

WRONG PLANET NO MORE: RHETORICAL SENSING FOR THE
NEURODIVERSE COLLEGE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

by

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DEDICATION

To Noah and Nicholas, who daily teach me the beauty of difference and give me strength I never knew I could muster.

To Liam, who teaches me the power of new beginnings and reminds me that neurotypicality is sometimes stranger than autism.

I am humbled that I get to call you my sons.

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ABSTRACT

A predominant metaphor in the autism community is that the neurotypical world is a “wrong planet” in which people with autism do not belong, and I assert that the university is one such wrong planet. I examine the rhetorical history of autism and argue that the construction and reconstruction of autism have led to learning spaces in higher education that Other students on the autism spectrum. I draw upon Krista Ratcliffe’s rhetorical listening as a way to address the inequities that persist in college writing classrooms. However, to avoid a bias toward neurotypicality, I recast rhetorical listening as rhetorical *sensing*, a term that encompasses the multiple ways of experiencing the world rather than privileging one modality.

I apply the rhetorical sensing model to four aspects of higher education. First, I look at the ways in which students with autism are already programmed to rhetorically sense neurotypicals through therapy models such as Social Thinking and argue that while such training is beneficial, it is not true rhetorical sensing because, as Ratcliffe asserts, both parties must be equal participants in the listening. Placing the burden of understanding on people with ASDs alone serves to reify existing power structures, further marginalizing those who are not neurotypical. Next, I turn my attention to the college composition classroom and present ways for instructors to rhetorically sense their students with autism. I describe the ways in which students with ASDs tend to approach writing and explore the ways in which these approaches may differ from the neurotypical approaches to which writing teachers may be more accustomed. I provide strategies based on universal design that can help all students, regardless of neurodifference, thrive. I then turn my attention to composition instructors who parent children with autism. Drawing upon a rich body of research on working conditions for women in rhetoric and composition, I describe the ways in which adjunctification has left caregivers overworked, under-paid, and under-insured as they try to provide for their children with autism. Using the concepts of Aimee Carrillo Rowe’s power lines and Andrea O’Reilly’s gynocentric mothering, I propose ways to improve conditions for teachers who parent children with autism. Finally, I focus on ways in which writing program administrators can make programmatic changes in order to foster inclusive learning practices. I propose training and partnership models that are low-cost and can create an inclusive planet that supports neurodiverse students, faculty, and writing programs.

PROLOGUE/INTRODUCTION

WHEN AND WHERE I ENTER

This isn't the dissertation I was going to write.

I had already decided who I was as an academic: I was the nineteenth-century motherhood rhetoric scholar. My earlier life as a literature scholar had led me to my passion. As I deconstructed the representations of motherhood in nineteenth-century transatlantic literature, I found myself going back again, over and over, to the non-fiction "expert" texts from the period, the texts that codified the ideologies that governed the behaviors of not only the fictional mother-characters I analyzed but also the real women who lived in the era. I found myself more concerned with how these nineteenth-century conceptualizations of moral motherhood and scientific motherhood impacted contemporary mothering practices rather than with how they impacted the fictional characters of the novels I analyzed. This was important rhetoric, for its legacy lived in the constraining ideology of perfect motherhood in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. I wanted to bring the restrictive narratives of the past to the forefront in hopes of challenging their constraining effects on modern-day performances of motherhood.

And so I dug myself deeply into the motherhood rhetoric of the time period and started applying to PhD programs in rhetoric and composition. Before I even moved to Tucson to start my program at the University of Arizona, I had reams of research in hand. During my first semester in the program, I wrote a dissertation chapter. You could say I was passionately focused.

Our lives as scholars, however, are not disembodied existences floating in the ether of intellectualism somewhere far away from our daily lived experiences. No, for we

live in a state of simultaneity where our thinking, teaching, and researching are intimately intertwined with our material realities. There is no ivory tower for us to lose ourselves in, for most mother-scholars must always come down at the end of the day, pick the children up from daycare, cook a somewhat healthy dinner (hopefully), and get the dishes and laundry washed so that the children have dishes to eat off of and clothes to wear the next day. No matter how much we aspire to follow the strict schedule separating our mom time from our scholar time that our (often childless) mentors preached to us, those dichotomies are mere fictions, impractical for a world where life doesn't stop just because you put a sign on your bedroom door that says, "Mom is working; please do not disturb," as one of my childless professors once suggested.

Scholar-Girl interrupted. Always already.

As I wrapped up my first semester, still euphoric from not just surviving, but excelling in my first fifteen weeks of a challenging graduate program, my daily lived experience dramatically interrupted my neatly-plotted scholarly path. Here's where my scholarship meets two of the most important people in my life: my sons Noah and Nicholas.

Taking advantage of the winter break, we traveled to northern Nevada to visit my family. My five-year-old Noah played with his nieces and nephews in my sister's living room, but Nick, just one year old, kept sneaking out to the garage to read the numbers and letters off the license plates. "458GFJ," he read off the letters and numbers from right to left. I dragged him back into the house, every five minutes or so, as he returned to the garage again and again.

I didn't know anything about hyperlexia¹ or autism; all I knew in that moment was fear: I was afraid that my child might end up like Rainman, so afraid that I dared not voice my fear to anyone.

A month later I had Nick in the pediatrician's office, expressing my concerns that he wasn't talking yet. "Oh, I'm sure it's nothing to worry about, but let's do a hearing test," our spunky pediatrician advised. A few weeks later Nick was in a sound booth, hearing every sound. "Let's do a speech evaluation," the pediatrician said next. I took Nick to Tucson Medical Center where a seasoned speech therapist named Jeanine evaluated Nick and asked me question after question for over two hours. Does he turn when he hears a voice? Does he wave goodbye? Does he respond to his name? Does he point to objects? Does he say "mama" or "dada"? No, no, no, no, and no. Nick was diagnosed with a severe language delay. It was the first of many diagnoses that would be affixed to my two oldest sons.

As I worked with specialists throughout the spring to piece together what was happening with Nick, Noah's struggles in kindergarten increased. He didn't understand basic social rules like not laying on other students during circle time and not kissing the backs of his friends' heads when the class was lined up at the door (since he was attending a parochial school, his innocent kissing of his male friends' heads was of particular concern to the administration). By summer I was again sitting in the pediatrician's office with my two boys, and she wrote words in each of their charts. In

¹ Hyperlexia is an extraordinary ability to decode symbol systems and is marked by learning to read at a very young age and an extreme fascination with symbols, letters, and numbers. It is a savant ability often associated with autism but is not necessarily an ability that all people with autism possess. Noah and Nick, both hyperlexic, began reading before the age of two.

Noah's she wrote "Asperger's syndrome"² and in Nick's she wrote "autism." I went home, called my mom, and started sobbing as soon as I heard her say hello. The autism spectrum cemented itself as part of my reality.

In the fall I returned to my life as a scholar. I found myself dawdling, preparing conference presentations on MySpace friendship metaphors rather than doing my "real" work on nineteenth-century motherhood rhetoric. I was floundering, refusing to write about motherhood or autism, refusing to admit it into my façade of an ivory tower far above my daily life on the dusty ground below. That lasted perhaps six weeks. Because, after all, that dichotomy between mother and scholar is artificial; our lived experiences are intimately intertwined with our intellectual lives. With the urging of Professor Roxanne Mountford, I began drawing together my passion for motherhood rhetoric and the realities of autism in my scholarship. Being so raw and so real in my work was extremely difficult during those early months because I wasn't just doing objective rhetorical analysis; I was laying bare my most painful wound to all my readers. Such vulnerability was foreign and scary, and if Dr. Mountford and my colleagues in the rhetorical analysis seminar had not been such a supportive scaffold in the process, this dissertation would not have been born.

My dissertation is about Noah and Nicholas. It comes from the tragedies and fears that have come not from autism, for I've learned that autism can be a beautiful thing, but rather from how the educational system responds to autism. In the years since our pediatrician wrote those words in the boys' charts, I have seen Noah misunderstood and erroneously labeled as a behavior problem by well-meaning teachers and administrators

² Asperger's syndrome is an Autism Spectrum Disorder, and individuals with Asperger's tend to be higher functioning than those diagnosed with traditional autism. The Asperger's syndrome is no longer a diagnostic label in the DSM-V but instead is wrapped into Autistic Disorder.

who did not understand his disability; I've seen police officers visit the elementary school to investigate a certainly not well-meaning teacher's physical abuse against Nick. I've also seen a wonderful handful of thoughtful, engaged administrators and teachers who understand neurodiversity, respecting the spectrum of neurological differences and ways of viewing the world, and also how to create educational environments that engage and respect the needs of all learners.

One day Noah and Nick will be in one of our composition classrooms. I want to ensure that when they arrive at the university, they are met by writing programs and writing instructors who are like that rare handful: committed to understanding neurodiversity and creating classroom spaces that engage and respect the needs of all learners. I am committed to making that rare handful the majority, not only because inclusive pedagogy will benefit students like Noah and Nick, but also because having diverse student populations will enrich composition classrooms. Composition students will benefit from neurodiversity as they interact with other students who see the world in different ways. The University of Kansas' Circle of Inclusion Project notes this importance, exhorting that "typical" students "must have an opportunity to develop relationships with [students] who experience a wide range of disabling conditions" because it enriches the lives of all students and acknowledges the importance of learning to live in a pluralistic society and accepting individual differences. As the saying of inclusion advocates goes, there are no self-contained Walmarts: people with and without disabilities share the same stores, buses, and banks in the "real world," and exposing students to multiple ways of being in the classroom will prepare them for experiences beyond the classroom. Moreover, valuing neurodiversity will enrich instructors and

strengthen praxis. The principles of universal design that create a fertile ground for inclusion are successful because they are “universal,” that is, they are the best practices for **all** students. Challenging the commonplaces of the composition classroom that we have taken for granted and thinking critically about how to best deliver content in ways that are most accessible to all students will make us better at our craft. Thus, in order to benefit both students and composition teachers, the goal of my dissertation is to examine the current approaches to educating students with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASDs) in college composition classes and provide ways to reshape our practices based on the principles of universal design at both the classroom and administrative levels so that all students can best access the curriculum.

Because I am simultaneously a mother and a scholar, I am actively choosing not to perpetuate the false dichotomy between work life and personal life in this dissertation. In *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, bell hooks weaves her way through the complexities of being “publicly private” in her writing, the difficult challenge of revealing private details about her personal experiences as Gloria Jean in her public work. Despite the inherent risks of opening up personal vulnerabilities in professional works, hooks finds it “crucial to talk about the points where the public and the private meet, to connect the two” because such “openness is about how to be well and telling the truth is about how to put the broken pieces of the heart back together again. It’s about being whole—being wholehearted” (2). In this dissertation, I will be wholehearted. I will not contribute to the fragmentation of self that is tacitly expected of women by the academy. Instead, I choose to fully embody this work, and thus each chapter will include my own lived experiences, for they are the roots of my scholarship and pedagogy.

Those lived experiences provide the shape for each chapter. In the first chapter, I address the rhetorical constructions and reconstructions of autism that have Othered both my children and me: Noah and Nick for failing to follow the normative model of a productive citizen in the post-industrial era, me for being a refrigerator mother who turned them autistic. Socialization therapy has been our culture's way to address this Othering, and in the second chapter I interrogate therapeutic models based upon Social Thinking that ask my children to ignore their own perspectives in order to adopt a neurotypical perspective. This tacit expectation that people with autism learn to perform neurotypicality infects Noah and Nick's classroom experiences, and in the next chapter I look to challenge existing paradigms in the college writing classroom so that when Noah and Nick are college students in just a few short years, they will be met by teachers who foster inclusive learning. As one of those teachers, I serve a dual role in the autism equation as both teacher and parent, and I address the challenges of this dual-positionality in the fourth chapter. Finally, I look to institutional structures, which my boys and I have often found hardest to change in our journey, whether it be the state's Division of Developmental Disabilities or a local school district. I advocate that writing program administrators can enact institutional change through simple, low-cost strategies. With small changes that reshape paradigms, we can create inclusive composition programs for Noah, Nick, and countless other students: programs that respect the neurodiversity of all learners.

CHAPTER ONE

RHETORICAL SENSING: MAKING “WRONG PLANET” OUR PLANET

Whatever else it might be, autism is a profoundly rhetorical phenomenon (Heilker and King 113).

Before we can look forward to an inclusive composition program that embraces neurodiversity, we must look back to the socio-historical constructions that have shaped current approaches to the inclusion of students with autism.³ Thus, in this chapter, I present contemporary definitions of autism and uncover the historical constructions of these definitions. Next, I examine the pedagogical implications of these definitions, looking at the ugly history of “education” for people with autism as warehousing individuals in institutions that were schools in name only. This horrific treatment led to a cultural backlash, and so I recount the resulting legislative reforms from the 1970s through the 1990s that opened opportunities for students with autism to have equal access to a public education. I argue, however, that there are still significant hurdles for students with ASDs in higher education. The metaphor in the autism community is that the neurotypical world, the place inhabited by those with so-called “normal” neurological structures, is a “wrong planet” in which people with autism do not belong, and I assert that the university is one such wrong planet. To challenge practices that leave students with autism feeling they are on a wrong planet when they enter the college writing classroom, I draw upon Krista Ratcliffe’s rhetorical listening as a way to minimize

³ Throughout my dissertation, I will use the phrase “students with autism” rather than “autistic students.” I am conscious that either term can be offensive to certain groups: some object to putting the adjective “autistic” before the word “student” because it puts the disability ahead of the individual, while self-advocates in the autism liberation movement embrace the term “autistic” as part of their identity. Because the emphasis throughout my dissertation is that individuals with autism are students and therefore deserve the same rights as all students, I choose phrasing that highlights this.

inequities. However, to avoid a bias toward neurotypicality, I recast rhetorical listening as rhetorical sensing, a term that encompasses the multiple ways of experiencing the world rather than privileging one modality.

Defining Autism

Autism, whatever else it might be, is ubiquitous in contemporary American culture. From *Larry King Live* to an edition of *Playboy* featuring autism mom Jenny McCarthy, popular media are teeming with reports about autism. This is due, in great part, to a shocking increase in the number of children diagnosed with autism. According to research conducted by the CDC's Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring Network in 2010 and released in 2014, one in 68 children have autism (one in 42 boys and one in 189 girls). This indicates an increase in autism prevalence of 29% when compared with the data for 2008 and 123% when compared with the data for 2002 (the first year the CDC began monitoring) (Baio). The researchers used the same diagnostic and recording standards in the 2010, 2008, and 2002 studies. Although there is heated debate beyond the scope of this dissertation as to why the number of autism cases has increased 123% in a few short years, the fact of the matter is that more and more individuals are diagnosed with autism every year. It is becoming increasingly prevalent, but what **is** it, exactly?

The American Psychiatric Association (APA) provides us with the clinical definition of autism. According to the APA, the term Autism Spectrum Disorder refers to a group of pervasive developmental disorders (PDD) specified in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V)*, including Asperger's Syndrome and

Pervasive Developmental Disorder Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS). To avoid confusion throughout this dissertation, I will be using “autism” or “ASD” to refer to this larger family of diagnostic labels rather than using the individual labels. The diagnostic criteria as stated in the *DSM-V* are as follows:

- A. Persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts, as manifested by the following, currently or by history (examples are illustrative, not exhaustive, see text):
 1. Deficits in social-emotional reciprocity, ranging, for example, from abnormal social approach and failure of normal back-and-forth conversation; to reduced sharing of interests, emotions, or affect; to failure to initiate or respond to social interactions.
 2. Deficits in nonverbal communicative behaviors used for social interaction, ranging, for example, from poorly integrated verbal and nonverbal communication; to abnormalities in eye contact and body language or deficits in understanding and use of gestures; to a total lack of facial expressions and nonverbal communication.
 3. Deficits in developing, maintaining, and understanding relationships, ranging, for example, from difficulties adjusting behavior to suit various social contexts; to difficulties in sharing imaginative play or in making friends; to absence of interest in peers.

B. Restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities, as manifested by at least two of the following, currently or by history

(examples are illustrative, not exhaustive; see text):

1. Stereotyped or repetitive motor movements, use of objects, or speech (e.g., simple motor stereotypies, lining up toys or flipping objects, echolalia, idiosyncratic phrases).

2. Insistence on sameness, inflexible adherence to routines, or ritualized patterns or verbal nonverbal behavior (e.g., extreme distress at small changes, difficulties with transitions, rigid thinking patterns, greeting rituals, need to take same route or eat food every day).

3. Highly restricted, fixated interests that are abnormal in intensity or focus (e.g., strong attachment to or preoccupation with unusual objects, excessively circumscribed or perseverative interest).

4. Hyper- or hyporeactivity to sensory input or unusual interests in sensory aspects of the environment (e.g., apparent indifference to pain/temperature, adverse response to specific sounds or textures, excessive smelling or touching of objects, visual fascination with lights or movement).

C. Symptoms must be present in the early developmental period (but may not become fully manifest until social demands exceed limited capacities, or may be masked by learned strategies in later life).

D. Symptoms cause clinically significant impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of current functioning.

E. These disturbances are not better explained by intellectual disability (intellectual developmental disorder) or global developmental delay.

Intellectual disability and autism spectrum disorder frequently co-occur; to make comorbid diagnoses of autism spectrum disorder and intellectual disability, social communication should be below that expected for general developmental level.

Thus, the clinical definition indicates that ASD is marked by impairments in social interaction, impairments in communication, and repetitive behaviors. The definition seems straight-forward enough; however, it is necessary to keep in mind that scientific definitions are not purely objective. While such seemingly clear-cut definitions suggest that autism is something that can be easily quantified and classified, such a misconception reflects positivistic biases that fail to take into account the social constructedness of disease and disability. Science is never value-free; as Ruth Bleier asserts, “Science as a method and body of knowledge is, as it must be, a cultural and social product” (qtd. in Lott 136). As a cultural and social product, the definition of autism is a site at which dominant ideologies work, and as ideological forces shift, so too do definitions. In her genealogy of the scientific construction of autism, Majia Holmer Nadesan claims, “The historical contingencies of autism diagnoses call into question artificial distinctions between biology and culture, and disease and social representation” (80). Such artificial distinctions are currently evident in the battle over definitional revisions in the *DSM-V* as labels like Asperger’s syndrome disappeared, replaced by the

general category of Autism Spectrum Disorder.⁴ That definitions can change as ideologies shift highlights the rhetorical nature of autism. As Paul Heilker and Jason King assert, “Autism is rhetorical . . . it is being constructed and reconstructed in the public sphere via strategic and purposeful language use” (113).

Tracing the historical construction of the term autism further reveals its rhetoricity. Autism emerged as a diagnostic category in the 1940s, when the conditions of “cultural practices and economy” coalesced in a manner that such a label was deemed socially necessary (Nadesan 80). Nadesan argues that autism as a diagnosis would have been unthinkable in nineteenth-century thought but that cultural changes in the closing decades of the nineteenth century prepared the way for the characteristics of autism to be pathologized. So what were these shifts that made autism as a diagnosis come into being? The first shift was economic. As Western economies shifted from agrarian to industrial, the skills required of workers changed. Before this shift, an “odd” or “awkward” person working in the fields wouldn’t have been an economic detriment, but as the economy shifted to urban centers with people working in factories and offices, suddenly the ability to interact with others was vitally important. Impairments in social interaction and communication were a hindrance, a disability, in the urban manufacturing world, and thus the traits of autism, now detrimental to the economic system, began to be pathologized.

Simultaneous to this economic revolution is a shift in constructions of motherhood that would eventually influence definitions of autism. Twentieth-century

⁴ The battle over changes to autism definitions, while incredibly important, is beyond the reach of this dissertation. Please see Wing, Lorna, Judith Gould, and Christopher Gillberg. "Autism Spectrum Disorders in the DSM-V: Better or Worse than the DSM-IV?." *Research in Developmental Disabilities* 32.2 (2011): 768-773. *Academic Search Complete*. EBSCO. Web. 21 May 2011.

conceptualizations of autism as a maternal short-coming are rooted in nineteenth-century constructions of motherhood, beginning with the ideology of Republican motherhood. Republican mothers had the moral obligation to rear the future (white, middle-class) leaders of the nation, and as Mary Hunt Tyler's 1810 post-Revolutionary motherhood manual, *The Maternal Physician*, indicates, mothers needed to look to science and the medical community and train themselves to function as their children's physicians in order to effectively rear the strong leaders the young Republic so desperately needed. Rima Apple argues that while in its early manifestations this scientific motherhood spurred mothers to "find and evaluate information for themselves" and thereby empower themselves to make health decisions for their families rather than having to depend on local doctors, this sense of maternal empowerment began to fade towards the end of the nineteenth century (91). In fact, by the twentieth century, women were caged by scientific authorities, being told "not just that they needed to learn from scientific and medical expertise but that they needed to follow the directions of experts" (91). Ironically, while mothers were held responsible for the health and welfare of their families, they were denied "control over child rearing" (91). It was a harsh dichotomy: "the ideology of scientific motherhood served to elevate the nurture of children to the status of a profession" as women were expected to leave behind the conventional wisdom of their mothers and grandmothers and educate themselves in scientific theories of child rearing, yet it simultaneously "devalued the importance" of women, who needed male experts to tell them what to do because they were supposedly too incompetent to rear children on their own (94).

It was in the midst of this glorification of scientific motherhood, and the deglorification of women's traditional wisdom, that the scientific concept of autism was created in the twentieth century. While in the nineteenth century the characteristics of what is now defined as autism were either not pathologized or lumped into the category of schizophrenia, autism became its own diagnostic category in the 1940s. Although German scientist Hans Asperger was likely the first to define the disorder in 1938, his work did not reach a wider audience until decades later because of the Nazi regime; therefore, Leo Kanner, who coined the term "early infantile autism" in 1943, is perceived to be the father of autism.

The developing construction of autism was closely linked to one prominent figure—acclaimed University of Chicago professor Bruno Bettelheim. Ironically, Bettelheim himself was a rhetorical construction, someone who carefully crafted an ethos to suit his needs (Severson, Aune, and Jodlowski 66). According to biographer Richard Pollak, when Bettelheim applied for his first full-time academic job, he lied on his *curriculum vitae*, claiming he had the opportunity to study for fourteen years, instead of the typical six, at the University of Vienna, when in actuality he left school for nearly ten of those years to tend the lumber business of his father, who was ailing from syphilis. He claimed to have earned three PhDs, with honors, in art history, psychology, and philosophy. In truth, he only had one PhD in philosophy, and it was awarded without honors. However, because the Nazis had negated the degrees of many Jews, American institutions had little way to check Bettelheim's credentials, and he became the leading authority in autism and child psychology (a field in which he had no degree). Although colleagues would tell Pollak after Bettelheim's suicide that the scientist was a chronic liar

who twisted facts to support his own ends, during his lifetime Bettelheim was revered at a celebrity status. Bettelheim was awarded a prestigious grant from the Ford Foundation to support his work at the Sonia Shankman Orthogenic School, an inpatient facility for children with autism. He also graced the covers of the most popular periodicals of the twentieth century, from *Time* to *Ladies Home Journal*, and appeared as a guest on the *Dick Cavett Show*. Severson, Aune, and Jodlowski argue that he published in popular media, rather than scholarly journals, because his adherence to scientific standards was so shoddy that journals refused to publish his work (67). Because of his prominence, he was regarded as THE expert in autism, and his work trickled down to influence the perceptions of autism adopted by pediatricians, social workers, school psychologists, and teachers, according to Jane Taylor McDonnell (225).

The rhetorical construction of autism forwarded by Kanner and Bettelheim was based upon misogyny, racism, and class bias. Misogyny is evident as early as 1949 in Kanner's article "Problems of Nosology and Psychodynamics in Early Childhood Autism." Kanner studied a small group of fifty-five middle-class families with autistic children in an academic community (a narrow selection that, as I will discuss later, helped to create inaccurate perceptions of race and class in the rhetorical construction of autism). Highly unusual for the 1940s, fifty of the fifty-five mothers in the survey held college degrees (Kanner 420). Based upon his observations, Kanner determined that because the mothers were too intellectual, they mechanized their human relationships (421). These mothers dutifully followed the experts, which as Apple tells us is the mark of a good scientific mother, but did so with a conspicuous "maternal lack of genuine warmth," carrying "out to the letter the rules and regulations which were given by their

obstetricians and pediatricians [in a] mechanized service of the kind which is rendered by an overconscientious gasoline station attendant” (422, 424). Drawing upon Freudian psychoanalytic theory, Kanner argued that from birth the children were exposed “to parental coldness, obsessiveness, and a mechanical type of attention to material needs only. . . . They were kept neatly in refrigerators which did not defrost. Their withdrawal seems to be an act of turning away from such a situation to seek comfort in solitude” (425). Here, Kanner gave birth to the concept of the “refrigerator mother,” a woman so cold that she turned her child autistic. This concept shaped the science of autism through the 1970s.

Bettelheim, however, went beyond merely claiming that the mothers of children with autism were cold as he developed a distinctly misogynistic view of mothers. In the documentary *Refrigerator Mothers*, women whose children with autism were treated by Bettelheim describe feeling that Bettelheim hated them, and in his biography of Bettelheim, Richard Pollak confirms that hatred was not merely imagined by the mothers. Pollak shares the shock of his first interview with Bettelheim in which the renowned doctor did not even attempt to shroud his vicious hatred for mothers of children with autism (including Pollak’s own mother). Bettelheim himself provides the clearest testimony of his cruel view of mothers in his book *The Empty Fortress: Infantile Autism and the Birth of the Self*. He goes further than merely accusing mothers of children with autism of being cold; he actually likens the mothers to prison guards at Nazi concentration camps. Both in the book and in his guest appearance on the *Dick Cavett Show* (excerpted in the documentary *Refrigerator Mothers*), Bettelheim claims that just as the prisoners at concentration camps could sense that the guards wanted them dead,

children could sense their mothers wanted them dead, and thus retreated into the solitary world of autism.

As Bettelheim recounts the cases of the children residing in his institution in *The Empty Fortress*, his strong bias against the children's mothers in his definition is evident. In one case, for instance, Bettelheim describes a girl who repeatedly broke the light fixtures in her room. Applying a Freudian interpretation to her actions, Bettelheim asserts that the girl is reacting to her mother's coldness while nursing. Rather than feeling nurtured by her mother, she felt hated, and therefore she breaks the breast-shaped bulbs in her room that remind her of the trauma of her mother's lack of love.⁵ In another instance, Bettelheim claimed a child under his care (and the older brother of Bettelheim's biographer, Pollak) committed suicide because he was so distraught over his mother's hatred. Pollak, however, contends that his brother's death was simply an unfortunate accident while the two boys played in a hay loft, not a suicide.

Added to this gender bias in the rhetorical construction of autism is race and class bias. The aforementioned study by Kanner had a very limited sample. The families he examined were white, middle-class, educated families in a university community. This limited sample created a false presumption that autism only affects families that fit into these categories. Kanner indicated that the reason that autism existed in this demographic was that the mothers were devoting time to educating themselves and perhaps even pursuing professional careers, which detracted from their ability to nurture their children. In her personal essay "On Being the 'Bad' Mother of an Autistic Child," Jane Taylor McDonnell, an English and Women's Studies professor, tells of how she was asked

⁵ Contemporary autism experts would likely attribute the child's behavior to Sensory Integration Disorder. It is common for people with autism to have overly reactive sensory systems, and the light from the light bulb was probably so bright that it hurt the girl's eyes, so she broke it.

questions such as “How many hours do you spend in the library every day?” when her son’s teachers began to note his autistic behaviors (220). Teachers and doctors alike blamed her academic endeavors for her son’s delays. And yet she was a white woman who had the privilege to pursue an academic career; most women of color and poor mothers often did not have this luxury of pursuing college degrees and improving themselves, so, according to Kanner’s hypothesis, it was unlikely that their children would develop autism due to their intellectual pursuits (the latent message here is that Kanner didn’t believe these mothers were intelligent). This construction made it difficult for women of color to get support for their children with autism in the mid-twentieth century; if the children received a diagnosis at all, it was “emotional disturbance” or, in more extreme cases, schizophrenia. In *Refrigerator Mothers*, an African American mother recounts her struggle to get help and support for her son with autism in the 1960s. Noticing that her son had developmental delays, the mother went to the library to research her son’s symptoms and realized that the descriptions of autism matched her son, yet his pediatrician discounted the possibility of autism because of skin color. Eventually an African-American teacher noted autistic characteristics in the child and he began to receive treatments; however, the mother jokes that even though the teacher didn’t adhere to the racialized definitions of autism, she did adhere to the concept of mother-blame and made sure to treat her as a refrigerator mother who damaged her child.

Racializing in the rhetorical construction of autism had an even more insidious side. Bettelheim’s theories were closely associated with a belief in the inherent weakness of some races. Returning to his concentration camp metaphor in *The Empty Fortress*, Bettelheim explains why some children who live with cold mothers develop autism while

others do not. He likened it to the ways in which various racial groups responded to the concentration camp guards. He notes that the Muslims were far more likely to suffer mental breakdowns under the guards' treatment and retreat into an autism-like state. Bettelheim claims this was indicative of an inborn weakness or susceptibility to psychological breakdown. Bettelheim's racism was not only evident in his definitional writings about autism, but it was also evident in his interactions with patients. Although Jewish himself, Bettelheim carried a hatred for European Jews, claiming that they let the Holocaust happen because of their laziness and inaction. He was particularly harsh with the Jewish mothers who brought children to be treated and lamented to his biographer, "What *is it* about these Jewish mothers?" (Pollak 10).

This history of racism, classism, and sexism indicates the rhetoricity inherent in definitions of autism. As Thomas Kent indicates, "Deconstruction reveals the futility inherent in the effort to discover an epistemological system that will stop the play of interpretation and stabilize meaning" (167). In describing the definitions of autism here, I am not attempting to find a stable meaning; on the contrary, I assert that the meaning is ever-shifting. The category of autism, however, has important material consequences on the lives of millions. While it is an unstable social construction, it is important to study the construction and its impact so that those to whom the label is affixed are not perpetually marginalized.

Educational Impact of the Definitions of Autism

The mid-twentieth century rhetorical construction of autism had an immediate impact on the ways in which children and young adults with autism were educated.

Because of the mother-blame forwarded by Kanner and Bettelheim, it was assumed that the best treatment for autism was to separate children with autism from the refrigerator mothers who supposedly caused their autism. Children were sent to schools that were really schools in name only; they were institutions.

The most well-known school for children with autism in the mid-twentieth century was the Sonia Shankman Orthogenic School, based at the University of Chicago, which Bruno Bettelheim directed from 1944 to 1978. The school was an inpatient facility for “disturbed” children and young adults. The school housed forty-five students, six to eight of whom were categorized as “truly autistic” (Bettelheim 94). Bettelheim asserts his goal as the director of the school was “to provide those general experiences in living and those special therapeutic ones that would help the most severely disturbed children get well” (9). While the center was called a school, Bettelheim’s description of his patient Laurie’s life reveals it was more of a mental hospital: “It should be noted here that ‘class’ meant the hours spent with her teacher in what, to all intents, was a prenursery school setting geared to the therapeutic needs of the children, with a psycho-analytically trained professor of group work functioning as the ‘teacher’” (131). In theory, the school was revolutionary: aiming to create a space that was completely opposite of the children’s supposedly concentration-camp like homes, Bettelheim insisted upon unlocked doors, fine china, and an open candy cabinet the residents could access at any time. However, in practice, the school had a destructive rather than freeing impact on its students.

One of the harmful practices of the school was isolating children from their families and local systems of support. Since, according to Bettelheim’s theories, mothers were akin to tormenting Nazi prison guards, the best treatment option was to remove

children from their mothers and homes. Although some students, like Stephen Pollak, were admitted as day students, Bettelheim soon insisted they reside at the school (Pollak 7). Parents were not allowed to enter the school or visit their children there; however, they were occasionally allowed to take their children home for holidays or special occasions. Isolated from the outside world, the residents had no escape from the school and its harsh therapies. Two former long-term residents of the Orthogenic School, Roberta Carly Redford and Stephen Eliot, have written biographies of their experiences at the school, and both authors relate similar horrors. Both describe Bettelheim as a tyrant who publicly beat and humiliated the children under his care. To ensure his control, Bettelheim purged the staff who worked under his predecessor when he became director in 1944. In their place, Bettelheim hired young women with little or no experience, like Gayle Shulenberger, a twenty-two year old whose only experience working with children prior to being hired by Bettelheim was serving as a substitute teacher on a couple of occasions in South Dakota. She was hired immediately as a night nurse (Pollak 134). Because the staff had little background or training outside of what Bettelheim told them, they had no frame of reference to challenge his therapeutic strategies.

Bettelheim's work at the school was seen as pioneering model for best practices and thus was emulated by other institutions. Institutionalization and isolation were the standard of care and education for children and young adults with autism. This would be the status quo until the early 1970s when three pivotal events—one investigative report and two ground-breaking legal decisions—led to a major shift in federal approaches to educating students with disabilities in the United States.

In 1972, Geraldo Rivera, then a rookie reporter for the ABC-affiliate WABC-TV in New York, unearthed the horrific conditions students endured at the Willowbrook State School, an institution for children with developmental disabilities. Rivera's Peabody Award-winning report reveals the appalling conditions experienced by the "students" at the "school": children were warehoused in large rooms with one or two attendants for up to seventy children. The rooms were dark and eerie, stuffed full of children and young adults, many of whom were mostly or fully unclothed upon feces and urine-covered floors. Feeding time consisted of attendants scooping up piles of ground mush with their hands and stuffing it into the students' mouths because this was the fastest, most efficient way to feed hundreds. Rivera tells viewers, "I can show you what it looked like and what it sounded like, but I can never show you how it smelled and the horrible conditions."

Not only did public outrage over the conditions revealed in Rivera's report provide an impetus for change, but so also did two key legal cases. In 1971, *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children (PARC⁶) v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* overturned a state law allowing schools to deny services to children who had not "attained the mental age of five years" by the time they reached the age of enrollment for first grade. The decision ensured that students with disabilities should be granted a free public education that was appropriate to their abilities until they reached the age of 21 (Martin, Martin and Terman 28). Then, in 1972, *Mills v. Board of Education* challenged the District of Columbia public schools' practice of expelling or refusing to admit students solely on the basis of their disabilities during a budgetary

⁶ The ARC of the United States is no longer an acronym for Association of Retarded Persons because the members reject the negative connotations of the word "retarded." Rather than being an acronym for anything, the name is simply The ARC.

crisis. The U S District Court found that based upon the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment that it is unlawful to place the burden of budget cuts unequally on students with disabilities.

This climate of outrage and change spurred the federal government to make historic moves to protect the educational rights of students with disabilities. The first protection set into place was Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (29 USC). Although the act is not geared specifically to the education of students with disabilities, it guarantees that “no qualified individual with a disability in the United States shall be excluded from, denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under” any organization receiving federal funds (29 USC). Included in organizations receiving federal funds are K-16 institutions, graduate schools, and technical/professional schools; thus, from kindergarten through college, students with disabilities were protected from discrimination in education.

Section 504 formed the basis of a monumental shift in educational policy. In 1975, Congress passed PL 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA), which in subsequent reauthorizations was renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (20 USC). As the research of Margret Winzer indicates, only one in five children with a disability was educated in his or her local public schools prior the passage of IDEA (qtd. in Darrow 94). Not only does IDEA provide federal funding for special education, it also guarantees the right to special education. Much like the *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka* decision that established equal access to education regardless of race two decades earlier, IDEA guarantees equal access to a “free, appropriate public education” (FAPE) for all students

regardless of physical or mental disability (20 USC). Working together with parents to create appropriate Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) for each student, school districts are required to provide an education for students with disabilities that emulates as closely as possible the education received by non-disabled students. Moreover, this education should take place in the least restrictive environment. The law also establishes procedural rights and safeguards for parents and students, securing avenues to challenge school districts if they fail to fulfill the mandates set forth by the IDEA (20 USC). Along with Section 504, the passage of IDEA held important educational implications for students with disabilities and their families. No longer was the status quo tearing families apart by demanding children be sent to institutions. No longer was education a luxury that disabled students had to prove they were worthy of through IQ tests. A free, public education in a student's home school district was now a **right**.

Further securing the rights established in the Rehabilitation Act and IDEA was the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (42 USC). Stretching beyond the realm of education to all civil rights, the ADA guarantees for individuals with disabilities the same basic rights established for all Americans regardless of race, religion, gender, or national origin established in the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Note that ADA lagged nearly three decades behind the Civil Rights Act, just as IDEA lagged two decades behind *Brown v the Board of Education of Topeka*: there is a reason why advocates call disabilities rights the last frontier of the civil rights movement. The ADA prohibits discrimination based upon disability in employment, state and local government, public accommodations, commercial facilities, transportation, and telecommunications. The Department of Education is one of several federal agencies with responsibilities to ADA. Not only does

it ensure the safeguards of the ADA in K-12 education, it also enforces the ADA “in public colleges, universities, and graduate and professional schools” (United States). An important aspect of the ADA in the Department of Education’s realm of enforcement is the auxiliary aides clause: “A public entity shall furnish appropriate auxiliary aids and services where necessary to afford an individual with a disability an equal opportunity to participate in, and enjoy the benefits of, a service, program, or activity conducted by a public entity” (42 USC). Schools are required to supply aides that “effectively meet the needs of a student with a disability” and may include the following:

- taped texts
- notetakers
- interpreters
- readers
- videotext displays
- television enlargers
- talking calculators
- electronic readers
- Braille calculators, printers, or typewriters
- telephone handset amplifiers
- closed caption decoders
- open and closed captioning
- voice synthesizers
- specialized gym equipment
- calculators or keyboards with large buttons

- reaching device for library use
- raised-line drawing kits
- assistive listening devices
- assistive listening systems
- telecommunications devices for deaf persons. (United States)

Thus, the ADA did more than just insist that students receive equal rights in educational access; it also required schools to provide students with disabilities with the tools they need to access the curriculum. As a result of the ADA, colleges and universities around the nation began to create offices to serve the needs of students with disabilities and ensure they have equal opportunities in education. Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders have benefitted from the access that the ADA, IDEA, and Section 504 have provided, and, according to Elizabeth Ferrell, the number of students with ASDs enrolling in post-secondary education is sharply on the rise as a reported 273-percent increase in California in the decade following the passage of the ADA indicates.

This All Sounds Great: Why Do We Need This Dissertation, Again?

If you look at it from the perspective of federal law alone, equality has been legislated, the good guys have won, so what's left to do here? It is important, however, to remember that legal mandates do not magically erase institutionalized ideologies.

Rhetoric scholars Kenneth Lindblom and Patricia A. Dunn remind us in their article "The Roles of Rhetoric in Constructions and Reconstructions of Disability" that disability is socially-constructed unfairness (169). Drawing upon the sophistic concept of *nomos* (cultural conventions), they argue that definitions of what it means to be abled or disabled

are determined by cultural conventions. Being a construction of our culture, autism and the rhetoric surrounding it are imbricated in the very fabric running through educational institutions. As Lindblom and Dunn tell us, “Renegotiating *nomoi* is difficult work” (170). Just as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 did not end racism, the ADA did not end prejudices against people with disabilities.

We can see the perpetuation of the harmful rhetorical constructions of autism from the 19th and early 20th centuries influencing the way people view disability in the 21st century. A telling example is Michael Savage’s tirade against autism on his nationally-syndicated radio show, *The Savage Nation*, in 2008. Calling autism a “fraud, a racket,” he went on to angrily tell his listeners:

I’ll tell you what autism is. In 99 percent of the cases, it’s a brat who hasn’t been told to cut the act out. That’s what autism is. What do you mean they scream and they’re silent? They don’t have a father around to tell them, “Don’t act like a moron. You’ll get nowhere in life. Stop acting like a putz. Straighten up. Act like a man. Don’t sit there crying and screaming, idiot Don’t act like a girl. Don’t cry.” That’s what I was raised with. That’s what you should raise your children with. Stop with the sensitivity training. You’re turning your son into a girl, and you’re turning your nation into a nation of losers and beaten men. That’s why we have the politicians we have.

In Savage’s comment, we see centuries-old ideologies. His emphasis on child-rearing for the nation harkens back to Tyler’s Republican motherhood of the early 19th century. Savage seems to see autism as a sign of Republican motherhood gone wrong: because the

sons were not reared to be the strong leaders of the Republic, they've instead become autistic losers and have infected the political institutions governing our nation with weakness. Likewise, his comments reflect the misogynist parent-blame of Kanner and Bettelheim. Because the (presumably male) children "don't have a father around," they are left to the influence of their mothers, and this, of course, is a negative influence that turns them into sissies.⁷ But Savage doesn't place the blame on parents alone: the person with autism is also implicated. He should pick himself up by the bootstraps, so to speak: he needs to "straighten up" and stop being autistic. Savage's rant reflects all three levels of stigmatization of individuals with disabilities described by Neil Scheurich (15). The first level, aversion based on frank ignorance or misinformation is clear as Savage erroneously believes that autism is linked to child-rearing practices rather than brain abnormalities. The second level, "a subtler but more insidious distrust and repugnance" is evidenced in Savage's angry, disgusted tone as well as disparaging terms like putz, idiot, and girl (15). The final level is a moral judgment that the individual is somehow responsible for his or her disability and should rise above it. Savage's commands to stand up and act like a man reflect this bias, that somehow the person with autism should be able to pull himself (since Savage genders autism as male) together and get over it.

Though the academy may mask it with the politically-correct rhetoric of accessibility and accommodation, the same stigmatization exists in higher education. Sociologist Karen E. Jung argues that the historical moves to legislate equality have created a "social 'disabilities apparatus' organized around the concepts of accessibility and accommodation" (92). She defines accessibility as the university's legal obligation to

⁷ This foolhardy assumption that autistic behaviors are the direct result of a missing father is something that mothers of children face daily. I once had a children's pastor at a church my family (briefly) attended call me into a private meeting to ask if my sons lacked a father figure at home, causing their "behaviors."

create genuine ways for students with disabilities to participate in university life and accommodation as “procedural changes and modifications in teaching and academic evaluation practices” in order to meet the unique needs of a student with a disability (92). While accessibility and accommodation seem to be honorable goals, Jung argues that rather than aiding inclusivity, they reify “the existing organization of the academy” and undermine the participation of students with disabilities (93). This is because within the academy a “backlash discourse” has arisen as a form of resistance to the legislative demand for equality (30).

The backlash against inclusivity is fueled by a resistance to change in an institution that has thwarted change for centuries. Cheryl Glenn reminds us that the academy has historically been “centered on the *telos* of perfect maleness,” and although her focus is on the exclusion of women in this ideological construction, there are also important implications for people with disabilities as well (ix). The perfect male body in this model is an abled body; the disabled body is excluded. Thus, the inclusion of students with disabilities is far too often perceived as “disruptive to the existing institutional order of the university” (K. Jung 99). As changes are forced upon the academy by legislatures, “there is a concomitant rise in resistance to the changes that such initiatives entail” because they threaten the status quo (K. Jung 98). This resistance is often couched in the language of autonomy, as professors and administrators assert that legislative mandates threaten their academic freedom.

Economic conditions add an additional impetus of the backlash against inclusivity. Difficult economic realities create competition for resources in higher education, causing academics to set aside “perceived limits to the ideas of openness and

accessibility” in favor of productivity and accountability (K. Jung 98). There are only a certain number of seats available in a classroom, a certain number of dollars available to fund programs. Moneys diverted to support accessibility and inclusion are perceived to be taking away funding from other programs. This concern for controlling resources is seen in the argument that providing accommodations for students with disabilities may give them an unfair advantage over other students (K. Jung 99). James C. Wilson and Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson explain, “Concepts of universality and the norm are deeply embedded in academic culture, and inclusion can very quickly trigger cries of reverse discrimination, exclusion, or injury from the seemingly displaced group that identifies itself as the norm” (300). This argument of reverse discrimination when funding is diverted to so-called “special” learners is reminiscent of the argument that affirmative action in education gives unfair advantages to people of color over Caucasians. Both arguments have the same roots: those who align themselves with “the norm” feel their positionality threatened when the Other becomes included in a realm that was theirs alone.

The result of these biases is that policies of accommodation in higher education often serve to further ostracize students with disabilities rather than include them. Each institution has its own specific rules and codes, but they typically follow the same guidelines: “(1) students must identify themselves as disabled, (2) they must supply medical documentation where appropriate, and (3) they must individually arrange the accommodation with each instructor in each individual course” (K. Jung 101). The burden of accommodation falls fully on the student. He or she is required to overtly out him/herself as different, ironically, in order to be included. Not only out themselves, but

to provide documentation from an expert that proves they are different. Rather than creating an atmosphere of inclusiveness, the procedures of accommodation further Other students with disabilities. For students with autism, this serves to only perpetuate the feeling that they are from the wrong planet when they step into the classroom. A predominant metaphor in the autism community, the idea of being an alien from the wrong planet reflects the isolation a person with autism feels in the neurotypical academy—isolated, confused, and alone in a world whose customs and practices are completely foreign. They feel like little green men . . . in glasses, as the mascot of Wrong Planet illustrates (Plank).



Figure 1: The Wrong Planet logo, an alien

We as compositionists are complicit perpetuating the neurotypical bias of the academy in our pedagogy. As James Berlin asserts, “[A] way of teaching is never innocent. Every pedagogy is imbricated in ideology, in a set of tacit assumptions about what is real, what is good, what is possible, and how power ought to be distributed” (492). Writing teachers are imbricated in a cultural ideology that disadvantages difference; however, the composition classroom can also be a site that revises existing ideologies of oppression. Moreover, we have the ethical obligation to welcome neurodiverse students into composition classrooms. As Brueggemann et al. assert, “Issues of disability matter in composition studies and classrooms . . . because we have a long, proud history of making the invisible visible and of examining how language both reflects and supports notions of Other” (370). For the past seventy years, the field of rhetoric and composition has championed the rights of the marginalized as scholars such as Mina Shaughnessey, Kenneth Bruffee, Elizabeth Flynn, Jackie Jones Royster, and

Victor Villanueva have defended the right for all students to access education regardless of socio-economic status, gender, sexual orientation, or race. Like these other social-justice movements, the neurodiversity movement advocates “civil rights of all those diagnosed with neurological or neurodevelopmental disorders,” including such diagnoses as autism, Tourette’s syndrome, attention-deficit-hyperactivity disorder, and bipolar disorder (Fenton and Krahn 1). We have the ethical duty to continue our field’s commitment to afford access and voice to all students, including those with ASDs. If we ignore the differences presented in the growing population of ASD college students, we are in danger of not only further marginalizing an already marginalized population but also limiting opportunities for both neurotypical and ASD students to be transformed by learning about one another’s uniqueness. As Temple Grandin, a world-renowned animal behavior professor and person with autism, claims, by ignoring the differences of students who aren’t “normal,” we are “letting a huge amount of talent go to waste” (214). Instead, we should value what all students have to contribute as by building an inclusive educational space. Julie Jung asserts, “To create a fully inclusive discipline, we must articulate the material concerns of individuals with an understanding of accommodation as a shared social responsibility” (175). But how do we go about creating this sense of a shared social responsibility when it comes to including students with autism?

Rhetorical Sensing: An Opportunity

Addressing the context of difference is vitally important for the inclusion of students with ASDs who otherwise might be ostracized in a composition classroom and the academy as a whole. How can instructors and writing programs best include students

within the context of the university? Unfortunately, scientific labels fail to adequately answer this question. As the rhetorical history of autism indicates, science is imbricated in cultural ideology. Neuroscience pathologizes behaviors that deviate from socially-constructed conceptions of what qualifies as acceptable behavior, creating a perception of deficit or disability. Relying on a model that places destructive categories upon students is reckless and can perpetuate the cultural stereotype that people with autism are deficient.

Rather than pathologizing students with scientific labels, an approach that seeks to understand students, rather than categorizing them, would be more fruitful for creating a classroom space that embraces neurodiversity. Krista Ratcliffe's rhetorical listening provides a starting point for creating such an inclusive classroom community. Ratcliffe highlights the damage that labels, like the exclusionary labels of cognitive science, can do to the communicative process. She describes one feminist's refusal to read Mary Daly because she wrote from a white, middle-class perspective, and another feminist's refusal to engage with Audre Lorde's work because she wrote from a black perspective. Focusing on the categories shut off each of the feminists from the ideas of an author, negating "the possibility for cross-cultural dialogue not just about gender and ethnicity but about any subject" ("Rhetorical Listening" 197). In effect, the categories prevented the opportunity to listen to another perspective. Rhetorical listening offers a way out of the closed-mindedness that categorizing creates. Rhetorical listening, according to Ratcliffe, is not a naïve empathy, but is instead "an ethical responsibility to argue for what we deem fair and just while simultaneously questioning that which we deem fair and just" (203). It is a trope of interpretive invention on equal footing with the tropes of

reading, writing, and speaking; however, Ratcliffe argues that reading and writing have erroneously been privileged in contemporary culture, in part because speaking is gendered masculine (and therefore privileged) and listening is gendered feminine (and therefore disregarded) (196, 200). Her work calls for re-emphasis on the act of listening. While Ratcliffe's focus is on listening to the intersections of gender and race/ethnicity in order to facilitate cross-cultural dialogues, she asserts that rhetorical listening can be "employed to hear discursive intersections of any cultural categories" (196). In short, it is "a stance of openness that a person may choose to assume in relation to any person, text, or culture" (*Rhetorical Listening* xiii).

As the work of Paul Heilker and Jason King illustrates, Ratcliffe's rhetorical listening can be applied to autism. Their work focuses on contentious relationships between groups within the autism community, namely, the struggle between neurodiversity advocates (predominately self-advocates with autism) and cure advocates (predominately neurotypicals who parent children with autism). Heilker and King argue, "Rhetorical listening, we believe, offers concerned citizens, people on and off the autism spectrum, scholars, and educators the means by which we can all collectively begin moving toward . . . forgiveness" (125). For Heilker and King, rhetorical listening can lead to healing and forgiveness within the divided community as participants learn to "relate *through*" discourse, penetrating through the noise of anger and partisanship that had prevented senders and receivers from hearing one another's messages (125). While rhetorical listening will not erase difference, it will allow community members to see the common ground they share and to work together for commonly-held values, like insuring educational protections for people with ASDs.

While rhetorical listening provides an avenue through which participants can “relate *through*” discourse, we must approach rhetorical listening with the same cautions we would approach any theoretical framework in order to ensure that placing it upon the relationships between neurotypicals and people on the autism spectrum does not further marginalized those who are already within a position of disadvantage. The first caution to this end is to become aware of the bias the term “listening” holds. From a neurotypical perspective, listening indicates becoming aware of and understanding the positions of another. However, from the perspective of a person with autism, listening is a limited and neurotypically-biased metaphor for experiencing another’s perspective. People with autism tend to use *all* of their senses to experience the people and objects in their world rather than limiting themselves to the neurotypically-appropriate sense of listening. In her video manifesto for autistic language, *In My Language*, Amelia Baggs explains that she and others with autism use their senses of touch, taste, sight, smell, and proprioception (movement), as well as the sense of listening, to interact with the world. She explains that her language “is about being in constant conversation with every aspect of my environment.” This constant conversation goes beyond the watching and listening valued in the neurotypical world, in general, and traditional classrooms, in specific; it utilizes all the senses to engage every aspect of the environment. Often people with autism are condemned for this atypical form of sensory experience, as Baggs explains:

Ironically, the way that I move when responding to everything around me is described as ‘being in a world of my own’ whereas if I interact with a much more limited set of responses and only react to a much more limited part of my surroundings people claim that I am “opening up to true

interaction with the world.” They judge my existence, awareness, and personhood on which of the tiny and limited part of the world I appear to be reacting to.

The metaphors we use to describe paying attention to the experiences of those around us reflect the bias and judgment of which Baggs speaks. *Listening* is a neurotypically-privileged way to become aware of the perceptions of others, whereas *tasting* or *smelling* are not. Because a unisensory focus perpetuates the marginalization of multisensory modes of experiencing the world, I argue that it is important that we re-think the language we use for Ratcliffe’s concept. Thus, in this dissertation, I will refer to rhetorical *sensing*, rather than rhetorical *listening*, to describe the stance of openness that Ratcliffe advocates. I define rhetorical sensing as using all of the senses to experience the perspectives of others and thus enable cross-categorical dialogues based upon openness and respect.

The next step we must take to caution against further marginalizing those with autism is to redefine *who* does the sensing. Typically, it is those without power—the “disabled”—who are expected to take on the role of learning the modes of those who control systems of power. After all, it is perceived to be their responsibility to pick themselves up by the bootstraps and succeed in the typical world despite the challenges that world presents to someone who is not typical. In terms of autism, specifically, we see the demand for the person with autism to listen carefully to the neurotypical world in the treatments used for autism. The most predominant example of such treatments is Social Thinking, a therapeutic approach to teaching individuals with ASDs to read (or sense to) the non-verbal signals neurotypicals give off during a conversation, learning to identify

the emotions, points of view, and intentions of others. At its core Social Thinking is an intensive rhetorical sensing training program, challenging the person with an ASD to observe and listen to the neurotypical world and respond to it.

While Social Thinking challenges people with ASDs to sense the experiences of neurotypicals, there cannot be true rhetorical sensing if only the marginalized are required to listen. Too often those in the position of privilege, the neurotypicals, do not take the time to listen to those with autism. Far too often people with ASDs are not heard or, to mix sensory metaphors, are not seen, as Brueggemann, White, Dunn, Heifferon, and Cheu explain:

Disability studies activists and scholars talk and write a lot about “visibility.” It concerns them because even at the dawn of this brave new millennium disabled people still aren’t very visible in our culture. There are, according to one recent estimate, 56 million Americans with a disability, a stunning one-half of whom are underemployed or unemployed But as one student in my freshman composition class last spring finally asked me, point-blank—“You’ve said that several times now—that there are about 56 million Americans with disabilities. Then why don’t we ever *see* any of them?” If you want to cast a quick glance around any meeting room at a CCCC Convention—or just your own classrooms at your own institutions—you’ll quickly understand why he would ask this question; you’ll *see* what is meant by the *invisibility of disability*. (369)

When ASD ways of experiencing the world are not seen or heard, there is no assumption of a shared social responsibility, no true rhetorical sensing because only one party is

listening. This perpetuates the Othering of students on the autism spectrum as they are expected to overcome their ways of understanding and interacting with the world in order to conform to neurotypical models of being. We must change this disempowering model in order to create classroom environments that value the ways of being of *all* students.

Mark Osteen's model of "empathetic scholarship" gives us one such way to sense students with autism. Osteen asserts, "Understanding autism requires extraordinary flexibility and an unusual willingness to accept atypical modes of communication and sociability" (297-8). He calls for an empathy that recognizes the "'eudaimonistic' kinship between autists and non-autists" and claims that "without such interaction, there can be no empathy or understanding" (301). He ties mutual, empathetic listening to respect: "Let us address each other with respect, not as means to some other end, but as human agents. Above all, let us keep listening" (301-2). This mutual, continual, empathetic listening embodies rhetorical sensing. Neurotypicals and people with autism can accept one another's very different modes of communication and learn to sense to each other.

Overview of Upcoming Chapters

The following chapters of this dissertation will examine ways to make the concept of rhetorical sensing a reality in post-secondary writing programs. In Chapter Two, entitled "Sensing Neurotypicals: A Programmatic Approach to Reading the Wrong Planet," I examine the ways in which students on the autism spectrum are trained to rhetorically sense the neurotypical world. I interrogate Social Thinking, the predominant therapeutic model for training people with autism to read and understand the "wrong planet." I also examine courses and programs designed to teach individuals with autism

to navigate the university. I argue that while such training is beneficial, it is not true rhetorical sensing because, as Ratcliffe asserts, both parties must be equal participants in the listening. Placing the burden of understanding on people with ASDs alone serves to reify existing power structures, further marginalizing those who are not neurotypical.

In Chapter Three, entitled “Change Begins in the Composition Classroom: Rhetorical Sensing as Transformative Practice,” I present ways for instructors in compositions classrooms to rhetorically sense their students with autism. I describe the ways in which students with ASDs tend to approach writing and explore the ways in which these approaches may differ from the neurotypical approaches to which writing teachers may be more accustomed. I provide strategies based on universal design that can help all students, regardless of neurodifference, thrive.

Then, in Chapter Four, I turn my attention to faculty-parents of children with autism. “Sensing Academic Autism Mothers: Rewriting the Discourse of Double Martyrdom” addresses the needs of composition instructors who have children on the autism spectrum. The chapter focuses on women predominantly because 1) research demonstrates that mothers are the primary caregivers of children with autism, and 2) the feminization of composition studies had made it a female-dominated profession. Drawing upon a rich body of research on working conditions for women in rhetoric and composition, I describe the ways in which adjunctification has left caregivers overworked, under-paid, and under-insured as they try to provide for their children with autism. This is coupled with a cultural legacy that places the burden of “curing” the autistic child on the mother. Using the concept of power lines, I propose ways to improve conditions for teachers who parent children with autism.

Finally, in “Sensing a New Writing Program: Creating an Administrative Structure for Our Planet” I focus on institutional change. While the changes proposed in previous chapters are helpful on the small scale, there cannot be lasting rhetorical sensing unless there is administrative support and the building of an institutional memory to perpetuate inclusive practices. I begin the chapter by deconstructing a heated thread on the WPA listserv about how to address the “problem” of students with autism programmatically. I assert that this conversation is indicative of the tension about how to deal with a growing population of students that is unfamiliar to most WPAs. I propose training and partnership models that are low-cost and can reshape the composition program from being a wrong planet to being our planet.

These chapters have a shared goal: to reshape the orbit of higher education so that it becomes an inclusive planet for all students and faculty. Imagine the status quo of the university as a solar system, as shown in this NASA replication:

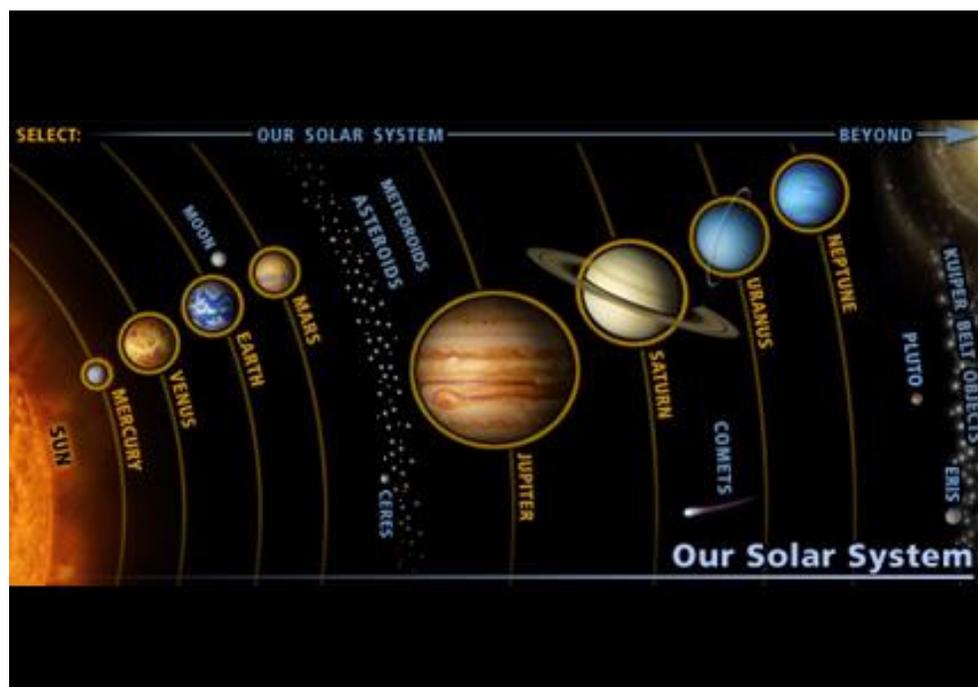


Figure 2: “The Solar System”

The university is like Planet Earth. With a pre-Galilean mindset, it sees itself as central, the sun around which teachers, students, and community members orbit. Teachers who are simultaneously parents of children with autism are akin to objects in the asteroid belt, orbiting in the liminal space between the terrestrial planets and the gas planets. Students with autism, however, are on the fringe of the solar system. Their “wrong planet” is an icy Pluto, so far away that it not only doesn’t feel the sun’s warmth, but that it also is questioned as being a planet at all. The wrong planet is dismissed as merely a Kuiper belt object, an asteroid floating in space.



Figure 3: The Earth

Through the practice of rhetorical sensing, we can change this picture. I envision a model of higher education that doesn’t have wrong planets; in fact, it doesn’t have multiple planets at all. I see one planet on which administrators, students, teachers, and parents all come together, playing their parts to make one whole. Rather than “wrong” or “right” planets, higher education can be one sphere. This does not mean assimilation: each member can and should keep his or her individuality as a unique continent adding texture and beauty to the whole, just as the ice fields of Antarctica and dusty outback of Australia enrich the physical planet Earth. As we rhetorically sense one another as a shared community, the university will become a place where learning does not come merely from lectures and textbooks; it will also come from each one of us who inhabit the community. As we are enhanced by the experiences of those around us, the university will begin to reflect the fruits of the mission it once cherished: enlightenment.

CHAPTER TWO

SENSING NEUROTYPICALS: A PROGRAMMATIC APPROACH TO READING

THE WRONG PLANET

Neurotypical syndrome is a neurobiological disorder characterized by preoccupation with social concerns, delusions of superiority, and obsession with conformity (Muskie qtd. in Blume)

Living with Asperger's is hard, being married to it even harder

I am doing everything in my power to help heal Nick's autism, as you well know if you've been reading any of my blogs. I'm doing all I can for him, but at the same time I sort of love the beauty of his autism. He's got this way of interacting with the world that is so unique, so free, so uninhibited by the social norms the rest of us constrict ourselves with. While we all focus on conformity, he doesn't. His habs⁸ try to get him to count or say the alphabet, and he'll interact with the letters and numbers--in his way. He'll count backward by odd numbers. He'll say his vowels. He does it his way, in between his karate-like hand stims⁹, and it is beautiful.

I love autism.

Asperger's, not so much.

I was taking Noah to the bus stop today, and he told me about why his bus was late yesterday: "Bus 101 broke down yesterday, that's why I was late to

⁸ Habilitors, which are therapists who work one on one with people on the autism spectrum to address behavioral, personal care, and social needs.

⁹ Stims are self-stimulatory behaviors exhibited by person with autism. Common examples of stims are rocking, spinning, arm-flapping, and repeating words or phrases. Stims can be tied to any of the senses and are thought to be a self-organization strategy enabling people with autism to cope with the bombardment of sensory input in the environment.

school.” Notice the “I” there--it wasn’t about the others who were late, just about him. And then he got really upset, holding back angry tears in his big brown eyes. “That was mean of them to do that. They did it on purpose because they wanted me to miss morning recess. That was rude!” We were at the bus stop by then and I parked Nick’s stroller then got down on my knees to look Noah in the eye. I cupped his face in my hands, the loving way that mommies do, and I explained that sometimes things like buses breaking down just happen, that it wasn’t something someone did on purpose to him just so that he would be forced to miss playing on the playground before the school bell rang.

My gentle momminess didn’t work. “It’s true! They did it on purpose! They’re mean!”

I tried again, a little more forcefully.

And Noah pretended to assert understanding, but his mutterings under his breath testified that he still believed he’d been deliberately wronged by the bus.

Mindblindness. People on the spectrum tend to only see the world from their perspective, blind to the ways others see it.

Noah shares it with his dad, my ex-husband. I’ve watched him get angry at injustices against him over the years, listening and nodding all-the-while thinking, “But that’s just how workplaces are. That’s just how traffic is.” And sometimes his anger was directed at me. Like when I got that little tattoo and I was bombarded with a flurry of anger because of what I had done to him. “Every time I think our marriage has a chance you go and do something stupid like this,” he said. Curse words abounded. During the verbal attack I just sat there

dumbfounded. What he was saying didn't make any sense. It wasn't something cruel I'd done to him. It was, in fact, something I'd done to me. So I just sat silently, in awe of the illogic, and wrote down the words he said afterward, still in awe of the illogic.

Mindblindness.

I worry about Noah. Today, as he was muttering under his breath, I think he was starting to learn something that his dad has learned and does sometimes. He was holding back his righteous anger, burying his indignation. Oh, he still feels it, but he might be learning to hide it. And that is not necessarily a good thing. Especially when those sorts of feelings tend to bubble over in a dangerous explosion. I think I spend a lot of my time treading carefully, waiting for his dad's next explosion.

I read "Parallel Play"¹⁰ again, prepping for the assignment I'll be giving my students in a couple of weeks, and I cried at that small section toward the end, the one that Page deliberately doesn't give too many words to, the one where he talks about the end of his marriage. He only gives us one sentence about its ending: "While it lasted, everything was enhanced; I just wish this were the time and place to write that first happy ending."

I cried because I thought about Noah. I thought about what mindblindness would do to his marriage; I cried at the thought of him losing someone he loves because of it. I didn't want him to share his father's fate.

I want him to be able to write happy endings. I hate Asperger's.

¹⁰ "Parallel Play" is a personal narrative about the difficulties of navigating the world while having Asperger's.

My son Noah's experience at the bus stop provides a snapshot of the way in which Autism Spectrum Disorders are typically described by clinicians. The person with autism or Asperger's syndrome is perceived to be mindblind, or without the ability to sense that others have different ways of thinking about the world than he or she does. The idea of blindness indicates disability: being able to see is the "norm," and those who cannot see are somehow "deformed." It is the moral imperative of the person with the deformity to rise above their disability, to grab a cane and learn to navigate the ordinary world (Scheurich15).

Despite my own lamentful longing three years ago for my "mindblind" son to learn to envision the typical world so that he could have a happy ending, I am suspect of the theoretical concept of mindblindness and its implications for students with autism. Looking back, I become aware of my own presumptuousness in projecting upon my son my ideas of what a happy ending is from my privileged position of neurotypicality. Perhaps there are other ways of looking at the world; perhaps it is me and other neurotypicals who have been mindblind. In this chapter, I will examine the construction of mindblindness and the ways in which this theoretical construction has shaped the training students with autism receive in Social Thinking groups and college readiness programs. While there are some benefits to this therapeutic approach, I argue that intensive programs to train students to read the neurotypical world are imbricated in a centrist ideology that forces conformity to the norm rather than respecting differences. Moreover, this approach has profoundly negative consequences as the

flawed scientific concept of mindblindness unfairly places all of the responsibility for rhetorical sensing on the person with autism, which leads to resentment against neurotypicals in the autism community and serves only to increase the divide between the two communities rather than create opportunities for cross-cultural dialogue.

Defining Mindblindness

The concept of mindblindness is a component of the theory of mind hypothesis, which has its underpinnings in Cartesian philosophy. In the “Second Meditation” of *Meditations on First Philosophy*, René Descartes develops the basis of what would come to be known in the 20th century as theory of mind. In the mediation, Descartes describes the mind’s ability to perceive concepts and ideas beyond what the eyes (and other sensory organs) report to it from direct observation. Descartes elucidates the idea that the mind can imagine things that exist beyond what sensory neural networks relay to the brain through his Mediator’s discussion of wax taken from a honeycomb. A person can experience what the hard piece of wax is through the senses, defining it through its color, taste, shape, and smell, yet the same piece of wax can be melted by a fire, which would change all of the properties the five senses used to define the material as wax. Descartes argues that since a person’s understanding that the solid piece and the melted piece of wax are the same cannot come through the senses as all of the sensible properties have changed, there must therefore be a component of human cognition that goes beyond the material and projects into the possible. Descartes

aligns this ability to see beyond the visible with imagination. The differentiation between the senses and imagination links into relationships between human beings: a person is able to go beyond merely taking in the sensory information about the kind of coat and hat a person is wearing and instead see the human underneath, understanding that they have hopes and imaginations much like his or her own.

Modern theorists have applied this Cartesian understanding of the mind to philosophy, psychiatry, and psychology, and it is pivotal to the theory of mind hypothesis applied to individuals with autism. The term “theory of mind” was coined by David Premack and Guy Woodruff in the 1970s based upon their research of chimpanzees. They claim that theory of mind allows one to understand and predict the behaviors, knowledge, intentions, emotions, and beliefs of others (Premack & Woodruff 516). Simon Baron-Cohen,¹¹ a professor of Developmental Psychopathology at Cambridge whose research builds upon Premack and Woodruff’s definitions, asserts theory of mind means “being able to infer the full range of mental states (beliefs, desires, intentions, imagination, emotions, etc.) that cause action. In brief, having a theory of mind is to be able to reflect on the contents of one’s own and other’s minds” (“Theory of Mind” 3). Theory of mind names the ability to “walk in somebody else’s shoes,” so to speak, enabling people to identify with alternative perspectives and be empathetic. Andrew Whiten, an evolutionary and developmental psychologist who researches theory of mind in both captive and wild non-human primates as well as neurotypical children and children with autism, sees it as an essential quality of

¹¹ Yes, he is related to comedian Sacha Baron-Cohen; they are cousins.

humanity: “A theory of mind remains one of the quintessential abilities that makes us human” (qtd. in Baron-Cohen, “Theory of Mind” 3).

Some theorists contend that individuals with autism lack a theory of mind. Psychopathologists Uta Firth (who oversaw Baron-Cohen’s graduate research) and Francesca Happé explain that people with autism do not have “the ability to attribute independent mental states to self and others in order to explain and predict behavior” (98). This means that someone with autism may not convey his or her feelings to others (not smiling when happy or not crying when sad), but it also means that he or she may not appear to be aware of those emotional states in others. This has been interpreted as a lack of empathy, or as “mindblindness,” according to the theories of Baron-Cohen. People with autism are considered to be “blind” to the perceptions of others, “especially in situations that require them to take into account a listener’s thoughts and feelings, such as when a listener needs to be supplied missing facts,” compositionist Ann Jurecic explains in her article about mindblind students in the college writing classroom (“Mindblindness” 2).

Therapeutic Applications Based upon Mindblindness Theory

The concept of mindblindness has been the basis of therapies and school programs for individuals with autism since the late 1990s. The premise is simple: people with autism have the disability of blindness, and schools and therapists aim to fix their flaw. The predominant therapeutic model to treat this condition is Social Thinking®. Social Thinking is a flawed form of rhetorical sensing, for it does train people on the

autism spectrum to observe and listen to the neurotypical world (the flaws will be addresses in a later section of this chapter).

Michele Garcia Winner, formerly of the University of Arizona's speech and hearing program, created Social Thinking in 1995 for high school students in the district where she served as a speech and language pathologist. According to her biography on the Social Thinking website, she treats individuals with "social-cognitive deficits" (Winner). Her approach caught the interest of teachers and therapists throughout the autism community. In 1998 she created a private practice "due to community demand [from] both parents and school districts" (Winner). Subsequently, she founded the Social Thinking Center, located in San Jose, California, and Think Social Publishing, which publishes an extensive line of books, videos, workshops, and workbooks under the Social Thinking brand. She is a highly-sought after figure on the autism conference circuit, both nationally and internationally. Her work has been lauded: the national nonprofit GreatSchools.org has revered Winner as "the leading expert in the field of social skills" and Congress bestowed on her "Special Congressional Recognition" in 2008 (Winner).

Winner's premise is that people with autism have gaps in their social development. For example, around the age of six typical children learn how to lie, and "as children begin to realize they can manipulate other people, their language emerges into increasingly sophisticated linguistic trickery. It is not uncommon to see a third grade child trick someone into looking in a certain direction and then state, 'made you look'" (Winner and Crooke 62). A person with autism may miss such steps and thereby have social gaps. The Social Thinking protocol aims to remedy these developmental disparities. However, not every "mindblind" person is a candidate for Social Thinking.

Throughout her biography on the Social Thinking website, Winner reiterates the word ‘bright’ to refer to those who are appropriate for her protocol: “brighter students” and “bright but socially clueless students” (Winner). One is left to wonder how Winner defines “bright”; would my son Nicholas, who has both a high IQ and an extreme language delay which results in a communication level equal to that of an 18 month old, be eligible for Winner’s program? Likely not.

The Social Thinking approach to addressing the supposed retardation in social development of these “bright” students is to systematically fill in the gaps so that individuals with autism can blend in with their neurotypical peer group. Pamela Crooke, Winner’s partner at the Social Thinking Center, explained at a conference I attended how the protocol works with an example of one of her male patients. Crooke took the patient into a therapy room then stared at a clock across the room on the wall. Next she asked the patient what she had been looking at to see if the patient had been following her gaze. She then repeated this procedure many times until the patient was trained to follow her gaze. Then, she asked him why she might have been looking at the clock, trying to elicit a response that inferred her feelings. She continued this until she trained the patient to interpret her looking at the clock as a sign that she was bored and wanted to leave. Once her patient mastered this, she moved onto another body language cue, then another, re-implementing the process of getting the patient to notice and then interpret what she was doing. Finally, in the latter stages of the program, she asked the patient to map out his own actions (e.g., “I sit in the back during class”) and then imagine what others may think about those actions (e.g., “People may think I don’t want to be their friend because I don’t sit with the rest of the group”). In essence, this Social Thinking protocol steers the

person with autism to take on both roles in the rhetorical sensing conversation, reading both the actions of the neurotypical and himself. According to Winner, students who become “[s]uccessful social thinkers consider the points of view, emotions, thoughts, beliefs, prior knowledge and intentions of others (this is often called perspective-taking—considering the perspectives of others).” That is, they have learned to observe and listen to the neurotypical world and respond to it.

Although there are some college programs that are exceptions, the predominant approach to integrating students with autism into the university is based upon the theories of Social Thinking, teaching students with autism to read the neurotypical university in order to be successful. In a very concrete way, these Social Thinking-based programs are the embodiment of David Bartholomae’s now classic text “Inventing the University.” Bartholomae’s student, much like the student with autism, “has to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on particular ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse community” (Bartholomae 623). In doing so, the student must “appropriate (or be appropriated by)” the neurotypical ways of being in the academy and perform them “as though he were easily and comfortably one with his audience,” the non-autistic institution of the university and all the people there within (Bartholomae 624). It becomes the responsibility of the student with autism to “build bridges,” as Bartholomae describes it, between their neurodiversity and the mainstream neurotypicality of the university (628). Sociologist Karen E. Jung asserts this burden to acclimate to the neurotypical university falls fully on the student (101). Unfortunately, building the sorts of bridges Bartholomae describes in order to assimilate to the university is even more difficult for students with autism versus students

with other disabilities. Felicia Hurewitz, a professor of developmental psychology at Drexel University, and Pamela E. Berger, a disability rights attorney, described this challenge to the Pennsylvania House of Representatives in 2008: students with autism entering postsecondary education “are being expected to fit into structures developed by high schools and colleges for an earlier wave of learning disabled college-bound students” (109). In recent decades, autism has been dramatically on the rise, and the first students of the autism boom are now hitting a university that is not prepared for them (Farrell A35). Schools’ disabilities support services were built for students with more “traditional” disabilities, like deafness and blindness, and these new students with autism are foreign to the institution. With a university community so impaired in the language of autism, students with autism have an even greater pressure to “learn to speak our language” if they are going to survive higher education (Bartholomae 623).

The call to invent a new self who functions easily and comfortably in the neurotypical school environment is fostered by the U.S. Department of Education, which encourages students with disabilities to take a leading role in building bridges for themselves so that they might assimilate smoothly into the university. To this end, the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights (OCR) published a packet to help students learn the university’s language. In the pamphlet’s introduction, OCR advises students that they must be assertive in the process of acclimating to the university:

As a student with a disability, you need to be well informed about your rights and responsibilities as well as the responsibilities postsecondary schools have toward you. Being well informed will

help ensure you have a full opportunity to enjoy the benefits of the postsecondary education experience without confusion or delay.

The message is clear: the student has a responsibility to learn the postsecondary system and their rights within the system or else he or she will experience “confusion or delay” in his or her education. Fortunately, OCR’s congressional mandate requires it to also advise educational institutions of their responsibilities to students with disabilities, so not all the weight (perhaps only a majority of it) rests on students. However, most programs for students with autism only draw upon the first part of OCR’s message, teaching students about their responsibility to learn the system and assimilate to it rather than also teaching instructors about their responsibility to best meet the needs of all learners, regardless of disability.

One such college readiness program is ACCLAIM, a summer course sponsored by the Watson Institute in Pennsylvania. ACCLAIM’s name reflects a bootstraps ideology rooted in Social Thinking: the acronym stands for Autism College and Community Life Acclimation and Intervention Model (“ACCLAIM Program”). Just as Social Thinking practitioners intervene in students’ faulty development and then work to remediate shortcomings by acclimating students to the neurotypical world, ACCLAIM aims to “acclimate academically capable candidates to campus life,” according to their web page. Participants learn “social interactions [and] social communication skills” so that they can speak the language of the world of post-secondary education. In addition, the program teaches coping skills, emotional regulation, and “behavioral competencies.” While the program take place at local college campuses, ACCLAIM is not

affiliated with any postsecondary school; therefore, faculty and/or administration training is not a component. Although the program has existed since 2008, there are no statistics on how successful it is in acclimating students to college.

ACCLAIM founder Dr. Lori Zychowski reports, “Anecdotally, we hear about former participants. A couple have enrolled in college and are doing well” (qtd. in Vogel).

Another program based upon a Social Thinking framework is College Internship Program (CIP). At a cost of up to \$75,500 per year (not including room and board), students can enroll in programs in Massachusetts, New York, Florida, Indiana, and California to focus “on concrete goals such as completing college, building a career, developing a social network and learning independent living skills” (“Tuition and Fees”). The concepts of mindblindness and Social Thinking run throughout the curriculum. For instance, students take a variety of social skills development courses, including one course called “Theory of Mind.” In this course, “students learn to track what others are thinking and feeling by attempting to take their perspective” using Social Thinking strategies like social inference, whole body listening, and memory (“Theory of Mind”).

A key component of CIP is the concept of reframing. Frames, according to CIP founder Dr. Michael McManmon, shape the way people see the world. He writes, “A frame can refer to a belief—which often can amount to a limiting view of the world. Similar to a window frame, a smaller frame may mean you will be able to see less of the outside” (McManmon & McManmom). A frame can be thought of as similar to a Burkean terministic screen inasmuch that a screen

directs an individual to particular points of view rather than others (Burke 45). The screens or frames employed by individuals with autism are faulty, according to McManmon's theory, and therefore must be adjusted in order to properly reflect the correct, neurotypical view of the world. The process of reframing "converts one's thoughts and feelings" to create "a positive pathway for change" (McManmon & McManmon). In doing so, students in the program will be better prepared to shift their perspectives to those of the university. "The Donkey Rule" is one way CIP teaches students reframing:

The "donkey rule" can be used in group discussions in a reframing class. The theory behind the donkey rule is as follows: if five people call something a horse, it is not a donkey. This concept asks that you take a poll of five or so of your most trusted mentors when making a critical decision. The idea is that these people will generally lead you to the appropriate outcome. (McManmon & McManmon)

Students learn not to trust what they see through their own frames because they are wrong in thinking that what they see is a donkey. Instead, reframing teaches them to learn what other people perceive and adopt those frames in order to be successful in college environments.

Programs based upon Social Thinking protocols may or may not be successful in assimilating students on the autism spectrum to speaking the neurotypical language of the university, as there is a lack of meaningful statistical data to evidence program effectiveness. But what if the theoretical framework

guiding these programs and the university they aim to invent are flawed? What if people with autism are not “mindblind” in the way some neuroscientists have assumed?

Empathy

They say that people with autism lack empathy. There’s the whole theory of mind hypothesis that says people with autism have mindblindness--they are blind to the thoughts and experiences of others.

Today Nick proved those theorists wrong.

Nick was in a sensory-seeking mood as he was trying to calm himself down from the trauma of a dog visiting the house (unfortunately the therapy techniques that work for Noah don’t work for Nick). And so in a frantic split-second he reached for the nearest person—Noah, grabbed him by both arms, and bit his bicep.

The bite broke the skin. It was the ugliest Nick bite I’d ever seen and, my friends, I’ve seen a lot of Nick bites.

I quickly shuffled Nick off to his room and focused on Noah’s wounds, making them feel a bit better with Band-Aids and Bacitracin and ice packs and lots of mommy kisses. Then Nick came out of his room.

I did it mostly for Noah, because I wanted him to see that I treated his brother’s misdeeds the same way I treated his, and not because I thought it would register with Nick. I brought Nick over to where Noah and I sat on the floor and had him sit with us. “You hurt Noah,” I told him.

*Nick looked at his big brother, who was still working to control the sobs, and when he saw the sadness in Noah's face, his face immediately changed to match the sadness. I thought that *he* was going to begin to cry.*

"Noah sad," he said with a heartbreaking tone in his voice.

"Yes, Noah is sad," I told him. "Noah is sad because you hurt him."

"Oww, oww," Nick said, acknowledging his brother's pain.

"You need to say sorry to Noah," I said. Nick was silent. "Say sorry to Noah," I repeated.

"I sorry Mommy," Nick said.

And then I had the brothers hug.

Six months ago I wouldn't have been able to get Nick to focus on looking at his brother's face. Six months ago Nick wouldn't have been able to speak the words he did today--he was still using PECS cards to communicate.

Those two things are miraculous. But the most miraculous thing is the way he looked at his brother and felt his pain. I've never seen empathy and compassion like that from anyone. He saw his brother in pain and immediately he felt that pain, too.

I love the way Nick pushes the boundaries every day, challenging what all the theorists and experts said about what he'd be able to accomplish. He started speaking when they thought he wouldn't. He went from one-word utterances to complete sentences in mere months when others thought it was impossible. He demonstrates compassion when the very term that labels him, autism (derived it

from the Greek word αὐτός, meaning self), says he is so into himself that he can't sense the feelings of others.

Ha, take that experts--a five-year-old has thwarted you again.

Challenging the Mindblindness Model

I was wrong. My uncritical willingness to follow everything that experts said about people on the spectrum being mindblind was unfair to Noah that day at the bus stop. Nick, who many would think is too far lost in his autism to feel compassion at the suffering of others, demonstrates that people on the spectrum deeply feel the hurts of others, becoming emotional when he saw the pain on his brother's face. Noah, likewise, has proved, time and time again, that he is aware of the hurts others feel; not only feels them, but feels them more deeply than others would. Years after the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, Noah still insists that we keep every strand of hair when he brushes his cat because during the spill he read an article about a grassroots group that was collecting pet hair, tying the hair into panty hose, and placing the pantyhose tubes in the waters because pet hair is an extremely effective oil absorber. If I try to throw the globs of cat hair away, he cries, overwhelmed by the thought of an animal suffering from the remnants of human error—both BP's and ours. Noah is compassionate. My children, and countless others on the spectrum, call us to rethink the mindblindness model.

Social Thinking-based college assimilation programs, and the invention of the university that they call for, have significant theoretical flaws that call into

question the effectiveness of the status quo. While Bartholomae may say that individuals outside of a dominant discourse community are required to “carry off the bluff” of taking on the ways of being of the dominant, to call the donkey a horse, critics of his “inventing” underscore the problematic nature of such claims (Bartholomae 624). Nancy Welch argues that Bartholomae’s “inventing” “replaces questions with absolute statements of what must be” (150). No longer is there a question of whether the animal is a donkey or horse; the student with autism is expected to take that it is a horse as an absolute truth. Nick Tingle builds upon Welch’s critique, saying that Bartholomae’s expectation that the student writer become someone he is not is “a formula for self-betrayal” (224). Tingle writes:

I see Bartholomae’s theory of the composing process as the ideological assertion of middle-class values. Learning these values may be relatively easy if one is born into the middle class. But these values may be very hard to learn if one is born working-class. I have struggled to learn these values, not because they are inherently hard to learn, but because learning them has put my sense of self at risk. (228)

While Tingle’s focus is on class, his critique reveals a troublesome aspect of Bartholomae’s “inventing” that affects other marginalized groups, including students with autism: if students were not born into the groups privileged by the university, assimilating into the university’s ways of being will threaten their very sense of self. Richard Boyd claims that this process of assimilation can lead a

student to “distain his or her old self” (339). Social Thinking, which advocates that students with autism assimilate to the neurotypicality favored by the academy, threatens the autistic student’s sense of self. Imitation-based programs for inbound college students with ASDs are dangerous and counterproductive for three major reasons: the mindblindness theory upon which such programs are based is faulty, there is no true rhetorical sensing because only one side—those with ASDs—is tasked with the responsibility of sensing, and such programs serve only to create a greater rift between both groups because of the ways in which they dehumanize people on the spectrum.

The first major flaw with Social Thinking-influenced college programs for students with autism is that the concept of mindblindness upon which Social Thinking is based is faulty, at best. Although it was long believed that people with autism were lost in themselves, new findings challenge that perception. Emergent research demonstrates that this perceived lack of empathy in people with ASDs may actually be an extreme overload of empathy. Neuroscientists Henry Markram, Tania Rinaldi, and Kamila Markram posit Intense World Syndrome to counter the theory of mind hypothesis, claiming that due to hyper-reactive amygdala, a person with autism may find the world surrounding him or her to be overwhelmingly intense and highly stressful, and therefore may attempt to cope with this intensity through avoidance.

The amygdala is the area of the brain responsible for memory, emotion, fear, and smell (an odd combination, it seems, but ever notice how smells trigger memories? Memory, emotion, and smell are intimately intertwined.) People with

autism typically have amygdalae that are larger and more hyperactive compared to those of a person with a neurotypical brain. Because of this, memory, emotion, and fear are intensified. Imagine remembering everything and feeling the emotions and fears related to those experiences far more intensely than a typical person would. The way memory modulation works in the brain is through emotional arousal, which solidifies our remembering of an event. The greater the emotions, the more we remember something. Thus, a person with autism such as Daniel Tammet can remember pi up to the 22,514th digit because he has an emotional attachment to every single number (Tammet 185). However, along with these savant benefits of hyperactive amygdalae come extreme challenges. Think of all the unpleasant moments in life. The dog that barked and scared you. The seatbelt that was too hot and burned your hand when you tried to fasten it. The teasing you encountered on the playground. Imagine feeling all of the negative emotions and fears related to these miserable daily experiences a thousand-fold. This is likely why routine is so important to my sons and others on the autism spectrum; they likely fear they will encounter negative experiences that will trigger responses, and sticking to routines reduces the chances of that happening. Since amygdalae are responsible for moderating both emotion and fear, they also trigger responses to emotion and fear. Stressful situations typically activate the fight-or-flight response. My son Nicholas is a classic example of the fight-or-flight response at work. In stressful situations (like going with me to drop off his brother at camp this morning), Nick has meltdowns and fights (as the fresh bruises on my arm evidence) in response to the stressful event. Alternatively, he

may try to flee when he is afraid, as he did yesterday when his new occupational therapist briefly left the therapy room to get an eraser, leaving Nick alone in an unfamiliar room.

However, in extreme cases of fear, another fear response—paralysis—results. The emotions resulting from the antecedent are so intense that they are too much to handle, and thus the individual shuts down. The person may seem to draw into himself, becoming “blind” to those around him. Markram, Rinaldi, and Markram find that Intense World Syndrome caused by a hyperactive amygdala is the reason people exhibit the symptoms often interpreted as mindblindness: “impaired social interactions and withdrawal may not be the result of a lack of compassion, incapability to put oneself into some else’s position or lack of emotionality, but quite to the contrary a result of an intensely if not painfully aversively perceived environment” (90). Rather than being mindblind, individuals with autism have “enhanced emotionality” which leads them to experience hyper-empathy rather than no empathy (90). This finding completely contradicts the presumption underlying Social Thinking and college programs based upon it, leading one to question the efficacy of programs based upon a faulty theoretical and ideological framework.

Not only is the typical mode of acclimating students with autism to college questionable because it erroneously relies on Social Thinking strategies, but the approach is also flawed because it fails to result in true rhetorical sensing between the academy and the student with autism. Rhetorical sensing, as described in Chapter One, is a reframing of Krista Ratcliffe’s “rhetorical listening” that does

not privilege only one sensory mode of connecting with others. When true rhetorical sensing occurs, a space for open cross-cultural dialogue is created. Unfortunately, current college programs for students on the autism spectrum do not create this space.

One reason why rhetorical sensing is not possible within programs based upon Social Thinking concepts is that students with autism are not afforded the agency to choose to “sense” the academy. According to Ratcliffe, rhetorical listening (or sensing) requires a “conscious choice to assume an open stance in relation to any person, text or culture” (26). Rather than a speaker/agent versus listener/object power differential, the sensor has agency in rhetorical sensing. Rhetorical sensing “constructs a space wherein listeners may employ their agency . . . to foster conscious identifications that may, in turn, facilitate communication” (26). Unfortunately, typical college programs for students with autism are grounded in the belief that students on the spectrum need to be stripped of their agency and trained to adopt the language and customs of the neurotypical university. As Bartholomae writes of the university, “The student, in effect, has to assume privilege without having any” (632). Assimilation and indoctrination, rather than “analyz[ing] discursive convergences and divergences,” is the goal of such programs (Ratcliffe 33). Reframing protocol is a clear example of this. Students are trained to set aside their own perceptions and adopt those of others, calling a donkey a horse because the neurotypicals who have agency tell them to. Rather than analyzing to find convergences and divergences, as Ratcliffe endorses, traditional college programs “lead [students] to the appropriate

outcome,” with “appropriate” being what those in power deem appropriate (McManmon & McManmon). There is no room for cross-cultural dialogue when one side is being coerced.

Moreover, traditional college programs for students on the autism spectrum fail to create an environment that fosters rhetorical sensing because only one side is required to do the listening. True rhetorical sensing must be collaborative, with all participants negotiating “our always evolving standpoints, our identities, with the always evolving standpoints of others” (Ratcliffe 34). All parties must sense one another not just passively, but “*with intent* to hear troubled identifications” (46). Unfortunately, when it comes to college programs grounded in the mindblindness framework, only students with autism are listening. The neurotypical participants within the academy remain in rhetorical silence, “and/or, at best, awkward conversations,” with students with autism (16). There cannot be a cross-cultural dialogue leading to understanding among all participants because the burden of sensing is solely on the marginalized student with autism. In fact, this type of assimilation strategy, according to Carl Bereiter and Marlene Scardamalia, “is educationally faulty because it specifically avoids the forming of connections between previously separated knowledge sites” (qtd. in Bartholomae 633). Thus, interaction simply becomes students with autism “‘fitting in,’ a definition that locates the responsibility for adaptation within the ‘abnormal’ body rather than within the institution and ideologies that construct it as well” (J. Jung 161). In this paradigm, the university seems to be holding an ideal position of power. They have little responsibility in the relationship, and the student with

autism carries the weight of fitting in. However, this disproportionate relationship in fact creates much greater problems for the university and its relationship with students with autism as those disenfranchised students inevitably revolt against inequities.

The reason for this backlash is evident when one looks closely at the debasing rhetoric of mindblindness and Social Thinking. If we return to earlier sections of this chapter describing mindblindness and Social Thinking, a disturbing pattern of language emerges. First of all, individuals with autism are portrayed as inhuman. Andrew Whiten, for example, draws parallels between humans and the non-human primates he studies. The animals are mindblind, the humans are not. “A theory of mind remains one of the quintessential abilities that makes us human,” proclaims Whiten (qtd. in Baron-Cohen, “Theory of Mind” 3). By this logic, individuals with autism who are supposed to have no theory of mind are not human; they are animals.

Not only does scientific rhetoric portray people on the autism spectrum as inhuman, they are also labeled as deformed. First of all, they are crippled with the disability of “blindness.” Rather than being respected as neurodiverse, they are “mindblind.” Next, they have failed to develop, their social growth retarded. Winner describes individuals with autism as having “social-cognitive deficits” (Winner). They have failed to attain developmental milestones, such as learning to “manipulate other people” (Winner and Crooke 62). While those on the autism spectrum might see this inherent honesty as a positive trait, the ideology of neuronormativity casts it as a deformity.

Finally, the rhetoric of Social Thinking makes judgments of individuals on the spectrum, labeling some as good enough to help and others as too inhuman to benefit from help. Winner makes this distinction with her repetition of the word “bright” to describe the students who will be a good fit for her program. She doesn’t define what she means by “brighter students,” but it is clear that she sees a difference between those who are worth her while to have as participants in her protocol and those who are not (Winner). Likewise, ACCLAIM differentiates between students who are too feeble for their program from those who are not. Rather than “bright,” ACCLAIM uses the label of “academically capable candidates.” This rhetoric reveals a tacit belief that some students matter more than others and that those who are too autistic are not worthy of opportunities to participate in college programs.

Not surprisingly, people on the autism spectrum do not respond well to being cast as deformed non-humans who may be too damaged for neurotypicals to be help. In response, a grassroots movement advocating neurodiversity has emerged to challenge neuronormativity. Evidencing the backlash against neuronormativity is a language shift: individuals on the spectrum differentiate themselves as being part of “Autistic” communities, while educators, parents, and therapist treating them claim to see themselves as part of the “autism” community (Heilker and King 125). Self-advocates within the neurodiversity movement assert that nothing is wrong with the autistic way of experiencing the world; rather, there is something wrong with neurotypical individuals presuming something is wrong with them. Turning the tables, one advocate pathologizes

neurotypicality: “Neurotypical syndrome is a neurobiological disorder characterized by preoccupation with social concerns, delusions of superiority, and obsession with conformity” (Muskie qtd. in Blume).

Beginning in the 1990s simultaneous to the disabilities rights movement, the neurodiversity movement coalesced into national and international advocacy groups in the 2000s (“About ASAN”). One of the first global self-advocacy organizations was the Autistic Liberation Front, founded in 2004. The Front argues that individuals with autism are not disabled; instead, autism is “an alternative form of brain-wiring . . . rather than as a disorder in need of a cure” (Harrison & Freinberg). The group closely aligns itself with the gay rights movement, asserting that attempts to cure individuals with autism are parallel to attempts by psychologists and religious organizations to cure individuals of their homosexuality. The Front’s logo, a clenched fist, reflects its combativeness: they will fight to ensure their human rights and the “dignity of autistic citizens” (Harrison & Freinberg). The movement’s staunch anti-cure message led to “anxiety” amongst therapists, doctors, and parents who believe autism is a disorder that needs to be cured (Harrison & Freinberg).

Two years later, in 2006, the Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN) was co-founded by Ari Ne’eman. Refusing to let neurotypical “experts” decide what programs and treatments people with autism need, ASAN is “run by and for Autistic people” not neurotypical “experts,” with the goal of empowering individuals with autism “across the world to take control of our own lives and the future of our common community” (“About ASAN”). Rather than allowing

experts to do such things as teach them that a donkey is a horse, they firmly advocate their right to decide for themselves what type of animal they see. ASAN is heavily engaged in advocacy both nationally and internationally, including public policy advocacy and neurodiversity advocacy. Most importantly, ASAN sees people with autism as a culture, not a group of people with a disease, a belief that is reflected in their choice to capitalize *Autistic*. As a culture, they advocate scientific research that improves quality of life rather than finds cures. The group calls neurotypicals to practice rhetorical sensing, asserting that individuals with autism must “have our voices heard in the national conversation about us” (“About ASAN”).

Once seen as a fringe causing “anxiety” for neurotypicals, organizations that self-advocate for the rights of people on the spectrum are now gaining a powerful voice on the national stage (Harrison & Freinberg). The clearest example of this is President Barack Obama’s appointment of Ari Ne’eman to the National Council on Disability in 2009. The co-founder of ASAN is the first person on the autism spectrum ever appointed to serve on the council. The appointment of Ne’eman, so staunch in his anti-cure stance that he views genetic research looking for a “cure” as an avenue for the extinction of his culture, has caused an uproar among neurotypicals (Edelson). Moreover, he believes research to identify genetic markers for autism is a tool for genocide, as pregnant women will abort fetuses when amniocentesis and other prenatal diagnostic procedures indicate the fetus carries autism genes. Organizations funding cure research, such as Autism Speaks and Talk about Curing Autism now, are outraged that the

Obama administration would allow Ne'eman's radical views to inform the decisions of the council.

Ne'eman's rhetoric of holocaust is not outlandish given the rhetoric of war that neurotypicals opposed to neurodiversity employ. In 2006, Congress passed Pub. Law No. 109-416, the Combating Autism Act. The martial name of the bill reflects a clear ideology: autism is an enemy combatant we must use deadly force to defeat. A neurotypical supporter of the legislation, Cure Autism Now co-founder Jon Shestrack, takes the militaristic rhetoric even further, declaring, "This bill is a federal declaration of war on the epidemic of autism. It creates a congressionally mandated roadmap for a federal assault on autism" (qtd. in "Cure Autism"). More recently, Jenny McCarthy, founder of Talk about Curing Autism Now, has stridently perpetuated the use of militant rhetoric. In her book *Warrior Mothers*, she describes mothers of children with autism as soldiers fighting to eradicate their children's disease:

A warrior mother is a mother who hears there is no hope for her child and, instead of retreating and mourning, breaks down walls, weaves her way through obstacles, follows her intuition even when people tell her she is crazy . . . These are the women who will continue to open the door so future generations of children don't have to suffer. These are the mothers with hearts of gold and shields made of the strongest armor. (216)

Again, the martial rhetoric emerges: mothers are soldiers with shields and armor, fighting to slay autism.

The rhetoric of Ne’eman, Congress, Shestrack, and McCarthy are disturbing indicators of the way in which cross-cultural communication between neurotypicals and those on the autism spectrum has devolved into a perilous state of volatility. Rather than sensing, we have war, as those who are subject to normalization are fighting back against those who wish to change them.

Describing this battle between neurotypicals and people on the spectrum, Paul Heilker and Jason King write, “We worry that this deeply agonistic rhetoric may do nothing more, ultimately, than make both sides dig even deeper, make both sides ever vicious in their attacks, ever less able to hear anything from the other side” (124). Progress cannot be made in an environment filled with such hostility. The university can no longer ignore their responsibility in rhetorical sensing, following the status quo of dealing with students on the spectrum, because students will fight against the oppression, leading to an escalation of attacks on both sides where no one listens to anyone. In effect, insisting that programs continue to use a Social Thinking approach will ensure that the inclusion of students with autism will fail, contrary to the intention of those creating such programs.

How, then, do we in the academy respond to this difficulty? Bartholomae leads to a solution, encouraging us to seek out “a discourse that lies between these two . . . poles” (634). It is incumbent upon us to do so, as Heilker and King assert:

We submit that as rhetoricians, scholars of technology and disability studies, and writing teachers, we have an ethical and pedagogical obligation to help hasten such transformations, to

intervene and educate those in both the autism and autistic communities so that their heartfelt but perhaps misguided and counterproductive discourses of advocacy issues may become more fully effective in achieving their ethical and political aims.

(125)

Finding the discourse between requires listening, requires sensing. In the following chapters, I will look at ways in which to rhetorically sense our students with autism in order to understand their perspectives and enter a meaningful dialogue between all participants in the conversation that is the university. I will begin with the composition classroom itself, uncovering ways teachers can sense and understand the neurodiversity of their student populations.

CHAPTER THREE

CHANGE BEGINS IN THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM:
RHETORICAL SENSING AS TRANSFORMATIVE PRACTICE*Putting the Key in the Lock**Monday, January 4, 2010*

Context

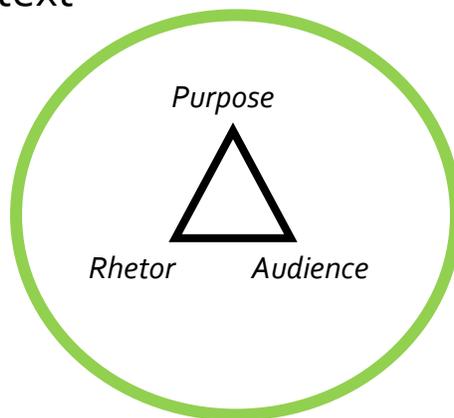


Figure 4: The Rhetorical Triangle

Our world is based on words. They are the way we share our feelings and fears, our hopes and needs. Whether they are signed, written, or spoken, they are the predominant way we communicate with one another.

But imagine that you never understood that words were communicative. You spent your life around them, and maybe even used them to label things in your environment, but you never understood that they could be used to convey your wants and emotions to others; you never understood that they were rhetorical.

Imagine that, and you know what life has been like for Nick.

It's not that Nick didn't communicate. He did—through hand stimming,¹² biting, pinching, and smiling. But our culture's most privileged mode of communication—words—was locked to him. Nick is almost five years old, yet he'd never made the developmental leap that infants master: understanding that the sounds one makes are a way to influence those in the world around him.

The irony isn't lost on me; here I am, the writing teacher who believes in the ultimate rhetorical power of words to shape and change the world, someone who not only has Jonathan Miles' "words are everything" in the quotes section of her Facebook page but also religiously, unwaveringly trusts in Miles' claim . . . and my own son is oblivious to the power I preach and worship.

But Nick got it today.

It started on Thursday when Jerrud¹³ was working with Nick. Nick usually uses PECS cards¹⁴ to communicate, but when Nick was wanting chips, Jerrud pushed him to say the word. "Chhhh-ip," he modeled for Nick.

For some reason, Nick decided to go ahead and copy Jerrud. And magically he was rewarded with the chip he wanted and lots of praise.

Nick didn't think that was so bad, so he played along again. And got his chip.

He started putting the pieces together: I say this group of phonemes, and someone gives me a chip. Cool.

¹² Self-stimulatory behaviors, or stims, are repetitive movements in which people with autism engage as a self-soothing practice.

¹³ Jerrud was Nick's Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA) therapist and worked one-on-one with Nick in the home on language, self-help, academic, and behavioral skills.

¹⁴ The Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) is a method in which people with verbal language difficulties exchange picture cards in order to express themselves to others.

Friday, Saturday, and Sunday we practiced the word “chip.” Sometimes I'd manipulate the situation, getting chips and then asking him what he wanted as he drooled over my stash (actually, that's also how I taught him to use his first PECS card, which was a “chips” card). Other times he'd request chips all on his own, bringing me his chips PECS card but saying the word when he made the exchange.

Today, though, Nick learned to transfer the skill he learned with the word chip to other contexts.

*First it was “pretzel.” But the cutest imaginable version of the word *ever*. It was more like two words, actually: “Pweh. Zil!” After some frustrations, he deftly navigated through the linguistic landscape, saying “chip” when that was what he wanted and “pretzel” when he wanted something different.*

Of course, salty snacks make a child thirsty, so how about some juice? I filled his cup with apple juice . . . and he said “juice” when he wanted Jerrud to give him the cup! Awesome!

So we spent the early afternoon cycling through these three words when I got curious. What else would he say?

I brought in a 16-ounce bottle of Coke, which he loves. I gave him a choice between the apple juice and the Coke. “Nick, what do you want?”

“Co,” he answered.

Sweet!

I hunted down a bag of M & Ms, and my child asked for the candies, over and over and over again, by saying “M” (this worked for me; I mean, there's just one “m” on the candy so why should I make him say two of 'em?).

Next I brought him some cookies, and again, success.

Nick has had some language since he was one year old, back when he'd read the letters and numbers off the license plates of cars. He's babbled in his own language, and he's labeled things in his environment as he attends to them. But his words only reflected context. Today, though, my son became a rhetor and learned about audience and purpose. He realized that he could guide his audience (me) to a specific purpose (to get him stuff he wanted).

How many times I have drawn that tired old triangle on the board in my writing classes, telling my students how important it was that their message take into account audience, context, and purpose? I preached it for years . . . but I never really understood its significance until today, when my child finally put all three together and opened a door to a new world. (Hill)

Parenting a child with autism changes the way a compositionist encounters the classroom space, whether she is conscious of this change or not. For English professor Celest Martin, this change meant not only shifting her content to include non-fiction narratives about children with special needs but also changing her teaching persona to include more of her lived experience in her pedagogy. Martin's "coming out" to her colleagues and students meant that on some days she would come to class with unshed tears in her eyes and say, "I had a hard time getting Andrew on the bus today. I need a minute" (170, 171). Martin asserts that this pedagogical shift deconstructed the traditional power dynamics of the classroom. Rather than functioning as an authoritarian figure, Martin became a colleague of her students, bringing in her own writing about her son's

autism on the days when the class workshopped texts. In doing so, Martin created a community of writers in which all voices were equally valuable.

In my own experiences as a mother of sons with atypical language development, I have likewise seen my perspective of the composition classroom shift. Participating in Nick's process of coming into being as a rhetor challenged me to rethink what rhetoric is, both for my children and for my students. I both realized the challenge of being a rhetor and gained respect for the privileged position afforded to traditional means of persuasion. I learned that practicing rhetoric could be as simple as saying the word "chip" if it met the exigency of a kairotic moment. The knowledge I gained from my child's moment of becoming a rhetor forever changed the way I approach my students, for I became keenly aware of the power the rhetorical principles I was teaching had to invite students to discover their agency. In short, my classroom became the grounds for instilling the seeds of self-advocacy in my students.

Reframing rhetoric as a vehicle of advocacy and change has important implications for the ways in which instructors theorize the teaching of composition. While, as Chapter One demonstrates, the academy is entrenched in practices that marginalize students with autism, rethinking the classroom as a space where difference is welcomed and, moreover, valued, can be a beginning step for changing the institution as a whole. In this chapter, I draw upon Krista Ratcliffe's conceptualization of rhetorical *listening* and propose a shift to rhetorical *sensing* as a framework through which to ground pedagogy in neurodiversity. First, I describe the neurodiverse context of the composition classroom. Next, I describe the benefits of using rhetorical sensing within this neurodiverse context. Finally, I discuss specific pedagogical techniques that

composition instructors can use in the classroom to encourage a respect for neurodiversity. Such a pedagogy that values neurodiversity through rhetorical sensing is essential because it not only breaks down the dichotomies that far too often separate neurotypical (NT) students and students with autism spectrum disorders (ASDs), but it also makes all students better rhetors, giving them opportunities to express their perspectives and empathy to understand the diverse perspectives of their audiences.

Diverse Modes of Language Expression

Anthony¹⁵ enrolled in first-year composition just like any other college freshman. When the semester began, he went to the class he had enrolled in just like any other college freshman. He sat in a desk in the classroom, just like any other college freshman.

But Anthony's peers didn't see him as any other college freshman. The way Anthony rocked back and forth in his chair when the teacher lectured about paragraph organization, the way he spoke way too loudly when responding to the teacher's questions, the way he sat a foot or two back from his peers and refused to look anyone in the eye during group workshops—all of it annoyed Anthony's peers.

For Anthony, his behaviors were a way to survive in the college classroom. Like many on the autism spectrum, Anthony had Sensory Processing Disorder, which “is a condition that exists when sensory signals *don't* get organized into appropriate responses,” akin to a neurological “traffic jam” that overwhelms the areas of the brain responsible for processing sensory information (Sensory Processing Disorder Foundation). He rocked in his chair to calm himself because the classroom was an overstimulating place for his neurological system, filled with the harsh sights and sounds and

¹⁵ Pseudonym.

smells of twenty-something students under the blinding glow of fluorescent lights that painfully buzzed in his ears. This difficulty with sensory processing is also why Anthony spoke too loudly: he didn't even realize that his voice was louder than it should be because voices always sounded loud to him. And he hung back during group workshops, staring down at his paper, because social situations were painful and confusing.

By the second week of class, five students had already made their way to the teacher's office hours . . . just to complain about that "weird" kid Anthony.

Anthony was the student of one of my colleagues at the University of Arizona, but he is certainly not alone. As Elizabeth Ferrell asserts in her article "Asperger's Confounds Colleges," there are "no definitive statistics tracking how many students at the college level have . . . autism spectrum disorders"; however, these "numbers are on the rise" as a reported 273-percent increase in California in one decade indicates.

Unfortunately, the presence of students with ASDs is not always welcomed by writing teachers, as evidenced by the discussion following my presentation on neurodiversity in the composition classroom at the 2010 Conference on College Composition and Communication. While the response from the audience was overwhelmingly approving of fostering neurodiverse classroom spaces, one voice countered what would have otherwise been the consensus. She worried about her workload and that of others—how could my fellow panelist and I expect teachers to take on the additional work of being accepting of neuro-difference in composition pedagogy when they are already overworked? Workload is an important issue that needs to be addressed in the academy, and because of this the entirety of Chapter Five will address ways to facilitate teacher training so that instructors are supported as they learn new strategies. But here is the

simple fact: students with ASDs have the right to be in our composition classrooms. As discussed in Chapter One, they have the legal right to be in our classrooms based upon both the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which states:

No otherwise qualified individual with a disability in the United States, as defined in section 705(20) of this title, shall, solely by reason of her or his disability, be excluded from the participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance or under any program or activity conducted by any Executive agency or by the United States Postal Service.

Beyond the law's requirements, we also have an ethical commitment to include students on the autism spectrum. As Brueggemann, White, Dunn, Heifferon, and Cheu assert, "Issues of disability matter in composition studies and classrooms . . . because we have a long, proud history of making the invisible visible and of examining how language both reflects and supports notions of Other" (370). I assert we have a duty to continue our field's commitment to afford access and visibility to all students, including those with ASDs. Yet, these students will differ from neurotypical students, and these differences will seemingly pose challenges to the status quo of the composition classroom where social interaction, discussion, and peer group work are mainstays. However, if we ignore the differences presented in the growing population of ASD college students, we are in danger of not only further marginalizing an already marginalized population, but also "letting a huge amount of talent go to waste" (Grandin 214). Instead, we should approach

autism with an emphasis on valuing multiple ways of experiencing the world rather than approaching autism as a stable category in which to slot students.

It is important to note that categories are slippery. As a feminist scholar, I am keenly aware of the problematic nature of categorization. Donna Haraway warns against the “hardening of the categories in technoscience,” and likewise we should be cautious against the hardening of the categories in neuroscience (149). Neurotypical and autistic are certainly not concrete categories, and in fact, people with either label may have characteristics of the other category. As an inclusion specialist from the Easter Seals Blake Foundation once told me, “We all have a little bit of autism in us.” In fact, many who have grown up firmly grounded in their belief that they are in the neurotypical category find themselves in middle age being diagnosed with an ASD. Such moving from one category to the other is indicative of the blurriness of the categories themselves. They are not stable, and we do a great disservice to everyone if we essentialize the categories. So why do I use these categories in this chapter if I find them so problematic? It is because they exist in our cultural discourse and ideologies. However fallacious the reasoning, our culture has adopted an ideology that there is a “normal” and a “not normal.” In this chapter I aim to acknowledge the existing cultural categories and describe them, not to reify them, but to deconstruct them and thereby enable the creation of classroom spaces in which addressing the needs of all students, rather than addressing the needs of students in certain categories, becomes possible.

The category of ASD is itself not really a category but a spectrum, for there are countless variations of the ways in which one might experience life with an ASD. In general, ASDs are marked by difficulty in using and/or processing language, difficulty in

social interaction, and repetitive body movements or behavior patterns, according to the DSM-V. Yet, it is important to note there are wide variations in terms of functionality across the autism spectrum; for instance, two of my sons have a diagnosis of autism, yet my older son, Noah, is considered high functioning and attends mainstream classes, while my middle son, Nick, is considered low functioning and attends developmental classes because he still cannot perform basic self-care tasks. Functionality, however, has nothing to do with intelligence; in fact, both of my sons have very high IQs. Instead, functionality is related to how well a person on the autism spectrum can function in the neurotypical world. It is the higher-functioning students with ASDs who will take seats in mainstream university writing courses. The DSM-V criteria are rather general descriptions; how do these broad strokes relate to the specific ways students with ASDs may approach composition? While there is no single way that students with ASDs participate in the writing process, there are several concepts that may help instructors understand their ASD students' diverse approaches to the writing process.

One such concept is the differentiation between language and communication. Cognitive neuroscientists Uta Firth and Francesca Happe outline the difference: “A language is a grammar-governed representational system. By contrast, communication is a process in which one person alters the physical environment of another in such a way that the other constructs internal representations similar to those in the head of the first” (97). To rephrase that in terms of our discipline, language is the symbolic system whereas communication is where rhetoric—an act of persuading an audience—takes place. Some students with ASDs excel in language. As Elizabeth Farrell points out, Asperger’s

Syndrome, an Autism Spectrum Disorder,¹⁶ is sometimes referred to as “little-professor syndrome” because students with Asperger’s have deep knowledge of subjects that interest them and advanced vocabularies to describe those subjects. While some with ASD may have accelerated language, according to the diagnostic criteria of autism they do not have the communicative (or rhetorical) processes in place to express their interests to others.

Some theorists attribute this difficulty in using language for rhetorical purposes to the theory-of-the-mind hypothesis. As discussed in Chapter Two, Firth and Happe argue that people with autism lack a theory of mind, “that is, the ability to attribute independent mental states to self and others in order to explain and predict behavior” (98). This has been interpreted as a lack of empathy, or as “mindblindness,” according to the theories of developmental psychopathologist Simon Baron-Cohen. While people with autism may appear to be “blind” to the perceptions of others, it is critically important to note that emergent research indicates that this perceived lack of empathy in people with ASDs may actually be an extreme *overload* of empathy. Neuroscientists Henry Markram, Tania Rinaldi, and Kamila Markram posit Intense World Syndrome to counter the theory-of-the-mind hypothesis, claiming that due to a hyper-reactive amygdala (an area of the brain involved to memory, emotion, and fear), a person with autism may find the world surrounding him or her to be overwhelmingly intense and highly stressful and therefore may attempt to cope with this intensity through avoidance.

Whether the lack of interaction with other’s perspectives is due to mindblindness or to intense empathy, it holds important implications for how a student with an ASD

¹⁶ In the DSM-V, Asperger’s Syndrome no longer exists as a diagnostic category; instead, all of the different diagnoses that are part of the autism spectrum are categorized as Autism Spectrum Disorder.

might approach writing. So much of composition teaching and learning focuses on audience awareness: teachers ask students to use pathos, ethos, and logos in ways that best appeal to the audience's needs, to look for kairotic moments that would best engage the audience's interest in the argument at hand. This, however, can be extremely challenging for students on the autism spectrum because of their difficulty in processing the feelings and needs of others. According to rhetoric and composition scholar Ann Jurecic, this manifests in writing in several ways. First, ASD writers may fail to provide sufficient background information for readers—the background is evident to the writer, and therefore he or she may falsely presume that it is evident to the reader. Likewise, a student may have narrational gaps, “jumps in topic, unclear references, and lack of transitions” (“Neurodiversity” 430). In addition, claims may seem to lack support. Jurecic describes a former student named Gregory who evidenced such issues in his writing: “I noticed that, although the syntax of his complex sentences was usually correct, he could not structure his thoughts or revise his arguments by imagining a reader who did not already know what he knew. Without a sense of a reader, he had serious difficulty creating transitions, filtering background information, and constructing counterarguments” (“Neurodiversity” 427). All of these characteristics do not necessarily indicate a lack of critical thinking on the author's part; rather, he or she may have just taken for granted the details that writing instructors and audiences find important because they are so obvious in the writer's own mind that they need not even be mentioned in the text. The student writer with autism may not realize that what is so obvious to him or her needs to be specifically spelled out for readers.

The difference between language and communication can also impact the way students on the autism spectrum interpret words. Farrell notes the “literal-mindedness” of students with ASDs.¹⁷ Rather than looking at the underlying messages words convey, students with autism may instead focus on the denotative meanings of words and may not be able “to infer meanings from tone or context” (Farrell). Thus, as Jurecic indicates, students with ASDs may “have difficulty with non-literal language and with the double-voiced and implicit humor of irony” (“Mindblindness” 2). This can present challenges for students as they try to interpret their instructor’s words—being asked to “tear apart a text” may be incredibly confusing for a student with autism. Likewise, students may struggle with interpreting texts. Presented with an assignment to analyze a satirical piece like Jonathan Swift’s “A Modest Proposal,” a student may focus more on the literal meaning of the words than Swift’s underlying message.

Added to the struggle to differentiate between language and communication is the difficulty of the writing process itself for many on the autism spectrum. The writing process can be severely challenging because it is a *process* with multiple steps. Often people with ASDs have dyspraxia, a condition that affects the organization and planning of what to do and how to do it. Some argue that the social difficulties experienced by people on the autism spectrum are in fact caused by dyspraxia affecting their perceptions and language (National Center for Learning Disabilities). Dyspraxia can make facing a writing assignment daunting. While a student may be capable of completing every step in

¹⁷ It is important to note that not everyone with autism interprets words on a purely literal level. Douglas Bilken writes of a severely autistic, non-verbal person named Jonothan who learned to use a Canon Communicator (a small electronic device into which he could type and print messages to others). Jonothan typed such sentences as “I got sat on by Rosie” and when he was asked if he meant that literally or metaphorically, he replied “MET.” He knew the difference between literal and figurative language (Bilken 292).

the writing process, the sequence of going from one step to the next and to the next can be difficult to navigate. Farrell writes that when people with ASDs encounter writing assignments, which often lack explicit, sequential steps for completing the assignment, they may “hit roadblocks.” She tells the story of a current doctoral candidate at Boston University named Stephen Shore who was brilliant enough to teach himself how to play every instrument in his school’s band when he was in junior high but who could not overcome the daunting hurdle of writing a college essay. He found books on his subject, but after he read them he felt lost about what to do next because “the syllabus had given him no specific instructions or intermediate deadlines.” He eventually withdrew from the class because he “didn’t know what to do” with the sources he had found.

A component of the writing process that may be particularly troublesome for students on the autism spectrum is adherence to conventions. While writing teachers may put the greatest importance on content and ideas, for some students with autism, rules and form are extremely important. In both “Mindblindness” and “Neurodiversity” Jurecic tells the story of a former student on the autism spectrum who fixated on MLA format. He “obsessively” read and reread the MLA style manual and asked countless questions about proper citation format (“Neurodiversity” 424). I had a similar student in my English 102 course in the spring of 2009. While his content was strong, he always turned in his papers late because he wanted to perfect his grammar and punctuation. Temple Grandin attributes this to the autistic mind’s tendency to particularize. She draws upon Charles Darwin’s terms *lumpers* (taxonomists who group animals into large categories based on major characteristics) and *splitters* (taxonomists who divide animals into smaller categories based on minor variations). Grandin argues that neurotypicals are

lumpers, focused on the big picture, while people with autism are *splitters*, focusing on minute details. Grandin asserts that focusing on specific details can be an attribute to those with autism, making them effective engineers, air traffic controllers, and airport security screeners. However, this emphasis on specific details may also mean that it is difficult for people with autism to generalize very well (211). Thus, a student may be so focused on specific conventions and rules that he or she may have great difficulty seeing the bigger picture of the assignment.

Rhetorical Sensing in the Composition Classroom

Addressing this context of difference is vitally important for accommodating students like Anthony who otherwise might be ostracized in a composition classroom. How does an instructor address the thorny social issues related to a student with an ASD, especially in a composition class where social interaction, discussion, and peer group work are the status quo? Jurecic advocates a return to neuroscientific frameworks as a means through which to respond to neurodifferences. She finds commonalities between the “mindblindness” of an ASD writer and the “writer-based” prose of Linda Flower. While turning to cognitive science would allow for clear, medicalized labels for the experiences we observe with our students’ approaches to writing, even Jurecic herself notes the danger of such a model. Citing Mike Rose’s article “The Language of Exclusion,” she notes his objection that the medicalized language neuroscientific models imply “disease and innate defect” in the non-typical student (“Neurodiversity” 433). While she never fully addresses the implications that deficit labels might have on students, I argue that this risk of further stigmatizing students with ASDs is a concern too

important to be overlooked. Scientific labels pathologize students who deviate from socially-constructed conceptions of what qualifies as acceptable behavior, creating a perception of deficit or disability.

Rather than pathologizing students with scientific labels, an approach that seeks to understand others, rather than categorizing them, would be more fruitful for creating a classroom space that embraces neurodiversity. Rhetorical sensing provides a starting point for creating such an inclusive classroom community, serving as “a stance of openness” (*Rhetorical Listening* xiii). Rhetorical sensing does not erase difference; rather, it allows members of the classroom community to see the common ground they share. As Chapter Two demonstrates, students with autism are already actively practicing rhetorical listening in academia; however, there cannot be true rhetorical sensing if only the marginalized are required to listen. Too often those in the position of privilege, the neurotypicals, do not take the time to listen to those with autism. When composition instructors become active practitioners of rhetorical sensing, powerful change can happen in the classroom.

Employing a pedagogy based upon rhetorical sensing in the composition classroom may require instructors to adjust some of their traditional teaching practices. As Brueggemann et al. assert, “Composition professionals may, unwittingly, be privileging a way of knowing with which we ourselves are most comfortable, perhaps not realizing that our students have other talents we might use even as we teach writing” (379). Rhetorical sensing provides a means through which compositionists can move beyond a pedagogy based upon our own strengths and comforts to a pedagogy enriched by the diverse talents that our students bring into the classroom. By embedding writing

instruction in an environment that values sensing the talents that all students bring to classroom, we can reshape our students' interactions with and acceptance of one another, lessening the chances that neurotypicals will ostracize a student with an ASD, as happened in my colleague's classroom.

To begin with, discussions of different ways of being should be a part of the curriculum, which could dramatically alter peer-to-peer relationships for students like Anthony. From as early as Isocrates, rhetoric has been closely tied to civic engagement, and as such, rhetoric and composition classrooms should engage in discussions of how all can access venues for civic engagement. Lott asserts that "in systems aiming to represent each interest somewhere, systems reflecting our democratic ideals, it is imperative to address in classrooms some of the issues related to disability" (150). As a civic practice, discussing difference in the classroom "helps cultivate others' awareness of cultural constructions of disability and their own power to alter such constructions" (150). Lott underscores the importance of cultivating this awareness of difference, saying, "Only by cultivating receptivity and sensitivity to the positions of those we are less familiar with can we create a community of collective health. . . . [W]e must articulate our different perspectives and negotiate among them" (150). So how do we cultivate this awareness? Lott claims that it requires "a form of advocacy in the classroom" in which teachers, through typical classroom activities, "can propose to students the option of respecting and accepting diversity as opposed to harboring and fostering Otherness" (151). However, in these discussions of difference, it is essential that persons with disabilities are involved and can voice or sign their own experiences, Lott contends, so that they are not objectified by neurotypicals. While on the surface it seems that such conversations would

benefit students with disabilities, whose experiences are now sensed by others, Lott contends that these conversations benefit everyone, disabled or not: “By bringing disability studies into the curriculum even in small ways, we further move toward a cultural ideology that embraces the continual negotiations advantageous to the welfare of persons with disabilities as well as to their nondisabled fellow citizens” (151).

Applied directly to autism, the sorts of conversations Lott describes can occur very naturally in the composition classroom. Our subject matter is language and communication, and since autism by its definition is related to differences in communication, it lends itself to conversations foregrounding the various communication styles people employ. Such conversations are the beginning point of creating a shared sense of rhetorical sensing among students, creating a community in which students like Anthony would be respected as one of many members of a diverse community rather than perceived as someone who doesn't belong. As a starting point for such conversations, instructors can bring in texts that highlight neurodiverse modes of communication and the way neurotypicals and students with ASDs might read these diverse modes of communication. These can range from print texts, like Tim Page's essay “Parallel Play: A Lifetime of Restless Isolation Explained” about his life with Asperger's syndrome, to new media texts like Amelia Baggs' web video “In My Language” (for my sample lesson plan based on these texts, see Appendix A). Such texts can be the basis of rhetorical sensing activities in which instructors ask students to identify with the perspectives of the rhetors of each text. What is each rhetor's style of communication, and what roles do eye contact, body language, and intonation play in their communication styles? How might differences in communication style erroneously lead to misunderstanding? Finally, what

common ground can you find with the rhetor? Such rhetorical sensing discussions can help students learn to understand the perspectives of other rhetors, whether they be neurotypical or ASD.

Moreover, drawing upon these understandings of diverse ways to communicate, instructors can create instructional spaces that allow for a wide range of communication modalities. In the academy, our primary mode of communication tends to be oral. As Brueggemann asserts, it is not easy to separate rhetoric's 2,500-year-old received tradition from an "imperative to speak and speak well" (11). Drawing upon centuries of tradition, the classroom tends to be a space in which teachers speak and encourage students to talk through questions they pose. Teachers also encourage students to talk with one another in small groups, workshopping their work. This oral-based pedagogical design favors neurotypical students, however, and does not create avenues for students with ASDs who have oral communication difficulties to effectively communicate with their teachers and peers. Through technology, however, teachers can easily provide communication opportunities that give students with ASDs more communicative agency. Uta Firth notes the benefit of electronic spaces for writers with ASDs, observing that unlike the rapid exchanges of conversation, writing in digital spaces allows authors time to think and "to use an explicit theory of mind to compute effects on the recipient of the message" (qtd. in Jurecic, "Neurodiversity" 426). In fact, new media has been embraced by autistic culture. Joyce Davidson's research finds that since the 1990s people with autism, even those with significant oral language delays, have been using chatrooms, email lists, and online bulletin boards to communicate (792). While Paul Virilio speaks of the speeding up new media causes, Davidson argues it is actually the simultaneous

slowing down that new media enables that attracts users with ASDs because it allows for a delay in response that is rarely afforded in face-to-face communication (796). Today there are multiple online communities for people with ASDs, most notably *Wrong Planet*, which has 29,000 active users. Teachers can harness the already-existing writing practices of students by bringing new media technology into instruction. Blogs are one simple example of how teachers can create instructional spaces that foster involvement of students with ASDs. Using built-in blogging tools in existing course management systems like Blackboard, students can carry on written conversations about readings, and these electronic discussions can carry over into face-to-face classroom discussions (if blogging tools are not available in a course management system, free utilities like Blogger and WordPress are viable alternatives). Whereas relying solely on oral conversations privileges the contributions of the neurotypical student who feels confident in sharing his or her ideas, pairing existing discussion modes with new media options provides room and voice for students with ASDs as well as students who are shy about speaking in class discussions. Moreover, online written discussions support one of the key goals of a writing class—to foster students’ writing.¹⁸

Practical Accommodations of Rhetorical Sensing in Neurodiverse Pedagogy

One of the trickiest issues when it comes to students with ASDs is knowing how to accommodate them in the writing classroom. Even if a campus has a disability resource center, students with ASDs often do not request accommodations through the center either because they do not want to carry the stigma of autism into the classroom or

¹⁸ For examples of blogs used as discussion tools, see my Thinking Critically about New Media course blog <http://thinkingcriticallyaboutnewmedia.blogspot.com/> or my Writing Center Internship course blog <http://uawcinterns.blogspot.com/>.

because they have never been formally diagnosed with an ASD and therefore do not even know that accommodations might be available. For instance, when Stephen Shore struggled to write a college essay, he did not know that he could go to his instructor for help with the roadblocks his disability created for him as he tried to navigate through the writing process (Ferrell). Because of this, it is vital for instructors to practice active sensing of the struggles that students who may be on the autism spectrum face. Jane Thierfeld-Brown, director of student services at the University of Connecticut's law school, says that "creative accommodations become very important" for students with ASDs (qtd. in Ferrell). "Accommodations" can be a charged term, one that has a contentious history. One need only look to Boston University Provost Jon Westling's very public diatribe against classroom accommodations in 1995 for evidence of how turbulent the idea of accommodations can be. Westling expressed his outrage for having to make accommodations for Somnolent Samantha, a student whose sleep disorder prompted her to sleep during class (it turned out, despite his outrage at having to accommodate Somnolent Samantha, the student did not exist and was instead a fiction Westling dreamed up to support his anti-accommodation message) (Brueggeman et al. 375-6). That provosts would go so far as to invent problematic learning disabled students to challenge the pressure on universities to accommodate diverse learners shows how deep the frustration against the concept of accommodation runs. Rather than conceptualize this as accommodating a few "different" students, I challenge us to think instead in terms of rhetorically sensing the needs of *all* of our students.

The practical accommodations I propose in this section are based upon best practices that can benefit every student in the composition classroom. Sensing the needs

of students who do not conform to neurotypicality and thoughtfully responding to those needs can create a space where all students have a better opportunity to learn.

Brueggemann et al. argue:

We need to supplement writing-centered instruction, even in our writing classes, not only because people do make knowledge in different ways, but also because everyone can benefit from occasionally using nonwriting strategies to alter perspectives and create the intellectual distance needed for sophisticated revising. The system needs to change not because some people are labeled LD but in spite of it. Those called “normal” also learn along a continuum of difference and would be better challenged if classrooms became more interactive, student-centered, multi-modal, and collaborative. (380)

All students, even those labeled neurotypical, learn along a continuum of difference. We are already aware of some of those differences. For instance, teacher-training programs teach instructors to understand that their students may be visual learners, auditory learners, or tactile learners. Practical accommodations based upon rhetorical sensing encourage instructors to listen to their students’ unique learning needs, equipping us to be better rhetors in the classroom as we become aware of our audience and its needs.

There are many simple adaptations that instructors can use to support the diverse needs of learners, regardless of the discipline. Teachers can ensure that orally-delivered content is paired with visual content since many students with ASDs have auditory processing disorders. This can be as simple as uploading lecture notes to Blackboard, D2L, or another course management site, or using PowerPoint slides in conjunction with

lectures. Another simple adaptation is to become aware of the roles that color and light play in students' learning. Because of sensory integration difficulties, many students with ASDs suffer from Irlen Syndrome, a disorder in which readers cannot filter out offensive light waves when encountering texts. It is important to note, however, that it is not only students with ASDs who are impacted by Irlen Syndrome: students with reading and learning problems, dyslexia, ADD and ADHD, migraines, chronic fatigue, photophobia, traumatic brain injury, and certain medical or visual conditions are also affected ("Irlen Method"). Irlen Syndrome can make reading painful and negatively impact reading comprehension. Instructors can ease the reading difficulties that Irlen Syndrome causes through simple document-design changes: choosing larger, sans-serif fonts, including white space between blocks of text, and using soft greens and blues in both handouts and electronic documents. Changes to lighting can also benefit students, although instructors may have less control over lighting options than they do over document design. Natural lighting is the most beneficial, but in classrooms where fluorescent lighting is the only option, instructors can dim the lights or only turn on half of the rows of lights. And, though it may seem like a shocking idea, instructors can allow students to wear sunglasses in class.¹⁹

In addition to these more general applications of sensing the needs of students, there are also other ways of sensing our students that apply more specifically to the composition classroom. The first of these is for instructors to become more critically-aware of their own language use, tuning into instances when their meaning and tone do not match the denotative meaning of their words. When we discuss learning diversity in

¹⁹ To get a feel for the struggles students might face with visual processing, or to test yourself, you can use the simple diagnostic tool at http://www.sde.com/downloads/teacherresources/di/self_test_irlen_syndrome.pdf.

the Writing Center Internship course, I help the tutors become aware of their language use through a simple activity. I secretly ask one student to interpret everything in the class discussion literally and comment on those literal interpretations. For instance, if one student says, “That cracks me up,” my secret student will interpret that literally and perhaps ask, “What part of you is cracking? Does it hurt?” When I reveal later in the class what the secret student is doing, it creates a space for the interns to critically examine how their words might be interpreted literally during a tutoring session with a student on the autism spectrum, as Jurecic, Firth and Frappe, and Ferrell explain. Becoming aware of one’s own metaphorical use of language can help the instructor give clearer, more precise directions to all students, not only those with autism, but also those who may speak English as a second language or who may just simply favor concrete instruction.

Instructors can develop their critical awareness of the language used in the texts they assign to students, too, and choose texts that are easier for literal-minded students to decode. Harbinson and Alexander assert that “non-fiction is often a more positive experience for individuals with an autistic spectrum disorder (ASD), as they can enjoy the concrete nature of reading and writing non-fiction texts” (11). Because of this, students with ASDs would benefit from non-fiction options. However, it isn’t always possible to use solely non-fiction texts (for instance, a course focusing on literary analysis must, by definition, include literary texts). In this instance, instructors can give students the tools to interpret unfamiliar use of metaphorical language through what Harbinson and Alexander call an “inferential reading scaffold” which assists students in decoding figurative language and understanding body language and emotions in literary texts (14-15). The inferential reading scaffold contains multiple components. First is decoding

idiomatic language. The instructor can pull out passages from the text the class is reading (e.g., “She’s got a bone to pick with you”) and then have students work to interpret the idiom. Next is decoding the body language of the characters in the text as students analyze “how a character behaves in a text to determine what type of person the character is, using textual evidence in their answers” (16). For instance, students can work to break down descriptions like “she sat rigidly” to decode what type of person the character is. Third, the framework is used to develop a sense of empathy for the characters as the students try to imagine how a character feels. For instance, students might write a diary entry from a character’s perspective. These scaffolding techniques help build critical reading skills in all students, not just those on the autism spectrum, enabling all learners to better-understand texts.

Next, instructors can create intermediary steps for writing assignments rather than simply assigning an essay and saying the final draft is due in four weeks. Ferrell encourages instructors to work “with students to figure out exactly what an assignment requires and break it down into literally defined steps, helping them understand how to complete the task” (Ferrell). For instance, an instructor may have students turn in a proposal for what they want to write about, then turn in a list of sources, then turn in an annotated bibliography, then turn in a draft thesis statement, then turn in an outline, etc. This process-based approach to writing is beneficial to all students, not just students with autism, for many reasons: it breaks down the sometimes overwhelming task of writing an essay into manageable parts, it gives the instructor the chance to provide students with constructive feedback at several points throughout the process, and it safeguards against plagiarism as students have to demonstrate that they are working through the writing

process at several points. Most importantly, a process-based pedagogy does not single out the differences of the ASD student as someone “not normal” who needs “special accommodations.”

Instructors can also work to make students critically aware of the demands of their audience. Steps can be added to the writing process that require students to analyze the audience to whom they are directing their writing. I do this in my English 102 courses with an assignment I call an “audience analysis” in which students must describe, in specific detail, who their audience is, what the audience already knows about the topic, what additional background they need to be fully informed about the topic, what values the audience members hold, etc. Then, students plan out how they will address the needs of the audience. Which rhetorical appeals will they use? What type of organizational structure will work best for the audience? (See Appendix B for this assignment).

Breaking down audience awareness into conscious steps can help students with ASDs—and all students—identify with the audience’s perspective and overcome the hurdle of mindblindness. Likewise, teachers can teach students organizational structures that help them overcome the perceived lack of development that comes from assuming that the argument is as clear to the reader as it is in the author’s head. The model of PIE (Point, Illustration, Evidence) that the University of Arizona presents in *The Student’s Guide* is one such model that can be used to push students to prove *why* a claim makes sense rather than simply stating the claim and assuming that readers will intuitively grasp the logic of it.

Finally, instructors can be compassionate to ASD students’ need to adhere to rules in their writing. While minute details like how many spaces should follow a period may

not be a highly valued component of an instructor’s curriculum, she can take the time to help a student with autism work through such rules during office hours visits. Telling a student on the autism spectrum to focus on content rather than conventions simply does not work because of the way the autistic mind works—rules and order help someone with autism organize the often-seeming chaotic world around him. Be patient with this need for structure.

Figure 5: Summary Table of Inclusive Teaching Strategies

Strategy	Need Supported
Use texts that highlight neurodiverse modes of communication	Creating a community of acceptance
Use digital spaces for workshops and discussions	Auditory processing and social language
Pair orally-delivered context with visual content	Auditory processing
Practice inclusive design: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use larger, san-serif fonts • Include white space • Use soft greens and blues as the background color of digital texts 	Visual processing
Use natural lighting or only a portion of the florescent lights	Visual processing
Use clear, literal language in directions	Literal-mindedness
Use an inferential reading scaffold to help students decode figurative language and emotion in texts	Literal-mindedness and interpreting emotion
Break assignments into smaller sequential steps with intermediary deadlines	Multi-step processing
Use audience analysis assignments	Interpreting multiple perspectives
Respect students’ need to focus on conventions	Tendency to particularize

The importance of supporting ASD writing students cannot be underscored enough. Writing can be a groundbreaking avenue of communication for students who struggle to express themselves in other ways. Louis’ story emphasizes how key writing can be to someone with an ASD. Louis was non-verbal and considered severely autistic. When given a Canon Communicator and allowed to communicate for the first time,

however, Louis had a lot to say. “He typed, ‘IM NOT RETARDED . . . MY MOTHER FEELS IM STUPID BECAUSE IH [he back-spaced this and crossed out the *h*] CANT USE MY VOICE PROPERLY.’ A tear rolled down his left cheek as he typed” (Biklen 296). Because he did not communicate in typical ways, he was falsely presumed to have nothing to say. But students, all of them, *do* have something to say, regardless of any disability labels they may happen to carry—it is our job as writing teachers to help them find the voice to communicate those things to the audiences that most matter to them.

Fostering a respect for neurodiversity through rhetorical sensing has the power to transform the world for people like Louis, giving them the tools to use their power as rhetors in ways that neurotypicals can sense. This is a powerful motivation to embrace rhetorical sensing as a pedagogical framework; however, the power rhetorical sensing has to shift structures of power goes far beyond its impacts on individual students like Louis; rhetorical sensing has the potential to begin to reshape the very structures of power that marginalize the Other. Embracing rhetorical sensing of the neurodiverse is akin to other liberatory practices that have transformed our awareness of gender, race, class, and orientation in classroom environments in the past decades. Jurecic notes that working with a student with an ASD “made me consider how the academic essay, with its linear structure and intolerance for tangents, is rooted in ‘normal’ neurology” (“Neurodiversity” 427). Thus practicing rhetorical sensing among ASD and neurotypical students is part of a much larger issue: logocentrism as neurotypical centricism. Scholars have critiqued the Western logocentric tradition as barring non-dominant others including the female, the poor, the homosexual, the person of color; yet it also bars the person whose brain is neurologically wired differently than a so-called typical person’s brain. This emphasizes

the continued importance of embracing alternative ways of doing rhetoric by employing liberatory practices for all marginalized students in our approach to teaching composition. By working against this structure within the classroom space, we can continue the important gains that critical race scholars, feminist scholars, and queer theorists have made in deconstructing the phallogentric academic tradition, thereby making a space where all students, regardless of the labels that have been placed on them, are sensed and honored as rhetors who have important contributions to make.

Of course, teachers should not be expected to go it alone as they make change through rhetorical sensing: the administrative structure itself must be active in the process for there to be a paradigm change. Chapter Five focuses on ways in which writing programs can practice rhetorical sensing. But before we look at the larger administrative structure, let us first examine the practice of rhetorical sensing as it applies to one specific group of composition teachers: mothers of children on the autism spectrum.

CHAPTER FOUR

SENSING ACADEMIC AUTISM MOTHERS:

REWRITING THE DISCOURSE OF DOUBLE MARTYRDOM

The mental math is intimidating: teaching plus research plus writing plus institutional service plus family equals nervous breakdown (Adams and Ianetta 145).

You have to be like a superhero [or] Foxy Brown and kick that wall down . . . to bring your child through (Peete qtd. in Winfrey).

Mothering and the Academy Don't Mix (?)

Yesterday was Dead Day. You know, the “quiet” day on campus when there’s nothing to do but grade.

Hah.

I spent my morning at Campus Health with the most recent contestant in the “Let’s Try to Figure Out the Mystery Abdominal Pain” trivia game. Yet another doctor stumped, so I was shuffled off to the lab for tests. Gosh, you’d think that with the number of people who’ve played this game that someone would be a winner by now ::sigh::

Then I grabbed some lunch and scooted off to my study carrel to grade portfolios in the bit of time I had before I needed to be at the WC²⁰ to interview the next crop of potential interns.

That’s when my cell phone rang. Uh oh.

It was Nick’s teacher. “I think I got confused,” she said. Apparently, she thought for some reason that I’d be picking Nick up . . . and didn’t put him on the bus to his daycare.

²⁰ Writing Center.

Not good.

I called W to see if he could pick up Nick, and it was taking painfully long for him to call me back so I frenetically scooped up my things, ran down three flights of stairs, ran over to the parking garage, ran up three flights of stairs. I was already to my car when W called back and said, "I wanted to do this for you, but it's a bad day at work . . ."

I raced off to Nick's preschool, trying not to burn my fingers on the steering wheel that had been baking in the 100-degree heat, consistently breaking speeding laws all along the way.

When I got to his school, Nick was out on the playground with an aide. "I thought he was supposed to get on the bus. I told the teacher that," she said.

I know the kind thing would have been to engage in conversation a bit, to thank her for watching out for Nick, but I was rushed. I mumbled something brilliant like "it's okay" (which, you know, none of this was okay), and steered my child toward the gate.

"Nick, let's play GO!" I said. And my child and I ran hand in hand to the car.

I got Nick to his daycare on the north side of town and rushed to get him unbuckled and into the building. I took him straight to his classroom and opened the door. He promptly threw himself to the floor and started screaming.

In autism language, that means, "Yikes! Someone's messing with my routine and I'm freaking out!"

Nick's teacher just sort of stared at all of this (super helpful--thanks), but fortunately a teacher from another class said, "He needs to go to the playground when he first gets here."

Oh.

So I scooped up the mid-meltdown child and led him to the playground. Then I went back to my car and choked down a sob before starting the engine.

I rushed and rushed and rushed back to mid-town. My cell phone rang with “where are you?” calls. I pulled into a parking spot and ran to the WC. I think I got there four minutes before the interviews were scheduled to start.

I put on my game face, and I don’t think the eight undergrads who came in that afternoon could tell that I’d been racing across town like a manic Speedy Gonzales moments before.

All of this crazed running made me think about whether or not mothering and the academy really can mix. People from outside of the academy think I have a great gig-- they think I can schedule classes for when my kids are in school and that I can do work when the kids are asleep.

In theory, it sounds ideal.

In practice, I’m racing through town mid-day, praying that I can make it back in time. (Hill)

Admittedly, there are benefits to life in the academy that many mothers working outside of the academy do not experience in their professions. While the time demands are great, they are also somewhat flexible in ways that many other jobs are not: a mother waitressing must be at work during the café’s hours of business, but a writing instructor can grade papers at 2AM (and too often does). There is also a certain cultural cache that comes with saying “I teach at the university,” even if you are an adjunct who barely

makes a living wage. Yet, life in the academy isn't easy. That sentence is one that my audience of writing teachers experiences so intimately on a daily basis that it needs little elaboration. You know the sweat equity you invest in student conferences, committee obligations, tenure hoops, lesson plans, conference presentations, grading, writing. Life in the academy isn't easy.

Parenting a child with autism isn't easy, either. There are the meltdowns, occupational therapy sessions, feeding difficulties, IEP meetings, speech therapy sessions, battles with Medicare, children's sleep disorders that in turn keep you awake. As actress Holly Robinson Peete, mother of a child with autism, proclaims, you have to be more than human to carry out the task: "You have to be like a superhero [or] Foxy Brown" (qtd. in Winfrey). Parenting a child with autism isn't easy.

Now pair these two difficult lives together. This is my reality, and the reality of so many other academic parents of children with disabilities. It is a frustrating life: you want to excel professionally (not taking years to write your dissertation) and excel in creating a full life for your child, but in the end you find that you aren't Foxy Brown; you do not have the superhuman strength to be all you want to be in both worlds. And while the title of professor may hold cultural capital in many spheres, its mythos doesn't carry over into autism world, where therapists, doctors, and specialists call you "Mom" rather than by your name because you are just one of the many nameless, title-less moms who come in with their patients, and where those other nameless mothers look down on you for having not yet abdicated all titles outside of autism world in order to dedicate yourself fully to your child's care. It is important to note that being an academic does afford parents access to research on autism and knowledge of institutional structures, something that has

proved itself vital in finding the best care for my own children, but that privilege often does not carry over into interactions with doctors, therapists and teachers who, far too often, see educated parents as adversaries, assuming that we erroneously think we know better than they, the experts, do (when we know we are not erroneous in thinking we know better than the experts do)²¹. Academic parents of children on the autism spectrum are stranded between planets. If the academy is Earth, and if students with autism inhabit the “Wrong Planet,” a distant Pluto-like formation that might be a dwarf planet or might be an object floating in the Kuiper belt, then academic parents are stranded in between the two, floating along in the asteroid belt between Mars and Jupiter, somewhere between the terrestrial planets and the gas giants. I hate that truth. I love my work. I love my children. I want to fully inhabit both planets.

While parenting a child with autism is difficult for both mothers and fathers, in this chapter I will look specifically at mothers in the academy. I do this because although parenting is challenging regardless of gender, there are significant social constructions that marginalize mother-academics far more than father-academics. First of all, women comprise the vast majority of autism caregivers. Following a child’s autism diagnosis, 82 percent of mothers will divorce their partners, leaving them to fight for their children and shoulder the estimated \$3.2 million it will cost to treat their children with limited support from fathers (DeFord; Harvard School of Public Health). Not surprisingly, bankruptcy rates of mothers with children on the autism spectrum exceed the national average as they bear this heavy expense. Second, women comprise the vast majority of both faculty and

²¹ I do want to acknowledge that positionality does dramatically affect the access parents and their children have to services. I have found, however, that my positionality as the wife of a judge has far more cache than my title of English Instructor. Not only do I have more knowledge of disability law and the state DDD system because of my husband’s job, but people within governmental agencies respond much more readily when they hear what my husband does for a living.

graduate students in rhetoric and composition programs. Theresa Enos estimated in 1997 that 70% of scholars in the field are women, and that number has likely increased (“Mentoring and (Wo)mentoring” 141). Third, working mothers, regardless of whether their work is within or outside of the academy, face unique pressures from predominant cultural ideologies with which fathers do not have to contend. While it has always been acceptable in American society for men to serve simultaneously as workers and fathers, this has not been the case for women, adding a burden on women to prove their right to inhabit both spaces. Women are pressured to be the best in both the work place and home, creating a cult of perfect motherhood. This intensive motherhood ideology, as described by Angela Hattery, places women in the impossible position of striving to rear the happiest, smartest, most successful children on the block while outshining their male counterparts at work (192). All of these factors make living the life of an academic autism mom particularly challenging.

Examining the unique, often overwhelming, difficulties faced by autism mothers in rhetoric and composition matters because uncovering the positions of the marginalized is a crucial obligation of feminist scholarship. Our field has long been dominated by male voices and experiences. Andrea Lunsford explains, “[T]he realm of rhetoric has been almost exclusively male not because women were not practicing rhetoric—the arts of language are after all at the source of human communication—but because the tradition has never recognized the forms, strategies, and goals used by many women as ‘rhetorical’” (6). With the rise of feminist historiography in the past decades, however, women’s place in rhetoric and composition has gained recognition from scholars. As part of this movement, scholars have begun to examine the works of women related to their

domestic roles, as Nan Johnson's work on nineteenth-century parlor rhetoric underscores. Examining motherhood is vitally important to continuing the project of freeing women's role in rhetoric from its marginalized position, and it is the obligation of feminist scholars to do so. Johnson writes:

It is the particular obligation of feminist historians to recover the role of rhetoric in the disposition of power and in what has always been in American culture a highly gendered struggle over the control of public rhetorical space and its benefits. By rereading the history of rhetoric as a drama about how convention is inscribed and redefined within rhetorical space, we better prepare ourselves to identify where and how circles of rhetorical power are constructed in our own times and to better understand who is drawing those circles, who stands within them, and who remains outside. (2)

As Johnson stresses, looking at women's rhetoric is of great import in revealing existing power structures. The women who remain most outside these structures in the private sphere are the mothers of non-typical children, mothers who have been blamed for their children's disabilities by the scientific mothering paradigm. Likewise, in the public profession of rhetoric and composition, it is under-paid, over-worked women who most remain outside these structures. Because of all these factors, academic mothers of children with autism are marginalized and under-represented; it is the responsibility of rhetoric scholars to bring the voices of these women out of the margins, just as feminist scholars have been working to bring other marginalized voices to the center.

The humanities in general, and the field of rhetoric and composition specifically, have paid very little scholarly attention to mothers of children with autism. Sheryl Stevenson's chapter entitled "(M)Othering and Autism: Maternal Rhetorics of Self-Revision" in the book *Autism and Representation* is one of the few scholarly essays written on the subject. Instead, the texts that have been published tend to be personal narratives, a genre less valued in the academy than traditional scholarship, such as writing professor Jane Taylor McDonnell's essay "On Being the 'Bad' Mother of an Autistic Child" in the book *"Bad" Mothers: The Politics of Blame in Twentieth-Century America*. So why hasn't this quickly growing population of women been paid more scholarly attention? The oversight of autism mothers' experiences in scholarship reflects a larger cultural ideology that asserts the experiences of autism mothers are not important. A user comment on an AutismVox blog posting about Jenny McCarthy's book *Louder Than Words: A Mother's Journey in Healing Autism* reflects this minimization of mothers' experiences: "I find the whole notion of 'mother's journey' distasteful and entirely insulting. It's not the mother's journey, it is the child's journey. Period. It's not about the mother" (Long Day's Journey into Acceptance). This post reveals a presumption that a mother's experiences do not matter. While she may face divorce, depression, and bankruptcy as the parent of a child with autism, her suffering has little cultural value. Her experiences are not deemed important enough to voice.

In this chapter, I aim to remedy this oversight in research. I will begin by examining the ways in which teaching composition and mothering a child with autism compound to double the marginalization of women in the academy. Then, I will suggest pathways through which we can use rhetorical sensing to ameliorate the intensity of the

difficulties faced by academic autism moms. I do not, however, suggest a panacea; the marginalization of women in rhetoric and composition is a significant problem that has no magical fix. Instead, I offer beginnings of change through the practice of gynocentric mothering and scholarship.

While I speak of mothers in general, it is not my intention to imply all academics who parent children with autism are the same; they are far from a homogenized group. Race and class significantly affect mothers' experiences. African American, Asian, and Latino children tend to be diagnosed much later than other children (sometimes two to five years later), in part because there are more barriers for socio-economically challenged families to access information, and in part because socio-cultural stigmas related to mental health make families in these communities hesitant to raise concerns about their children's differences to medical professionals (Peete). The delay in getting early intervention services due to a late diagnosis means that children of color who have autism do not progress as quickly as Caucasian children with autism who benefit from early therapies, adding additional hurdles for these academic autism moms. Likewise, lesbian and transgender mothers of children with autism face compounded challenges because they are faulted for not having father figures in their children's lives. Unfortunately, a legacy of mother-blame persists in our culture; if boys just had strong male role models, they wouldn't be autistic. Michael Savage's rant against autism described in Chapter One exemplifies this. He says that children have autism because "they don't have a father around to tell them, 'Don't act like a moron . . . Straighten up. Act like a man.'" In two-mother households, women are doubly faulted for their children's autism because they "chose" to keep their children from having fathers around

to tell them how to act like men. Finally, academic autism mothers are neurodiverse. Autism often has a genetic link, so it is not unusual for a mother of a child with autism to be on the spectrum herself. A woman with autism in the academy must challenge the assumption that people with autism are not “fit” for the academy; the edited collection *Scholars with Autism Achieving Dreams* is one example of academics on the spectrum challenging the false presumption that they cannot be successful in the university. Added to this stereotype that they are not good enough for the academy, mothers of children with autism must simultaneously battle the challenges of parenting their children with special needs. This wide range of ways of experiencing mothering a child with autism emphasize that all mothers are not the same. While I talk in general terms about the challenges of mothering in the pages that follow, I honor these differences.

The Work Horses in the Basement Stall: Women in Rhetoric and Composition

In 1991, Susan Miller introduced the metaphor that has become central to describing the work conditions of women in rhetoric and composition: sad women in the basement (*Textual Carnivals* 121). Unfortunately, this metaphor is still applicable, perhaps even more so, two decades later. At the university where I work, instructors are housed on the fifth floor instead of in the basement, but the conditions my colleagues and I face can certainly be described as base. In a city where temperatures in the 100s persist until November, as many as ten people share small offices without air conditioning vents,²² making our work environment as nasally unpleasant as Miller’s musty basement. In the three months when the temperatures are bearable enough for us to spend time in

²² As luck would have it, a major flood of our offices led to new ceilings and, thankfully, an air conditioning vent in my office.

our offices, you'll often find clusters of teachers sitting together, swapping war stories. One teacher's family receives food stamps, another housing assistance, another reduced prices for her children's school lunches, another Medicaid. The lucky ones have benefits to go along with salaries that are, at best, \$10,000 above the federal poverty guidelines, but others earn salaries below the poverty guidelines with no benefits (United States Department of Health and Human Services). Although there are many who have secured positions on the tenure track, women in rhetoric and composition, by and large, still occupy the basement in terms of salary and work conditions.

From the adjunct earning a few hundred dollars per section to the tenured full professor with a comfortable salary, there is a vast range of positions occupied by women in rhetoric and composition programs, resulting in disparate levels of agency and working conditions. There is no question that conditions are better for tenure-track faculty than for contingent faculty. Yet, while the impact may be experienced differentially because of positionality, women in rhetoric and composition are subject to marginalizing forces steeped in the discipline's history. The degradation of the people doing the work of teaching writing is rooted in the feminization of rhetoric and composition studies which began as university teaching positions transitioned from being solely dominated by males to composition jobs opening up to women. From the 1970s on, women were a fixture in composition teaching, and by 1987 women substantially outnumbered men (Enos, "Gender and Publishing" 57). As Theresa Enos warns, "Disciplines where women excel—and are acknowledged—are devalued" ("Gender and Publishing" 57). Scholars tracing the development of the field argue that as women grew to dominate in composition, the field became "feminized" and therefore devalued, reflected by lower

pay, less job security, and fewer opportunities for advancement. In effect, the teaching of writing became marginalized as “women’s work” (“Gender and Publishing” 57). This process of feminization was not a smooth linear path, however. Joy Ritchie and Kathleen Boardman provide what they term a “brief critical historical survey” of women and feminism in composition studies (7). Looking at both formal publications and informal conversations and lore from the 1960s through the 1990s, they examine the narrative strategies of inclusion, metonymy, and disruption in disciplinary stories of feminism in composition studies (9). They argue that use of these narrative strategies does not reflect a neat, chronological evolution of the feminization of composition; rather, they argue that the three strategies converge, suggesting “a rich tradition of feminist thought and activity in composition” (21). Likewise, Janice Lauer examines the field’s stories of feminization, but rather than focusing on narrative techniques, she critiques several interpretations of the field’s feminization. In her article “The Feminization of Rhetoric and Composition Studies?” Lauer delineates between teaching and scholarship, arguing that while teaching has been feminized (evidenced by women holding the majority of composition instruction positions), scholarship has not (evidenced by men holding the majority of scholarly publications). While Theresa Enos later argues against what she perceives to be Lauer’s dichotomizing of teaching and research, Lauer complicates the linear narrative of the feminization of rhetoric and composition studies, demonstrating that there is not a neat application of feminization across the discipline (Enos, “Gender and Publishing” 58). While the process of feminization was messy, it created and even messier legacy for women in rhetoric and composition with workload increases, pay decreases, and a demand for self-sacrifice that overwhelms.

The workloads for women in the field have become weightier. Teaching writing-intensive courses is grading-intensive for instructors, both female and male. A full-time teacher of first-year writing courses likely collects 100 essays four times per semester, requiring hundreds of hours of commenting and grading. Added to this is the time required to plan lessons and respond to students' process work of prewriting and drafting. However, the demands on women do not end with teaching-related responsibilities: faculty in rhetoric and composition programs have a significant administration and service load. Enos' research finds that research faculty devote thirty-three percent of their time to administration; four-year, twenty-five percent; liberal arts, eighteen percent; two-year, eighteen percent ("Gender and Publishing" 64). The weight of administration and service duties rests more heavily on women than on men, reflecting a "discrimination [that] is subtle and socialized" (Enos, *Gender Roles* 6). Enos asserts that the faculty members with the greatest authority to place demands on others are male ("Gender and Publishing" 64), and these male department chairs and directors assign women faculty "a disproportional amount of counseling duties" (*Gender Roles* 6). While there is a disproportionately large number of female instructors and faculty, they are relegated to service-oriented tasks that are devalued and receive less pay ("Gender and Publishing" 57). This relegation of women to support positions reflects a cultural ideology that relegates women to nurturing roles. Women are expected to fulfill the nurturing, "female" roles of mentoring other faculty and students, while men are expected to complete the real, "male" work of researching and publishing (*Gender Roles* 33). This dichotomy has become the status quo in rhetoric and composition programs. Enos writes, "Subtle acts of discrimination, 'normal' behavior patterns with roots in social settings, lead women to

feel invisible, as if they are being told to stay in their ‘proper’ roles” (*Gender Roles* 6). Unfortunately, Enos’ observation is still accurate more than fifteen years later. While it may not be true in all writing programs, I hear it in the conversations of my office mates who feel the pressure to perform their proper roles under the weight of the panopticon’s heavy stare.

Another detrimental side effect of the feminization of composition studies is the shift away from tenure-track lines to adjunct positions. The adjunctification of the profession is escalating at a shocking rate as universities look to save money by hiring several adjunct instructors for the price of one tenure-track faculty line. A 2012 article published in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* reveals non-tenure track professors now make up 70% of faculties (Patton). According to the American Association of University Professors, those instructors earn, based on national averages, “just under \$2,500 per course” (qtd. in Patton). This equates to only \$20,000 a year for an instructor teaching a full-time 4/4 course load, which places adjunct faculty at the poverty line based upon Department of Health and Human Services guidelines. Unfortunately, women are far more likely to serve in adjunct positions than men are. The National Council of Teachers of English calls attention to this gender inequity in its “Statement from the Conference on the Growing Use of Part-time and Adjunct Faculty,” stating, “Part-time and adjunct position are disproportionately occupied by women, who hold 39 percent of all faculty positions and 33 percent of full-time positions, but 47 percent of part-time positions.” Likewise, the *AAUP Faculty Gender Equity Indicators 2006* reports “women are significantly over-represented in these non-tenure track positions, the least secure, least remunerative, and least prestigious jobs among the full-time faculty” (West and Curtis 9).

In effect, women have become the exploited labor force of rhetoric and composition, making less than a living wage for the hardest of work.

Compounding the harsh work conditions and slave wages is the expectation that women in the profession adopt an ideology of heroic self-sacrifice. Rather than question the fact that they are living in or near poverty while they carry an intense workload, women are asked to be “team players” who sacrifice themselves for the greater good of the writing program (McMahon and Green). In *Women’s Ways of Making It in Rhetoric and Composition*, Michelle Ballif, Diane Davis, and Roxanne Mountford tacitly adopt and endorse this ideology of self-sacrifice, asserting that the purpose of their book is to demonstrate that, in the words of one of their survey respondents, “women in our field have been absolutely heroic . . . against significant odds” (3). It is the job of women not to challenge the “‘normal’ behavior patterns” and “‘proper’ roles” of which Enos speaks (*Gender Roles* 6). Instead, they must learn to succeed “in spite of these challenges”: gender inequity, overbearing administrative responsibilities, and poor salaries (Ballif et. al 3). According to the definition of “making it” forwarded by Ballif, Davis, and Mountford, women must become heroic martyrs, certainly a dysfunctional approach to a career, especially when men do not have to brave such martyrdom in order to be successful. For women of children with autism, this dysfunctional call to self-sacrifice is compounded as they are called to martyr themselves for their children. How many times can a woman martyr herself?

Struggling to Shut the Refrigerator Door: Mothers of Children with Autism

The film *Autism Every Day* opens with a montage of terror screams masking the eerie music playing in the background. On a grey day, a mother reaches helplessly for her son, who has fallen to the ground in high-pitch cries. Another mother tries to cradle her inconsolable preschooler in her dining room. A hand-flapping, screaming boy in a tie-dyed shirt is ineffectually restrained by a father. A mother desperately calls out her fleeing child's name as she races after him down a steep street. A hand powerlessly grasps at the back of a screaming, crying toddler crawling on the floor. A child crashes to the floor in tears. A son yanks on his mother's ear, oblivious to the pain he is causing. A girl wails helplessly in her car seat. Beside her, in white letters, the word "Autism" appears on the screen. Following this opening scene, mothers narrate the challenges and horrors of their lives as autism moms. In the most shocking story, a mother shares her thoughts of suicide and filicide:

But I remember that was a very scary moment for me when I realized I had sat in the car for about fifteen minutes and actually contemplated putting Jodie in the car, driving off the George Washington Bridge. That would be preferable . . . It's only because of Lauren, the fact that I have another child, that I probably didn't do it.

Autism Every Day, which screened at the Sundance Film Festival in 2007, was produced as a fundraiser for Autism Speaks, casting a particularly horrific picture of autism to encourage financial donations to combat it. The film sparked a firestorm of outrage among neurodiversity advocates because it depicted autism as an evil that drives mothers to want to kill themselves and their children. However biased the portrayal, the

film very keenly captures the dominant cultural ideology of autism: there is no more horrifying fate than being the mother of an autistic child.

Strengthening the rhetorical construction of mothering a child with autism as horror is research indicating that autism mothering causes extreme stress and depression. A study conducted by the University of California, Los Angeles Department of Psychology finds that mothers of children with autism are at an elevated risk for high stress (Eisenhower, Baker, and Blacher 665). In another study, maternal stress is likened to combat stress. Principal investigator Marsha Mailick Seltzer measured cortisol levels of mothers with children on the autism spectrum and found them to be significantly decreased, a condition that occurs when individuals experience chronic stress. Their levels mirrored those of combat soldiers and others who experience constant psychological stress (Diament). This extreme stress is gender-specific, differentially experienced by mothers and fathers. Liza Little, an assistant professor of nursing, finds that mothers of children on the spectrum score significantly higher in stress than fathers on the Questionnaire on Resources and Stress (QRS) (567). Likewise, psychologists M. B. Olsson and C. P. Hwang find that mothers of children with autism have higher depression scores than fathers with children with or without autism. Partnerless mothers of children with autism have the highest depression scores (539). Sociologist David E. Gray explains that the differential stress and depression are due to greater demands placed upon mothers than fathers. Mothers are more likely than fathers to take the primary role in ensuring that their children's medical and educational needs are met, and they are "most likely to be held responsible for their child's behavior" (638). This additional weight leads to additional stress.

Sadly, the stress and depression experienced by mothers of children on the spectrum does, at times, lead to horrific acts. In July of 2010, a mother in Texas called 911 to report she had murdered her children. “They are autistic,” Saiqa Akhter told the operator. “Both are autistic. I don’t want my kids to be like that . . . I want normal kids” (qtd. in Park). In fact, the rhetoric that autism dooms mothers to a dark hell is so powerful that one mother murdered her infant because she merely suspected autism. Stephanie Rochester had worked with children on the autism spectrum at a children’s hospital for two years and worried that her six-month old son, Rylan, was demonstrating signs of autism, such as hand-flapping and avoiding eye contact. According to the police report, she said that when you have a child with autism, “your life is ruined . . . financially and emotionally” (Spurgeon 6). Rather than face that ruin, she smothered Rylan in his crib, and faced an entirely different type of ruin when investigators discovered that her son was murdered rather than a victim of SIDS.

A tradition of mother blame plays a pivotal part in the destructive construction of autism motherhood as ruin. “The worst mother in twentieth-century psychological literature is quite possibly the mother of the autistic or schizophrenic child,” professor of English and Women’s Studies and mother of a child of autism Jane Taylor McDonnell found as she scoured books on children with autism and other developmental disorders (223). The history of autism as a rhetorical construct discussed in Chapter One reveals how the autism mother became the “worst mother.” Leo Kanner, one of the originators of the autism diagnosis, blamed autism on “refrigerator mothers”: women who so lacked maternal warmth that they forced their children to withdraw as “an act of turning away from such a situation to seek comfort in solitude” (425). Bruno Bettelheim went even

further, casting autism mothers as cruel prison guards at Nazi concentration camps whose extreme hatred for their children turned the children autistic.

The construction of the refrigerator mother placed—and still places—an immense amount of guilt on autism mothers. Motherhood historian Rima Apple explains that the ideology of scientific motherhood insists that to be good mothers, women “needed the assistance of medical and scientific authorities in order to carry out their maternal duties successfully” (105). And so, to be good mothers, women have to accept what the medical authorities said about them—that they are cold concentration camp guards who damage their own children. Several mothers shared their struggle to ignore their own perceptions in order to adopt the experts’ perspective on their children’s autism in the film *Refrigerator Mothers*. Through the 1970s, the accepted treatment for autism was psychotherapy—for the mother. Once mothers worked through their latent hatred for their children and accepted their responsibility for making them autistic, the children could begin the process of healing from the trauma. One mother, for instance, talks of how she entered psychotherapy and tried—really tried—to believe that her childhood was miserable and filled with neglect, which led her to resent her own child. After several years, however, she couldn’t deny that her childhood really was okay and that she never had resented her own child. Although the ideology of scientific motherhood demanded she accept she was a refrigerator mother, she found that she couldn’t. Either way, she had failed as a mother according to the scientific paradigm.

The imprisoning ideology of the refrigerator mother led to a revolt against the medical establishment. Biomedical approaches to treating autism freed mothers from the guilt that they had psychologically harmed their children and made them autistic.

However, biomedical approaches also created a new maternal guilt and workload as women wondered which biological agents they had exposed their children to, causing their autism, and labored to reverse the effects of the agents they introduced.

The pendulum swing from psychological to biological causes of autism began with Bernard Rimland. Rimland was a psychiatrist and parent to a child with autism. Although he had been schooled in the Kanner/Bettelheim paradigm, his own lived experience told him that the paradigm was wrong, that autism was not caused by cold mothers. In 1964 he published the book *Infantile Autism: The Syndrome and Its Implications for a Neural Theory of Behavior* and made a radical new claim: autism had medical causes rather than psychological causes. *Infantile Autism* was the first challenge to Bettelheim's dominance over the field of autism, and Rimland's rejection of Bettelheim's science was strengthened by Kanner himself, who wrote a foreword for the book and expressed his frustration that the diagnosis he created had become a "pseudodiagnostic wastebasket" (v). Despite Kanner's support, Rimland's theory of biological causes for autism was largely ignored by scientists specializing in autism until the 1970s (and, in fact, ignored by many practitioners even today). While Rimland's work may have been overlooked by the profession, it was not overlooked by mothers. Greatly relieved that someone—finally—stopped blaming them for their children's autism and provided new possibilities for treating their children, mothers began writing letters to Rimland, asking him to help them do more for their children. In response to the mothers' intense letter writing campaign, Rimland organized a small meeting of parents, and thus the Autism Society of America was born.

Not only did Rimland's work create an avenue for mothers to organize and work together for their children through the Autism Society of America, but it also challenged women to claim the role of maternal physician. Rimland founded the Autism Research Institute in the late 1960s, and based upon the Institute's research into biomedical causes of autism, Rimland devised a regimen of vitamins and nutritional supplements for the treatment of autism. Since Rimland's guidelines were not approved by the FDA and doctors would not endorse them, the burden of implementing the regimen rested solely on mothers. In the years since Rimland's initial research, biomedical practitioners have identified scores of other potential biomedical causes of autism that mothers needed to identify, treat, and eliminate. Some more far-fetched than others, these include, but are not limited to, the following:

- higher age of mother and father at conception
- caustic prenatal environment, including maternal infection, maternal immunization/ Rhogam shots, maternal use of prescription medications, maternal use of folic acid, maternal contact with toxic fumes and pesticides, elevated levels of testosterone in amniotic fluid, gestational diabetes
- genetic abnormalities
- contaminated drinking water
- high levels of heavy metals, including arsenic, lead, mercury, and cadmium
- immunizations
- proximity to freeways/diesel exhaust
- exposure herbicides and insecticides
- use of plastic products

- infectious diseases, including strep throat and measles
- diet that includes gluten, casein, corn, chicken, dyes, and non-organic foods
- rain

With such a long list of possible causes, mothers certainly have their work cut out for them.

By taking on a new role as their children's physicians, many mothers of children on the autism spectrum began to adopt an extremely intensive form of motherhood. Sheryl Stevenson describes this extreme performance of motherhood in *Feminism and Disability*. The mothers of children with autism face pressures to make their children competent and productive members of society and "are expected to increase their [children's] productivity by providing educational and rehabilitative services, medical therapies, and so on in addition to their normal work loads" (69). In order to do this, they must strive to attain the status of a "superwoman" who is simultaneously a figure of supreme self-sacrifice (52-53). The superwoman must lay down her life to make her child a healthy, productive member of society.

The rhetorical construction of mother as superhero holds problematic implications. First, it creates a new form of guilt to replace the guilt of the refrigerator motherhood. One source of guilt is mothers feeling like they caused their children's autism. I have been there myself. *If I'd only eaten organic foods when I was pregnant. If I'd only chosen to forgo the Rhogam shot and chanced miscarrying if my Rh-negative blood saw my sons' Rh-positive blood as an invader and attacked the fetuses. If only I'd been better about choosing where to live and avoided the home near a military base laced with weapons' heavy metals, the home on former farmland laced with pesticides,*

the home near the Santa Cruz River and all the arsenic it carries up from Mexico. If only I had spaced out their immunizations more. If only I had spent several hundred dollars on a whole-house water filtration system. If only I had pushed harder for doctors to find the cause of Nick's mysterious fever after his one-year immunizations and discovered sooner that he had a latent measles infection from his immunization. The guilt autism mothers shoulder is immeasurably heavy.

Another source of guilt is the chance of making the wrong decisions in the child's treatment. If the mother is the child's medical practitioner, she is at fault if she doesn't find the right cure for her child. In her examination of mothers' choices on the issue of whether or not to give their children the MMR vaccine (which has been linked to autism), Rachel Casiday found that for the mothers in her study "getting this decision 'right' came to symbolize what it means to be a good parent" (127). The "wrong" choice equates to failure as a mother and maternal guilt. Immunization choices are not the only medical decisions that can lead to maternal guilt, however. Mark Osteen writes:

Because of the condition's challenging and sometimes intractable manifestations, parents of autistic children constantly feel guilty and inadequate; if they don't try every possible therapy, diet or medication, they may believe they haven't done enough for their child. This guilt not only makes them easy marks for unscrupulous or careless practitioners; it also creates a need to point fingers at others. Thus parental self-blame—*itself a product of our society's myth of the supercompetent parent—is easily transformed into a penchant to blame whatever scapegoat seems*

handy. Such finger-pointing sometimes consumes parents' lives and frequently does no real good. (298-9)

This self-blame leads to another difficulty as mothers sacrifice themselves to account for their own "failings" and save their children from autism. The mothers in *Autism Every Day* give voice to this: "Everything I do is about autism"; "I really had to give up my life." Such martyrdom underscores Andrea O'Reilly's critique that mothering practices that employ maternal power only to transform the child and not to transform the mother as well perpetuate the patriarchal domination of motherhood. While the position of the child with autism may be forwarded, the status of the woman who labors for the sake of the child is not. Moreover, dominant hegemonic discourses assert that this should make a woman content, "that being a mother is all that a woman needs to feel fulfilled" (Horwitz 44). This is dangerous, for it reflects a patriarchal view of motherhood that is "oppressive to women," forcing them to abdicate their claims to individuality (O'Reilly, *Rocking* 15). This oppressive ideology calling women to sacrifice themselves for their children sounds eerily similar to an oppressive ideology that calls women to sacrifice themselves for the good of the rhetoric and composition.

Ed White and Potty Training Don't Mix: Struggling to Stay Alive in the Face of Double-Martyrdom

In a 2010 survey of 326 families, public affairs scholar Dana Baker found that mothers of children with autism face "negative effects" in the workplace. Because women have the majority of responsibility for autism care, the workplace ramifications they face are much starker than those faced by fathers ("Mothers of Children with

Autism”). Being the working mother of a child with autism is challenging. Autism mothers in rhetoric and composition programs bear a unique burden of mother-blame, face severe economic challenges due to employment limitations, and deal with uncomfortably jagged lines between the professional and personal spheres.

While the tradition of mother blame is pivotal piece of the autism mom construction, academic mothers face an even more severe strain of mother blame. When Leo Kanner conducted the research that would lead to the refrigerator mother theory, it was academic women that he studied . . . and blamed. Kanner writes, “All but five mothers of the 55 children have attended college. All but one have been active vocationally before, and some also after, marriage as scientists, laboratory technicians, nurses, physicians, librarians, or artists . . . One, who has a Ph.D. degree, collaborated in the publication of a Middle English dictionary” (420-1). In the 1940s, this is anything but a random sample as very few women of the period had the opportunity to pursue higher education and careers. Kanner’s choice of women was controlled mainly by convenience. He drew upon the population immediately surrounding the university where he worked, where members of the university community lived. The results of this non-random sample were extremely detrimental to mothers who pursued an education. They were blamed for caring more about improving themselves and being successful in their intellectual endeavors than they did about their children. The selfish desire to develop their intellect led to their children’s autism.

Unfortunately, mothers’ intellectual pursuits are still blamed for children’s autism. Jane Taylor McDonnell, an English and Women’s Studies professor, describes how her son’s teachers judged her for her scholarly pursuits. She was peppered with

questions like “How many hours do you spend in the library every day?” when the school staff began to notice his autistic behaviors (220). In the world of publish or perish, this places a difficult pressure on autism mothers in English departments. If they spend hours in the library researching and writing, they are bad mothers. If they do not spend hours in the library researching and writing, they are bad academics. Sadly, mothers internalize this blame and apply it to themselves. Joanne Detore-Nakamura, now an Assistant Professor of Humanities, recalls a time when she was working on her writing and her then-two-year-old daughter wanted to play “dinosaurs on the floor” with her. Detore-Nakamura said what so many mothers have said to their children: “Give Mommy ten minutes and we’ll play” (57). Her moment is so familiar; it happened to me twice this morning. I was working on this paragraph, and Nick came in, doing the miraculous—he spoke. “Close pew,” he asserted. He wanted me to close my laptop and focus on him. “One second; Mommy just needs to finish this sentence.” I rapidly pounded out the words I feared I would lose if I stopped, closed my computer, and gave my attention to Nick. An hour later when I returned to my laptop to write again, the scene replayed. Claiming those ten minutes was disturbing for Detore-Nakamura, as claiming my minutes this morning was for me. She writes, “That seems to placate her temporarily, knowing that Mommy makes good on her promises. Even so, I feel guilt for my self-indulgence and for my neglect of my daughter, even if it is for ten minutes” (57). Detore-Nakamura’s words echo the ideology that Kanner brought into being: for a mother to have intellectual pursuits is self-indulgent, neglectful parenting.

In addition to judgment, academic autism mothers face career limitations that block their ability to succeed. If we adopt Ballif, Davis, and Mountford’s problematic

definition of who has “made it”—women who “hold a PhD; are full professors at an academic institution; are tenured; are well-published; are cited regularly; have contributed a consummate piece in the field; are frequently keynote speakers at national conferences; are actively mentoring other women in the field; are able to have a real life, in addition to their scholarly activities” (7)—then few academics have the hope of making it, given that 100,000 new PhDs emerge from graduate schools every year to fight for only 16,000 new professorships (Rasmussen). However, mothers of children on the autism spectrum have even fewer hopes of “making it” in the current academic job market because of the additional hurdles they encounter.

One hurdle to Ballif, et. al’s definition of making it is geography. As former-academic Alexandra M. Lord writes in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, academe indoctrinates graduate students into the belief that they must be willing to move anywhere for a job. The good newly-minted PhD will accept a good tenure-track job, regardless of whether or not that job is in rural North Dakota. However, location becomes a “complicated and personal” difficulty for many academics, and Lord notes that parents of children with disabilities are among this group. A national job search is not feasible for most mothers who have special needs children. First of all, they must live in places where their children can get the services they need. Children on the spectrum need access to skilled habilitators, developmental pediatricians, speech therapists, feeding therapists, music therapists, occupational therapists, and physical therapists; without these resources, their progress will slow significantly. I looked for a job in the Phoenix area simply because after my children sat on waiting lists for services for over a year in Tucson, I needed to make a radical change to get them the therapy they need. It didn’t matter that

the job paid little; it got my children where they needed to be. Secondly, mothers are geographically limited by their support systems. Being an autism mom is stressful, as the research above clearly indicates, and mothers need people to lean on during the roughest times. For many women, moving away from friends, family, and trusted respite providers is not possible.

Another significant hurdle faced by autism mothers is a lack of time because of their care-giving duties. Anna Atkinson, mother of a child with Sensory Integration Dysfunction (an autism spectrum trait), describes challenge of time: “I lack(ed) the time, the energy, the freedom of movement and of schedule that other academics (even sessionals) have. The fact that my daughter is now in Junior Kindergarten but cannot, because of her sensory challenges, cope with an after-school program, means that Monday, Wednesday, and alternate Fridays, my day ends when her school dismisses at 2:30pm” (30-1). Because time is scarce, autism moms don’t have the ability to spend unlimited hours padding their CVs with service, conference presentations, and publications in order to outshine others on the job market. Atkinson laments, “I doubted whether I could compete with other new Ph.D.s hungry for jobs, since the competitive field seemed to me so uneven” (30). For those who are lucky enough to get that sign of “making it,” an offer for a tenure track job, their caregiving responsibilities may prevent them from being able to accept (or keep) the job they covet. Studies indicate that three out of five autism mothers report turning down job offers because of their caregiving responsibilities. Likewise, one out of four autism mothers have declined a promotion (“Mothers of Children with Autism”). For Kristina Chew, creator of the well-known blog Autism Vox, the challenge of devoting time to the special needs of her son, Charlie, after

his autism diagnosis meant first taking a leave of absence and then stepping down from her position as a professor of classics at the University of St. Thomas and becoming an adjunct writing instructor in northern New Jersey. She says of her choice, “I love Catullus, but Charlie is my man” (“Charlie, the Classics, and Life”).

These career limitations lead to financial limitations for autism moms. Not surprisingly, 60 percent of mothers of children with autism report experiencing financial difficulties because of their career limitations (“Mothers of Children with Autism”). For graduate students with children on the autism spectrum, care-giving responsibilities mean that it takes longer to finish, which means a significantly higher student loan debt load. Atkinson shares that her student loan debt tripled because she needed more time as a result of taking care of a special needs child (30). Unfortunately, financial woes do not subside once mothers do finish the PhD since their care-giving limitations often only allow them to work in adjunct positions. Lower pay and higher expenses due to children’s special needs make it even harder to complete the extra work to move forward in their careers. Atkinson writes, “The fact that my housing and food costs are higher—not to mention the cost of daycare for the days when she is not in school—means that even book money is scarce, and travel is out of the question. All of which leads to less time and fewer resources for research purposes” (31). Atkinson’s story is not unlike my story. When I recently tracked all of the additional expenses I incur every month because of my sons’ autism, I found it was nearly \$700. Because of this, additional expenses for scholarship, such as attending conferences, are frequently out of the question. Autism is a financial challenge to scholarship and is an impediment that a normative parent, or a

person without children at all, does not have to face, making it far more difficult for autism mothers to compete in the market.

A final challenge for academic autism mothers is that career and home demands butt up against each other. Part of our discipline is bringing work home. Each of us has graded papers at home, researched at home, planned lessons at home. English professor Joanne S. Frye writes, “Most times, when my daughters were home, with me, I would work in not so clearly defined areas of our mutual living space. I would be in my chair—with them and, sometimes, not really with them—but always in the midst of their lives” (21). Likewise, part of being a mother means that sometimes we bring our home to work, like when it’s summer vacation and the children have to tag along with us to campus or when the elementary school calls during our workday about an immediate situation to which we must attend. Mothers of children on the autism spectrum are interrupted one out of every four days at work because of their children’s needs, compared to interruptions one in every ten days for mothers of typical children (Diament). This causes difficulties for autism mothers. A study conducted by political science researcher Dana Baker finds that mothers are reprimanded at work for dealing with the obligations of caring for a child with autism during work hours, doing such things as taking time off for doctor’s appointments or IEP meetings (“Mothers of Children with Autism”). For academic mothers, taking time off is even more difficult. An English professor and mother of a child with autism, Celest Martin describes having to teach when her child needs her: “But I am an academic and I have a graduate course until 7:00 tonight. Unlike other state employees, I cannot take a personal day and follow the dictates of my heart. There are at least fifty-five human beings who have paid for my presence today and who

deserve my undivided attention” (167). Like two continental plates, the academic and the domestic hit against one another, threatening an earthquake. The stories of autism mothers themselves best illustrate the challenges of this conflict.

Rochelle Gregory is a writing instructor at North Central Texas College and the mother of Tobey, who has autism, and Ethan. During her dissertation process, she kept a blog. One post in particular, excerpted here, demonstrates the difficulty of the academic sphere intruding upon the private sphere:

What they also don't show in the movies? That autistic children . . . are very difficult to potty train--something I have worked with Tobey on for many, many years. It's been slow going and we have to do “potty cheers” when Tobey poops in the toilet and not his underwear (“Poo poo in tha Pot'ay, Poo poo in tha Pot'ay...”--you get the gist).

So, one night about two years ago, as I was sitting at the computer enthralled in Ed White's *Teaching and Assessing Writing* and typing away, Tobey came into the living room, “poo in tha pot'ay!” I responded, “Great job,” and went back to work.

He came back about 2 minutes later: “Poo poo in tha pot'ay!” I responded, “Yea, I know. Great job!!”

Tobey was still not satisfied. So, he went into the bathroom and came back a minute later: “Momma, poo poo in the po'tay!!” To get my attention this time, Tobey had reached into the toilet, pulled out the poop, and brought it to me in the living room to show me just exactly what he'd done. And, that he wanted me to sing the song.

So, I cheered for his wet poo dripping all over the floor. Then I washed his bottom. And, hands. And, went back to work. Yes, that is something they never show in the movies.

Gregory's story demonstrates the ugliness of the academic world infringing upon the maternal sphere. Ed White and potty training do not mix. For all the value of reading about writing assessment, when it oversteps into the terrain of motherhood, the results are messy, both figuratively and literally.

Likewise, autism butts up against the academic world. It comes to the university with mothers, sometimes literally. Kristina Chew, after making the decision to go back to working full-time as an associate professor, describes her first day on campus, her son Charlie with her:

We parked the car on Kennedy Avenue in Jersey City and Charlie started a low hum-moan that became louder and louder as I inquired about where to get a parking permit and walked him through the campus. Students (with a few parents in tow) were dragging in suitcases and boxes, or dialing their cells while their eyes observed everywhere, or swaggering in groups in front of dorm doorways. "Black car," said Charlie. We went to my office, got the keys from one secretary; he tried out another's chair. "You're being really good," I said to Charlie. "How about a soda?" "Yesssss so-duh." At the college bookstore, Charlie ran amid the sweatshirts and textbooks and did the shake-and-bake thing so hard to his "green drink" that it fizzed over in the IT department. "Uh, sorry," I said to a work-study student and rushed to fill out a form, one eye on Charlie as

he slowly drenched the front of his shirt at the water fountain. (“Moving In”)

Much like Gregory had a mess to clean up when the academy came to her house, so too does Chew have a mess when autism intrudes upon the academic world. The “green drink” flooding the floor of the IT department has a metaphorical component—like the drink, autism can leave a sticky mess when it jumps the boundary between public and private spheres.

With all of the obstacles facing autism mothers in the academy, from time to money to jagged boundaries between home and work, it is difficult for the academy to retain them. As Ballif, Davis, and Mountford remind us, we already have a “leaking pipeline” of women Ph.D.s who do not succeed in “making it” (3). With the added pressures of autism upon some academic mothers, the holes in the leaking pipeline are much larger. Many of these women choose to take part-time adjunct positions, as Kristina Chew did for several years after Charlie’s diagnosis. Others leave the academy all together. For instance, Priscilla Gilman, author of *The Anti-Romantic Child: A Story of Unexpected Joy*, chose to leave her career as an English professor at Yale and Vassar after her child was diagnosed with autism. As one of the mothers of *Autism Every Day* laments, “I left a job that I never intended to leave.” Unfortunately, women are often left with an either/or choice: “Support your child or build your career. You can’t have both.”

Towards Having a Life: Gynocentric Mothering and Professionalism

How do we destroy this dichotomy to enable academic mothers of children with autism to inhabit the borderlands of simultaneously living as mother and scholar?

Unfortunately, guidebooks like *Women's Ways of Making It in Rhetoric and Composition* do not provide the guidance that autism mothers need in order to succeed. In their review of the book, Halina Adams and Melissa Ianetta note that Ballif, Davis, and Mountford look at a narrow range of women, ignoring, among other blatantly absent issues like class and sexual orientation, disability. They suggest, "Perhaps a follow-up volume is in order, one that addresses additional varieties of women's experiences in Rhetoric and Composition" (146). In this section, I provide my own "follow-up volume" of sorts addressed specifically to the needs of academic autism mothers. While institutional change is vital (and will be addressed in the next chapter), I focus here on the women themselves, their colleagues, and their support systems because I believe that ensuring the well-being of individuals on the local, personal level is of upmost importance and is a pivotal step to a global-scale institutional change.

Throughout the dissertation, I have been advocating rhetorical sensing between stakeholders in higher education. However, here I want to talk about a different type of rhetorical sensing—listening to one's self. The voices of multiple destructive ideologies constantly scream at academic mothers of children with autism. *You need to sacrifice yourself for the team. You caused your child's autism. You haven't "made it" unless you land a tenure-track job at a Research I. You aren't doing enough to cure your child.* With all of these voices shouting, it is difficult for one to hear her own voice in the cacophony. The first step to countering the discourses of misogyny is for women to listen to their own perceptions and beliefs, ignoring the standards of Ballif et al. and deciding for themselves what the definition of "making it" is for their lives. Gynocentric mothering and scholarship are avenues to self-rhetorical sensing.

As an alternative to the superwoman model, feminist motherhood scholar Andrea O'Reilly proposes gynocentric (woman-centered) mothering. Drawing upon Adrienne Rich's distinction between *motherhood*—a patriarchal institution—and *mothering*—a practice that empowers women—O'Reilly advocates a woman-centered form of mothering. O'Reilly writes, “[M]othering, freed from motherhood, could be experienced as a site of empowerment, a location of social change if, to use Rich’s words, women became ‘outlaws from the institution of motherhood’” (*Rocking* 11). This outlaw mothering would move women away from the maternal sacrifice model and would instead emphasize “the importance of mothers meeting their own needs” (*Rocking* 17-18). O'Reilly’s theories of gynocentrism can be adapted for the academy as well as women transform their teaching and scholarship into a site of personal empowerment. Outlaw academics can embrace meeting their own needs rather than trying to become an ideal that some academic guidebook tells them they should aspire to.

The beginning of this transformative process is to set clear boundaries. Theresa Enos provides helpful strategies to begin boundary-setting, the first of which is for women to carve out time in their lives so that never-ending demands do not overwhelm every moment. Drawing upon the advice of Winifred Horner, Enos writes that if women have a heavy load of department responsibilities (which most women in rhetoric and composition do), they should negotiate one free day or two afternoons a week that they will be out of the office. “Stick to it,” she writes. “Whatever you do, do not even think you can work anywhere near the building where the composition office is . . . Hide, so no one can find you—and they will try. The ‘problem’ will always be there in your office waiting for you the next morning; it can wait till then” (“Gender and Publishing” 70).

While her goal here is for women to have time to publish, the same strategy of taking time to hide can be useful for any need an academic autism mother has. This might mean scheduling a weekly respite appointment where a provider takes care of the children so that mothers can go on a walk, read a book in the park, or sit at Starbucks sipping a chai latte. For Kristina Chew, taking time to maintain “a life ‘exclusive’ of autism . . . has enabled Charlie and me to learn and grow” (“Moving In”). While mothers might be tempted to feel guilty to carve out time for themselves, it benefits the well-being of both mother and child.

Since respite care is not available for all autism mothers, carving out a space for themselves might take on a digital meaning. In my previously published study of autism mothers in online communities, I found one mother, Heidi²³ “Poeticmama,” who shared with others her choice to carve out space for herself in the midst of autism. She writes in her MySpace profile, “I’m just getting back to living life for myself as well as for [my son Zane]²⁴. Life is always busy and usually stressful . . . there seems to be little time to smile or laugh. I’m doing both Zane and myself an injustice by that. Don’t get me wrong—Zane is still my EVERYTHING, but now I realize that I deserve a little happiness for myself as well.” Heidi “Poeticmama” is learning about balance. To continue to develop this sense of balance, Heidi “Poeticmama” took advantage of the MySpace architecture to carve out a space for herself: she created an additional personal profile. In a bulletin post she writes:

I started a new account . . . my own personal profile. I am going to dedicate my current myspace to my son in efforts of Autism Awareness—

²³ Pseudonym.

²⁴ Pseudonym.

in addition to my family affected by autism, etc. Although autism always has a deep impact and often seems to control most everyday life . . . I wanted to have a different account so others can get to know my personality & character somewhat outside of that. Just add “Heidi” if you want to get to know me . . . not just as a proud parent of a son with Autism, but as an individual. I look forward to hearing from you . . .

Heidi’s experiences reveal that mothers need not reject other aspects of their personalities in order to fight for their children on the autism spectrum. In creating an additional account, Heidi is taking a step toward becoming someone who nourishes both herself and her child. (Barnum-Burgess 131)

The second suggestion Enos provides to women is learning to say the word “no.” While the concept is simple, it is extremely difficult to follow in a profession that calls us to give all we can for the team. Citing an unnamed colleague, Enos writes, “Jobs stick to an administrator as ticks to a dog; every job performed well leads to requests for two more” (“Gender and Publishing” 70). These ticks exist in the autism community as well. One of my friends of a preschooler with autism—I’ll call her Lily—did so well in assisting with one project sponsored by her local autism society that she was soon drafted to serve on the board of directors, become treasurer, organize the annual autism walk, and create a chemistry program in partnership with the local university for teenagers with autism. Lily also worked full time as an engineer at night; her engineer husband worked during the day so that one parent could always be home with their son. Eventually all of the pressures became too much and Lily spent an evening in sobs, overwhelmed with all of the pressures facing her. Enos cautions, “We need to learn how to discriminate better

between essential duties and peripheral chores that can be delegated” (70). Heeding this caution, Lily resigned her responsibilities as treasurer and walk organizer to focus more energy on her passion—the chemistry program.

A third suggestion Enos provides for creating healthy boundaries is what she refers to as connecting. In her advice to women seeking publication, she counsels, “Young scholars—more and more of you women—situate *yourself* in your research topic, and I can assure you that a voice will emerge that shows an active mind in the process of constructing. Always connect” (“Gender and Publishing 71). For women who are daily consumed with autism, making the connections between autism and scholarship can be a way to decrease workload, bringing together their lived experience with their work rather than fragmenting their hearts and energy between two different worlds. Instead of the personal and professional challenging one another, they can complement one another. Paul Heilker, Kristina Chew, and Rochelle Gregory are among scholars who have successfully made the connection between their scholarship and their lives as parents of children with autism, seeking “to bring autism and cognitive disability more and more into the academic sphere” (Chew, “Moving In”). For Celest Martin, another scholar who has successfully linked her work to her life, blending led to the realization that “it’s just plain liberating” to merge her personal life as an autism mother with her teaching rather than being forced to stay in her “‘professor’ box” (172). As a writer, her son’s autism was her predominant subject, and she felt the need “to figure out a way to work it into my courses so that I can talk about what I’m writing” (168-9). Teaching narrative writing was the door to this blending. She writes along with her class, and on read-aloud days, she shares excerpts from her own writings about her son. She writes:

I am always a little nervous about taking time on “my issue,” but the students’ responses to the narrative of my son, to videos of him, and to the subject of autism itself has been so much more than I had ever expected or dreamed of. There are days when they have peppered me with frank questions, days when they have made connections with their lives and the handicaps that we all have, and days when they have approached me after class with “You know, I have a cousin (or little brother or a friend) who is like your son.” And there are nights when my phone rings and it’s one of my students calling to let me know there’s something on television about autism. (171)

In transforming her classroom space to merge her motherhood and scholarship, Martin finds a place where her life, teaching, and research “are finally complimentary” (172). She demonstrates that such a healthy, holistic view of the life of a woman who is simultaneously an autism mother and a teacher can transform the workplace into “a kinder, gentler part of . . . life” (172). This transformative action echoes bell hooks. As women in the profession, autism mothers are always already “publicly private” and can find balance by simultaneously embodying the role of professional and individual. Doing so allows women to “[be] whole—[be] wholehearted” (2).

Sensing to one’s own needs by setting boundaries, carving out time, and blending are important for academic autism mothers’ success and sanity, but they also need support from others in order to do these things. Working together with others and forging power lines, as feminist scholar Aimee Carrillo Rowe names them, can strengthen and sustain academic autism mothers. Moreover, building coalitions with mothers,

academics, and community members can create a powerful force to affect change to the systems that marginalize. Many of these coalitions are formed online. For instance, “Bad” Autism Mothers, a Facebook group created in January 2010, boasts, “We aren’t doing everything possible to ‘cure’ our autistic children and we are proud of it. We don’t care how ‘hot’ we are and we are not looking for anyone to tell us how strong we are. We just want to share some experiences so that we can help like-minded mothers navigate this truly special journey.” Likewise, the Adjunct Project’s online space provides under-paid, over-worked adjuncts from across the nation to form power lines with one another. It is a digital space “designed collaboratively by the new majority of motivated, intelligent, and driven academics who are struggling to use their experience and knowledge in a meaningful way that benefits both themselves and society.”

As part of both my research and my personal work to build support networks, I participated in a coalition that focused on building power lines throughout the disability community. Partners in Policymaking is an international legislative advocacy program designed to make visible the invisible. Founded in 1987 by the Minnesota Governor’s Council on Developmental Disabilities, Partners is “a ground-breaking, innovative training program . . . to teach parents and self-advocates the power of advocacy to change the way people with disabilities are supported, viewed, taught, live, and work” (Partners in Policymaking). The program is intensive: there is a competitive application process, and those who are selected must sign a contract agreeing to participate in training classes for six months, not miss a class or be late, complete all homework assignments, and participate in thirty hours of advocacy work each month.

The organization asserts that “more than 17,500 Partners graduates are part of a growing national and international network of community leaders serving on policy making committees, commissions, and boards at all levels of government” (Partners in Policymaking). Their self-identification as a network indicates the coalitional nature of their organization—it is grounded in the idea of working together and forging power lines in order to affect change.

In 2009-2010, I participated in the Arizona Partners in Policymaking program. We had 18 participants: 16 women and 2 men. In this class, all the participants were caretakers rather than self-advocates, but this is not always the case in Partners classes. Seventeen of these caretakers were parents and one was a grandparent. The children and grandchild on whose behalf they advocated carried an array of labels, from Down’s Syndrome to Angelmann’s Syndrome, but over one third had children who were diagnosed with autism.

My Partners class coalesced at a particularly powerful kairotic moment. As the budget crisis exploded, legislators in the overwhelmingly conservative state legislature wielded a devastating 32% budget cut to services assisting those with disabilities, according to the Autism Society of America, Pima County Chapter, while, at the same time, as democratic state representative David Bradley points out, the same legislature was fighting to ensure that the state sales tax would not be applied to golf carts. Health and human services, the Department of Developmental Disabilities (DDD), and the behavioral health system all faced dramatic cuts. Early intervention program were stripped of millions of state dollars, which meant they were also stripped of matching federal funds. The Governor’s Council on Developmental Disabilities, a council which

all states have and which receives federal funding, was completely disbanded. The Arizona Long Term Care System (ALTCS), the state's version of Medicaid, also faced deep cuts, which again meant losing matching Federal dollars. In response to the cuts, ALTCS made eligibility much more difficult to attain and cut many of the services it used to cover—from yearly well-child visits to organ transplants.

For the parents and grandparent in my Partners class, this was much more than just some governmental maneuvering taking place far away in the Capitol; it had immediate material consequences for the children they love. It meant their children losing speech therapy, physical therapy, occupational therapy, feeding therapy, music therapy, and habilitation therapy. It meant their children losing access to basic medical care. It meant their young adults would no longer have access to job training programs, stripping away their opportunities to becoming financially-contributing members of society.

In Rowe's reflection on the subject of feminist alliances, she advocates a politics of love. She writes, "I mean 'love' not necessarily in the narrow sense of lovers, or even friends, although I mean those relations too—I mean 'love' in the more expansive sense of whose lives matter to us" (3). To this Partners group, the politics of love was central, essential. Their children's lives mattered to them above all. United by the politics of love in an intense kairotic moment, the participants immediately bonded with an emotional fervor. Lunch sessions never seemed to be quite long enough for the passionately energized conversations between participants. When sessions were over, participants frequently went out to dinner or to someone's house to continue sharing their stories and to strategize ways they could fight to change the system together.

There was fervor in the classroom as well. Speakers came in from across the country to share their strategies for creating power lines and affecting change. We learned about the rhetorical construction of disability and the histories of parent advocacy and self-advocacy. We learned what inclusive education should look like and how to advocate for it. We met with leaders from non-profits and learned about ways we could partner with them in their advocacy efforts. We met with local, state, and national representatives. We quizzed directors from the Arizona Department of Education, DDD, the Social Security Administration, and ALTCS to find out how to best make the system work for our children. We listened intently as the director of the Arizona Center for Disability Law took us through how to navigate the legal system for our children. We learned about how to secure employment and housing for our adult children. Although each of these presentations provided an immense amount of information, that information was always grounded in the pathos of our politics of love. We watched disturbing videos of children with autism being warehoused in the 1970s. We watched tear-jerking stories about young adults with disabilities becoming painters and poets. We listened as presenters who were also parents cried through the stories of their own children, the people who motivated them to become professional advocates, and we bonded with them through their stories. Uniting through a politics of love, more than anything else, is what we took from the class.

The coalition created by the Partners participants is a model for forging power lines. While in the Southern Arizona disability community people tend to stay with their own—the autie moms clustering here, the Down's moms clustering over there—parents reached across the aisle, so to speak, at Partners. Moms who happened to live in the same

school district banded together, whether their kids had autism or cerebral palsy, sharing strategies about how to work within the school administration and committing to attend one another children's yearly Individual Education Plan (or IEP) meetings at the school so that each parent had another parent to lean on. Drawn together for a common purpose, the power lines they forged were strong.

Organizations like Partners can respond to Susan Miller's call: "persistently marginalized status demands political action" ("The Feminization of Composition" 520). She sees transformative potential in composition, and its women, saying that "it contains active resistance to the exhausted social situations that produced both its negative feminization and 'traditions' that should have become cultural embarrassments long ago" (533). Rather than acquiescing to these traditions and providing women scholars the means to manage living with them, she calls for us to transform them. Through power lines and political action, autism mothers in the field have the potential to reshape and reclaim the work that they do. By counteracting hegemonic narratives, women can recast feminization as positive and empowering. It is only through partnerships engaging in counterhegemonic practices that women can transform the ideological presumptions the academy functions under and create a professional climate that embraces autism mothers and others at risk of slipping through the cracks of the pipeline.

Institutions are based upon powerful constructions that are very difficult to challenge, especially if one wants to remain a member of the community. While Heidi "Poeticmama" does take a step toward the gynocentric mothering envisioned by feminists, her claim that Zane is still her "EVERYTHING" demonstrates that she is still entrenched in her community's rhetorical vision. Her actions reflect a challenge to the

dominant discourse that dictates women should sacrifice themselves for their children, yet she still places her role as a mother as higher priority than the other aspects of her life. The difficulty of attaining the ideal of gynocentric motherhood and professionalism, even for a woman like Heidi who has become aware of the need to be an individual, highlights the importance of changing the institutionalized discourses that marginalize women and those with disabilities. In my final chapter, I will look at the specific changes we can make to the larger institutional structures of the university in order to reshape it into a unified planet through the practice of rhetorical sensing.

CHAPTER FIVE

SENSING A NEW WRITING PROGRAM:

CREATING AN ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURE FOR OUR PLANET

All,

I am hoping your collective wisdom will help me work with one of our FYC teachers who has a fairly severe autistic student in FYC this semester. How a student with this level of autism made it to college is another question that we aren't dealing with right now. The teachers here are remarkably generous and would do much to help this young man, but one of his accommodations is that he never has to write more than one page per assignment. Oh dear.

I'm meeting with the head of the OSD and the student tomorrow to talk about what kinds of interactions work best for him, but I would appreciate any advice you have.

Many thanks,

Lauren

(Ingraham)

It was a seemingly simple solicitation for colleagues' advice, but the post "Working with Autistic Writers" initiated a fraught discussion on the WPA listserv (August 30-31, 2010) about autism and college writing programs. Responses tended to fit into one of three categories. Some responders directed Professor Ingraham to sources

related to autism: Margaret Price the Disabilities Studies SIG at CCCC, Sara B. Chaney an article in *Disability Studies Quarterly*, Duane Roen the website for the Southwest Autism Research and Resource Center, Melanie Yergeau blogs by individuals on the autism spectrum, to name a few (30 August). Other responses focused on providing pedagogical tips. Sara Glennon (31 August), for instance, shares tips based on her teaching experiences:

One thing that I've found is often true of writers with Autism Spectrum Disorders is that elaborating on ideas can be difficult. To just tell a writer to develop or support an idea more may not be useful. Responding by asking specific questions that guide them to more support and details, or providing heuristics to do this sometimes help. Also, thinking about a longer paper as a series of chapters can help when pushing a student to write longer papers. The more structure and specific feedback and scaffolding you can provide the better.

Likewise, Shannon Walters (31 August) writes,

As others have said, multimodal, including visual or digital assignments may work. One-on-one work is also extremely beneficial for some students with ASD. Students may also benefit from being able to choose their own assignments and topics and may need flexibility with the time to complete the assignment. The students with ASD I've worked with have also liked writing creatively and have been students who are eager to work with their instructors to create a good partnership. Some of my students

have even written their own assignment parameters and completed their self-designed assignments with great success.

On the other hand, some responses veered away from practical tips and instead engaged the ideological issues brought to the surface by Ingraham's post. The original post, however unintentionally, reflects an ideology that categorically Others students with autism, seen in Ingraham's concern about "how a student with this level of autism made it to college," as if college is not a place for those with neurodifferences. Many posters warned about generalizing about students with autism, emphasizing that if you've met one person with autism, then you've met one person with autism. As Walters (31 August) asserts, "In my own work with students with autism, I've found that each one is different, of course (like any student)." Yergeau (30 August) goes even further, addressing the implication in the original post that students with autism do not belong in the university:

I want to address what you've said concerning how a severely autistic person got into college. As someone who is autistic, and as someone who knows many autistic people who are in college, as well as many autistic people who desperately want to be in college but are not -- a statement concerning severity and worthiness of college entry is hurtful, and it's an unfortunately pervasive attitude that we have to deal with daily.

One conversation on WPA-L does not necessarily represent the experiences of all WPAs in all writing programs in the United States. However, the responses to the original post represent the challenges many WPAs face. Whether the responses provided sources and tips or addressed the larger cultural context that marginalizes students on the autism spectrum, two things are clear. First, there is uncertainty about how to approach

autism within writing programs, as the original question indicates. Second, there is a notable lack of programmatic responses to having neurodiverse student populations. All of the advice provided, while helpful, does not engage autism on a programmatic level. Advice focused on classroom practices, which are incredibly important, but none of the responses from writing program administrators addressed writing programs themselves.

How, then, do we address autism on a programmatic level if WPAs themselves are at a loss for how to do it? In terms of quality of education and student retention, this is an important question with which administrators must contend. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, 67% of college students with disabilities fail to complete their degrees within six years (Smith). These students are capable: they meet the admission requirements deemed by their universities to be the benchmark skillset for academic success. Instead, the problem lies within a university structure, both ideological and physical, that was not built to include students with disabilities. A student named Laura who had to withdraw from college states, “I would say that my experience as a disabled person in college has been pretty difficult . . . If I'd had adequate support for my disability, I might not have had to withdraw from two courses and postpone my graduation date” (Smith).

Laura’s experience no longer needs to be the norm. Dawn Prince-Hughes, editor of *Aquamarine Blue 5: Personal Stories of College Students with Autism*, writes that students on the autism spectrum are “students for whom intellectual activity and a place in the academy are indispensable lifelines that give them the connections they need while providing an outlet for their unique intelligence” (xvii). University writing programs can become active partners in building such lifelines for students if they embrace inclusive

practices. Inclusion is often a misunderstood term, falsely correlated with reducing standards for those who are “different.” This is not what true inclusion is. According to Frederick A. Miller and Judith H. Katz, “Inclusion is a sense of belonging: feeling respected, valued, and seen for who you are; feeling a level of supportive energy and commitment from others so that you can do your best work” (2). The goal of inclusion is the goal of the writing program: for all students, regardless of disability status, to find academic success. In this chapter, I aim to create a blueprint for WPAs and other administrators to build an infrastructure of inclusiveness in their programs. There are three prongs to my approach: drawing upon community resources for faculty education, offering online course options to enable participation of all students, and celebrating the unique benefits a neurodiverse student population can bring to our universities.

Some WPAs may question the need for investing time and budgets into building an inclusive infrastructure. Unfortunately, most WPAs are over-worked and most writing programs under-funded. Because of this, administrators might question devoting resources to inclusion when neurodiverse students do not seem to be all that common in the university. Why not just respond to the needs of neurodiverse students when issues arise rather than invest scarce resources in anticipation of the need for inclusivity? While such thinking demonstrates the prioritization skills that WPAs need in tough budgetary times, it is faulty. First of all, neurodiverse students are not uncommon. Looking strictly at autism numbers, the CDC estimates one in 68 people have autism. If a program’s writing courses have the Conference on College Composition and Communication’s recommended cap of 20 students (which, unfortunately, many of our programs do not), that translates to having one student with autism in about every third composition course.

A third of a program's classes is a significant percentage that cannot be ignored. And these are just the autism numbers: when you add in related neurodiversity groups such as students with sensory integration disorder or soldiers returning from war with PTSD or mild traumatic brain injuries, the numbers multiply exponentially. The writing program is already a neurodiverse space. Secondly, it is shortsighted to wait to address the needs of neurodiverse students until problems arise. Why wait until student achievement and retention suffer? By being proactive and taking steps to foster inclusiveness, WPAs can head off challenges before they become a critical situation.

Supporting Inclusivity through Teacher Development

The strategies in Chapter Three are practical rhetorical sensing techniques that an individual instructor may adopt to support student writers, but in order to perpetuate these best practices, there must be training and support at the institutional level. As Chapter Two demonstrates, academic institutions have historically been unsupportive of neurodiversity, and changing the face of an entire institutional system can seem a daunting task, both in terms of time and money. However, I argue that through small steps, WPAs can begin to change institutions into places that support instructors as they work to provide a quality education to all learners.

The first step WPAs can take is to gather a small group of interested people to begin inquiry. The make-up of the committee will vary based upon individual institutions and their needs, but it could include faculty, graduate student instructors, administrators, and students with ASDs. I strongly encourage the inclusion of at least one student with an ASD in the committee because, as the interview findings Shannon Walters presented at CCCC 2010 reveal, college students with ASDs are incredibly insightful about the

strengths they possess and the challenges they face in the writing classroom. Moreover, if those with ASDs are not included in the conversation, programs run the risk of talking for them rather than allowing them the agency to speak for themselves, thereby further marginalizing those WPAs aim to help. Once the small group is configured, the members can begin conversations about what their institutions' needs are when it comes to addressing neurodiversity in the classroom.

The second step is to build coalitions with existing organizations so that the committee spares itself the work of reinventing already existing responses and programs. On most campuses, there may already be units that are working to meet the needs of students on the autism spectrum. Support services, like disabilities resource centers and tutoring programs, are likely engaged in meeting the needs of students with ASDs and may have strategies that can help writing programs develop supports for teachers with neurodiverse classroom populations. At the University of Arizona, for instance, the Disabilities Resource Center, the Think Tank at the Student Academic Learning Center, and the Strategic Alternative Learning Techniques (SALT) Center support the learning of diverse student populations and have knowledge that can benefit classroom instructors. In addition, there may be student groups that can serve as a rich resource. Arizona State University, for instance, has an "Aspies at ASU" club.

Academic programs, as well, can be a beneficial resource for a writing program seeking to support neurodiverse learners. WPAs should think broadly about the coalitions they can build with colleagues across their campuses. Disciplines researching autism and learning can run the range from Neuropsychology; Speech, Language and Hearing Sciences; Educational Psychology; Special Education; and New Media Studies. At the

University of Arizona, Speech, Language, and Hearing Sciences has an on-campus clinic that provides services for people with autism. The College of Education at Arizona State University has a Master's Degree program focusing specifically on autism, and graduate students in the program would likely be pleased to continue their research by partnering with colleagues in the writing program. Another academic program at Arizona State University is SPE 394: Autism Spectrum Disorders Higher Ed, a one-credit course offered to students on the autism spectrum. Taught in a hybrid online/face-to-face format, this course focuses on coping strategies, study skills, and independent living skills within a higher education setting. Students within the cohort have a supportive environment to share challenges and build friendships. Courses like these provide a fantastic opportunity for cross-department collaboration. Imagine the possibilities if the ASU Writing Programs aligned instruction with this program, perhaps allowing the students in the cohort to be clustered into a few select sections of freshman composition. With the partnership between teachers in both programs, composition teachers would learn a great deal about how to best teach students on the spectrum, and the students would benefit (Adams).

If smaller institutions lack on-campus partners, they can look to the community for partnerships. Most areas have a local chapter of the Autism Society of America (ASA), which are all listed on the ASA's website. If there is not an ASA chapter in the area, there may be other autism-based groups that would be able to provide WPAs with information. The exceptional education departments of local school districts are also an important partner to consider. While their emphasis is on primary and secondary education, many of the principles that empower diverse learners in lower grades transfer

to post-secondary learning. If these local resources are not fruitful, national organizations like the Center for Understanding and the Golden Hat Foundation may offer support. The Center for Understanding has a free online Asperger's 101 course that would be very helpful to the WPA trying to gather information about autism.

The key to these partnerships, whether they be campus or community-based, is to learn from the wisdom of those who are already knowledgeable about the needs of students with autism. Drawing upon their expertise can save a writing program from having to replicate research that has already been conducted elsewhere. Ideally, the writing program will be able to give back to these organizations down the road by sharing the strategies and techniques that have worked well in supporting ASD students in the writing classroom.

Once a committee has been formed and has been strengthened by the knowledge they have gained from their partners, the next step is to create modes through which to share this knowledge with other writing instructors in the department. This can begin informally with brown-bag meetings where instructors meet to discuss strategies that would benefit the ASD students on their campus. Teachers can share lesson plans and assignments that have been successful in their classrooms or can share things they have learned from their own readings on neurodiversity. The shape of these brown-bag meetings would vary depending on the particular concerns and needs of the institution.

Finally, there must be a method in place to ensure that the knowledge cultivated through partnerships and brown-bag meetings remains in the writing program as some instructors move and new instructors enter. A resource bank can be created to help new instructors draw upon the knowledge of other instructors. Resource materials from

partners, notes and handouts from brown-bag meetings, and lesson plans and assignments from instructors can be housed in the writing program for all instructors to access. If technology is available, this resource bank can be housed online for easy access. At the University of Arizona, for instance, we already have an in-house instructor resource website (Writing Instructor Resources or WIRe); a section on neurodiversity could be added to this existing resource.

Along with making these resources available, a writing program can continue its commitment to honoring neurodiversity by making it a component in all new instructor trainings. Administrators may think this is not feasible because there are so many other things to cover and there is so little time, but a basic introduction to neurodiversity and classroom strategies, as addressed in Chapter Three, does not have to be time consuming; it can be as short as fifteen minutes. For instance, I was able to speak to new Graduate Associates in Teaching (GATs) as part of a Difference and Inequality rotation during their pre-semester training at the University of Arizona. I provided a brief overview of how to foster inclusive classrooms and where to turn for help. This short presentation generated a lively discussion and as a result I was contacted several times throughout the following semester by GATs who needed additional guidance in how to best meet the needs of neurodiverse students. Such a discussion could be led by a campus or community partner, a student with an ASD, or a teacher with expertise in working with students with ASDs. Regardless of who leads the discussion, the brief time allocated to neurodiversity will benefit incoming teachers because they will be able to address student needs before they become a challenge, and they will know where to get additional support when they need it.

Take Advantage of Digital Learning Environments

In addition to training teachers how to best teach a neurodiverse student body, writing programs can also consider digital modes of instruction as a way to give all students the best opportunities to access the full curriculum. The rise of new media has created opportunities for adults with autism, especially those who struggle with spoken language, to both communicate with others and more actively participate in the educational process. While, as Lev Manovich and others point out, we should be wary of idealizing new media as a democratizing power giving equal voice to all, when members of a community assemble online in electronic environments, it can allow members “to facilitate the diffusion of their ideas, to participate in productive political involvement, and to extend their own ‘possibilities for interaction and debate,’” according to Gail Hawisher and Cynthia Selfe (280). These possibilities for interaction and debate are the very heart of the composition classroom. Online, hybrid, and computer-mediated course offerings can enable students with autism to become vital members of the classroom community.

Laura Gurak argues that “powerful and quick delivery on computer networks and a strong sense of community *ethos*” allow users to establish presence and deliver a message “in the absence of traditional face-to-face methods” (244). Individuals with autism are already actively creating such communities through new media, including social-networking sites for people on the spectrum like Wrong Planet. User-generated content sites like YouTube have become a stage for people with autism to express themselves to a large audience. One of the most notable examples is Silentmiaow, a woman with autism who has her own YouTube channel devoted to autism and

neurodiversity issues. One of her most poignant videos is “In My Language,” which has been viewed nearly 900,000 times. The first part of the video is in what Silentmiaow calls her “native language,” and to the person unfamiliar with autism it appears to be a strange montage of humming and unusual, repetitive sounds made with everyday objects. However, with the help of computer software that speaks the words Silentmiaow types, she explains (or translates) in the second half of the video what all the seemingly strange sounds meant in her language. She claims that her language is interacting with the things in the world around her, feeling them and sensing them. Through her video, Silentmiaow challenges our very conceptions of what language and rhetoric are. Classical rhetoric teaches us two things about rhetoric: first, that it is persuasive in nature (c.f. Aristotle’s definition of rhetoric as “the faculty of discovering in any particular case all of the available means of persuasion”), and second, that it is verbally performed (c.f. Cicero’s definition of rhetoric as a good man speaking well). Instead of a persuasive verbal performance, Silentmiaow’s language draws closer to the definition that George Kennedy provides in “A Hoot in the Dark.” Kennedy claims that rhetoric is the energy inherent in communication: “the emotional energy that impels the speaker to speak, the physical energy expended in the utterance, the energy level coded in the message, and the energy experienced by the recipient in decoding the message” (7). Silentmiaow’s rhetoric is energy; she engages with the energy of the world around her as she rocks and feels the sounds of her daily experience.

Building upon the successful digital communication models already practiced by members of the autism community outside of the classroom, K-12 educators are already looking to virtual learning to empower students with disabilities. According to the

International Association for K-12 Online Learning, forty-two states have state virtual school projects and enrollments in 2009-2010 topped 1.8 million (Serianni and Coy 102). In addition to these virtual schools are blended or hybrid programs, in which students spend time both in the brick-and-mortar classroom and online. Enrollment in these programs is rapidly growing, jumping from 2,000 in 2000 to four million students in 2010 (Serianni and Coy 102). Matriculating high school students who have found success in K-12 online programs are looking for similar opportunities in college. Rather than shoulder the challenge of creating new online sections for students on the autism spectrum, universities can reserve seats in existing online and/or hybrid courses for students with autism and other students with disabilities who may benefit from online instruction.

Why is this medium so effective in allowing students with autism to practice rhetoric? In her article “Autistic Culture Online: Virtual Communication and Cultural Expression on the Spectrum,” Joyce Davidson asserts that the digital world allows people with autism something that the real world cannot: time. Users are afforded delayed response time in the virtual world, freeing them from the pressure to formulate a social reaction on the spot (796). Ironically, the benefit here is the transverse of what Paul Virillo says new media gives us: speed. Online classrooms can benefit all students, including those with autism, because they can simultaneously speed up and slow down communication in positive ways. Online classrooms harness the power of speed because they reduce distance (students don’t have to drive to campus, which has the extra benefit of reducing sensory overload for students on the spectrum) and they offer immediate access (students don’t have to wait until a scheduled course meeting time to access the

instructor's materials) (Serianni and Coy 103). At the same time, they harness the power of time because students who might find it challenging to compose quick verbal responses in class, whether it be to an instructor's question or to a peer's essay during a review session, have to opportunity to compose responses. For non-verbal students with autism, this medium can facilitate classroom participation and community membership that would not have been possible before the Internet (Davidson 798). Drawing upon Stuart Hall, Ananda Mitra illustrates that online community membership has important implications for groups of marginalized individuals. She argues that members begin to renegotiate their identities "in relation to those of others in the group as well as in relation to the larger real-life public sphere where the members and the communities are inserted" (30). She says this renegotiation of identity is often an "urgent necessity" for those marginalized individuals who are "Othered" by hegemonic structures.

In addition to the community benefits, another benefit of online course options for students with autism is that they can utilize accessibility tools that are not available in the face-to-face classroom as they complete their coursework. Some features can help with the reading process, which can be challenging for some students on the autism spectrum. For instance, a student named Martin experienced visual challenges with reading, "but his online teacher showed him how to turn on the read-aloud feature, so the text would be read to him" (Serianni and Coy 103). Likewise, my friend Brooke, who has Asperger's syndrome and struggles with the stark visual contrast between black and white on the page while she reads, enjoys working in online environments because she can open a document in Microsoft Word and simply change the background color on the page, alleviating the visual strain. Other features can help students with the composing process.

My son Noah, for instance, thinks much faster than his hands can respond, so he struggles to compose texts. Speak to write tools enable him to get his ideas down on the page.

Although there are commercial packages like Dragon available, read aloud and speak to write features come standard on Windows-based computers under the “Accessibility” tab, so there is no additional cost to the university for students to use these.

The example of peer review shows how online instruction can bring marginalized students with ASD into the heart of the classroom community. Journalist Maura Lerner describes a scene all too common in the face-to-face classroom: “For a college class, the assignment seemed simple enough: Gather in circles of five or six students and discuss a few questions as a group. But one young man refused, sitting uncomfortably apart from his classmates and saying nothing.” Unfortunately, in the context of the traditional classroom, “he might have flunked the assignment outright.” In an online environment, however, many of the barriers that prevent the student from fully participating in the curriculum, from not being able read the social cues to know when it was his turn to speak to experiencing sensory overload from sitting so close to classmates, are eliminated.

Although digital technology has several benefits for students on the autism spectrum, it is important to keep in mind that technology is not a panacea. Simply throwing technology at the problem of high numbers of students with disabilities not completing degrees will not solve anything. Thoughtful online course design, based on the principles of universal design, is essential to student success. According to The Center for Universal Design, universal design is “the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need

for adaptation or specialized design” (Burgstahler 7). Universal design, at its core, is simply good rhetorical practice: it is all about presenting your message in the clearest way to reach everyone in your target audience.

There are ways that writing programs can work to ensure that their online course content can best reach its target audience: all learners. Kavita Rao provides a framework for best practices in course design. In his research on universal design in online courses, Rao identifies four particular challenges that non-traditional student groups might face: ambiguity and uncertainty about expectations, excessive reliance on text-based learning modalities, isolation and lack of community, and technology challenges (22). He then cross-references these challenges with the Universal Instructional Design (UID) framework of supports for various learner needs. The eight principles of UID are:

- a. Creating welcoming classrooms
- b. Determining essential components of a course
- c. Communicating clear expectations
- d. Providing timely and constructive feedback
- e. Exploring use of natural supports for learning, including technology
- f. Designing teaching methods that consider diverse learning styles, abilities, ways of knowing, and previous experience and background knowledge
- g. Creating multiple ways for students to demonstrate their knowledge
- h. Promoting interaction among and between faculty and students (Rao 22).

By matching students' potential challenges with principles of UID, Rao demonstrates how programs can support students, as seen in his table of Pedagogical Strategies and UID Principles.

		A: Welcoming classrooms	B: Essential course	C: Clear expectations	D: Timely, constructive feedback	E: Diverse teaching methods	F: Natural supports	G: Demonstrate knowledge	H: Interaction - students/ faculty
Challenges	Pedagogical Strategies	UID							
Ambiguity/ uncertainty of expectations	Personalized introduction Consistent and organized use of CMS Provide clear syllabus and rubrics	●	●	●					
Excessive reliance on text- based learning	Provide multimodal sources of information Include digital texts and audio files for reading assignments Provide assignment choices with alternate ways to demonstrate knowledge					●	●	●	
Isolation/ lack of community	Include synchronous class meetings Have short, frequent lower-stakes assignments instead of larger high-stakes assignments Provide timely feedback from instructor on all assignments	●		●	●	●	●	●	●
Technology barriers	Provide proactive tech support Create mechanisms for peer assistance				●		●		●

Figure 6: Pedagogical Strategies and UID Principles (Rao 23)

The interventions are simple. Create a welcoming online environment by perhaps including a warm “welcome to the course” page and using a harmonious color scheme. Provide clear expectations for students through syllabi and assignment descriptions. Provide thoughtful, timely feedback to students. Lay out the course shell in such a way that students can quickly and intuitively navigate it. Guide students to natural supports

(for me, this is often guiding them to Arizona State University's Help Desk webpage). These UID principles are keys to a positive experience for all students, regardless of disability status.

Vive la Différence: Celebrating Neurodiversity

Developing teachers and implementing online programs based on UID will amount to nothing if these practices are not accompanied by a paradigm change. As Chapter One demonstrates, there is an active legacy of demonizing autism that still has footholds in our culture and our universities. In his article in online edition of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Tyler Cowen eloquently demonstrates the way in which the university is imbricated in an ideology that pathologizes students with autism:

Thinking back on history, maybe you've wondered how it was that American colleges and universities could ever have contributed to racist discourse. But Princeton and many other institutions kept out Jews, and 'academic' defenses of slavery, segregation, and eugenics were commonplace until broader social changes rendered such views unacceptable. The sad truth is that dehumanizing ideologies are still with us in the modern university, although they take very different forms. Prime examples include the unacceptable ways we sometimes talk and think about the autism spectrum.

Think about the ways autism is talked about. It is a "disease." It is a "disorder." People with autism are "retarded." Even the titles of academic publications reflect an ideology that treats people with autism as faulty. Cowen notes that Michael L. Ganz, who

teaches at the Harvard School of Public Health, published an essay, titled “Costs of Autism in the United States”: “Nowhere in the essay does he consider whether autistic people have brought benefits to the human race. Can you imagine a comparable essay titled: ‘Costs of Native Americans’?” People on the spectrum are seen as a burden to shoulder rather than a vital addition to our academic communities.

In actually, people with autism have much to contribute to our world and our universities. Temple Grandin often says that people with autism are “different, not less.” Cognitive neuroscientist Laurent Mottron echoes this claim in his *Nature* article on the advantages of autism. He outlines the supporting research:

A growing body of research is showing that autistics outperform neurologically typical children and adults in a wide range of perception tasks, such as spotting a pattern in a distracting environment. Other studies have shown that most autistic people outperform other individuals in auditory tasks (such as discriminating pitches), detecting visual structures and mentally manipulating complex three-dimensional shapes. They also do better in Raven’s Matrices, a classic intelligence test in which subjects use analytical skills to complete an ongoing visual pattern. In one of my group’s experiments, autistics completed this test an average of 40% faster than non-autistics. (34)

Think about the value these skills can add to the classes in our writing programs. The student who excels in auditory discrimination might notice a sound pattern in a poem that others in the classroom community missed. The student who excels in analyzing visual patterns will certainly have rich insights to bring to class discussions of visual rhetoric.

Writing program administrators can take steps to foster a respect for neurological differences. One way to do this is through textbook adoption. WPAs can choose composition readers that include the voices of those with disabilities or neurodifferences. The texts we give our students to read establish a canon of value, and by including the voices of those with disabilities, we are actively reshaping the paradigm. It is incredibly important to choose texts that don't approach disability studies in a marginalizing way, however. In her essay "Add Disability and Stir: The New Ingredient in Composition Textbooks," Deb Martin claims that simply tossing in texts about disability can be harmful because it can simplify and dichotomize disability. It is "usually presented as a pro/con debate 'or as just another unexamined kind of difference in a long line of difference, that is, the pluralist approach' (78), the tendency to promote an us/them divide . . . create an atmosphere which causes students to 'relate to dominant ideology and speak to mainstream culture while suppressing marginalized voices'" (82). With that caution in mind, there are some textbooks that effectively incorporate difference. Martin suggests the following:

- *Between Worlds: A Reader, Rhetoric, and Handbook* 3rd ed. By Susan Bachmann and Melinda Barth
- *Rhetorical Contexts* by Suzanne Strobeck Webb and Lou Ann Thompson
- *Cultural Conversations: The Presence of the Past* by Stephen Dilks, Regina Hansen, and Matthew Parfitt
- *In Context: Participating in Cultural Conversations* by Ann Merle Feldman, Nancy Downs, and Ellen McManus *

- *Uncommon Threads* by Robert D. Newman, Jean Bohner, and Melissa Carol Johnson
- *Patterns for College Writing* by Laurie Kirschner Stephen Mandell
- *The Allyn and Bacon Guide to Writing* by John D. Ramage, John C. Bean, and June Johnson

In addition to her list, here are more worth considering:

- *What's Language Got to Do with It?* by Keith Walters and Michal Brody
- *Joining the Conversation: A Guide for Writers* by Mike Palmquist
- *Everything's an Argument* 6th ed. by Andrea Lunsford, John Ruskiewicz, and Keith Walters

For writing programs that create in-house readers, WPAs can select readings that highlight neurodiverse voices. Authors to consider are Timothy Page, Temple Grandin, and Eli Clare. Again, WPAs should be cautious about presenting these readings in a way that further marginalizes people with ASDs. If the committee that creates an in-house reader aims to be inclusive by throwing in a section on disability and lumping all of the ASD readings there, they may inadvertently be perpetuating the marginalization of those with neurodifferences. It implies that “they” (those with autism) are different from “us” (neurotypicals) and must be sequestered in their own area of the book. Instead, WPAs should look for ways for a diverse range of voices to be in conversation with each other within an in-house reader. For instance, many first-year composition readers include a section about higher education. Essays about the college experiences of ASD students, many wonderful examples of which can be found in the collection *Aquamarine Blue 5: Personal Stories of College Students with Autism*, could be included in such a section.

Rather than marginalizing, this organizational strategy would provide students with the opportunity to discuss the broad spectrum of college experiences.

Program administrators can also reshape the paradigm by creating events that showcase and honor neurodifferences. We have days and celebrations that honor other marginalized groups—like African American history month—what if we created events to honor neurodifferences? Arizona State University does just that every year. ASU hosts the Annual Symposium on Autism Spectrum Disorders in Higher Education (often in April, which is autism awareness month). The celebration includes presentations that focus on student success and student programs at the postsecondary level, as well as summer internships with companies like IBM. The student organization ASD@ASU plays a central role in the symposium. The works of ASU students on the spectrum is celebrated. For instance, one year ASU student entrepreneurs with ASD shared their innovations and one student team, Alien's Guide to the Galaxy, launched a mobile application designed to support individuals with ASD. Celebrations of autism such as ASU's symposium are vital steps in the difficult work of renegotiating *nomoi* (Lindblom and Dunn 170). By choosing to publicly honor neurodifferences, writing programs can reshape cultural conventions. This is the power of rhetorical sensing: by listening to and honoring the experiences of students on the autism spectrum, we can reshape the writing program into an inclusive land.

Conclusion: A New Heaven and a New Earth

In their book for teaching literacy to students with autism, Paula Kluth and Kelly Chandler-Olcott adopt the title *A Land We Share*. The title echoes back to the solar

system metaphor in my opening chapter. The university has been like Planet Earth, and students with autism have been like aliens from a “wrong planet,” visiting the land of the university but never really feeling like it is their own. Students with autism have been on the fringe of the solar system. Their “wrong planet” is an icy Pluto, so far away that it not only doesn’t feel the sun’s warmth, but that it also is questioned as being a planet at all. The wrong planet is dismissed as merely a Kuiper belt object, an asteroid floating in space.

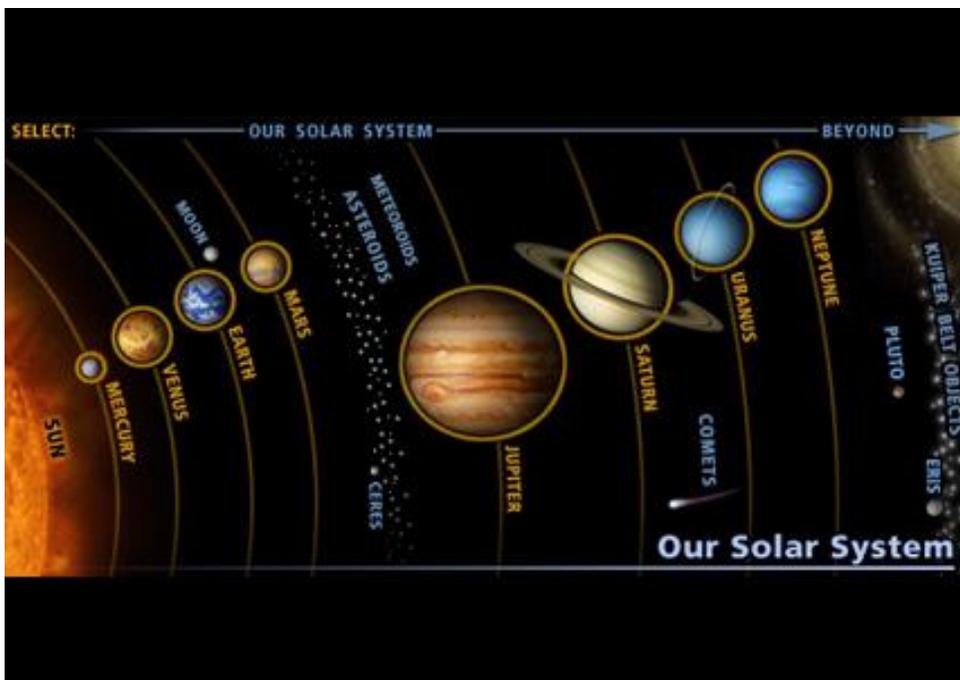


Figure 2: “The Solar System”

Through the practice of rhetorical sensing, we can change this picture. I envision a model of higher education that doesn’t have wrong planets; in fact, it doesn’t have multiple planets at all. We can rethink paradigms and create a land we can share. Rather than “wrong” or “right” planets, higher education can be one sphere. This does not mean

assimilation: each member can and should keep his or her individuality as a unique continent adding texture and beauty to the whole, just as the ice fields of Antarctica and dusty outback of Australia enrich the physical planet Earth. As we rhetorically sense one another as a shared community, the university will become a place where learning does not come merely from lectures and textbooks; it will also come from each one of us who inhabit the community. As we are enhanced by the experiences of those around us, the university will begin to reflect the fruits of the mission it once cherished: enlightenment.



Figure 7: Earth at Sunrise

EPILOGUE

SENSING MY WORLD

In the prologue of my dissertation, I made a commitment, both to myself and to my readers, to be “publicly private” in my scholarship. As bell hooks shares in *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, bringing the personal and the professional together is crucial because such “openness is about how to be well and telling the truth is about how to put the broken pieces of the heart back together again. It’s about being whole—being wholehearted” (2). In this dissertation, I challenged myself to be wholehearted. I have put my family *in medias res*, sharing my children’s struggles and victories alongside the research of “experts.” At times, the goal of being publicly private was the hardest part of drafting the dissertation, especially in Chapter Four. I lost count of how many times I wrote myself into the story of women’s struggles in the academy then erased myself out again. How honest should I be about my working conditions? About my salary? About the cost of autism for our family? In the end, I hope that I found the right balance for my readers.

Yet, if rhetorical sensing teaches us anything, it is that all parties need to be active participants in the sensing process for it to have any hope of success. For me and the fragments of my heart that I must bring together to be “wholehearted,” this means that it cannot just be the rhetoric scholar in me who practices rhetorical sensing. It also has to be Momma Neese, the mother of three great kids; Ms. H, the teacher of college composition; and Denise, the wife, daughter, sister, and friend. It is not enough for scholarship to be informed by lived experiences; the personal must also be informed by scholarship. Only then is there a hope for the cross-cultural dialogue of which Krista Ratcliffe speaks.

As I've gone through the dissertation process over the past several years, I have not only attempted to be wholehearted in my scholarship, but I have also challenged myself to practice rhetorical sensing in daily life. That practice of sensing has led to a radically different, radically better, world.

First and foremost, I foregrounded sensing my sons and their needs. Because Nick is mostly non-verbal, sensing him requires a great deal of quiet, focused attention. When I was able to quiet myself enough to really hear him, I realized that we needed to make some radical changes in our lives, and so I applied for a job in Tempe, picked up my boys, and started a new life for them, filled with new opportunities. No longer was Nick floundering on waiting lists, waiting to receive speech therapy. Both Noah and Nick had all of the therapy services they needed, finally. School was even better: all of the devastating challenges the boys met in their old school district melted away when we moved to the Kyrene School District. Rather than adversaries, the boys had a supportive team of teachers, aides, therapists, and administrators in their schools. With the support of their teams, Noah and Nick are flourishing. Noah is now a fully-mainstreamed eighth grader. While autism will always be part of what makes him who he is, it is no longer the defining characteristic. Instead, he is a thirteen-year-old boy obsessed with video games and girls . . . so like any other teenaged boy. Nick, likewise, has been nurtured by his educational team. His school program is catered specifically to his academic and social needs, and he has a classroom space designed for his particular sensory needs. He is finding his voice: while he still cannot speak many words, he has taken to text messaging his step-father. Building upon his strength in writing, Nick will soon have an

augmentative communication device that will speak what he types so that he can communicate with the world.

The step-father that Nick texts, he comes from another rhetorical sensing practice. In order to write Chapter Four and advocate that autism moms listen to their personal needs, I needed to actively practice listening to myself. Sensing myself was often messy and hard. It meant ending a non-functioning marriage and all of the challenges that go along with divorce. But it also meant opening myself up to all of the good the universe had in store for me. There was a boy who drove me crazy in high school: he could always read me, always able to sense what I was feeling even when I was able to mask it from everyone else. What was frustrating as a teenager became beautiful as an adult, and I married a man who actively embodies rhetorical sensing as a partner and a father. One year ago, that partner and I added another boy to our family, Liam. Our pediatrician exclaims, every time I see her, that Liam is the best therapy Noah and Nick could have ever hoped for. Liam's jovial and boisterous personality complete our family, and as I type this sentence about him, I have tears in my eyes thinking about the gap that would have been in our lives had I not accepted the challenge of listening to myself.

Rhetorical sensing has not just affected my family, but also the students my colleagues and I teach. Every time I enter my classroom, whether it be a physical space or an online space, I actively practice the inclusive strategies I advocate in Chapters Three and Five. Has it taken some work? Yes. I remember frustrating weeks when I angrily fought with software in an attempt to add voiceovers to my online course content, wanting my materials to be accessible for all students regardless of whether they were visual or auditory learners. The frustration eventually paid off and I now have content

that is universally accessible. However, the most exciting part is that my classroom is not the only place where these changes are taking place. Over the years, I have been able to share teaching strategies I discuss in this dissertation with colleagues, in venues ranging from CCCC presentations to local composition conferences. Every time I have presented my work, I have been met with such enthusiasm that audiences have stayed around to talk with me for so long that we had to be kicked out to make room for the next panel.

My colleagues' enthusiasm demonstrates that our discipline is hungry for change. Rhetoric and composition, by and large, is ready to practice rhetorical sensing. The problem is not that teachers do not want to create learning spaces that are inclusive for all students; the problem is that most teachers do not know where to start. I love to see the excitement in my colleagues' eyes after I share steps they can take to foster neurodiversity. "This makes so much sense, and it is so simple!" I have had people exclaim. And, really, so much of it is simple. Things like presenting writing as a process with multiple steps or being very clear and specific with directions are not complicated. They are simply best practices for **all** students.

Rhetorical sensing means being willing to enter the conversation, not knowing all the answers before the conversation even begins. It means being willing to listen and learn through the process of cross-cultural dialogue. It means being open to possibilities. There is an ever-growing cohort of colleagues who are ready to enter the conversation—will you join us?

APPENDIX A: LESSON PLAN

Objectives

- 1) Build descriptive writing skills
- 2) Sharpen analytical reading skills
- 3) Develop awareness of other ways of thinking

Materials

- 1) Journal assignment prompt 1 (Resource 1)
- 2) Tim Page's "Parallel Play" essay
(<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/08/20/parallel-play>)
- 3) Reading questions for Tim Page's "Parallel Play" (Resource 2)
- 4) Amelia Baggs' "In My Language" video
(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JnylM1hI2jc>)
- 5) Journal assignment prompt 2 (Resource 3)

Lesson Sequence

1. Review characteristics of strong descriptive writing. (2 minutes)
2. Assign journal prompt 1 (Resource 1). Ask students to go outside of the building, find a place to sit, and write descriptively about what they see. (13 minutes)
3. Have a 4-5 students share what they have written. (5 minutes)
4. Engage the class in a discussion about the commonalities of students' observations as well as the very different ways the students framed and interpreted the same scene (e.g. some students focusing on buildings, others focusing people, others focusing on nature).

Tie these differences into a larger discussion of neurodiversity, pointing out that we all have different ways to viewing and interpreting the world. Provide a basic definition of ASDs and explain that people with ASDs do not interpret the world the same way that neurotypical (so-called “normal”) people do. (10 minutes)

5. Transition to Tim Page’s “Parallel Play.” Read through the text together and stop at points indicated to discuss the questions on the reading questions handout (Resource 2). Focus on close, critical reading skills as well as awareness of different ways of viewing the world. (20 minutes)

6. After reading through and discussing Page’s article, show the video “In My Language.” Have a class discussion about responses to the video and how it might challenge students’ conceptualizations of what it means to think and communicate. (15 minutes)

7. End class with journal prompt 2 (Resource 3). This is an opportunity for personal reflection about the students’ conceptualization of neurodiversity and acceptance. It should not be shared in class discussion. (8 minutes)

8. Collect journal prompts 1 and 2; review assignments for next class. (2 minutes)

Resource 1: Journal Prompt

Find a spot outside of the building to sit and observe your surroundings. Then, using the sensory details we’ve been discussing in class, write a descriptive paragraph that brings to life your observations. Your paragraph should reflect a specific point of view. Avoid clichés.

Resource 2: “Parallel Play” Questions

Pre-Reading

1. What associations does the title “Parallel Play” bring to mind?
2. Knowing that this is a memoir, what do you think the essay might be about?
3. The author describes his experiences living with Asperger’s Syndrome. What, if anything, do you know about this condition? (Have you ever heard the term used? Do you know someone with it? Etc.)

Stop 1 (Bottom of first column, page 37)

4. What does Page describe in this section?
5. What do you notice about Page’s use of specific descriptive details?
6. From this opening, where do you think the text is going to move from here?

Stop 2 (Bottom of third column, page 38)

7. How does this section differ from the previous section?
8. Page waits to define Asperger’s Syndrome, the primary focus of his text, until now. Why do you think he waits? What is the effect of this strategy?
9. How does his description of what Asperger’s Syndrome is match up with your pre-existing knowledge? (Question 3)

Stop 3 (Bottom of first column, page 40)

10. What insight does Page’s discussion of the “I’m Sorry” book he would write add to your understanding of his character?

11. Point out two examples of specific details that Page uses to bring the experiences of his youth to life for the readers.

Stop 4 (Top of first column, page 41)

12. What book helped Page to understand the rules of social conduct?

13. Notice the switch in tone in this section from the previous section. What is different here?

Stop 5 (End)

14. The section begins with one of the most personal discussions in the text—love. Yet then Page shifts to talking about the non-personal—Aspies in general and Aspies for Freedom (a group that is part of the larger Autism Liberation Movement). Why do you think he makes this shift? How does it affect you as a reader?

15. Look back at your pre-reading questions. How has your interpretation of what “Parallel Play” means changed? How has your perspective on and understanding of Asperger’s Syndrome changed?

Resource 3: Journal Prompt

Reflect on what you learned today. What does neurodiversity mean to you? How have Page’s article and Baggs’ video changed the way in which you think about differences?

APPENDIX B: AUDIENCE ANALYSIS

Writing an effective argument requires that you craft your text to a rhetorical situation. This assignment asks you to think critically about the audience you've chosen for your argument and the context in which you will be sharing your argument with your audience so that you can best respond to your audience and rhetorical situation. The goal is to demonstrate thoughtful critical thinking about your role as a rhetor. Be thoughtful, detailed, and rhetorically aware as you answer each question.

1. Sense of purpose: What is your argumentative thesis statement? Why? What specific result are you trying to achieve through your text? This should go beyond just simply “to persuade.” What specific actions or reactions are you seeking from your audience? For instance, do you want them to vote a certain way on a proposition? In narrowing your sense of purpose, consider whether the step you advocate is worthwhile and achievable for the target audience you choose.

2. Audience: Who is your target audience? Why? Be specific and narrow—an audience like “the general public” is far too broad. Consider the demographic background of your audience as well as their current experience with your issue. You should choose an audience who will possibly be persuaded by your argument, not an audience that is so entrenched in their own ideologies that they are beyond reaching. Likewise, you should choose an audience that needs to be persuaded—there's no point in targeting an audience that already agrees with you. Explore why you've chosen this audience. As appropriate, consider the following:

- Age
- Gender
- Ethnicity
- Level of education
- Disability status
- Sexual orientation
- Class
- Upbringing
- Place of living
- Place of work

3. What does your audience already know about your critical situation? What are their past experiences with the issue? How have they learned to look at the issue? What are their commitments in the critical situation?

4. What background information will you need to include so that your audience can best follow your lines of argument?

5. Context: What is the context in which your argument takes place? When considering context, there are two levels to address:

- First, what is the social/political/cultural context in which your critical situation exists? For instance, if you are writing about the need for greater security at schools, you should take into account recent incidents at schools as well as the

current debates regarding school safety. Take into account both the big picture and the local details.

- Second, when and where would be best to present your argument to your audience? Why? Be very specific and keep kairos and rhetorical timeliness in mind. If you are planning to deliver a speech encouraging college-aged women to perform self-breast exams, you would want to consider details like the time of the year (perhaps during Breast Cancer Awareness Month) as well as the physical location (perhaps the student union). Likewise, if you were publishing a magazine article, you would want to be specific about when the article would be published as well as the specific magazine it would be published in.

6. Rhetorical Strategies: Knowing what you do about the audience, context, and purpose, which rhetorical appeals (ethos, pathos, logos) and rhetorical strategies (figurative language, tropes, schemes, etc.) would be most effective for your argument? Why? What are some specific ways you can use those appeals? Be detailed and specific.

7. Medium: What medium would be best suited to your audience, context, and purpose? Why? What are the characteristics/conventions of that medium? Name the specific expectations for your medium (e.g. a business letter has a return address, date line, salutation, etc.). Be specific with your consideration of media: if you are writing a magazine article, the formatting conventions will likely be different in *Seventeen* versus *Time*.

8. Arrangement: Which style of arrangement would be most effective for your audience, context, and purpose? Why? Be thoughtful, detailed, and specific. Consider the following:

- Visuals: For instance, perhaps you may choose to include bar graphs as a strategy of logos or pictures of children to engage pathos.
- Fonts: What are the best font choices for your text? Why? Keep in mind both the conventions of the medium (for instance, using a san-serif font in a digital environment and a serifed font in a print environment) and well as the pathos created by the font.
- Graphics: What design features would you include and why?
- Colors: Individual colors as well as color combinations can have a specific rhetorical effect on an audience. Which specific color choices would be most appropriate for your text? What effect are you hoping those colors have on the target audience?
- Page layout: Consider your choices for columns, headings, white space, etc.
- Sounds: If your genre has a sound component, discuss your choices for sound effects, narration, music, etc.

9. Style: What type of communicative style would be most appropriate for your target audience (e.g., technical, business, conversational, etc.)? Why? What are the traits of this communication style in terms of language, paragraph length, formality, etc.?

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