

Musings of an Aspie: Blogging, Gender and Affect

AUTHOR BIO

Susannah French is a PhD candidate in the School of Sociology at the Australian National University researching the female experience of autism. Her thesis argues that there is under- or mis-diagnosis of females with autism, rendering them invisible to the autism support community. Susannah's thesis aims to explore how the social conditioning of females and conventional diagnostic practices contributes to the invisibility of autistic females. Through her research, she hopes to improve the understanding of clinicians and the public of the varied experiences according to gender that autistic individuals have.

Susannah French

ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to investigate how blogging creates opportunities for autistic women to resist against patriarchal medical epistemology that has long determined the profile for Autism Spectrum Disorder. *Musings of an Aspie*, which is written and managed by American autistic author Cynthia Kim, is one of many examples of how technology poses a way for autistic women to become legitimate and legible subjects by creating a kind of “digital” body that gives them access to a political sphere that is otherwise closed to them. While exploring two particular blogposts, this paper will take theories of affect into consideration. This paper draws upon a Spinozist conception of affect, one concerned not simply with emotion or structures of feeling, but with the capacity of bodies to relate and become. The paper's analysis turns to Spinoza's bodily ethics to think through bodily capacities as they are described by the autistic women in Kim's online community.

KEYWORDS

Blogging; Affect; Autism; Women; Technology

Introduction

Autism has long been determined by patriarchal medical epistemology. A result of this has been an obscuring of female autistic identities. This paper will discuss the various forms of resistance against patriarchal medical narratives of the female profile, using the blog *Musings of an Aspie: One Woman's Thoughts about Life on the Spectrum* as an exemplar. *Musings of an Aspie*, which is written and managed by American autistic author Cynthia Kim, reveals how technology poses a way for autistic women to become legitimate and legible subjects by creating a kind of “digital” body that gives them access to a political sphere that is otherwise closed to them.

Musings of an Aspie discusses Kim’s experiences as an autistic woman who was diagnosed at age 42. To help other women who have been diagnosed late in life, Kim discusses strategies and advice as well as anecdotes about growing up, motherhood, and marriage, and how exactly “being autistic” has shaped her own definition of womanhood. The blog has attracted a large following of autistic women.

While exploring how Kim’s online community of autistic women discuss their lived experiences, this paper will take theories of affect into consideration. This paper draws upon a Spinozist conception of affect, one concerned not simply with emotion or structures of feeling, but with the capacity of bodies to relate and become (Hickey-Moody). The paper’s analysis turns to Spinoza’s bodily ethics to think through bodily capacities as they are described by the autistic women in Kim’s online community. In discussing the bodily capacities in her blogposts Kim employs a non-deficit approach; however, she does not turn to the reductive “superhuman” approach to autism that is often described in populist texts on autism (see Tania Marshall’s *AspieGirl* series as an example of this). Instead, Kim prefers to describe mundane and everyday experiences of autistic women that are different to the experiences of autistic men and neurotypical (non-spectrum) women. Thus, Spinoza’s affect is a productive tool when studying the everyday lives of autistic women as it connects to the situational and emergent aspects of their experiences. Thinking along emergent lines by applying affect theory offers opportunities to move beyond dualistic understandings and medical constructions (Reddington).

This paper hopes to contribute to not only feminist disability studies but also to critical autism studies where it critiques the dominance of “neuro culture” and dominant constructions of personhood and what it means to be human. This paper will also attempt to unpick the dominant constructions of womanhood and what it means to be a woman, let alone an autistic one.

A brief definition of Autism

Autism is a lifelong developmental condition that affects how a person communicates with, and relates to, other people and the world around them. It is a spectrum condition, which means that while all people with autism share certain areas of difficulty, their condition will affect them in different

ways (Autism Asperger ACT). According to Autism Spectrum Australia, “The main areas of difficulty are in social communication, social interaction and restricted or repetitive behaviours and interests.”

Although it was first described in the 1940s, diagnoses on what is now known as the “autism spectrum” have risen dramatically since the 1990s (Silverman 326). This is at least partially the result of improved awareness among parents, paediatricians and educators, and of a broadening of the diagnostic category to include disorders like Asperger Syndrome (AS) and Pervasive Developmental Disorder-Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS) (Silverman 326). Since 2013, the Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-5 (DSM-5) has declared ASD a single diagnosis. This means that the AS and PDD-NOS *terms* were effectively eliminated (American Psychiatric Association). These changes have not been met without controversy in the autism community and definitions of the condition are still contentious to this day. As critical autism studies scholar Stuart Murray puts it, “With so little clinical consensus on autism, national and geocultural differences will only continue to provide revisions to our thinking about the condition” (1370). Thus, the varying social and cultural contexts of clinical researchers causes definitions of the condition to be constantly in flux and are updated frequently with new knowledges embraced, old knowledges discarded while old stigmas and misunderstandings persist.

Autism numbers according to Australian government surveys have increased exponentially over the past ten years and it is estimated one in 100 people has autism (almost 230,000 Australians). According to official statistics, autism affects almost four times as many boys than girls (Australian Bureau of Statistics Prevalence of Autism; Autism Spectrum Australia). However, these figures concerning gender are still debatable considering the increase in women receiving a diagnosis later in life (Gould & Ashton-Smith). These issues however will not be discussed comprehensively in this paper.

Feminist Disability Studies and Technologies

Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s 2005 article first published in *Signs* introduces Feminist Disability Studies as:

[an] academic cultural work with a sharp political edge and a vigorous critical punch. Feminist disability studies wants to unsettle tired stereotypes about people with disabilities. It seeks to challenge our dominant assumptions about living with a disability. It situates the disability experience in the context of rights and exclusions. *It aspires to retrieve dismissed voices and misrepresented experiences. It helps us understand the intricate relation between bodies and selves.* It illuminates the social processes of identity formation. It aims to denaturalize disability. In short, feminist disability studies reimagines disability. (Garland-Thomson 1557, emphasis mine)

The above passage is useful because it highlights exactly what I intend to do not only for this paper, but also for my broader scholarly work. Most particularly I take Garland-Thomson's position on how Feminist Disability Studies "aspires to retrieve dismissed voices and misrepresented experiences" quite literally. Unfortunately, mainstream feminism has often excluded many intersecting voices, despite the best efforts of disabled feminists on the web, in the academy, and in activist groups (Hamilton). To resist this trend and open up mainstream feminism to disability studies more generally, I examine how women online have used their agency and autonomy to make their voices heard and their ideas made available to the public mainstream, rather than within the academy or the medical institution. Although there appears to be – at least in my own reading – an emphasis on physical disability, feminist disability studies provides a useful framework for examining the knowledges that autistic women contribute online, especially when they have been overlooked by academic feminists.

Although the attention from academic feminists has been small, there has been a burgeoning interest in the female experience from scholars across many disciplines and international locations in recent years. There are more websites, blogs, handbooks and self-help manuals on women, scores of which are now being widely published and disseminated through obscure publishers such as Jessica Kingsley (Silverman 328). However, as autistic author Sarah Hendrickx puts it, "knowledge of the way life is experienced by women on the spectrum is relatively new and, as yet, poorly understood" (Hendrickx 18). As long as clinical research was solely in the hands of mainly masculine and neurotypical institutions, many of the lived experiences of autistic women were overlooked (Shelly). While many autism autobiographies are written by women, they are still not widely visible in the mass market.

This paper, however, will pay particularly close attention to the use of blogs and how autistic women have used them to develop interesting and innovative insights about their lived experiences. Some blogs have been used to not only change the picture of what the autistic female is, but blogging as a medium has also been used to resist against their invisibility in autism discourses. This invisibility was a mixture of the following consequences:

- Conventional practices of diagnosis, which favours the masculine profile;
- A culture-wide misunderstanding of what the "autism" label means, and;
- An essentialist understanding of gender that is perpetuated by professionals and which dismisses diverse presentations of female embodiment.

Because of these issues, I stress that the female experience of autism must be explored as a standalone topic. Autistic women have displayed multiple identities and their issues, particularly regarding the diagnostic process also intersect with those of class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and of course disability. Many autistic women have used technology as a means of revealing their experiences and expertise in creative and innovative ways that

would otherwise not be found in conventional medical research. Their embodied knowledges also provide important insights on gender that may not have been considered by academic feminists.

Musings of an Aspie and the Usefulness of Blogging

For this paper, I have chosen to explore *Musings of an Aspie* for two reasons. First, because the posts unpacked profound insights as Kim described in detail how her autistic symptoms work with or against her female body. Second, because of the high volume of autistic women who have chosen to engage with Kim's posts. While there are other blogs I could have explored, to do such an in-depth analysis of each blogger and their material would be impossible within the constraints of this paper.

Kim's blogposts are centred on her thoughts as an autistic woman who was only diagnosed at age 42 in 2013. She also discussed strategies and advice for other autistic women, anecdotes about growing up, motherhood and marriage and how being autistic has shaped her identity as a woman. The blog had attracted a huge audience of autistic women and she had published a book based on her popular blog posts entitled, *Shy, Nerdy and Socially Inappropriate* in 2014. Her blog and her book are rich with personal anecdotes and useful advice to an audience of adult women who are coming to terms with "being autistic." To be able to do justice to the stories and ideas, it is best to give adequate space to explore the complex and multifaceted embodiment of autistic women that is presented in Kim's blog.

Before we begin to discuss the medium's usefulness for autistic women, we must understand exactly how blogging is useful for generating new knowledges. A blog (short for weblog) is an online, public journal or diary: a place of expression, characterised by "frequently updated, reverse chronologically ordered posts on a common webpage" (Hookway 92). They are produced by single authors or collectively to provide information, as self-representation, to tell a story, to work toward a political goal, or to represent a culture, experience, or issue outside of mainstream media (Gauntlett and Horsley). Although writing is certainly an important part of a blog, Jill Walker Rettberg argues that a blog must be understood holistically as constituting writing as well as layout (including visuals), connections/links, and tempo.

Blogging about a condition also adds an extra layer, as Anthony McCosker argues:

Among other uses, blogs have been adopted to self-document the intimate and often intense experiences of living with serious illness, particularly cancer, charting their author's health and treatment often over many years, connecting with others and drawing attention and concern along the way. (131)

Kim's blog and other blogs like hers do not sit in the same boat as illness blogs. However, McCosker's analysis on illness blogs does provide useful

ideas of the interactivity and information exchange when users share the same condition. Particularly one with symptoms that makes it difficult to adapt to a world meant for neurotypical people. McCosker further argues that:

the value produced through the ongoing act of blogging can be described as: *personal*, in the form of identity management through a traumatic, disrupted life period; *network enabling* in generating online spaces for shared traumatic experience and a culture of self and networked help; and *social* in what is recouped in the forms of non-institutional management of serious illness (133).

These listed elements above also apply to Kim's blog, albeit in different ways. Personal, regarding the idea of identity management, is useful when we consider how those on the spectrum including Kim herself describe how they have needed to learn how to be autistic after being diagnosed. This idea will be discussed in further detail later in the paper. However, it is important to note that the autism condition is lifelong, and it would not have been traumatic nor disruptive in the same way receiving a diagnosis of terminal cancer would. Rather, their diagnosis is a discovery of a way of being that was not known or understood properly but is now an important part of one's life (Hendrickx; Simone). Furthermore, they can also learn exactly how the condition always has been an important part of their lives rather than the condition developing within their bodies overtime in the same way a terminal illness would. The point is that women with Asperger's have always lived with the condition; the difference is that they now have a name for it and can learn how to live with the condition to ensure the best quality of life. There are of course a variety of emotions that come with being diagnosed late in life, particularly anger, resentment or sadness for the blame and misdiagnoses that may have been laid upon them by themselves or by others (Simone). This is why having that support network becomes even more important; often, seeking people out in your immediate environment who understand your experiences may not be an option.

Autism blogs are also network enabling, meaning that users can exchange information and find commonalities as they recount their experiences in the posts and comments section. In their own ways, users are redefining a new sense of "normal" and can exchange advice on how to make their lives more bearable in a neurotypically dominant world. Finally, autism blogs are social because they are building relationships that help them understand a diverse range of experiences that are often not found in medical or academic sources. However, this fault-finding narrative need not apply to professionals as blogs could also be helpful to experts working in the world of autism. Allowing women to recount their experiences without the restraints of the medical institution could also be useful to practitioners who may want to learn more about the condition. This is especially relevant to professionals who wish to treat their autistic female patients not only more accurately but also more respectfully.

Because knowledge of the female experience of autism is not widely accessible in the public mainstream, women need to have a space to negotiate and understand *who* they are. Considering the emotional impacts that comes with being newly diagnosed late in life, having these online spaces becomes even more important. However, while online communication is often described as “liberating” and/or “emancipatory” for the disabled community, I acknowledge that there is considerable evidence of “disabling” environments and discourses being reproduced rather than challenged online. As Ellis, Goggin and Kent put it, “the progress of web accessibility – even in its most basic requirements – has been slow” (12). Goggin and Noonan have identified three main areas where blogs “can present accessibility problems for people with disability: establishment of a blogging account, maintaining a blog, and reading blogs” (163). For example, captcha can be a serious issue of you are vision impaired and poor interface design can also present more accessibility issues when trying to keep and maintain a blog (Goggin and Noonan). Those who have very little access to the Internet and can’t participate in these online cultures are also at a serious disadvantage (Ellis, Goggin and Kent). One also needs to have enough social capital to be able to understand and talk adequately with others in an online space.

Critiques of participatory cultures on the Internet should be acknowledged, but we cannot deny how transformative new technologies, particularly the Internet, have been for the disability community. Various discourses within the autistic community would not even exist were it not for the Internet. Rebecca Olive explains that, “The majority of non-commercial blogs are hosted on websites that are free to use, easy to understand, and which offer an easy interface that requires low technical competency” (3). Therefore, I argue that reading and commenting on a blog is more accessible and more cost-effective than a peer reviewed journal article or even books on autistic women that are circulated through obscure publishers (Silverman). For example, the comments section in the *Musings of an Aspie* posts reveals how the women engage with the information that Kim presents. They also discuss their own opinions and describe in detail their own experiences of a topic, e.g. menstruation, employment, parenting etc. knowing with confidence that their audience will understand where they are coming from. A very important feature of blogging that is also worth noting is that they are “archival in their capacity to store past posts and comments on the website” (Olive 3). Therefore, even long after a thread has “died”, the information is still accessible to users who could still benefit from the information. These could be users who have also been diagnosed later in life and would like more information about their condition from people who also have it. Alternatively, these could be users who have already read the posts long ago but may need a reminder of some positive representation about their condition. I must stress that Kim’s last post was made in January 2015 citing a decline in her language abilities. She noted that even writing once a week had been difficult for her. However, even though Kim has chosen to stop producing new material, it does not diminish the importance of her old material, which is still permanently archived for those who can still benefit from it.

At the Intersection of Autism and Gender

A thematic analysis (Webb & Wang) was used to explore various blog posts that discussed gender, the diagnostic process (i.e. from being newly diagnosed to acceptance and understanding of the condition), and more generally the female experience of autism. Selection of the blogposts was mostly intuitive and the process involved reading and re-reading Kim's blog posts that used key terms such as "gender", "diagnosis", "women" and "girls." Because I was drawing upon Spinoza's seminal question of what the body can do, I chose blogposts that also discussed bodies in detail, with particular interest in how they describe their autistic symptoms and how it influences the way they understand and interact with the world around them. Six blogposts were originally selected because of my specific interests in Kim's commentary on the female experience of autism and her relationship to her body. However, I quickly realised that because of the richness of a single blogpost, I had to settle on just: "At the Intersection of Autism and Gender, Part 1" and "Acceptance as a Wellbeing Practice." Even though Kim had many other relevant blogposts, these two posts provided very important and interesting discussions of the autistic female body that takes place outside of clinical expertise.

In her series of blogposts entitled, "At the Intersection of Autism and Gender," Kim describes in detail how she grew up dealing with her autistic symptoms without having a name for them. She discusses in detail the negative bodily reactions to feminine dress without knowing that she had sensory sensitivities to particular stimuli. By assuming the lack of comfort in clothing and her female embodiment, she drew the conclusion from an early age that she was "unfeminine" and wanted to be a boy. She describes here in these opening paragraphs:

At five, I wanted to be a boy. I don't know what I thought being a boy meant. Maybe I thought it meant playing outside in the summer, shirtless and barefoot. Maybe I thought it meant not wearing dresses.

Dresses were all scratchy lace trim and tight elastic sleeves. Stiff patent leather shoes pinched my sensitive feet. Perfume tickled my nose. Tights made my legs itch and had maddening seams at the toes.

Too young to understand sensory sensitivities, I followed my instincts. While other girls favored frilly clothes, I gravitated toward the soft comfort of cotton shirts and worn corduroys.

Somehow, comfort got mixed up with gender in my head. For decades, "dressing like a girl" meant being uncomfortable. And so began a lifelong tension between being female and being autistic. (At the Intersection of Autism and Gender – Part 1, Kim)

[1] This is *not* a term that I would personally use to describe autistic individuals.

These paragraphs are an example of Joyce Davidson's (2007) explanation that "many women experience a profound sense of distance and difference from both the male majority of ASD sufferers [1] and predominant stereotypes of femininity surrounding other, neuro-typical women" (660). Therefore, with online spaces being made accessible to autistic women, they can at last understand how they are not only different to autistic males but also to neurotypical (non-spectrum) women. Thus, they can take the necessary steps to relieve the tension between being female and being autistic and claim a different way of "being" for themselves.

What concerns many of these women and particularly Kim herself is the distinction between *being autistic* (organic self) vs *knowing you are autistic* (knowing and understanding your autistic self). Kim discusses often in her blog of the dynamic and complex process of living your life post-diagnosis. On finally knowing you are autistic, she writes in "At the Intersection of Autism and Gender, Part 1":

There are many things I've had to learn or relearn over the past year. Mostly I've had to learn how to be autistic. That sounds like an odd thing to say. After all, I've been autistic all my life. But being autistic and knowing that I'm autistic are two vastly different things.

Knowing that I'm autistic has helped me to reconcile so many confusing aspects of my life. It's as if I'm slowly reassembling the pieces of myself.

Regarding Kim's profound commentary of "being" and "reassembling", Ingunn Moser has used the notion of the "becoming body" in her account of disabled identities and technology. The notion of "becoming" in her work points towards "disabled" as an identity that can be (and often is) acquired later in life as has been the case with Kim and many like her. Moser writes in her article, *Disability and the promises of technology* that, "The starting point is that disabled is not something one is but something one becomes, and, further, that disability is enacted and ordered in situated and quite specific ways" (373). This again is relevant to the experiences of autistic women. Clinical studies reveal that for many women are not diagnosed until well into adulthood or not at all and the ratio between men to women is still officially 4:1. Therefore, autism is an identity that will not necessarily be acquired (if at all) until much later in life. Kim refers to how these late diagnoses affects representation of autistic women:

There are few role models for autistic women. There is no Rain Woman, no popular stereotype that comes to mind when you hear the phrase autistic woman. Perhaps that's for the better. Stereotypes carry with them the burden of proving them wrong.

Still, we face hurdles when it comes to public perceptions of autistic adults. Again and again in my blog's search terms I

come across people searching for an answer to questions that surprise me.

Can aspie women marry? Can women with Asperger's have children? Do aspies say "I love you"?

It seems we're a mystery.

I hope that when people find my blog, they see that the answers to all of those things are *yes*. I'm married. I have a child. I tell my husband and daughter that I love them.

Sadly, that wasn't always the case.

(At the Intersection of Autism and Gender – Part 1, Kim)

Kim reiterates why her blog is useful and attempts to problematise stereotypes of autistic adult women and their perceived lack of femininity. Because there is very little representation of the female experience, Kim had taken it upon herself to shine a light on the various experiences autistic women have and open avenues to challenge negative stereotypes of the spectrum. However, she also makes it clear that she had anxieties over the feminine cues such as hugging, socialising and nurturing in the past. The fact that these cues eluded her previously had compelled her to question her own humanity, not just her femininity. She explains:

I was a mother and wife for twenty-four years before I was diagnosed with Asperger's. Over and over during that time, I questioned not only my womanhood, but my humanity. I questioned why I didn't respond the way other women did to their children. I watched the other mothers tear up as the bus pulled away on the first day of kindergarten and felt guilty at my relief. *Finally, a few hours alone*, was all that was running through my head.

Looking back, I bet the other moms walked back to their newly quiet homes and felt a similar relief. The thing is, I never knew for sure because I didn't talk with any of them. Beyond a friendly good morning at the bus stop, I was at a loss for how adult women socialized. I hovered around the fringes of social groups, watching as other moms made dates for coffee or shopping. They seemed so at ease, as if they'd all gotten the Mom Handbook while my copy had been lost in the mail.

I probably should have been envious but I was too busy being intimidated. (At the Intersection of Autism and Gender – Part 1, Kim)

Users who had commented had brought forward their own stories of similar feelings when they had been in the situations described above. One of the

first things that users had commented was how they had struggled with clothes that triggered their sensory sensitivities but at the same time they were able to give advice on shopping for clothes with comfort in mind. Another important thing to consider that among users, there was a collective relief as they unpick the strangeness that is hugging and touching. Finally, they discuss their own anxieties to do with motherhood and their struggles to follow the motherhood script knowing that the intended audience will not judge them harshly. One user posted:

I feel so much like this blog is written especially for me! The thing that bothered me the most before I was diagnosed was the feeling I was somewhat lacking in “mommy-ness”. I am not a nurturer nor do I feel much like a mom even though I have three amazing children whom I love very much. This was the specific trait I zeroed in on when an article appeared in our newspaper in November 2012, about women with Asperger’s. Four months later I had my diagnosis at the age of 56. Ever since then I have been “learning how to be autistic” as you have written. It has been difficult at times, getting easier with CBT and reading your blog, which has been invaluable to me because our journeys are so similar... Many thanks!

These positive connections that are being established on an online forum created a powerful force. This idea will be discussed in further detail in the next section.

Spinoza and the Autistic Female Experience

While Spinoza did not focus his attention on issues of sex and gender, his philosophical system offers many resources for current feminist discussions. A close reading of Spinoza will reveal that he was a product of his time and published problematic ideas about women (Gullan-Whur). However, there has since been a long body of feminist engagement with Spinoza and a long wave of work on affect (see Ahmed and Probyn). Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd’s *Collective Imaginings* and Anna Hickey-Moody’s *Unimaginable Bodies* in particular have informed my reading of Spinoza. Gatens and Lloyd articulate “how an appreciation of Spinoza’s philosophy might form the basis of a constructive but critical engagement with contemporary concerns” (7). Anna Hickey-Moody’s work draws from Spinoza, Deleuze, and Guattari, and challenges the restrictive and hierarchical ways in which bodies and minds have been thought about. Through her work on the Restless Dance Ensemble, she delivers a critique of medical discourses in their reliance on terminologies based around impairment and lack.

I have chosen to look more directly at Spinoza’s theories of affect, most particularly the seminal question, “No one has yet determined what the body can do” (Spinoza Ethics III Prop. 2). Affect theorists turn to this question to explore the body’s capacity, and to define affect – a term still hotly contested in various fields. Spinoza’s concept of affect is, in brief, the variability of a

body's power to act across different encounters. Sad encounters diminish bodies' powers to act; joyful encounters, conversely, enhance this power to act. These concepts are useful to consider, as blogging enhances these autistic women's capacities to act when they have felt powerless trying to fit in constricting and contradictory ideas of both humanity and womanhood, which are incompatible with their autistic symptoms. The flexible and empowering nature of blogging allows them to challenge outdated knowledge systems perpetuated by patriarchal and very often ableist epistemologies. They thereby can challenge the role of the expert by generating more relevant knowledges on their own condition in their own words.

Feminist theorists, queer theorists, and critical disability theorists have turned to Spinoza's philosophies, raising pertinent epistemological and ontological issues and, in the process, have unsettled representational thought driven by medical and binary systems on individual lives (Reddington). For example, Amanda Cachia, a feminist disability studies scholar argues that:

we haven't even scratched the surface of knowing our bodies! Most of us know even less about the disabled body. It is important to think about what disability does rather than simply what it is. Such reframing breaks binary constructs as it is focused on a type of concretized being-in-the-world, on the truths of living inside a disabled body. (112-13)

Most importantly, Spinoza did not speak of bodies through dualisms. Instead, Spinoza envisioned a body through movement, connections and emergence: "the mind is united to the body because the body is the object of the mind" (Spinoza Ethics II Prop 21, cited in Reddington). For Spinoza, there is only one substance, and it is this intersecting of mind and body in Spinoza's theories that rejects the dominant mind producing a non-hierarchical entity when thinking about bodies. And as Sarah Reddington argues in her thesis, "An individual with ASD analysed through Spinoza's bodily ethics is not cast as a body with an inferior mind or a body lacking mental states but a plurality, continually changing and transforming" (Deleuze, cited in Reddington).

The idea of Kim's blog is to generate knowledge and exchange information between autistic women who choose to engage with the posts. At last, there are spaces to engage in discourses that were otherwise closed or simply unavailable to them. Through their activities online, they can make sense of their everyday experiences without having to live by neurotypical standards of living, which can be very constricting and unhelpful at best, and damaging at worst. Information is then circulated on how to understand your symptoms and how to better manage them. Spinoza describes that when those whose natures agree, in this case, the autistic women – and their encounters thus bring joyful affectations – are "joined to one another, they compose an individual twice as powerful as each one" (Spinoza IV Prop 18). Blogging allows these autistic women to be joined to one another. Their digital bodies begin to transform and adapt to one another, thus composing a more powerful force (Nishida).

Why Seek a Diagnosis at all? How Can a Diagnosis Help Us Understand what the Body Can Become?

It is quite clear that many of these women can “pass” as neurotypical. This means that they can speak verbally, live a productive life and often do not need assistance with everyday tasks such as eating, cleaning, showering, dressing etc. However, even though autism is a *lifelong* developmental condition, without a name for your symptoms such as executive dysfunction, stimming, meltdowns, sensory overload etc., it would be impossible to be able to manage them (Attwood). These terms are very specific and will not be in your vernacular until you are made aware of it. Many of the women on Kim’s online community express that they can “pass” as neurotypical quite well, however it comes at a cost to their energy levels. Therefore, the diagnosis to many women has come as a relief and in fact they understand that there are ways their symptoms can be managed (Simone). It would seem counter-intuitive to even be trying to approach medical authorities. Wouldn’t these women want to resist being enrolled in the medical system? Often the pathologisation of symptoms needs to happen particularly when one’s material circumstances does become unbearable. For some of the women on Kim’s blog who have been diagnosed late in life, these circumstances can include over-responsibility, lack of support, or relationship tension (Kim). Any one or a combination of these things are what ultimately pushes a woman’s limits later in life when they are there less likely to have energy to maintain their composure (Kim). Therefore, specific symptoms need to be identified and managed. The pathologisation of symptoms often goes hand in hand with material circumstances. If the material circumstances were not an issue, then having one’s symptoms pathologised probably would not need to happen. Unfortunately, this is not the world we live in and people do need a diagnosis if they are to have to receive appropriate support such as disability benefits, medication (if needed) and better targeted therapy for their autistic symptoms. Knowing your symptoms and what it does to your body also means that you can better look after yourself.

This goes back to seminal Spinozist question of “What can the body do”? To return to joyful and sad encounters, this understanding cannot happen if you are routinely disempowered and losing energy trying to fit into neurotypical standards. And as it was mentioned previously, trying to be a “good woman” by neurotypical standards is overloading.

The purpose of these blogs is to peel back the layers that mainstream culture would have us understand about autism and to get to the barebones of what autism actually is by consulting the experts themselves, the people who actually are autistic. The idea of “self-pathology” should not be totally damned, especially when we have barely begun to scratch the surface of what autism actually is.

In her final blogpost, “Acceptance as a Well Being Practice”, Kim stressed exactly why it was important for her that she seek a diagnosis:

As a late-diagnosed autistic adult, people often ask me why I bothered seeking out a diagnosis. At age 42, I was happily married, the parent of a grown daughter, and a successful business owner. Because I was self-employed and about to complete my college degree, a diagnosis wouldn't grant me access to additional services or accommodations.

While not necessary in any practical sense, my Asperger's syndrome diagnosis was a turning point for me. It answered a question that I'd been asking myself since childhood: *Why am I so different from other people?*

That may seem like a trivial question, but when left unanswered for decades, it can become unsettling and haunting. Finally having an answer opened the door for me to do something I'd never been able to do: accept myself as I am. (Acceptance as a Well Being Practice, Kim)

She stressed in her posts that when she stopped trying to fix herself, she was better able to accept herself and be more outspoken about the accommodations she needed. Even if she did not need them, she knew that there are ways to manage her autistic symptoms in a world built for neurotypicals. However, she had to know her autistic self before any of that could happen. Although what had helped her understand her autistic self better was turning to blogs written by other autistic authors, as she explained in the same post:

...I discovered a community of autistic adult bloggers. Reading about their experiences, I was surprised to discover how much I had in common with them. The books I'd read up until that point were mostly written from a male point of view and the few that were authored by women told extraordinary stories of success or lifelong struggle, neither of which I could relate to.

Autistic bloggers, on the other hand, seemed like regular people. Women like me, with average lives, writing about experiences that felt familiar. I left long, excited comments on the blog posts that spoke to me most strongly and was surprised to get friendly, thoughtful replies. There was a sense of community among the writers and their readers that was unfamiliar to me. (Acceptance as a Well Being Practice, Kim)

The above excerpt also points out why it is important to avoid not only deficit narratives but also of reductive superhuman archetypes. To return to the network enabling aspect of blogging, by sharing their everyday experiences with each other, they are able to have a better idea of what their body can do and what it can become. As Kim expressed:

From other adults on the spectrum, I began to learn coping strategies and about the concept of neurodiversity. I learned

about supports and accommodations, the social model of disability and why it's important to presume competence. I learned that it was okay to struggle with things that come naturally to typical adults, that there was no shame in finding socializing difficult, that my autistic traits can be a source of strength.

I learned that acceptance could open the door to a strong sense of identity and pride, not only in what I'm capable of but in who I am. (Acceptance as a Well Being Practice, Kim)

The above passage relates to Elisabeth Grosz's reading of Spinoza:

Following Spinoza, the body is regarded as neither a locus for a consciousness nor an organically determined entity; it is understood more in terms of what it can do, the things it can perform, the linkages it establishes, the transformations and becomings it undergoes, and the machinic connections it forms with other bodies, what it can link with, how it can proliferate its other capacities – a rare, affirmative understanding of the body. (Grosz 165)

By enabling a network online with others who also have autistic female bodies, we can ultimately see how the body continues to be a site for “endless experimentation, modification and becoming.” (McCosker 91).

Conclusion

Spinozist theories of affect have been useful in highlighting the emergent and situational aspects of the everyday experiences of autistic women as they are documented in *Musings of an Aspie*. Through the personal, network enabling and social aspects of the blog, we see how transformative it has been for its users. This is important for those who are newly diagnosed and need to understand their bodies and what it can do. As we have barely begun to scratch the surface of what an autistic female body can do, blogging has created an opportunity to discuss their bodily capacities unhindered by outdated and often ableist medical knowledge systems. Because of the continually fluctuating nature of the autism definition, blogging provides a useful space for these women to negotiate and redefine their own sense of “normality” while avoiding reductive deficit or superhuman narratives. The paper hopes to contribute to the growing fields of feminist disability studies and critical autism studies.

Works Cited

“4428.0 - Autism In Australia, 2012.” *Abs.gov.au*. Australian Bureau of Statistics 2014. <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/4428.0>.

“About Autism.” *Autism Asperger ACT*. Autism Spectrum Australia 2015. <http://www.autismaspergeract.com.au/about-autism>

“Autism On The Rise? Autism Spectrum.” *Autismspectrum.org.au*. Autism Spectrum Australia, 2017. <https://www.autismspectrum.org.au/blog/autism-rise-0>.

"What Is Autism? Autism Spectrum." *Autismspectrum.org.au*. N.p., 2017. <https://www.autismspectrum.org.au/content/what-autism>.

American Psychiatric Association. DSM-5 Task Force, and American Psychiatric Association. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-5*. American Psychiatric Association, Washington, D.C, 2013.

Attwood, Tony. *The Complete Guide to Asperger's Syndrome*. London: Jessica Kingsley, 2015.

Cachia, Amanda, “What Can The Body Do? Inscribing and Adjusting Experiences of Disability in Contemporary Art.” Sightlines, California College of the Arts Thesis Publication, June, 2012.

Davidson, Joyce. “‘...In a World of Her Own.’: Re-Presenting Alienation and Emotion in the Lives and Writings of Women with Autism.” *Gender, Place & Culture*, 14.6 (2007): 659-677.

Deleuze, Gilles. *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*. City Light Books, 1988.

Ellis, Katie, Gerard Goggin, and Mike Kent. “FCJ-188 Disability’s Digital Frictions: Activism, Technology, and Politics.” *The Fibreculture Journal* 26 (2015): 7-31.

Gatens, Moira, and Genevieve Lloyd. *Collective Imaginings: Spinoza, Past and Present*. Routledge: London, 1999.

Gauntlett, David, and Ross Horsley. *Web.Studies*. 2nd ed. London: Arnold, 2004.

Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. “Feminist Disability Studies.” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 30.2 (2005): 1557-587.

Goggin, Gerard, and Tim Noonan. “Blogging Disability: The Interface Between New Cultural Movements and Internet Technology.” *Use of Blogs*. Axel Bruns and Joanne Jacobs. 1st ed. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2007.

Gould, Judith, and Jacqui Ashton-Smith. “Missed Diagnosis Or Misdiagnosis? Girls And Women On The Autism Spectrum.” *Good Autism Practice* 12.1 (2011): 34-41.

Grosz, Elizabeth. *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Allen & Unwin, St. Leonards, 1994.

- Gullan-Whur, Margaret. "Spinoza And The Equality Of Women." *Theoria* 68.2 (2008): 91-111.
- Hamilton, Anna. "Why Feminist Disability Studies?" Blog post. *Disability Intersections* (14 Mar. 2014). <http://disabilityintersections.com/2014/03/why-feminist-disability-studies/>.
- Hendrickx, Sarah. *Women And Girls With Autism Spectrum Disorder*. 1st ed. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2015.
- Hickey-Moody, Anna. *Unimaginable Bodies: Intellectual Disability, Performance and Becomings*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
- Hookway, Nicholas. "'Entering The Blogosphere': Some Strategies For Using Blogs In Social Research." *Qualitative Research* 8.1 (2008): 91-113.
- Kim, Cynthia. "Acceptance as a Wellbeing Practice" *Musings of an Aspie*. January 14 2015. <https://musingsofanaspie.com/2015/01/14/acceptance-as-a-well-being-practice/>.
- Kim, Cynthia. "At The Intersection Of Autism And Gender – Part 1." *Musings of an Aspie*. 19th November 2014. <https://musingsofanaspie.com/2014/11/19/at-the-intersection-of-gender-and-autism-part-i/>.
- McCosker, Anthony. *Intensive Media: Aversive Affect And Visual Culture*. 1st ed. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
- Moser, Ingunn. "Disability and the Promises of Technology: Technology, Subjectivity and Embodiment within an Order of the Normal." *Information, Communication & Society*, 9.3 (2006): 373-395.
- Murray, Stuart. "Autism And The Posthuman." *Worlds Of Autism: Across The Spectrum Of Neurological Difference*. Joyce Davidson and Michael Orsini. 1st ed. Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2013. 1068-1452.
- Nishida, Akemi. "Relating Through Differences: Disability, Affective Relationality, And The U.S. Public Healthcare Assemblage." *Subjectivity* 10.1 (2017): 89-103.
- Olive, Rebecca. "'Making Friends With The Neighbours': Blogging As A Research Method." *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 16.1 (2012): 71-84.
- Reddington, Sarah. "Thinking Through Multiplicities: Movement, Affect And The Schooling Experiences Of Young Men With Autism Spectrum Disorder." PhD. The University of South Australia, 2014.
- Rettberg, Jill Walker. *Blogging*. 1st ed. Cambridge, England: Polity, 2008.

Shelly, Sola. *Women From Another Planet? Feminism And AC Awareness.*. 1st ed. 2004.

Silverman, Chloe. "Fieldwork On Another Planet: Social Science Perspectives On The Autism Spectrum." *BioSocieties* 3.3 (2008): 325-341.

Simone, Rudy. *Aspergirls*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2010.

Spinoza, Benedictus de. *Ethics*. Trans. E. Curley. London: Penguin Classics, 1996.

Webb, Lynne and Yuanxin Wang. "Techniques for Analyzing Blogs and Micro-Blogs." *Advanced Research Methods with New Technologies*. Ed. Natalie Stapleton. Hershey: Information Science Reference, 2013.