they tend to view gendered roles almost as theater—costumes to be taken on or taken off depending on the situation.

Gender as Idiosyncratic

As an adult, Williams engaged in a range of relationships (with other women, with an androgynous man, and now with an Aspie man). In a good example of gender *copia*, she describes herself as a “monogamous genderqueer bisexual happily living in a straight marriage who generally feels like a gay man in a woman’s body” (“Being a Gay Man in a Woman’s Body”). Williams is not alone in employing queer terminology to her self-understanding. These terms provide an alternative framework to help autistic individuals with nontraditional gender identities to affirm an individualized, or idiosyncratic, identity.

A number of autistic writers describe identity types that they have tried on. Vivian writes that she experimented with a range of terms, including *butch* and *trans*, but eventually rejected those terms as unsuitable for her own self-conception. Vivian has settled on another term: “If I can get away with using the word ‘faggy’ without being a gay man, that’s the best word to describe my gender expression and the gender expression I’m attracted to” (“I’m So Butch I Wear Nightgowns”). Another writer, Mariah Sheehy, notes that as a teen she “felt that [she] was viewed as asexual and desexualized and ‘un-dateable,’” perhaps because she was considered a “nerd/geek.” Sheehy writes that she has found the terms *queer* and *bisexual* as ways of understanding her identity. The term *queermind* is also interesting to Sheehy, because it focuses on queerness as a mental or neurological condition, not just a matter of gender presentation or performance. Both Vivian and Sheehy have developed idiosyncratic gender identities that mix or blend culturally available terms.

The availability of these terms means that autistic individuals who do not identify as simply male or female have a range of alternatives. But terms do more than that. According to Burke, “Names embody attitudes; and implicit in the attitudes there are the cues of behavior” (*Attitudes* 4). For Burke, attitudes are incipient actions and in them lies “the realm of ‘symbolic action’ par excellence” (*Attitudes* 243). In this case, then, names provide resources for “symbolic actions” that individuals use to understand themselves and others, to affirm identity, or to cope in relationships.

Nonetheless, other individuals refuse such terminology altogether, such as this poster on an LGBT discussion group for people with autism: “i’d say i was more intergendered than transgendered. basically, i don’t feel like a ‘man’ i don’t feel like a ‘woman’ and don’t really want to be identified as either one . . . i’m sort of a neutral mishmash of masculine and feminine” (“Is Anybody Here Who Has Autism and Is Transgender?”). Another poster offers a similar refusal to choose: “More than feeling female (or male) I feel like *me*. I (and everyone else) shouldn’t be seen as a gender but as an individual whose traits are her or his own, period” (Sklddebid). A third poster writes: “I’ve never seen any purpose for genders. They don’t reflect anything real, since they take ‘this sex is likely to do this’ and turn it into a set of rules, making ‘likely’ into ‘has to’ . . . And I don’t identify as either because of that. It’s arbitrary [*sic*] and doesn’t fit anything about me” (BlackjackGabbiani). By rejecting gender, these individuals seem to be echoing gender theorist Kath Weston’s call for a “zero concept” of gender, one that refuses to fix genders or to offer alternatives simply by multiplying the number of gender categories in our list. For Weston, naming genders “fixes as it nominalizes, encouraging people to look once again to bodies, to the visual, as gender’s ultimate referent” (44). Weston warns that categories of gender are easily commodified and ranged into a continuum, with “masculine” and “feminine” securely holding up the terminal points. The possibility of a “zero concept,”

the nongendered or ungendered, refuses this ordering principle, thereby making possible an understanding of gender as *copia*—an unordered collection of gendered concepts, including the nongendered. Rejecting gender might also be understood as an idiosyncratic interpretation, one that does not bow to cultural norms or discourses.

Conclusions

While these findings cannot be taken as representative of autistic individuals as a whole, their diversity does support an expanded concept of autistic gender identity that pushes past a gender continuum toward a *copia*, in which terms can be tried on and appropriated, discarded, and invented while still being understood as embodied and constructed. The previous sections indicate five possible ways that gender functions rhetorically: as disidentification, as a resource for ambiguity, as a social code or symbolic order, as performance, or as idiosyncratic. Importantly, any one individual might draw on and enact any combination of these gendered processes at any one time—they are not mutually exclusive. For instance, one person might disidentify with traditional notions of femininity and draw instead on elements of clothing and behavior as resources of ambiguity; another person might consciously perform a traditional gender role as a coping mechanism, even as she struggles to interpret the social codes that make that gender role natural for others. All of these gendered processes function as rhetorical resources for self-creation, in the sense Corder describes as the rhetorical act of creating “a way of being in the world.”

By generating a range of possibilities, participants can rhetorically constitute possible identities for themselves out of their embodied experiences. While gender theorists might privilege the moment of disidentification—the zero concept, in Weston’s terms—individuals who participate in these discussions seem to want to find a stasis point of some kind. Terms for gender identity seem to offer these points of identification, even if they do not square up with mainstream, binary notions of gender. No one theory of gender accounts for this range of insights; instead, we might draw from autistic descriptions an understanding of gender as identification, as ambiguity, as a social code, as performance, and as idiosyncrasy. Together, these elements might be understood as *copia* or congeries—a heaping up of theories, names, and qualities that range far beyond simple binaries (male/female; masculine/feminine; nature/culture; symbolic/embodied) or even continuums.

In short, autistic understandings of gender challenge feminist and gender theorists to consider gender as a rhetoric, one that is not simply discursive but material, embodied, neurological, and fundamentally multiple. Such a perspective does not preclude a feminist analysis of, in Bumiller’s terms, how autism is imbricated in gendered organizations of labor, authority, and citizenship, nor does it preclude critiquing how autistic individuals are often pushed to conform to gender roles. Nonetheless, it does encourage scholars of gender and feminist theories to include autistic perspectives, not just critiques of neurodiversity or autism discourses, in theorizing about sex and gender more broadly.

Incorporating autistic perspectives helps to further denaturalize sex and gender not only as fluid concepts but as resources for rhetorical acts of self-fashioning. Paying attention to individuals with neurological conditions, in particular, helps to denaturalize models of gender that might, in some cases, be better termed neurotypical models, since they sometimes presume an innate ability to decode and model an appropriate gender identity or, to the contrary, celebrate conscious acts of

resistance to normalizing models. For autistic individuals, for instance, performing a stereotyped gender role may be very much an act of resistance and survival.

More broadly, we might use a model of gender as copia to further consider how other individuals compose gender identities through multiple, recursive rhetorical processes, without assuming a necessary “base” of sex or gender identification prior to rhetorical acts. While feminist and gender scholars have argued for an understanding of gender as fluid and shifting, a rhetorical perspective based on copia emphasizes that gender identity is invented and crafted in different situations, not simply subject to the whims and fancies of the individual in question. Such a perspective supports continued attention to the question of what counts as rhetorical, including embodied behaviors, self-creation, dress, and the like in everyday lives, and not only when publicized or placed on a stage.

Notes

1. While the use of the term “blind” might seem problematic to those versed in disability studies, it indicates that, like gender, disability serves as a heuristic to help autistic individuals understand their lives.
2. Psychological research suggests that factors such as social desirability bias or impression management may lead individuals to offer responses to sensitive questions that reflect what they think they should say rather than what they actually feel. These tendencies have been reported to be greater in females than in males, which may reflect the greater pressures women face to conform to social norms (see Vispoel and Fast).
3. For more on the cultural construction of autism, see Nadesan; and Grinker.
4. For critiques of the rhetoric of the DSM more broadly, see Kirk and Kutchins; and Prendergast.

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