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# Understanding David Eastham's Neuroqueerness

JENNIFER BLAIR

Q: HOW DOES IT MAKE YOU FEEL, BEING ABLE TO  
COMMUNICATE EASILY WITH PEOPLE?

A: QUEER

— Margaret Eastham, *Silent Words* (70)

**D**AVID EASTHAM WAS A TEENAGER in 1982 when he responded to this question from his teacher, Wilhelmina Watters. Diagnosed with autism at age three and unable to participate in some neurotypical forms of communication (i.e., speaking and signing) throughout his childhood and adolescence, Eastham had extremely limited exchanges with others until his mother learned about the Sharp EL 7001 Memowriter machine and its potential to enable people like her son to express themselves. Although he could not speak, it was discovered (in part through his teacher) that he could read. From about 1979, he had used a rudimentary word board to communicate (by pointing to specific common words to indicate his needs), but the Memowriter made it possible for Eastham, for the first time in his life, to participate in a relatively fast-paced exchange of words with another person: that is, to have a conversation. Although the keys were very small on this “mini-computer,” it was possible to program them so that punching a single one could generate a whole word or phrase rather than just one letter. The words would print out on a narrow strip of paper resembling a receipt from a cash register. Eastham quickly became adept at using the machine and programmed words into it himself. Working creatively within the constraints of the size of the Memowriter, the width of its paper printout, and its minimal programmability, in just a few years he would use the device to produce what is now recognized as the first book ever published in the English language written by a person with autism: *Understand: Fifty Memowriter Poems*. The book was published in Ottawa by Oliver Pate in 1985 but now seems to be available only at a few libraries (I accessed it at Library and Archives Canada). It has

been mentioned by dis/ability scholars and activists in the United States (including those writing in online communities, where I first learned of the book), but to my knowledge this landmark text has yet to be addressed by Canadian literary critics.

I am trying to be very careful about how I describe — how I put into words — this scenario in which Eastham began using the Memowriter. The introduction of the machine brought about a key shift in modes of communication in his life. This shift was not instantaneous and never culminated in Eastham communicating entirely on his own. He always needed someone to rest a hand on his shoulder (initially, it was a hand on his hand and then on his elbow) to help him stay focused and able to type on the machine. This reliance on the consistent touch of another person puts his use of the device under the controversial category of “facilitated communication.” In fact, Rosemary Crossley credits Eastham as the first adopter of this assistive, human-contact-based engagement with technology (103). With this relatively minimal amount of assistance, his communicative reach via the Memowriter expanded rapidly in a short period of time. It proved to be an incredible improvement on his previous modes of communicating.

Yet I caution against any effort to recognize and recover Eastham’s work that is uncritically and unself-consciously celebratory. The challenge in embarking on a reading of his poetry is to avoid a customarily affective response to this situation, even as my selection of this pivotal point in his life as my opening risks reromanticizing and renormalizing notions and practices of human-beingness — in which being human requires being linguistically able — that I hope on the whole this essay critiques. Specifically, I do not want to overemphasize the occasion of Eastham’s first use of the Memowriter as a momentous point of entry into being rhetorical — a darkness-into-light moment, a coming to voice, an awakening, a self-identification, a release, a coming out.<sup>1</sup> Nor do I want to de-emphasize the significance of Eastham’s experience of this newly found ability to communicate in language with others (certainly, it was an important one, it alleviated some of his core frustrations with communicating, and thus also forming relationships, and it allowed Eastham to advance in his studies and work at a much faster pace than had been possible for him previously). Still, the assignment of significance to his writing should not assume these clichéd liberal enlightenment modes of humanism and humanization: first, the absolution (provided by a machine and a human love for machine’s

standardization of communicability) of having been dehumanized up until the point at which Eastham finally has access to this new technology; second, the apparently instant and certain knowability assumed by this new, smooth, and true communication of self — an event directly attached to the coming-out-of-the-closet metaphor and thus to the allure of the divulged secret.

The best word that we have to describe this shift is his own: Eastham felt *queer*. In his selection of this word, it is possible that he meant the one-time more conventional definition of *queer* as “unusual” — or so unusual that the word *unusual* does not do the queerness of the situation justice. It is also possible, if not likely, that reading Eastham’s writing within an academic context might also do a kind of “queer” work that is not automatically productive to the writing itself, let alone beneficial to dis/ability or queer studies or, for that matter, CanLit criticism. Yet in this essay I test the possibility, in part inspired by Melanie Yergeau’s claim, that “To author autistically is to author queerly and contrarily” (6). Yergeau’s discussion of the relationship between autism and queerness in their recent landmark book *Authoring Autism: On Rhetoric and Neurological Queerness* comes from their exploration and articulation of the assumptions of non-autistics (allistics) about autistic people’s capacities to be fully rhetorical.<sup>2</sup> To be “rhetorical” is to articulate oneself in linguistically meaningful and socially appropriate ways: to speak with intention, specifically in an affectively measured way, and in such a way that reflects a clear and stable knowledge of self and a relatively accurate awareness of the other with whom one is communicating, recognizing, and respecting the limited contexts of that language exchange.<sup>3</sup> In tracing the contours of normative rhetoricity in this way, Yergeau (who is autistic) establishes that being properly rhetorical also entails (at least from an allistic perspective) establishing oneself as human.<sup>4</sup> In this sense, the affordance of humanity operates on a deficit model: one has or does not have the capacity to be rhetorical, and this rhetoricity is directly indexed to the extent to which one is considered to be (and treated as) human. Yet, as Yergeau points out, autistic people are indeed rhetorical, if not always in the most conventional ways. Modes of communication affiliated with autism — that define autism, insofar as this diagnosis is based on demonstrated behaviours — include speaking out of context or not speaking at all; neglecting to make eye contact or otherwise to register the presence of others (or the presence of sounds, sights, or other significant forms of stimulation in one’s surrounding

environment); reacting emotionally (when there is an emotional reaction) in inappropriate ways, whether this means laughing at something sad or displaying significantly more or less emotion than a situation seems to warrant; engaging in verbal and perhaps other embodied acts that appear to be involuntary and are immediately considered to be devoid of meaning (flapping hands, repeating words and phrases); refusing to recognize key social categories (e.g., by persistently misusing gender pronouns); being willing to communicate only in a very self-absorbed fashion (talking about one's own particular interests at length regardless of the extent to which the interlocutor appears to be interested); and showing more interest in objects than in people. If these autistic forms of rhetoricity are commonly misrecognized as evidence of a lack of rhetorical capabilities, Yergeau argues that they can be understood instead as fundamental acts of "neuroqueering."

Neuroqueer, a concept developed (separately and together) by Yergeau, Nick Walker, and Athena Lynn Michaels-Dillon, is a mode of being "in which subjects perform the perversity of their neurotypes" (Yergeau 27). Yergeau's analysis in *Authoring Autism* keeps the notion of neuroqueer closely tethered to rhetoricity, if mainly to critique and, more specifically, to queer normative modes of being based on demonstrated linguistic ability and adherence to social conventions of communication. As Yergeau explains,

Queer bodies and autistic bodies betray rhetoricity in gesture, relationality, emotion, and intent. . . . Autistics are not only actively antisocial, defying the bounds of multiple social fabrics, but we are the ultimate asocial beings, forwarding self over others, humanizing objects and objectifying humans, rigid in our gaze and our gait and our affect. . . . Autistic bodies, mindblind bodies — these are bodies that not only defy social order, but fail to acknowledge social order's very existence. Autism, then, poses a kind of neuroqueer threat to normalcy, to society's very essence. (26-27)

As with so much cultural criticism that takes aim at normativity, Yergeau's focus on the centrality of rhetoricity paradoxically risks making the constructed connections between the normal and the rhetorical all the more legible if not also naturalized. Although *Authoring Autism* does the extraordinary work of deconstructing these connections and the various ways in which they are supported, the limitation of Yergeau's focus is that it relegates to the periphery the fact that someone

(an autistic person or anyone) can be human and even express humanness without being rhetorical at all. Readers of this essay might recall Eve Sedgwick's selection of American sculptor Judith Scott embracing her own artwork for the cover of *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Those who are not conventionally rhetorical might be actively ignoring, passively opting out of, unconsciously disregarding, or otherwise sidestepping rhetoricity (their ability, or perceived ability, notwithstanding). Meanwhile, those who privilege rhetoricity and treat symbolic expression as the key to humanity will inevitably read all expressions (sounds, gestures, facial expressions, and other embodied acts, including those mentioned in the long quotation from Yergeau above) along a scale of their perceivability as linguistic phenomena. Even in my own consideration of this narrowing of the scope of what constitutes the human, I struggle to leave out articulations such as "bring into the conversation" or "critically contend with" because our discipline also participates in an ableist streamlining of "the humanities."<sup>5</sup> Although there is no easy way out of this bind, I also note that the potential for an expansion of thinking about and performing neuroqueer is built into the intellectually and politically rich and thoughtful work of the scholars who introduced it. For example, Walker's list of the ways that one can perform neuroqueerness emphasizes "practices" and the sense of "neuroqueer" as a verb (i.e., not just as an adjective) even while in the same list and on more than one occasion Walker names "literature" as a key venue for enactments of neuroqueerness.<sup>6</sup>

Beyond the scope of the term as it has been theorized by its three originators, there are of course resonances between neuroqueerness and other terms coined by other scholars and activists who also think about the connections between dis/ability and queer theory. Perhaps the most comparable is Merri Lisa Johnson's and Robert McRuer's notion of "cripistemology." Drawing together McRuer's well-known notion of "crip theory" and Sedgwick's thinking in *Epistemology of the Closet* and elsewhere, the meanings and utilities of cripistemology developed out of a back-and-forth "discussion about knowing and unknowing disability, making and unmaking disability epistemologies, and the importance of challenging subjects who confidently 'know' about 'disability,' as though it could be a thoroughly comprehended object of knowledge" (Johnson and McRuer 130). This highlighting of the problem and project of questioning the stability of knowledge, particularly when such stabilities enhance those distinctions that undergird heterosexism and

ableism (and Johnson and McRuer theorize “cripistemology” specifically as a challenge to neoliberalism and racism), registers an important caution that my own task at hand (to write about *Understand*) is not an easy or straightforward process of identifying and absorbing a static object of knowledge. Particularly interesting, as this essay shows a number of times, is how the response by Eastham to the implicit or explicit demand to be knowable is a gesture, an overture, and/or a more direct and explicitly desirous call to engage in an affective exchange (as somewhat distinct from an informative exchange) with others around him or with his own writing persona.<sup>7</sup>

I draw mainly from Yergeau’s theorization of the relationships between autism, queer bodies, and rhetoricity to argue that Eastham’s writing neuroqueers linguistic expression and the social conventions, particularly around attachment, that attend it. Specifically, I highlight how Eastham calls attention to the rigid structure and highly normative circuitry of affect in communication — in particular affects signified or connoted by love, desire, belonging, friendship, happiness, and connection. As Joyce Davidson and Michael Orsini point out, the “social worlds of autism are revealing of nonautistic worlds, as well” (6). Not only does Eastham critique the limits of normative affect, but also he “perform[s] the perversity of his neurotype” to the extent that he uses language play and the opportunities afforded by poetic form (e.g., rhyme, rhythm, repetition, sound, and syntactic ambiguity) to demonstrate the multiple possibilities and intensities of affect.<sup>8</sup> In the first section that follows, I show how Eastham’s poetry and the printed Memowriter record of his conversations (published in his posthumous biography) register and critique the demands on Eastham and others, vis-à-vis the arrival of the machine, to react in particular affective ways. In the final section, I consider his writing about hope in relation to José Esteban Muñoz’s conceptualization of queer utopia. As Eastham writes, in various ways, about the kind of understanding that he seeks, he repeatedly redefines the nature of hope in terms of its affective and temporal conditions.

It should perhaps come as no surprise that an autistic (diagnosed or otherwise) would be an expert in the nature of affective normativity since people who display behaviours considered “autistic” are monitored closely for their capacity to recognize affect and respond appropriately. Yet those of us saturated in dominant depictions of autistic people as asocial people (Yergeau’s comments on the “asocial” above I read as

somewhat facetious) are likely to be caught off guard by the intensity of Eastham's desire to attach to others and his rich use of form and imagery to render love active and palpable. Take this short but remarkable poem, "Kindness Is Love": "LOVE, MY KIND INTELLIGENT FRIEND I LIKE / JUST JUMP INTO MY HEART / NOBODY UNDERSTANDS."<sup>9</sup> Evident in this condensed poem is what I find most intriguing about Eastham's work: it asks what it means to create and gauge "understanding" across autistic-allistic relationships, indeed across all relationships, and how this knowledge might be governed by the normativity that inflects the affective relationships that are necessarily part of communication. As Yergeau writes, "Autistic people do not tell allistics what they want to know; and because autistic people do not tell allistics what they want to know, autistics are presumed to hold variable impairments in those cognitive and neurological domains that control or mitigate social-intentional function" (23). Not only does Eastham's writing display his highly perceptive read on the nature and protocols of affect, but also it works to critique the ease with which the allistic world appears to have (and wield) knowledge about Eastham and people like him. His imperative to "understand" and his multifaceted exploration of understanding offer a stunning analysis of the desire that informs the very phrase "want to know" and its unsettling of the certainty of knowing — of what it means to know oneself and others via a diagnosis, a conversation, and a myriad of affective connections.

### "How Does It Make You Feel"?

#### Registering the Affective Protocols of Conversation

One of the first conversations reproduced in Margaret Eastham's biography of her son, *Silent Words: Forever Friends*, documents the fact that David sought to use the Memowriter to enlist others to help him find a lover:

David: QUESTION ME  
 Watters: WHAT KINDS OF  
 THINGS WOULD YOU  
 LIKE TO DO IN SPARE  
 TIME?

David: WANT STAY SCHOOL  
 Watters: DO YOU LIKE SCHOOL?  
 David: WILL ALWAYS



Watters: WHAT KIND OF THINGS  
WOULD YOU LIKE TO  
DO AT HOME?

David: WANT READ

Watters: WHAT KINDS OF BOOKS?

David: WANT SCIENTIFIC  
BOOKS ON SCIENCE  
FICTION

Watters: IS THERE ANYTHING  
ELSE THAT YOU  
WOULD LIKE TO DO?

David: WANT TO WED

Watters: DO YOU MEAN GET  
MARRIED?

David: YES

Watters: ANY IDEA TO WHOM?

David: PLEASE FIND SOMEONE (67-68)<sup>10</sup>

The result of this conversation is that David (approximately nineteen at the time) is told that he is too young to get married:

Watters: DAVE I DO NOT KNOW  
OF ANYONE THAT YOU  
CAN GET MARRIED TO.  
YOU ARE A LITTLE  
YOUNG NOW ANYWAY

David: WANT MARRY WHEN  
EARLY THIRTIES (68)<sup>11</sup>

That Eastham's clear, repeated, and explicit expressions of himself as a desiring being were met with some pause and deferral suggests that his afforded humanity did not extend to the sexual realm. In this respect, his writing serves as yet more evidence of Cartwright's summation that, "In all of the many writings on FC [facilitated communication], pro and con, written throughout the 1990s, the question of what constitutes the desire of the child — not its desire to speak, but simply its desire — was never, to my knowledge, broached. It is as if the child, not having entered into language, could not possibly be constituted relative to desire" (21). For this reason alone, Eastham's continued assertion of himself as a desiring being functions as an act of neuroqueering. The conversations about his desire for a lover register an ideological link between the (new) identification of his humanness as an autistic

person with newly realized rhetorical capacities and the perception that this new rhetorically established humanity reorients his proximity to love if not enhances his ability to express love and to be social: to be a loving being. And, importantly, as part of his neuroqueering — of perverting the proper place and conventions of desire in language in his writing — the project of considering desire as constitutive of his sense of self, his use of language, and his relationship to others expands to include multiple types of desire and modes of affect. If we return further to the Lacanian model of subject formation based on lack (to which Cartwright critically refers throughout her book), then we might position autism as akin to that of the feminine in Judith Butler's important critiques of Lacanian-based theories in the 1990s. The feminine (and, by extension, the autistic, the otherwise categorically not-normative) are not just figured as lack but also stand as the constant threat of lack: the destabilizer, the disorganizer, the antithesis of language and subjectivity. This perceived threat mobilizes, ideologically and politically, efforts to bolster the patriarchal and ableist structures of normalcy, of proper communication and engagement, and therefore of identity.<sup>12</sup> Eastham is permitted into language only as a certain kind of subject permitted a certain kind of language use, and these protocols are what he opens up with tremendous insight and precision — and overturns — in his attention to how affect governs communication. When, according to Cartwright, “Controversy over the emotional aspect of facilitation — what we might call the facilitation of the child's affective abilities and expression — lies at the core of the controversy about facilitated communication” (189), Eastham's approach is to highlight the various ways in which the affective nature of communication is managed (not necessarily, in his case, by the facilitators but by broader social conventions).<sup>13</sup>

Below is a fuller version of the exchange in my epigraph. Eastham's teacher, Watters, clearly lays out the affective expectations of Eastham: he must discuss how he feels. And his first answer to the direct question “How does it make you feel . . . ?” is “Queer.” Note that Eastham selects a word whose possibilities of signification are not located entirely in the realm of affect and that therefore invite a critical pause over the affective limits of the word and the relationship between “feeling” and “queerness” (and both of them and workings of normativity).

Watters: DAVE I LIKE YOUR  
HOME MEMOWRITER

BOOK

David: AM PLEASED

Watters: HOW DOES IT MAKE  
YOU FEEL, BEING ABLE  
TO COMMUNICATE  
EASILY WITH PEOPLE?

David: QUEER

Watters: I GUESS IT TAKES  
AWHILE GETTING USED  
TO IT

David: YES

Watters: YOU MUST FEEL  
THRILLED SOMETIMES

David: YES

Watters: EVERYONE IS VERY  
PLEASED WITH YOU

David: KNOW

Watters: YOU MUST BE VERY  
HAPPY THAT YOUR  
MOTHER TAUGHT YOU  
HOW TO READ

David: AM

Watters: ALL THE TEACHERS  
ARE SORRY THAT WE  
DID NOT DO ANY  
READING WORK WITH  
YOU WHEN YOU WERE  
YOUNG

David: OK

Watters: WE DID NOT BELIEVE  
THAT YOU WERE SO  
SMART

David: DIFFICULT

Watters: YES IT WAS, BUT I  
HAVE LEARNED A LOT  
FROM TEACHING YOU

David: GLAD

Watters: MAYBE I WILL BE ABLE  
TO HELP OTHER  
CHILDREN LIKE YOU IN  
THE FUTURE

David: WANT (*Silent 70-71*)

In her confusion by and perhaps even dissatisfaction with Eastham's response to her question, Watters pursues her topic and her questioning of Eastham using more routine, if not reductive, terms to describe "feeling" (specifically, she insists that he "must be very happy"). Yet Eastham offers terms that are undeniably affective though also always something more: "know," "difficult," "glad," and "want." Even the response to her apology does not supply Watters with any easy pardon; his difficulty remains, and Eastham indicates that further work is necessary, including the teacher's work with others more or less like him. This is what Eastham wants: the teacher must keep teaching, keep learning. And, in relation to this oscillating figure of what it means to have knowledge about someone, consider his single-word answer "know" in light of Yergeau's comments on what constitutes the knowledge about autism "in the public consciousness" today: "At a time when we know more about autism than we've ever known, what we know is very little, and what we know is decidedly not autistic" (11).

The above conversation is not the only one in which Watters asks Eastham to comment on how he felt about using the Memowriter. In the relatively brief conversation reproduced below, Eastham expresses what he wants in numerous overlapping contexts: what he wants his teacher to tell others about him and the love that he wants (presumably for himself, though this is not precisely what he states). When asked if he "gets enough" love — a bizarre question since Eastham also keeps asking to "wed" or have a "girlfriend" and so, presumably, does not have "enough" — he seems to retreat in his conversational sharing (his request for love, affection, and engagement with others) and to offer instead words that satisfy the expectations of his teacher:

Watters: ON FRIDAY YOU WILL HAVE A P.D. DAY

David: WAS READING

Watters: I WILL GO TO A CONFERENCE IN TORONTO  
 ANNE AND I WILL DO A  
 PRESENTATION ABOUT  
 THE MEMOWRITER

David: WANT

Watters: CAN I READ TO THE  
 PEOPLE SOME  
 CONVERSATIONS THAT  
 WE HAD?

David: YES

Watters: IS THERE ANYTHING  
THAT YOU WOULD  
LIKE ME TO TELL THE  
PEOPLE AT THE  
CONFERENCE ABOUT  
CHILDREN LIKE YOU  
AND ABOUT CHILDREN  
IN THIS CLASS?

David: WANT LOVE

Watters: DO YOU FEEL YOU GET  
ENOUGH?

David: YES

Watters: IS THERE ANYTHING  
ELSE THAT YOU  
WOULD LIKE OTHERS  
TO KNOW?

David: AM FINE

Watters: THAT IS GOOD HOW DO  
YOU FEEL NOW THAT  
YOU HAVE A  
MEMOWRITER?

David: WONDERFUL

Watters: HOW DID YOU FEEL  
BEFORE YOU HAD THIS  
MEANS OF  
COMMUNICATION?

David: SAD

Watters: HOW DID YOU  
FEEL WHEN YOU USED THE  
WORDBOARD?

David: SAD

Watters: BUT YOU WERE ABLE  
TO COMMUNICATE  
WITH THE  
WORDBOARD

David: NO CONVERSATIONS

Watters: HOW DO THE  
CONVERSATIONS  
MAKE YOU FEEL?

David: HUMAN (*Silent 77-78*)

In this exchange, the questions about “feelings” put to Eastham seem to follow from his response that he would like Watters to tell the people

at the conference that he is “fine.” If ever there was a phrase to dissuade others from inquiring into the details of one’s personal psyche/being/daily life, it is certainly “I’m fine.” In Eastham’s poetry, there is a poetic persona (one often called “youth” and thus explicitly not identical to David the author) who commands readers to engage deeply with certain concepts, insights, experiences, and feelings of being apraxic, of having low job prospects, and of having few people around him who can share his experiences. In this exchange, however, Eastham appears to think that others need to know that he desires love. In keeping with his other exchanges, this might be his effort to get the word out that he would like a lover — a provocation to allistics to think about Eastham as a desiring person, one who should not be automatically excluded from romantic life or considered unmarriageable. Beyond just an expression of desire for a particular person, for a romantic relationship, Eastham invites here, I think, a more complex understanding of love, his desire for a variety of attachments enabled through conversations. But, to add to this, my sense is that his “want love” comment, which he follows with one-word answers, demonstrates both his registering of and responding to the affective demands of verbal communication and then his disengagement, as if he is refusing those demands or, to put it another way, using language to rebuff his teacher’s inquiries. Eastham ends this interesting trajectory from affective engagement to disengagement in this conversation with the word *human*. If we follow from Yergeau’s argument that the becoming-rhetorical of an autistic person constitutes becoming human, then “human” in this instance can be read as Eastham’s word to describe this precise communicative/affective arc. First there is the invitation to share, via his teachers, his experience with those who will hear their paper at the conference, and then — in response to the general question about anything else that David would like conference attendees to know about him (and people like him) — he introduces the word/concept/affect “love.” Up to this point, the exchange is all about engaging with others in a variety of ways, yet from there David appears to use rhetoric precisely to disengage: from his offhand (as I read it) “am fine” to his one-word stock responses to his teacher’s questions (“wonderful” when clearly he does not feel that way) to “sad” and “sad” on cue to, finally, “human.” In other words, I am suggesting here that this transcript can be read as a carefully wrought lesson in normative human rhetoricity — the entire arc, from engagement to retreat, from using words to create exchange to using words

to limit affective sharing, constitutes what it means to be rhetorically human.

As in “Kindness Is Love,” Eastham’s poetry uses the figure of interiority to describe his experience of affect in relation to others’ affect. In the following excerpt from the poem “Love,” Eastham envisions love as a kind of interior space and then invites his reader/addressee to “help” him, but then he comments that there is “too much pity.” In reading this poem and considering the complexity of his analysis of the relationships between affect, language, and the potential available for attachment for an autistic person, consider too how his critique of normative affects, as part of his work of expressing his own desire, functions in relation to Yergeau’s further description of the neuroqueer as “disorientation”: “Given autism’s particular threats to social orders, autism’s queerity is often storied by means of disorientation: Autistics are so rhetorically impaired that they remain unoriented toward all that is normative and proper, whether empathy or eros or gender (performance and concept unto itself)” (27). It is Eastham’s attention to and rhetorical play with positioning, apparent in the next two poems that I quote, that belie this supposed deficit in self-positioning so often affiliated with autism.

LOVE

THERE  
IS  
LOVE  
GO  
INSIDE

I’M  
HUMAN  
YOUNG  
HELP  
ME

I  
THINK  
TOO  
MUCH  
PITY

Perhaps Eastham is commenting that the “I” of the poem engages too much in self-pity. The words state that this “I” *thinks* that there is too much pity — presumably too much pity for this situation, that “pity” does not “help.”

Elsewhere Eastham is more expressly critical of others’ affective responses to him, as in this stanza from “Hyper People”:

HYPER PEOPLE TRY  
TOO HARD  
TRY, CRY, SIGH  
I THINK UNLESS  
THEY STOP I’LL  
DIE, DIE, DIE

If in this poem Eastham records how intensely (and negatively) the pitying affects of others have impacts on him, in “Happy Feelings” he figures “feelings” as possessions and the teacher-student relationship (assumed most often to be about knowledge transfer) to be one of affect transfer:

TODAY I FEEL  
HAPPY  
TEACH ME JOKE  
TEACH ME LOVE  
AND GREATNESS  
TEACH ME FUN  
AND TEACH ME  
SOME  
OF EVERYTHING  
YOU  
POSSESS

And in “Tools to Learn,” Eastham clearly documents the process of supposedly “learning” from the human world how to “be human.” The irony is apparent in the two sets of repeated lines: the ominous “they guide my thoughts / they guide my thoughts” and “I am learning / I am learning”:

I HAVE TOOLS TO USE  
TO LEARN TO BE HUMAN  
I WATCH PEOPLE  
THEY GUIDE MY THOUGHTS



THEY GUIDE MY THOUGHTS  
 I SEE ROMANCE ON T.V.  
 I LIKE TO HUG  
 I AM LEARNING  
 I AM LEARNING

The irony, of course, is that Eastham is always human, even as he is in the process of “learn[ing] to be human,” and that “romance on TV.” is not a good teacher of “normal” human romantic life. His emphasis on seeing people, seeing people on television, and hugging also functions to take the human- and meaning-making pressure off language. Eastham is studying a normative model of human affect, presumably so that he can then have a better chance of participating in a romantic relationship of his own. If the Memowriter was the ultimate “tool” in his life, the deliverer of language and thus humanity to him, this poem calls to mind Cartwright’s point that “the emphasis on speech, voice, and language has involved a neglect of the affective aspects involved in appearing in the field of the other’s multisensory gaze” (226).

It makes sense that in Eastham’s rendering the “normal” is sometimes in tension with the “human” even as Eastham is always tasked with the challenge of behaving “normally” in order to be accorded more “humanity.” In the poem below, he “pretend[s]” in his mind that his dreams (again of getting married) will come true:

IN MY MIND

I TRY TO PRETEND I’M  
 NORMAL AS HUMANLY POSSIBLE  
 IN MY MIND

I TRY TO GO TO  
 TEACHING  
 IN MY MIND

TRY MY BEST  
 IN MY MIND

GO FOR MY LICENSE  
 IN MY MIND

GET MARRIED

IN MY MIND  
HOPE MY DREAMS CAN  
COME TRUE

The relationship of figures works somewhat differently in this poem than it does in the poems cited above. As with the interiority figured in “Love,” in this instance the focus is on the mind, and in this respect being “normal” is a form of knowledge, a practice of thinking rather than feeling and interacting with others. Eastham needs to dream these events because they are not actually available to him, though not because he cannot or does not want to partake in them. As well, the repositioning from “mind” to “dreams” signals a shift from the conscious to the unconscious, from intentional thought to desire. Here he engages in “hope” (as a verb), albeit not with a lot of optimism. His use of cliché here — “hope my dreams can come true” — suggests an ironic take on the prospect, for on the whole his writing both favours and charts a more robust critical path toward thinking about why he cannot have a lover, be a desiring being, even as he manipulates the tools of language and its attendant affective contexts so dexterously. As I will show in the following section, “hope” is an increasingly troubling concept for Eastham. In multiple instances in his conversations and his poetry, hope appears as something that displaces his lived reality. But he does not only offer this critique of hope: in his writing, it is hope that is displaced by his preferred affects — with markers of relationality, signifiers of his engagement with others.

YOU SEE HOPE / I COPE

Yergeau briefly references José Esteban Muñoz’s work on queer hope in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, pointing out that autism advocacy can learn from queer theory’s problematization of a simplistic hope-for-the-future perspective or what Muñoz terms “banal optimism” (3).<sup>14</sup> He argues for a “queer feeling of hope in the face of hopeless heteronormative maps of the present where futurity is indeed the province of normative reproduction” (28). For Muñoz, now quite famously, queerness was “not yet here” (these are the first words of *Cruising Utopia*) but a “potentiality” that, unlike “a possibility, a thing that simply might happen, . . . is a certain mode of nonbeing that is eminent, a thing that is present but not actually existing in the present tense” (9). Riffing on Muñoz’s celebrated argument that queerness is

part of this complex, surplus, “not-yet” present, something yet to come (Muñoz 1), Yergeau writes that “We might behold autistic storying — and the unearthing of nonautistic stories about autism — as methods for queering futures, for projecting autistic desires and autistic ideals” (25). In this last section, I further develop the neuroqueer potential of Eastham’s writing through Muñoz’s thinking on utopia. Two key aspects of this potentiality inherent in Eastham’s work are the complicating of the “asocial” (spurred by Muñoz and developed by Yergeau) and the complicating of the present time and present tense that Eastham explores and expresses (through play with line, rhyme, repetition, sound, and syntax) in his poetry.

By emphasizing “hope” and “queer futurity,” Muñoz offers *Cruising Utopia* as a polemic against queer theory’s preoccupation with negativity — with the antisocial thesis or what Muñoz more often calls “antirelationality.” This line of thought, also rooted in Lacan, was initiated in large part by Leo Bersani’s *Homos*, but more recently it has coalesced around the publication of Lee Edelman’s *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* in 2004. The antisocial thesis argued that “sex” (broadly construed) always tends away from the conventional, ordered, meaningful, and predictable, and toward the alogical, the excess, the outside, and the queer, and that its political impact lies in this refusal of sociality as a normative force. Holding on to this negativity — to what Lauren Berlant terms “radical incoherence” (Berlant and Edelman 2-3) — became an energized site of critical exploration. One might immediately see how a championing of “the antisocial” can appeal to neuroqueer sensibilities since, at its most general and perhaps most caricatured base, autism is the antithesis of the social.<sup>15</sup> As Yergeau points out, quoting Jonathan Alexander’s application of Muñoz, “autism is a neurologically queer motioning that is asocially perverse, a lurching forward towards a future that imagines ‘incommensurabilities of desires and identities and socialities,’ a ticking toward rhetorical residues” (18-19). But Yergeau also notes that “This asociality, while often represented by clinicians as a nonsociality, is inherently relational in that it defies, reclaims, and embraces the expansiveness that counter-socialities can potentially embody” (19). Here Yergeau’s parsing of the notion of “sociality” takes aim at one of the curious universals attendant both to queer theory and to clinical discourses of autism: both treat “the social” as a singular and universal phenomenon that all of us (or at least all allistics) apparently understand and that therefore apparently

requires little explanation. When social awareness, engagement, and belonging — all understood in the most basic ways — are denied to autistic people (denied by diagnosing non-autistics who tend to identify all sorts of often engaging behaviours as “antisocial”), it seems to be all too easy and uncritical to pitch the antisocial as ultimately a political site. Moreover, when autistics are determined to be antisocial, the point seems to be largely disciplinary: what is observed (and condemned) is behaviour not considered to be part of the social norm. All of these behaviours, however, might still be “social” in most understandings of the term. They might express or solicit a relationship with others, they might be otherwise oriented toward (or away from) others, and they might affect the social realm in some way. As I have shown, Eastham’s poetry is explicit and exuberant in its expression of attachment, and in the following examples Eastham offers an insightful critical perspective on “the social” and its relation to “hope” specifically.

The couplet “You see hope / I cope” offers both a rich critique of the easy adoption of hope by allistics in his life and a clever parsing of the discrepant affective engagements with potentiality across autistic-allistic relations. This couplet comes from Eastham’s “first letter” to his mother, Margaret, written on his wordboard (the precursor to the Memowriter). I read it as his response to his mother, who sees hope when she looks at him (or perhaps at the wordboard), while his own sense of his situation is one of coping: of continued survival, of dealing with the situation, of durational time rather than projected time. Importantly, these lines follow an affectionate gesture to his mom; the full letter reads

DEAR MUMMY  
 HAVE A KISS  
 YOU SEE HOPE  
 I COPE  
 LOVE DAVID (*Silent* 53)

The precise attention here to levels of sociality is illuminating and thought provoking. The letter itself is an affectionate gesture, like a kiss, during which this imagined (or perhaps real) act of receiving a kiss from David includes a lesson on what she sees when he faces her. The connection between mother and son is not necessarily impeded by this lesson, but the poignancy of the kiss and the coping, both arguably social and certainly embodied acts, is impactful and imbues the poem with an intensity of connection and experience that surpasses the visually and

ideationally oriented act of seeing hope. In other words, this is a lesson in types of engagement and in connecting to David's version of what it means to be living within the present. This early writing might be compared with a stanza in his poem "Kindness You Have." In this case, the replacement for hope is "kindness." A sign of attachment, affinity, and affection between people replaces the when-the-future-is-better hope for liking someone — for social connection: "HOPING IS NOT IN SIGHT / I HAVE DONE IT TOO / THERE IS ONLY KINDNESS / TO MAKE ME LIKE YOU." Although the letter and poem focus on the nature of affect as a supplement to, if not a replacement for, hope, the following poems are similarly critical of hope, but they also put forward what I would call a "queer futurity" in their rhetorical play with temporality, in particular their rendering of a complex (or excessive or surplus) present that echoes Muñoz's theory of potentiality.

There is in fact a poem titled "Hope" that Eastham explicitly begins by declaring his lack of faith in the concept. Although this is the most direct and perhaps most pessimistic of his poems, his particular critique is worth noting:

THERE IS NOT MUCH HOPE  
 FOR AUTISM RIGHT NOW.  
 WHEN THEY FIND A CURE  
 PERHAPS I WILL BE OLD.  
 YOUTH REALLY PAVES THE WAY  
 FOR OLD AGE  
 AND THE PAVEMENT WILL BE SET.

Eastham does not imagine the future as distinct from the now, as an imagined better world with a cure, but considers the future as lived experience — as his experience lived from the present into "old age." The irony that he points out is that, though some might hold out for a better future for people with autism, the state of things in his youth cannot be erased and might well set limits on (or otherwise "set") what sort of future improvement is in the cards for autistic people. The poem also casts doubt on the very notion of a "cure" — not just as a medical solution (today, of course, "cure" is a term not often discussed in the context of autism) but also as a temporal frame of mind that assumes the possibility of a complete erasure of the past, one that can become so preoccupying that it diverts a focus from the ongoing experience of living with autism in the present.

Yet another critique of hope appears in the poem “Try to Help Yourself.” It begins thus:

USUALLY I ROAM  
 FROM HOPE TO HOPE  
 HOW I WILL BE SOLVED  
 GOOD PEOPLE SO DON’T HOPE  
 I ANSWER I RESOLVE

With the repetition of “hope,” Eastham parses the concept so that specific, palpable hopes (failed ones) supersede any broad, vague sense of hope. Just as in the letter quoted above, so too his action in place of hope is to cope — in other words, the active, experiential, and difficult work of dealing with his condition. To engage in this work, he needs to assume a certain state of “resolve,” a term that wonderfully expresses his autonomous determination but also, given its positioning in the poem, serves as a linguistic displacement of “solve.” Whereas the latter term implies that autism is a “problem” to be solved (apparently by allistics), the former term refers to a state of being, a condition of determination, that Eastham himself can occupy. He might appear to take a kind of ownership of his situation in this poem; however, I cannot help but read in the title some sarcasm of the social demand on people to take responsibility for themselves — this hyper-individualized ethic of self-care is not what Eastham presents or lauds in the rest of his writing.

Each of these poems works to complicate any easy notion of futurity that might be assumed by the concept of “hope.” Eastham insists that the ideational hope be considered against the concrete reality of coping and that it be displaced by the localized and affect-oriented notion of kindness. Another contrast that he charts across his poetry, as can be seen above, is that between understandings of present-future relationships, in which hope most often is a future evacuated of the past. The passages that I have cited in this section begin with the conventionally singular future-located notion of hope, a simple present (“not much hope / for autism right now”), or a “usually” (i.e., a conventionality of a vague present). However, as the poems progress, each arrives at a more complex present that contains an excess, and thus a potentiality, a promise of futurity that does not abandon the now. In “Hope,” the “pavement” of the present casts forward and restricts the future (serving, perhaps, as an example of the phrase “ticking toward rhetorical residues”). In “Try to Help Yourself,” Eastham’s critical response to the

demand to exercise his autonomy is to “resolve” to communicate his position and perspective, recasting the terms of the demand itself with one that “embraces the expansiveness that countersocialities can potentially embody” (again to return to Yergeau). This consciousness-based and affective condition of “resolve” is also a future-oriented occupation of the present in which the present is the potentiality of the future. In “Kindness You Have,” the opening of “hope” (yet again referencing the trope of hope for the future of autism) becomes not just the signifier of attachment (“kindness”) but also a much more localized “me” and “you.” The use of the infinitive “to make,” however, positions the experience of this affect, of this attachment, somewhat vaguely on any timeline. The only temporal limit, really, is that this liking is not positioned only in the past. Once again, the present-future causal relationship becomes complicated, “to make” signalling a situation of ever potentiality. “Kindness” is in the present tense, and in this present is the potential for the speaker of the poem to develop a liking for its addressee.<sup>16</sup> “Kindness” is a form of desire, but so are all the references, gestures, and inklings to potentiality suggested here. As examples of neuroqueerness, these poems are imbued with forms of potentiality, a queer potentiality that recalls Muñoz’s claim that “Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present” (1).

In the last important example of Eastham’s poetry that I will discuss, the opening of the stanza echoes the one that I quoted above from “Try to Help Yourself.” The poem is titled “Usually”: “USUALLY I’M TERRIFIED TO FEEL / TODAY I KNOW MEANING / WHAT IS REAL.” In this instance, there is a more certain “today” that determines a present. Yet there remains a gap between the predicates of the first two lines. In the first instance, Eastham is “terrified to feel,” and I would suggest that this registering of fear recalls Muñoz’s point that both “hope” and “its other, fear, are affective structures that can be described as anticipatory” (3). But the supposed arrival point/resolution of “today” is about knowledge rather than feeling, and even more obscurely the reference to the *logos* is doubled insofar as Eastham now knows “meaning.” The effect mirrors the opening line, in fact a paradoxical claim (if Eastham is “terrified,” then he is feeling terror, yet at the same time he is too “terrified to feel”). It is also possible, of course, to read “meaning” as a gerund rather than a noun, such that the sense of the line “today I know meaning,” when put together with

the subsequent “what is real,” is that what he means by “know” is that he now understands “what is real.” But what has happened to feeling? Or what has happened to the quasi-absence of feeling denoted in the first line? Does knowledge replace feeling, or satisfy the lack of feeling expressed in the first line, or mitigate the terror in some way? Insofar as both meaning and feeling seem to hang somewhere in the ether of this stanza at the end, they infuse an anticipatory element that Muñoz adapts from Ernst Bloch’s work on hope. As Muñoz explains, “When Bloch describes the anticipatory illumination of art, one can understand this illumination as a surplus of both affect and meaning within the aesthetic” (3). Moreover, this is a “certain surplus in the work that promises a futurity, something that is not quite here” (7). Mapped temporally, Eastham’s “usually” (one form of a present, albeit an abstract and somewhat expansive one) arrives at a “today” that appears to contain almost an overdetermination of knowledge but seems to remain in the “not yet” when it comes both to feeling and to what the knowing, the “real,” actually means for Eastham.

As readers of this special issue will recall, Butler’s *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* includes a chapter titled “Arguing with the Real” that takes aim at Žižek’s adherence to Lacan’s theorization of the “real” and in doing so questions the missing role of feminism and antiracism in scholarly work devoted to the notion of subjectivity (specifically, subjectivity as it was understood in cultural theory at that time).<sup>17</sup> Eastham had already died by then, but I daydream here about what an essay by Eastham titled “Arguing with the Real” would teach us about the political potential, including the queer potential, of autistic expression and the nature of desire. This last poem that I have quoted is a beginning of what he might have said — something akin to what queer theorists from Sedgwick to Berlant to Ahmed would also say eventually — that affect as a material, intersubjective, enacted phenomenon repositions the nature of meaning. As in Eastham’s other writings, there is a shift in this poem in terms of understanding where and how meaning is established. The multiple natures and positionings of affect in communication that Cartwright highlights also point to the fact that the location of meaning, and therefore meaning itself, are never singular. To create “understanding” — Eastham’s titular goal — not only must his voice and perspective be taken into account, but also the layered and complex role of affect in knowledge production and transmission must be considered. Having a relationship, engaging with



others, is itself a kind of temporality, a kind of potentiality, enacted. Eastham emphasizes a rich present and a durational set of desires concomitant with his entry into a certain kind of language exchange. His sense of himself is informed (albeit only in part) by this entry as well as by others' affective relationships vis-à-vis their conversations with him. This harnessing and expressing of desire as an indicator of the excess of the present comprise the core feature of Eastham's neuroqueering — not just of subjectivity, of what it means to be human, but also of hope.

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Lisa Cartwright's provocative discussion of the Australian film *Annie's Coming Out* about a teenager with cerebral palsy whose use of facilitated communication led to a court case in which she won the right to be deinstitutionalized.

<sup>2</sup> Yergeau provides numerous concrete examples of supposed "treatment" strategies that understand both autism and queerness as deviances to be corrected. Their reading of various clinical, psychological, and otherwise expert research on the two "conditions" highlights the disturbingly close ties between autistic and queer "rehabilitative" or "correctional" therapies.

<sup>3</sup> As Yergeau also points out, rendering someone's expression involuntary, asocial, and without a properly constituted and delimited sense of self means that any rhetorical or otherwise expressional output from that autistic person can be dismissed ever after as meaningless, unintended, and without agency or regard for audience or aim to transmit information. Even the most poignant, well-honed, clearly articulated, or otherwise impactful utterance can be considered accidental. To pose any significant "threat to normalcy," then, becomes a complex exercise, dependent on how much it might matter that the normal registers this threat and what the impact might be.

<sup>4</sup> Margaret Eastham describes some of the institutional dehumanizations of David, beginning with the doctor who diagnosed him. She describes her reaction to the doctor's explanation of the word *autism* (which she had never heard of before):

"Oh my poor little David!" I sobbed. "Poor mother is more like it," the doctor replied, "to raise such a child will be very difficult; however, they do well in institutions as they are usually quiet." Aghast, I said, "But we couldn't do that with David, he would miss us and we would long for him."

Then the doctor said something I cannot to this day understand, with reference to autistic toddlers, "They are not sensitive." (*Silent* 6)

<sup>5</sup> See also Murray for further explorations of autism and its potential to critique the conventions of enlightenment humanism.

<sup>6</sup> Walker says the following:

*Neuroqueer* is both a verb and an adjective. As a verb, it refers to a broad range of interrelated practices. As an adjective it describes things that are associated with those practices or that result from those practices: neuroqueer theory, neuroqueer perspectives, neuroqueer narratives, neuroqueer literature, neuroqueer art, neuroqueer culture, neuroqueer community. And as an adjective, *neuroqueer* can also serve as a label of social identity, just like such labels as *queer, gay, lesbian, straight, black, white, hapa, Deaf, or Autistic* (to name just a small sampling).

A neuroqueer individual is an individual whose identity has in some way been shaped by their engagement in practices of neuroqueering. Or, to put it more concisely (but perhaps more confusingly): you're neuroqueer if you neuroqueer.

<sup>7</sup> I am thinking here, too, of Mel Chen's contribution to the *Cripistemology* special issue of the *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies* in which Chen states that

An information-handling reading of cognition, rather than being a remote disciplinary feature proper only to cognitive science, is integral to the prevailing mechanisms for the contemporary production of knowledge. As humanities and social science scholars we are tasked to work with a fluid cognitive tool set: taxonomies, namings, retrievals. Ultimately, the academic institutions we inhabit are at this moment adept at producing what I would call disciplined cognators. What happens to us in that process? I do not mean that some people simply become canonical or affixed to disciplinary frameworks. I mean that our disciplining goes much further than disciplinarity. (178)

<sup>8</sup> Yergeau briefly acknowledges Eastham's book as "[a]rguably the first published autistic biography," but in the next paragraph Yergeau's emphasis on both story and narrative, their concern with "who gets to determine whether we are, in fact, narrative creatures" (21), displaces non-prose-based forms of rhetorical expression. In terms of its challenge to the normative assumptions of individual agency and authorship, as well as Eastham's poetic play, his writing can be compared with other examples of machine writing, such as Erin Mouré's *Pillage Laud*. See Emerson for an expanded discussion of this critical subfield.

<sup>9</sup> The pages in *Understand* are not numbered. The conversations are taken from *Silent Words*, so for them I have provided page numbers.

<sup>10</sup> On another occasion, David requested to go live in a group home, where he thought that he could have (or meet) a girlfriend:

Anne: DO YOU WANT TO GO TO A GROUP HOME?

David: YES

Anne: CLOSE OR FAR AWAY?

David: SO WHAT

Anne: WHAT DO YOU MEAN?

David: ANYWHERE

Anne: WHY DO YOU WANT TO GO?

David: GIRLFRIEND (*Silent* 87-88)

This was around the time that he had been posing questions to one of his teachers regarding a class on sex education at school. Therapists at the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario made two suggestions about how to respond: "One was to tell David how we as a family felt about certain attitudes regarding sex and marriage. Secondly, tell David that it's okay if he wants to leave home, that we understand and don't mind" (88). His parents did take him on a tour of a group home, but, as Margaret recalls, he "seemed very nervous and frightened" and "never asked again to go to a group home" (89).

<sup>11</sup> David died suddenly and somewhat inexplicably by drowning beside the dock in his yard that backed onto the river. He did not live to see his thirties.

<sup>12</sup> In his review of Yergeau's book, Michael Bérubé writes that "To imagine an autistic rhetoric or an autistic literature is to struggle, audaciously, against a legacy of neurotypical people failing to imagine autism as anything other than lack."

<sup>13</sup> In January 2020, an autistic individual using a wordboard made the news in an article in the *Chicago Tribune*. Mitchell Robins works with a facilitator who does not touch him but often holds the board up in order for him to point to individual letters. Within three days of the publication of this article, Robins's blog, *Mitchell's Life with Autism*, had over twelve thousand views (see Fazio; Robins). Thank you to Evan Buck for drawing this article to my attention.

<sup>14</sup> And in so doing he gestures to Berlant's notion of "cruel optimism."

<sup>15</sup> Although, if one wants to look at the physiological basis of antisocial disorder and autism, medical studies show that there are distinct differences in brain structure between the two (see Wallace et al.).

<sup>16</sup> In "A Poem for Mark," Eastham comments on the ease with which someone who is not apraxic can be likable, with language that also comments, by way of comparison, on the lack of "personableness" (and personhood) associated with apraxic people:

YOU'RE PERSON TOO LIKABLE  
 TOO PERSONABLE . . .  
 YOU'RE PERSON TOO MARRIABLE  
 TOO EMPLOYABLE  
 I'M SORRY I'M NOT  
 I'M BOUND BY APRAXIA

These lines complement Yergeau's writing about the (illogical) disassociation between autism and people: "What Barnbaum and others suggest is that autism is a world without people, that a world without people is a world without rhetoric, and that an arhetorical life is a life not worth living — a life beyond the realm of voluntary action and intentionality" (8). Here Yergeau cites Deborah Barnbaum, whose book *The Ethics of Autism* "promotes a portrait of autism that is the antithesis of both community and communicability, echoing the stereotypical sentiment that autistics are closed off from the larger world" (Yergeau 8).

<sup>17</sup> Butler writes that

What counts as the "real," in the sense of the unsymbolizable, is always relative to a linguistic domain that authorizes and produces that foreclosure, and achieves that effect through producing and policing a set of constitutive exclusions. Even if every discursive formation is produced through exclusion, that is not to claim that all exclusions are equivalent: what is needed is a way to assess politically how the production of cultural unintelligibility is mobilized variably to regulate the political field, i.e., who will count as a "subject," who will be required not to count. (207)

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