

**Divergent Landscapes: Exploring Authenticity, Compassion, and Ecowellness through
Neuroqueer Therapeutics, Lived Experience, and Self-Acceptance**

Matthew P. Larson

Transpersonal Wilderness Therapy, Naropa University

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Author Note

This paper represents the author's reflections on neuroqueer theory and neurodivergent praxis within healing contexts, contemplative community, academia, corporate politics, and society at large. Slides for presentation of this material are publicly available:

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nihil de nobis sine nobis

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Welcome to Divergent Landscapes. I'll be your tour guide as we move together through terrain that is likely to be unfamiliar. Even if you've heard much of this terminology before, you may not have heard these concepts explained as they will be here. This may be attributed to the efforts of massively funded hate campaigns spreading falsehoods, assumptions, and unreasonable biases while striving for complete erasure of populations with whom I have a very close affinity (McGuire, 2016; Yergeau, 2018). Despite our geographic distance from each other, or the range of social environments we each call home, these truths have resonated through marginalized and disabled populations worldwide—across regional, cultural, socioeconomic, and racial divides.

For anyone feeling resourced enough to engage in a deeper dive, I welcome you into community. You are invited to take a few moments before we continue to acknowledge ways you were trained to reject atypical experience, to fear anything or anyone perceived as strange, to demand “normal behavior” in pursuit of efficiency, extractable value, and control over your local environment. In this brave space you are asked to suspend disbelief in the unfamiliar, move toward discomfort, examine these feelings, and then join in celebration of the wondrous and myriad offerings of presence shining through various facets of natural human diversity.

Our walk along this path together will feature a vast array of excellent prior work, and it will do so by stopping briefly at each of several points of interest. Before we complete this tour of frequently misunderstood, neglected, and dangerously navigated wilderness landscapes let us train our collective focus on diverse ecologies, scientific paradigms, neurominority research, extractive abandonment, emancipatory efforts, therapeutic nuance, and lived experience.

Diverse Ecologies

Practices based upon wisdom inherent to Relational Life Therapy (Real, 2022) and Neurodivergence-Informed Therapy (Chapman & Botha, 2022) focus on the edges between people. That is to say, they do not pathologize individual behaviors inasmuch as they begin challenging the systems giving rise to uncomfortable interactions within our relationships. Compassionate clinical practices, in these frameworks, are viewed through a lens deeply attuned to the many adverse impacts of extrinsic motivators and long-term dependence on identity management (Kohn, 1993; Sasson et al., 2017; Raymaker et al., 2020; Pearson & Rose, 2023), internalized exposure to chronic trauma, ableism, and racism (Schwartz, 2000; Yergeau, 2018; Jones et al., 2020; Douglas & Sedgewick, 2023), as well as the need for pride in disabled and divergent identities as a path to healing (Yergeau, 2015; McGuire, 2016; Stevenson & Mowad, 2019; Kölves et al., 2021).

Neurodiversity is a word I learned on my own, after decades of struggle in search of a place where I fit expectations and found my presence supported without encountering calls to give up authenticity or succumb to thoughtless demands for compliance. For decades I held a desperate hope of locating a thoroughly inaccessible context, one where I might spend more of my time and energy focused on forward thinking work than on the demands of surviving oppressive forces (McGuire, 2016; Pearson & Rose, 2021; Chapman, 2023). I was rapidly backsliding into another *autistic burnout* before finding anyone who confirmed that I matched intensely biased diagnostic criteria (Raymaker et al., 2020; Bottema-Beutel et al., 2020).

“It can be easy for the reader to distance themselves from the nebulous group of 'autistic people' while reading academic literature, however these issues impact our lives personally and

we want you to remain mindful that when we (and you for that matter) are talking about autistic people, that includes us” (Pearson & Rose, 2023). I was forced to pay out of pocket for access to diagnostic privilege, mistakenly believing it might finally unlock gates to some yet to materialize help from professionals. Such was the typically unacknowledged cost of fulfilling increasingly unreasonable demands on my labor and skill without any hint of accommodation for the multiply disabled and multiply marginalized ways that many autistic people with frequently co-occurring impairments and various intersecting identities experience the world (Bascom et al., 2012; Yergeau, 2018; Stevenson & Mowad, 2019; Jones et al., 2020; Chapman, 2023).

Scientific Paradigms

In offering *neuroqueer theory*, Walker (2021) builds on a concept the philosopher and historian Thomas Kuhn developed to make sense of how sciences developed historically. Kuhn (2012) described a paradigm as a set of assumptions and core beliefs that a given scientific community shares in order to ground their research within a given historical period. Walker further describes the transition from a status quo known as the *pathology paradigm* into a post-normal paradigm which supports the diversity required for societal and ecological balance in working toward an embrace of *neurocosmopolitan* futures, where oddity and unusual presentations in human cognition, sensory perception, and observable behavior are as readily welcomed as a cosmopolitan world traveler might welcome variety in cuisine. A *neurodiversity paradigm*, as defined by scholars of critical autism studies and critical neurodiversity studies, supports increasing demand for improved social support of *neurominorities* rather than continued calls rooted in eugenics which seek “cures” or elimination of these weird potentials through medicalized and parasitic relationships (Pearson & Rose, 2023).

Fallout from these divisions and the use of *power-over*, as expressed through funding aggressively negative awareness campaigns focused on divergent embodiment (McGuire, 2016), has given rise to the need for a counter-movement from autistic self-advocates (ASAN, 2022).

As Walker boldly wrote in a chapter entitled Guiding Principles for a Course on Autism:

The present state of autism related discourse, theory, and praxis in the academic and professional spheres is deplorable. The discourse and theory reflect a level of ignorance and bigotry that would be regarded as scandalous in most academic circles today if it involved any other historically oppressed group.

(2021, pp. 144-156)

For this capstone presentation I have gathered data in a different way than previous classes, or my peers. “Autoethnography, which utilizes the lived experience of the researcher as a foundation for cultural insight, is a methodology particularly well-suited to [the *neurodiversity paradigm*’s] foregrounding of traditionally marginalized voices” (Walker, 2019, pp. iv-v). As this presentation will demonstrate, it is precisely this lack of cultural insight that has infected the roots of broken and frequently abusive educational and professional praxis with mechanization, medicalization, and subsequent domination over embodied difference continuously centered as defining features within supposed cultures of care which do little more than collect profits from industrial application of behaviorist and eugenic practices lacking any legitimate evidence base.

CAS, [Critical Autism Studies], draws upon Critical Disability Studies and complements its critique of the nature of disability by exploring the manufacture of autism (O’Dell et al., 2016). [...] The varying traditions that have influenced critical theory and its applications within wider critical disability studies, such as Marxism, Feminism, Postmodernism, and Critical Realism, can also be found amongst autistic scholarship and activism.

(Woods et al., 2018)

Research Findings

The richest 1 percent of citizens have accumulated approximately 20 times the wealth of the poorest 50 percent since 1995 (Ahmed et al., 2022). The 2007 mental illness disability rate for the United States included 1 in every 76 people, double the rate in 1987, six times the rate in 1965 (Whitaker, 2010). Stress accounted for 37 percent of all work-related absence, and 45 percent of all working days lost to ill-health, during 2015 and 2016 (Ferguson, 2017).

In populations diagnosed with serious psychiatric disorders, 40 percent are held in police custody during their lifetimes. In recent years those diagnosed, especially Black people, are among the most likely to be arrested or harassed by the police, or to die in police custody (Parsons, 2018). Between 1992 and 2013 the medication of ADHD in children under 16 increased between three- and four-fold (Beau-Lejdstrom et al., 2016). Autism diagnosis in the UK increased nationwide by 787% from 1998 to 2018 (Russell et al., 2021).

“Autistic people are more likely to have co-occurring mental health conditions compared to the general population, and mental health interventions have been identified as a top research priority by autistic people and the wider autism community” (Timmerman et al., 2024).

Australian researchers found 37% of autistic people, spanning ages from childhood through old age, with a co-occurring depression diagnosis. This was linked directly to reduced quality of life, loneliness, and suicide risk (Richdale et al., 2023). Denmark, often cited among the happiest countries in the world, has an autistic population that was found to be 3 times more likely to die by suicide than members of the general population (Kölves et al., 2021).

Intersecting minority stressors only serve to compound this isolating experience, and the weight of these burdens is typically only borne for the comfort of those already wielding more

privilege (Jones et al., 2020). The result of such othering is frequent cycles through exclusion (Sasson et al., 2017; DeBrabander et al., 2019; Douglas & Sedgewick, 2023), autistic burnout (Bascom, 2012; Yergeau, 2018; Raymaker et al., 2020), and chronic physical health conditions across all organ systems (Ward et al., 2023). Richdale et al. (2023) explore the impact of sleep quality, fatigue, and social well-being on depressive symptomatology, and are joined by many others in sharing reports of suicidality, even among school children, at rates many times beyond those found among allistic peers (Kölves et al., 2021; Umagami, 2023).

Perhaps most revealing in consideration of these collected impacts, “Autistic people cannot meaningfully express themselves whilst feeling that it is safe to do so” (Pearson & Rose, 2023, p. 45). The worst of what humans create tumbles down the social location ladder, where autistic and disabled people may be found inhabiting the lowest rungs (Yergeau, 2018; Stevenson & Mowad, 2019; Chapman, 2023). Those compliant with normality tend to report failures to notice autistic distress before categorizing reactions as overblown in comparison to perceived impacts (Bascom et al., 2012), thoughtlessly perpetuating harm through the oblivion of privilege (Real, 2022). Through these practices, compounding suffering in autistic lives is wrought in daily epistemic, iatrogenic, and racial injustices (McGuire, 2016; Green & Shaughnessy, 2023).

Extractive Abandonment

Autistic culture is modeled after numerous counter-cultural movements. Queer and Deaf cultures have tended to dominate these comparisons (Schwarz, 2004). “Autistics, queers, and the deaf have been frequently subject to behavioral methodologies with similar or shared geneses. [...] Applied behavior analysis, auditory-verbal therapy, and reparative therapies often share as their goal the performance of normalcy by means of behavioral overwriting ... training subjects

to behave as [...] neurotypical, hearing, cisgender, or straight” (Yergeau, 2018, p. 209). Even without direct exposure to the ABA industrial complex, my life is full of experiences where operant conditioning, manipulation, and behavioral overwriting were present.

I can also speak directly to a lack of neurodiversity initiatives among the many tech companies where I engaged in interviewing for roles while approaching the end of a technology career spanning more than 20 years. Over a six-month period (often with multiple daily interviews, though sometimes only weekly frequency), not a single contact revealed support for different ways of perceiving the world. I was asked to explain the entirely unfamiliar definition of neurodiversity by almost everyone involved. So, while my sometimes unusual skills, keen observations, and depth in pattern matching aligned with business needs, not once during that entire job search was I met with any consideration of how supporting one with those valuable skills might manifest. Absent entirely was acknowledgment of the multitude of co-occurring conditions which come along with divergent embodiments (Ward et al., 2023), frequently resulting in disability of would-be work horses for shareholder profit (Sasson et al., 2017).

We cannot begin to level the playing field, and honor the differences inherent to neurodivergence (skilled or otherwise), until neurodivergent voices are consistently centered in research, outreach, and intervention design in medical, psychotherapeutic, and social praxis. As Walker reiterated, we’ll keep on building the master’s house unless we throw away the master’s tools (Bascom, 2012). One cannot broadly hold neurodivergence as disordered mental health and simultaneously embrace the work of neurodivergent thought leaders; these are opposing paradigms. “Embracing the concept of neurodiversity would bring the study of mental health disorders in line with movements that have already taken place over the last 50 years around

biodiversity and cultural diversity” (Armstrong, 2015). One notable blocker to prior autistic inclusion is lacking recognition of autistic (sub)cultures (Jones et al., 2020; ASAN, 2022).

The building tools were part of a concept famously delivered by Audre Lorde in a speech to a mostly white and affluent audience at a 1979 international feminist conference (Bascom, 2012). Alice Walker, credited with coining the term *womanist* in a 1979 short story, further developed these ideas when publishing *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983), a collection of smaller works written between 1966 and 1982. Continuing under the guidance of Black leaders in this womanist tradition, which eschews the racism and exclusion of males inherent to early feminist considerations, we see modern offerings from Sonya Renee Taylor (2020, 2021) and Tricia Hersey (2022, 2024) which seek to promote the benefits of practicing radical self-love and rest more broadly. These are resistance movements looking to compassionately disrupt prevailing paradigms through non-violent means, and the transferrable lessons are priceless.

Emancipatory Efforts

Given the social isolation often forced upon autistic and other neurodivergent people via unreasonable demands for compliance with dominant social narratives, self-advocacy and auto-bootstrapped communities must be materially supported in order for these practices to flourish. Assumptions regarding access, or capacity for leaning on social networks to meet support needs, quickly becomes framed as a cruel joke among populations already facing a marked lack of access to diagnostics, support, therapy, medicine, housing, education, and employment as disabled citizens—especially where racism or transphobia come into play (Crowe, 2023). Not only do disability provisions tend to fail at providing support in ways that avoid pathologizing non-normative experience, regardless of impairment, those dependent on systems of care are the

most likely to be suffering the ills inherent to other examples of intersecting marginalized experiences and identities.

The Empire of Normality, and in turn the pathology paradigm, emerged in the context of capitalist logics, but have now become pervasive and partially distinct systems of domination in their own rights. [...] at this historical moment, the collective building of a mass anti-capitalist politics of neurodiversity will be necessary for not just neurodivergent liberation but also for our broader efforts towards collective liberation.

(Chapman, 2023, pp. 164-165)

We need your help. Without extending trust and compassionate actions in support of people reporting non-normative experience, one is likely to be abusing the very same trust so often demanded up front in exchange for establishing or maintaining accommodated access (e.g. reactive repair vs. prior planning for inclusive environments). Consider this your personal invitation to neuroqueer every context you inhabit until radical acceptance of differences in capacity, capability, communication, sensation, perception, and impairment becomes a common and natural experience.

Therapeutic Nuance

There are deeply entrenched views adopted by societies around the globe regarding neurodivergence as pathology. Despite that widespread negative framing, autistic people have been shown to register, just as well as allistic people, behavior that sets autistic traits apart from those specific to allistic behavior, “but unlike their [allistic] counterparts, these trait judgments are not perceived as an impediment to subsequent social interaction and are relatively consistent regardless of diagnostic disclosure” (DeBrabander et al, 2019). Non-human agents also play important roles in many autistic lives, where exploring anthropomorphic relationships has been

shown to help develop new human relationships spanning the gaps between neurotypes (White & Remington, 2018; Negri, White, & Remington, 2019; Milton, 2012).

In order to provide space for autistic people to live authentically, we need to consider what can be done beyond the responsibility of the individual. As we have acknowledged, autistic people (and marginalised people more broadly) have limited power to shape the narrative, and thus to lead to social and cultural changes needed to safely foster authenticity.

(Pearson & Rose, 2023, p. 205)

Recently, allistics were found to negatively respond to atypical prosody, valence, modulation, and control in autistic voices, though less so in autistic females (Gibson, Schmidt-Kassow, & Paulmann, 2023). One study of high school students concluded that neurotypically presenting students need to be more accepting, affirming, and empathetic (Frost, Bailey, & Ingersoll, 2019). Another highlighted the need to reduce discrimination and stigma related to autism and disability as a way to reduce chronic exhaustion, loss of skills, and reduced stimulus tolerance in addition to negative impacts on health, capacity for independent living, quality of life, and suicidality (Raymaker et al, 2020). Meta-analysis confirmed across multiple studies that perceived oddity in non-verbal aspects of communication (e.g., prosody, facial expression, and body posture) from autistic people was met with reduced allistic willingness to engage in relationship (Sasson et al, 2017). These thin-slice judgments of exclusion did not change with education or increased exposure, however it is possible that study of the community building exercises presented by Menakem (2017) among these populations could confirm much-needed potentials for resolving thin-slice exclusion in re-test scenarios.

In a biomedical or mechanistic worldview, *normal* is implicitly privileged as a superior and desired state. As such, “the pathologization of neurominorities can be recognized as simply another form of systemic oppression which functions similarly to the oppression of other types of minority groups” (Walker & Raymaker, 2020). We, as healers in humanistic traditions, are urged to hold all people we encounter as complex and natural beings with agency and value, evolving free from the maladaptive, short-sighted, and frequently inhumane pursuit of homogeneity.

Taking this idea even further:

The pathology paradigm is nothing more than institutionalized bigotry masquerading as science. [...] When we hear someone refer to autism as a 'disorder' or 'condition,' it should instantly set off the same sort of alarm bells in our minds as hearing someone refer to homosexuality as a 'disorder' or refer to a member of some specific ethnic group as 'inferior'.

(Walker, 2021, pp. 129-131)

Wellness is defined by the World Health Organization as “a state of complete physical, emotional, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (Haller, Kennedy, & Capra, 2019). It is also true that “Autism is a culture unto itself, a culture that is not only socially created as a disability but is a countersocial way of being, communing, and communicating,” which is every bit as valid and varied as neurotypically conforming cultures (Yergeau, 2018, p. 108). Registered horticultural therapists cite diverse health outcomes arriving through their work, including reduced symptoms of depression, anxiety, stress, and mood disturbances with enhanced quality of life, cognitive function, physical activity, and sense of community reported by clients (Haller, Kennedy, & Capra, 2019, p. 256). “When we work with nature outside us, we work with nature inside us” (Stuart-Smith, 2020, p. 35).

These are all topics common throughout the records of my work with an autistic and queer clientele, as well as my own personal work. Access to diagnosis is a privilege, and as such self-identification as autistic is generally accepted among neurodivergent academics and social networks (McDonald, 2020). What I propose to bring into the clinical mental health counseling field is a profound cultural humility, developed through lived experience of marginalization and privilege at varying intersections. I am granted body privilege, and also embody the epistemic privilege inherent to surviving oppressive environments long enough to learn the language and behaviors preferred by these systems. My hope is that this wisdom may embolden future self-advocates in continuing the work of building sustainable, mutually nourishing futures.

Lived Experience

Throughout my life I have wrestled with language. A precocious reader and autodidact, I have an enduring and ravenous appetite for the works of engaging authors. My preferred love languages include silence and the *infodump*, prototypically autistic modes of communication. In my youth I lined up my toys, loved watching trains, and spent blissful hours utterly entranced in process with Lego or building model aircraft. With my father's help, I started the first chapter of Young Astronauts in our area. The next year my sixth grade class watched the live broadcast of the shuttle explosion together. Even at this tender age I studied carefully as peers and teachers morphed into whatever was forged in our collective trauma, while integrating these new layers into a prior and continuing complex trauma history. My introspection deepened dramatically.

*I am trying to check my habits of seeing, to counter them for the sake of
greater freshness. I am trying to be unfamiliar with what I'm doing.*

—John Cage (1961, p. 106)

There, as in much of my experience since, I was an observer, outside looking in and exhausted by playground politics. Easily overlooked failures to attend to the comfort of others, especially from within the maelstrom that is an autistic sensorium (Nerenberg, 2021), have often meant wholesale exclusion or worse. Frequently abused, and frequently silenced via collective bypassing while getting labeled as resentful, controlling, or aggressive, I am ever alert to even the most subtle changes in my self and my environment. This was an early and existentially developed skill set that allowed for ready adoption of contemplative practice, reinforced by self-taught skills in mindful ways of being and moving through the world. It was the labor of stigma and identity management required of members in a *Lost Generation* (McDonald, 2020).

I attribute this invaluable tool chain, and my lifelong meditation practice, to various sparks of creation, divinity, the unifying beyond. The intensity of pressure to excel athletically that I felt throughout my youth, and my own unrecognized dyspraxia, meant that I leaned into grind culture before it became our normative baseline. When I had to work out cognitive problems I practiced, and practiced, and practiced soccer technique in the back yard. I practiced, and practiced, and practiced how to social in ways that would allow me to go unseen, because that seemed preferable to absorbing thrown shoulders and other hazing while passing between classes. The kinetic stress would move the logical load; the team would earn another trophy.

There was both/and baked into everything in a loving household with no budget for anything beyond basic needs. Accepting perceived lack compared to peers, and figuring out my own access; feeling dirty pain, and never letting it show; desperately searching for mentorship, and insurmountable blockers preventing it.... My parents would often deny resource requests, and they were always in attendance for community access we could afford: soccer games, school

plays and concerts, fund raising work. Every decision was tempered by consideration of group needs before individuals. When we felt we had nothing to hold, we had someone to hold us.

That disappeared the moment I embraced adulting, and set to securing employment with a relatively useless college degree. An era holding dozens of jobs over decades ended in negligible savings to show for a quarter century of dedication to roles where I never really fit in, and excelled nonetheless. People I mentored after they arrived with the total experience of one meager training boot camp were promoted over me. Team members moving to new projects after a milestone achievement earned twice the salary of the one who consistently solved their debugging conundrums. The full-time employees on the team got raises after I quickly solved problems in solitude which they had repeatedly failed to solution collectively, and lunch invites for the contractors would dry up again. Once, a reporting manager (that I had interviewed and recommended for hire) leveraged my work for promotion to a director role. A short time after my guidance was withdrawn and his performance came under scrutiny, he told me to immediately solve all the teamwork issues I had brought in for help, or face termination.

The consistent breaking point in my many ruptured relationships is the moment I hold a self-care boundary. The first time I seek counsel in authentic presentation. The first time I seek clarification in structure or definition. The moment I refuse use of an inaccessible “upgrade” in tooling or process. The moment I say 80 hours per week is too much. Quite simply put, the moment I unmask I lose out. None of these working groups ever saw me in shutdown or meltdown states, which demonstrates how they acted on thin-slice judgments and little else.

My options, in most of the scenarios described here, were quite limited (Raymaker et al., 2020; ASAN, 2022; Douglas & Sedgewick, 2023). I attribute any capacity I had to move in

equanimity to a dedicated mindfulness practice, tireless devotion to learning, attunement to ancestral guidance, and the luck of body privilege. Later in my career, before catching the ire of an employer, I would often assemble meetings with the malcontents on my team and coach them through collective action in asserting their needs. Truth tellers were not welcome by executives during a career based on holding extreme sensory overload while outperforming senior team members and leading peers to better futures. I would often find myself able to maintain expected behaviors only long enough to get on my bike for the ride home, allowing myself verbal explosions within the cover of traffic noise as I pushed my body to the limit by maintaining pace with rush hour traffic over a bridge and away from downtown.

“There seems to be a lack of understanding that giving to others, being of service, is something that increases our well-being, regardless of what someone does for us” (Canty, 2022, p. 147). This spirit of service has roots in my early experience of community spaces. The contemplation of group needs before setting an intention and moving into action was an ever-present lesson. So, years later, each time that I was admonished to think of others, I knew that my deepest truths were being ignored. Each time I found myself outside of groups who spoke words of welcome without practicing the art of actually welcoming difference, I knew the search for my people must continue. My home place was calling. I entered the liminal....

Transformation begins, not with action, but with imagination and vision; we humans tend to build what we see. “[Transpersonal] experiences cannot be explained or comprehended by the rational, thinking mind; rather, they are perceived by the domains of our sensory awareness, our feelings, our dream world, and the unconscious” (Canty, 2022, p. 152). This embodied wisdom is telling us that unless we slow down consistently, and make plenty of space for contemplation

of various possible futures, we will almost certainly continue to reify the same damaging theories that currently engender disability in praxis.

We also need to allow enough room for integration. I'm not merely speaking to setting aside time; reliable access to quiet solitude is quite rare in my recent history, and a frequent cause for distress resounding in autistic community discourse. Integration is an unpredictable and ongoing process, especially for anyone enduring minority stress and isolation, as traumatic retentions, developmental delays, and attachment styles come into play any time one reaches out for contact. One very important key to right relationship with neurodivergent populations is the utilization of theory and praxis developed directly by neurodivergent professionals.

Note the call for clinical humility and centering of marginalized perspectives in *Neurodivergence-Informed Therapy*:

- re-conceptualization of dysfunction as relational rather than individual, supplanting pathology with neurodivergent perspectives
- emphasis on acceptance of neurodivergence, disability community, pride, and culture to emancipation from neuronormativity
- need for a relational epistemic humility regarding different experiences of neurodivergence and disablement

(Chapman & Botha, 2022)

Contrast this with phenomena that CAS scholars have categorized as *neurodiversity lite*:

For example, 'neurodiversity lite' could involve performatively speaking about celebrating neuro-cognitive differences while simultaneously promoting masking/camouflaging and reinforcing neurotypical social norms, and/or stereotyping neurodivergent people as having marketable 'super powers' that can be exploited to increase productivity.

(Dwyer et al., 2024)

Conclusions

As it has evolved, neurodiversity theory has helped to provide more unified approaches to activism which focus on collective liberation. Centering disabled people as primary experts regarding their own experience sets up a bold challenge to the prior assumptions of authority in psychiatry, psychology, and psychotherapy, among many other clinical professions (Chapman, 2023, p. 140). Acknowledging, similar to the way the Disability Justice Movement in the United States formed their position, that rights-based approaches tend to fall short of justice in varying and compounding impacts with the addition of each intersecting marginalization, neurodivergent activists are nonetheless demanding rights. In pursuit of this aim they neuroqueer the spaces they inhabit, embracing weird potentials by utilizing their neurodivergent presence, behavior, and customs as active and direct forms of resistance (Yergeau, 2018; Walker, 2021).

*If we had any sense in our heads, wouldn't we know
the truth instead of going around looking for it?*

—John Cage (1961, p. 43)

These are not new ideas. The Socialist Patients Collective, active in 1970s West Germany, produced a manifesto entitled *Turn Illness into a Weapon for Agitation* in which they called for the use of illness as leverage in demanding resources for the fight against capitalist domination (Huber et al., 1993). Their stated aim was to break the associations between health, normality, and productivity (Chapman, 2023, p. 146). The Neurodivergent Marxism described by Chapman blends all of these considerations, individual and collective, present and historical, in a call to divest from destructive capitalist, eugenic, and racist pursuits of normality.

My own neuroqueer pursuits, my own embrace of weird potentials, has been happening longer than I have known about these conceptual spaces. It began for me while seeking to

reclaim a label that has frequently been cruelly cast upon me in a prelude to exclusion. Since its recent inception, I have been celebrating Weird Pride Day each March 4th. That, and quite a lot of echolalic utterance and scripting, embodied listening throughout the sensorium, and downtime for integrating a high volume reading practice, were the ways I found access to intentional flow states of incredible depth and intensity.

Releasing introjects of shame and self-hatred, while laborious and wearisome work, opened access to experimentation and methodical study of my sensory diet. This provided a life-altering turnaround from floundering while failing at following all the best (ill-fit) advice that keeps arriving unsolicited, somehow blocking access to deeper explorations. Finding out I was built in an uncommon way allowed me new freedom in claiming restorative blocks on my calendars, focusing on frequently co-occurring medical conditions as possible ways to address chronic inflammation, pain, and tinnitus, and redefining how accessible social spaces are constructed to meet dynamic and actively fluctuating sets of competing needs.

Finding community who write heart-wrenching tales of bigoted othering which could very easily have spilled from my own pen was the major turning point in my own embrace of neurodivergence and disability. Time and again my social media feeds reveal these worldwide connections, not to mention the latest research and policy struggles, and my therapeutic clients reap the rewards. The more closely I follow the work of critical autism scholars, the more access to healing I have assembled and provided. After sitting in witness to these research findings, we agree that resources cited challenge dominant narratives and authority structures, do we not...?

My clinical disclosures, revealing similar lived experience with clients, have made space for many unprompted expressions of gratitude for that specific aspect of our clinical relationship.

Most of these people show up in need of witness, in need of resources, and holding a great deal of embodied trauma. In group sessions, and with individual clients, where slowing down is an ever-present focus, a frequent refrain similar to this might be heard weekly, "Notice the sensations, images, urges, impulses, meanings, and emotions you experience. Don't try to override them and get past them as quickly as possible" (Menakem, 2017).

The rushing through life demanded by the Empire of Normality (Chapman, 2023), this race to nowhere which inspires bloody wars and destruction of entire ecosystems in the service of creating novel distractions for bored oligarchs, is perfectly countered by the wisdom in the Nap Ministry (Hersey, 2022), refusals to grind our bodies down (Taylor, 2020), and commitment to leaning into processing our clean pain in order to avoid passing along any more dirty pain from traumatic retentions and fragility (Menakem, 2017).

When we have gathered resources enough to move into action, we would do well to note the speed of the river current before we begin exhausting ourselves with needless paddling. This is a mindful approach. Noticing the heat of the afternoon arriving with a felt sense of lethargy, we let the ends of our lips curve slightly into a knowing smile; our bodies are not overheating, and the current is moving us along. This is a mindful approach. Allowing our sensory gates to open to this experience, accepting only that which is wholesome and fulfilling, we deeply engage in observation of the river bank creeping along, we locate a suitable landing and take out. This is a mindful approach....

Beyond mindful experiencing of natural spaces, allowing ourselves unrestricted release into fascination with natural relations supports *ecowellness* (Roszak, Gomes, & Kanner, 1995; Plotkin, 2003; Plotkin, 2008; Kahn, & Hasbach, 2012; Haller, Kennedy, & Capra, 2019).

Missing from many practices, developing relationship with a home space invites added benefits in terms of access to reciprocal flows through stewarding plants, providing compost, water, harvesting, and shelter as needed throughout yearly cycles of seasonal bounty and decay. Every aspect of these practices is especially well suited to the needs of a wide variety of postmodern populations, especially so in neurodivergent people and anyone managing complex trauma.

None of this, from access to open space and back country adventure, to membership in this program of study, to surviving any of it as a trans, neurodivergent, disabled, or otherwise marginalized person.... None of it is a simple matter of choice for anyone but the most privileged, who already rest easy in their lack of consideration regarding most of the problems inherent to modern society. People who barely manage to move out of survival mode on a regular basis do not often report access to much of what cis/het/white/neuro-normative society takes for granted. This imbalance is the obvious focus for intervention, not individuals too often written off as exhibiting lazy, resistant, or drug seeking behaviors (Price, 2021).

We are long past the time that it became necessary to overcome our societal collusion in bypassing (Schwartz, 2000; Bottema-Beutel et al., 2020). If you don't think you've been doing any bypassing, the invitation for you is to get real about both the benefits and the costs of your access to privilege; get real about how much of your resources you actually share with people in need. If you have felt overwhelmed by how much weight there is to hold after dialing back on bypassing and engaging in shadow work, you're in good company—and you're also invited to keep contributing on a consistent basis—we don't get vacations from disability. If you are unable to set aside any time for this sort of contemplation, your invitation is simultaneously the

most simple to describe and the most difficult to achieve: locate and access relationships with compassionate people from the first group as soon as possible.

I'll finish with Stuart-Smith's words from *The Well-Gardened Mind*: "Trauma changes the inner landscapes in a way that is fundamentally displacing, and the physicality of gardening in this context is important—it is about getting dirt under your fingernails, planting yourself in the soil, rebuilding a sense of connection to place and to life in the process" (2020, p. 207). The way through complex trauma and exclusion leads us on arduous journeys, often inviting us into messy and painful process. The maturation that occurs when processing clean pain means we might then model this behavior and lead others away from perpetuating dirty pain and traumatic retentions (Menakem, 2017). Get rooted, then start noticing, and embracing, what you may have once perceived as difference with each brave step toward inclusive neurocosmopolitan futures.

Thank you all for your presence and attention today. I wish you wellness.

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Appendix A

Divergent Landscapes

In this appendix we turn our attention to the work of establishing practice with *Divergent Landscapes*. One's understanding of their relationship to personal interiors, as well as animism, biophilia, their place within nature, and social intersections will determine how well they may identify with this concept. As with any extant psychotherapeutic theory or praxis, interventions are not generally suitable for all populations. This is as much a function of the intention and design principles framing development of an instrument, and the clinician's social location, relationship to bias, and broaching skills, as it is a client's disposition, comfort with vulnerability, and ability to both identify and endure discomfort.

We begin building *Divergent Landscapes* by imagining ourselves alone, safe, and comfortable within the biggest physical expanse we are able to conceptualize. Any forms already within this space are welcome. We may also start within a void and actualize our landscape as we create its map, we might explore what is present before contemplating making changes. Also within this imagining are any number of biologically and neurologically diverse representations of relationships from our waking lives. Anything we perceive as outside of ourselves may also have one or more representations within our internal landscapes.

Just as we may understand ourselves to be in relationship with everything we encounter, we may also model those relationships within. We could go so far as to experiment with various ways of relating in imaginative play before deciding on one approach to embody, or perhaps set up clones for practicing variations on a theme in rapid succession. Passive fascination with a given aspect of introspected wilderness may also yield generative effects. In these imagined

wilderness areas it is perfectly reasonable for philosophical concepts to embody physical forms. Anything we struggle with may be objectified and examined from any angle, or in relationship.

Once we have oriented to this internal ecosystem we might begin to reflect on features of the landscapes we perceive. Paying careful attention to the labels and feelings that bubble into awareness, we may notice any number of sensations through somatic experience, traumatic replay, or other devices of memory. It is important to remain attentive to our self-care needs at such times, honoring anything that feels like too much with a retreat and return to the middle of our window of tolerance. If there is energy and curiosity present, if we feel resourced to handle the impact, we may choose to briefly examine each input before setting it aside. However you choose to map the space, it is entirely yours to define; one may want to consider building several different maps to meet with varying environmental demands on skills and resources, or the level of masking required via encounters with pathologization or bias (Pearson & Rose, 2021).

It may be that, even within our own introspected wilderness, we don't understand, or even see, all of what is present; we may entirely overlook, or bypass, wild expanses without skilled guidance. Similarly to the ways humans have been distanced from nature since industrialization, with separation often comes judgment and inevitable assignment of our experience to undesirable categories like neglected wilderness, dangerous territory, or even nature as enemy. "Trauma changes the inner landscapes in a way that is fundamentally displacing, and the physicality of gardening in this context is important—it is about getting dirt under your fingernails, planting yourself in the soil, rebuilding a sense of connection to place and to life in the process" (Stuart-Smith, 2020, p. 207).

In *Divergent Landscapes* we may choose instead to focus on nourishing relationships with our most private internal parts or the oppressive systems we encounter. We may choose to occupy ourselves in quiet conversation with a hummingbird, or leaping ravines symbolic of difficult exchanges; the point is to arrive in a place of complete control over how we react to any given stimulus, a place frequently denied to people marginalized as surplus class members.