Endlessly Becoming Orc: A case for making our classrooms monstrous

by

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Abstract

What might a dissertation look like, if it were also an adventurer's journal?

This is an inquiry about neuroatypicality and disability. It is also about role-playing game storyworlds, specifically the well-known fantasy game Dungeons & Dragons (D&D). Role-playing is the medium through which themes of neurotypicality / atypicality, neuroqueering, and learning as collaborative becoming-in-relation are presented and examined.

In the pages of this dissertation, I bring together a rush of stories—stories we know, stories we need to know, and stories that are not yet known and still emerging. Through these, the reader is invited to explore the tracings of family, research, gaming, walking, learning, and education storyworlds.

With/in layers of stories, I invite exploration and diffraction through a rush of methods: iterative walking- and playing, and emergent cartographic practices, all based in an affirmative, post-qualitative research ethic of relationality, refusal and the oblique, non-representational gaze. Posthumanism, new materiality, relational ontologies, as well as game and monster studies, support a re/imagining of several important concepts that describe, diagnose, pathologize, and intervene in neuroatypical becoming: social-emotional reciprocity, functional speech, gaze direction and eye contact, and repetitive behaviours.

As a postsecondary educator, caregiver, and role-player, my goal for this dissertation is to provoke a collaborative re/examination of our relationship with neuroatypicality, and how it shapes educational spaces and practices. I hope the reader will interrogate the ways in which we embody and enact "typicality" as a neutral that pathologizes some ways of being as "atypical," and how that informs and shapes our classrooms and other storyworlds.

The reader is encouraged to actively engage with the rush of stories, and to collaboratively question—and re/imagine—teaching and learning practices as storyworlds of becoming-together.

Dedication

This is dedicated to Ash and Storm. Always and forever and right now.

Acknowledgements

They say a PhD is a piece of individual research. It is supposed to be; that's how it's advertised, and that's how it's treated. I can tell you right now that is an institutional fiction; a storyworld we create for ourselves, that helps us toward our goal of feeling autonomous and intelligent. A doctoral study is deeply embedded within and dependent upon an impressive and extensive network of relations and supports, without which it would be meaningless to even try. The contribution of different people and communities can't be written in a page or two; it should rightfully take as much room as the entire thesis. But I will try to name a few of the most important.

First and foremost, I am an uninvited settler, balancing on the unwilling shoulders of those who have a traditional, unceded, and rightful claim to these lands. This doctoral work was carried out on the territory of the Coast Salish peoples, including the territories of the xʷməθkwəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), Səl̓ílwətaʔ/Selilwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh) and Kwikwetlem First Nations, where the campuses of Simon Fraser University are located. This carries a responsibility that I try to enact and live up to in this document, and will strive to continue in my work going forward. I am grateful for the opportunities to unlearn, relearn, and continue to grow into this responsibility.

I am indebted beyond words to my closest family, including my mother, my children, and their dad, who made this happen. You were willing to uproot your lives, put in hours, months, and years of support and accommodation, and patiently listened while I endlessly talked about role-playing games, neurodiversity, and posthuman theories. You willingly lent an ear to various re-readings of key chapters, and even agreed to let me write about you and your lives. You continue to teach me about what it means to be a person in this interconnected world, and I have more love and gratitude than I can express.

My ongoing journey of understanding also owes a deep debt to the tireless generosity and hard work of many autistic and neurodivergent self-advocates. In particular, SFU Autistics United and Aspergerforeningen in Copenhagen have been so willing to talk with me, attend occasional meetings, and learn from them. There is also a huge network of self-advocates I follow via social media, blog posts, and YouTube that I

continue to learn from. I hope that this thesis will contribute and support the important work that you do in some small way.

Thank you to T&N games, but mostly to my D&D adventuring companions, for being part of my journey! You are amazing, and the best mentors-turned-friends that anyone could ask for. Pretty soon, I won't have the excuse of "research" and will have to fully own becoming a role-player. Which I am fine with, because it is with you.

Thank you to Dr. Bingham, my senior supervisor, who was willing to give me a chance, and has been a source of constant encouragement and thoughtful feedback. My committee members as well, who always somehow knew how important a walk or a well-timed compliment can be in academic writing and thinking. I also have much to be thankful for in the close network of grad students (and a few faculty) I know from EGSA, the Research Hub, the Ed Review, the RTD club, the Learning Together Conference—It has been delightful and inspiring to think together with all of you.
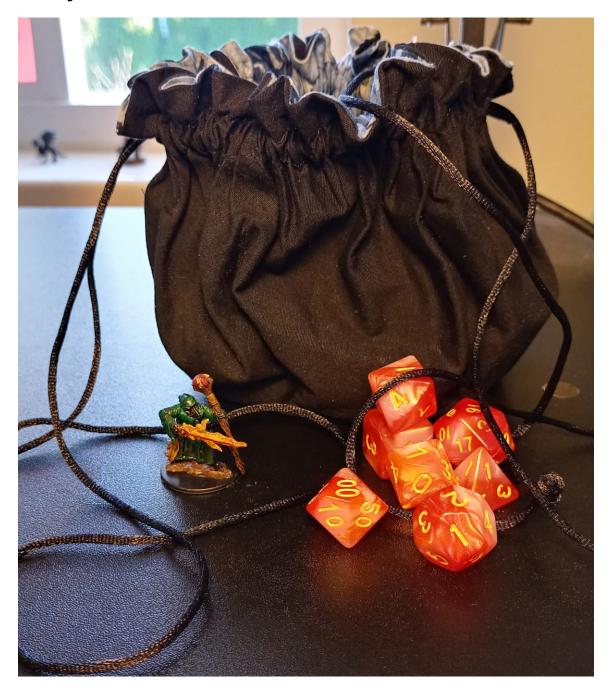
And, finally, my close network of scholarly companions: my nerd collective, cohort members, walking companions, colleagues, chapter readers, and conspirators. It seems to deny the laws of physics, but somehow we managed to carry one another over this weird un-finish line. Thank you all so very much for late night WhatsApp chats, tearful writing group sessions, and unflagging support. This is only the beginning of what we'll do together!

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Ready for adventure

Chapter 1.

Prologue: When the world was new

It was a clear Sunday afternoon, and the fall breeze had me bundling my scarf close. But the shiver that ran through me as I listened to the distant sound of screams was one of excitement, not cold. It was the first time in eight years of parenting that I felt unneeded!

Ash had been cautious but excited about joining the role-playing group for youth. I was more hesitant. Crowds were not usually their thing. To my mind, a quiet child with an autism diagnosis[1] might be asking for a healthy bruising, to the soul if not the body, in a group of fifty kids bearing foam weapons. In most of my experience parenting, groups of children were in general something to be avoided; a vicious lot, and somehow prone to singling Ash out as a target, for reasons I could never quite understand. In the end, I'd finally decided the fact that it took place outside and in our favorite spot, a sprawling, overgrown park near our apartment, tipped the scales. That, and my few past experiences with role-players made me think of them as a friendly lot.

When we'd arrived at the park hours earlier, we'd been told to start by choosing which of the five teams or "factions" they would join. I had tried to nudge Ash toward the orcs, my personal favorite, as I watched them stand in line for green face paint. Ash had

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[1] A note here on language use. In general, I support the majority community viewpoint of identity-first language, and use (e.g. "autistic person" or "neurodivergent person") rather than person-first language (e.g. "person with autism). There are times, in this thesis, where I will use other phrasing, such as "person identified as neurodivergent/autistic" to be clear I am addressing a certain perspective (e.g. the diagnostic process, or the way others react to or treat a person so identified). In some situations, like this one, I use the somewhat long and clumsy phrase "person with an autism diagnosis," because I am describing someone who has—or had—not made clear to me the extent to which they identify with autism or neurodivergence. It was not Ash's choice to be classified as autistic. That was my choice as a parent. It feels wrong to use identity language at this point in the story, because I would be placing the identity on them.

Neurodivergence or autism, when claimed by any person for themselves, is a powerful and important description of their experience of being in the world. A diagnosis, on the other hand, is a social and medically constructed category—a "naming." It can only be "granted" by someone else, and requires specific, medicalized credentials. By specifying "with an autism diagnosis," I am creating space to identify—or not—however one chooses.

seemed very certain, instead pulling a grey fleece tunic out of another bin. "Mountain dwellers" it was. Half an hour of chaos later, everyone was armed and ready.

The magic began to take hold during the brief ritual that followed. The faction leaders, many who appeared to be not long out of their teens, were dressed to the nines in an array of fantasy finery. They called for attention, and a wiggly stillness settled over the group as they sat on the grass. You could have heard a foam sword drop as the leaders of the Elves and the Black Legion narrated and demonstrated the rules of pretend combat and sportsmanship. "John," the elven leader and head planner of the season, held up a huge longsword covered in elaborate decorations.

"Do you know what this is?" he bellowed.

"A sword!" the enraptured crowd chanted back.

"No it's not!" he shouted. "It's a stick covered in foam and latex! But today it's a sword." There was scattered laughter as he demonstrated what kind of blows were acceptable on "Tom," the leader of the Black Legion. Tom, in turn, performed a dramatic death, writhing on the grass when hit by the fatal strike.

"What if you accidentally poke someone in the eye, or hit them on the head to hard, or between the legs?" John asked as Tom obligingly grimaced, howled, and bent double in pain.

"You stop, lay down arms, and say what?" John prompted.

"I'm sorry!" the experienced followers lead the chorus in answer. I smiled along with the titters, but wonder in my heart if it will turn into action. We've been disappointed before.

When the opening ritual was finished, the faction leaders took them away to their different bases, at secret spots deep in the forest. There, I would find out later, they all shared their character names, and were granted an extra life point or two for creative costume pieces. Extra effort to be "in character" is rewarded with the possibility of staying alive a little longer in battle. They were briefed on the storyline and did some strategizing, all in character.

I had lingered with a handful of other nervous parents and caregivers. We can always recognize each other, those of us with children constantly pushed to the margins, and I would learn, in the course of the season, that each of them is attached to a vulnerable youngster. I glanced around at the other faces and made some chit-chat, but knew that each of us always had one ear listening for a disaster. Probably none of us had prepared to stay this long. It's one of the tenets of parenting on the periphery: Come early, leave early. But three hours later, the distant shrieks were still those of delight, and the only attacks I had witnessed were the wild theatrics of the monsters they encountered.

At some point before the lunch break, I'd been feeling nervous about having violated another tenet (never be out of view) and had ventured out of the clearing in search of the Mountain Dwellers. When I found them, Ash was standing towards the edge of the group. Their face was carefully neutral, as it tended to be, but their body wasn't on alert. I let go of a tense breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding.

After a few minutes, I gave up trying to catch Ash's eye, and let myself be swept up into the story that had captured their attention. The faction had met an evil sorcerer, who was trying to trick them and their leader into blaming the Orcs for stealing a relic. The sorcerer was convincing them to break their truce with the Orcs and go into battle to win it back. A reward was offered.

 The Mountain Dwellers consulted one another, and I saw Ash nodding along with their decision. They apparently already understood that the Orcs were their sworn enemy, so breaking the truce didn't take a lot of arm twisting! It seemed Ash also understood that the Mountain Dwellers were fiercely proud of being "the ugliest and dumbest" in Jarkwelt, so letting themselves be outwitted was not only important for the story, but also a point of pride! As they roared their battle cry, I wandered back toward the other parents. I felt a flutter of hope.

At the end of the afternoon, all the weary warriors finally returned to the clearing. I discovered that there was to be a final, epic battle: "children vs. adults." Other parents seemed to know this already—at least twenty or so had filtered back before pickup time, ready to do battle against their offspring. I caught Ash's eye and sent a skeptical glance.

They mistook the question in my eyes and pointed to a pile of swords and axes at the edge of the grass.

"There are the grown-up weapons," they advised, eyes sparkling, and turned and ran to join the rest of the Mountain Dwellers on the opposite side. The faction leaders were wandering toward the milling group of parents. In their character voices, they chanted silly taunts at the youth, who answered with jittery excitement. I began to understand why this was the most important and exhilarating battle of the day.

I could feel questions beginning to bubble to the surface. What kind of sorcery was this? Who are these enchanting leaders in orc, elf, and pirate gear,most of them startlingly young? How does this playful, violent world become the kind of space that so many trained teachers and professionals can only dream of?

I leaned over the pile of weapons and finally chose an enormous battle axe. It was gory with painted blood, and had a chip out of one corner of the massive foam blade, surely from cleaving a particularly hard skull. Hefting the axe as I walked back over to the other parents, I sent my best menacing orc-glare towards Ash, who rewarded me with their very brightest smile.

"Children, are you ready?" bellowed John, his voice showing a ragged edge after the days' battles.

"Yeees!" their shrill battle cry swelled over the grass.

"Adults?" As we howled our answer, I swore a silent vow in my heart to one day look for an answer to my questions. But just then, I scowled and swung my axe in a threatening arc, because the wild joy of taking up arms against my child was magic enough.

1.1. The hook

This thesis is about autism and neurodiversity. It is also about role-playing games. This combination may seem quite a stretch–I know it was for me, once upon a time. I certainly never expected there to be a common ground when I first signed Ash and Storm up for their first Sunday afternoon adventures! But I quickly discovered Ash

was far from the only youngster there who had been identified as neurodivergent, or "atypical" in other ways, and who likewise found it an easier and more welcoming environment than so many other contexts.

What was the allure of becoming one of the "ugliest and dumbest in all of Jarkwelt?" And what made Jarkwelt a place where pathologized difference seemed less important? Most importantly for this thesis, why should anyone outside the world of high-fantasy role-playing worlds even care about something as niche as orcs?

Every good role-playing adventure, as I would come to find out, has a "hook." There must be a motivation for each individual characters will enter the storyworld offered by the gamemaster (GM); or lead storyteller it's not enough that folks have willingly showed up to play the game, as you, the reader, have graciously done in the last few pages. There has to be a reason to stay, a reason to become-together with and within the story. The story hook is a sort of gesture of goodwill from the gamemaster that shows they have an offering: the possibility of building relationships, of shaping and being shaped by the yet-to-be-determined world. Not only does it have to "hook" their interest, but it must be compelling to the becoming-with of the characters—and give them an entrypoint into contributing to the storyworld. It sets the stage for the rich and ongoing collaboration to come, between storyteller, player, and story, and gives a framework within which this might happen.

"As the Cult of the Dragon has grown bolder, its actions have drawn attention. Your character has stumbled into the Cult's scheme in some manner or has a connection to dragons" (*Hoard of the Dragon Queen*, n.d.), reads the character hook in Wizards of the Coast's grand adventure *Hoard of the Dragon Queen*.

"Aha," responds the player, on behalf of their created adventurer character, "That sounds intriguing!"

"You can replace or augment some or all of the options in your chosen background with one or more of the elements given below," the player reads on. The text includes a table and instructions, a framework for creating connection and motivation for the character to be in a certain place, and have an interest in the situation that the gamemaster presents. You can decide that your character has been having strange dreams, compelling them to travel to another city, and wants to find an explanation, the

table offers. Maybe someone they know has been kidnapped by dragon cultists, and your investigations have brought you to the town where the game is starting. The genius of the hook is that it draws in characters in a specific way, providing not only a personal connection to the storyworld, but also providing an entrypoint for collaborative becoming. The hook contains the handle where the character can grasp on and leverage their influence in and on the storyworld. It is just as much a call to action as an invitation.

What is the hook for this thesis? It needs to speak to why *you in particular* might find resonance in *this particular* storyworld. Why would you want to walk with me–and with Ash—through the tracings of encounters with and within diagnosis, neurodiversity, and disability? I imagine your reasons for considering it are many and varied, but I also think I could safely assert that you are–or could become–parent or caregiver, loved one, sibling, friend, or colleague or lover of someone identified as neurodivergent. Although, for some reason, we have created a storyworld in which we consider disability to be atypical, other, someone else's problem, and not persons with whom and with which we are already entangled.

Common conceptions of autism, like so much of our social understanding of the world that is based on the "scientism" (Oolong, 2022; Timimi & MD, 2018) and "normopathy" (Guattari, 1995; Manning, 2020) of psychological and medical frameworks, would have us enact the binary of autistic vs nonautistic, of typical *or* atypical functioning, language, sociality: all core areas that are described as "different," and pathologically so, within the autistically-diagnosed individuals. It is a difference that implies the need for intervention, therapies, specialized education, treatments, and cures.

Neurodiversity is an important challenge to this pathologizing view, born of activism and resistance work by persons described as neurologically or developmentally different. I feel strongly that the neurodiversity movement is an important and meaningful community, a gathering site of social, political, and medical change (Kapp, 2020). This thesis is not a challenge to the self-identifying neurodivergent folks out there; on the contrary, my hope is that this thesis follows the lead of autistic and activist scholars, such as Remi Yergeau (Maier et al., 2020; Yergeau, 2018), Damien Milton (Fletcher-Watson et al., 2019; Milton, 2014; Milton, 2012; Milton & Timimi, 2016), Jim Sinclair (Pripas-Kapit, 2020; Sinclair, 2012) Dora Raymaker (Walker & Raymaker, 2021), Nick

Walker (Walker, 2015, 2021), Ari Ne'eman (Broderick & Ne'eman, 2008) and Peter Smagorinsky (Smagorinsky, 2014, 2016), just to name a few. I hope that it will contribute to the important work of self-advocacy organisations such as Autistics United, the Autistic Self-Advocacy Network (ASAN).

As a parent, caregiver, and professional, I am in relation to autistic people, to those identified and identifying with neurodiversity, which gives me the privilege and insight of proximity, although not direct experience. My observations, from the dual perspectives of a parent, and as an educational professional, is that there has been and continues to be considerable harm enacted toward neurodivergent people, including by both of these groups. It is often well-meaning, and even loving, family members and professionals who are complicit. I have certainly been one of those who has contributed to the harm. As a family member and a professional, I am firmly committed to understanding and minimizing such harm. I hope to act as an accomplice to ongoing projects of resistance and empowerment, led by neurodivergent and autistic people. I hope that this thesis might be a piece of that work.

The field of special education has long been dominated by formulaic and prescriptive models, with normative expectations of "functioning," and trajectories of development. When Ash was diagnosed with autism, the questions for us as the responsible caregivers were always about how we could best reroute their path of development back toward the "normal." The possibility of allowing the unfolding of the autistic-person-as-they-are was never on the table. Any opportunities for non-normative becoming has always come at the cost of a conflict with systemic, institutional, and educational normativity and pre-defined goals.

Like our schooling and educational systems as a whole, special education is heavily influenced by late, neoliberal capitalistic principles of autotomy, competition, and productivity. A few decades ago, *inclusion* seemed a fresh, new way of thinking about how the educational system might become more open for students with disability, and where specialized programs might be re/shaped more equitably, and with less need for designation, categories, and segregation. At that time, special education theorist Tom Skrtic (1995) presciently warned that the inclusion debate could well "[reproduce] problems of professional practice rather than resolving them" (p. 234). Inclusive education seems, indeed, to have in many ways resettled into the familiar folds of

categorization and pathology. There are efforts to diversify instruction and make classroom spaces more open to the presence of difference. But impetus for change is still on the individual with the designation, with little attention to the role of community, or how our learning institutions enact narrowly rigid understandings of "typicality." In 2018, after a couple of decades of critically examining inclusive educational contexts, Roger Slee (2018) observes, "Inequality, and its fellow traveller, exclusion, are woven so tightly into the fabric of education, it often goes unacknowledged" (p. 12).

Inclusion, it turns out, has some unhappy parallels with the trend of "mainstreaming" before it, or even the longstanding practices of institutionalization that were and in some cases continue to be the way of life for many people seen as atypical. Furthermore, even when placed in less restrictive settings, there are still children, youths, and adults who find themselves isolated, lonely, bullied, and excluded. It is no small number of them who are those labelled as neurodivergent. Under the guise of freedom of choice, there is some evidence that families and caregivers also self-segregate into private school options that aren't required to include all students in the same way that public schools are. Freedom of choice also allows us to avoid befriending those that seem "different," according to what Slee refers to as "the taut and taught boundaries of the neo-liberal imagination" (p. 12)

Slee (2018) advises:

"Let's not feign surprise. The mobilisation of exclusion through the structures, processes, programmes and ethos; that is, the cultures, of schooling is an embodiment of our social condition. Neoliberalism provides an ethical framework for the organization and operation of our social institutions including schooling. Schools are forged within the furnace of competitive individualism, and students are reduced to the bearers of results. … As individual unites, students manifest risk or opportunity" (2018, p. 16).

In some interesting ways, role-playing games, through deeply collaborative practices of storytelling and worlding, model a sort of radically inclusive framework that invites collaboration and meaningful becoming/unfoldings, as a sort of contrast to this "competitive individualism." Playing my way through this thesis inquiry, I have found this brings me back, time and again, to think about what learning and schooling might look like, if its foundational ideals had groundings in something other than neo-liberalism. What would it look like if relationality, indeterminacy, exploration, mutual becoming had

more of a place in forming the structures of schooling? It seems more and more of us are coming to terms with the holes in our competitive and consumption based way of life; the dual crises of climate change and a global pandemic have pushed us toward an increased recognition of relationality and shared responsibility.

We struggle, however, to take the next step and imagine possible alternatives. This thesis explores ways in which role-playing games and storyworlds might be a way to glimpse other, possible futurities where competition, hyper-individualism, and human exceptionalism are less dominant. Role-players will tell you about the personal transformative potential of such forms of play (Bowman & Hugaas, 2021; Daniau, 2016; Transformative Play Initiative, 2021a). I want to invite you to think with me about how it might help us think transformatively about community, about learning, about research. I hope it might compel you to problematize for yourself the "assumption that neurotypicality is the neutral ground from which difference asserts itself" (Manning, 2020, p. 2), and the ways in which our schools, institutions, and systems of care are formed through such assumptions.

Unmodels

Despite my enthusiasm for role-playing games as transformational contexts, this thesis is, perhaps most importantly of all, *not* a (special) educational model. If anything, it is an exploration of anti-model. The worst possible outcome I can think of for this thesis is that it would give anyone the idea to "implement" role-playing games or structures as an intervention or form of special education.

Let us be clear from the outset that role-playing communities and storyworlds are also imperfect places, where there can be plenty of normativity and harm reproduced. Dungeons & Dragons (D&D), the game system I write most about here, as well as many others, have been rightfully problematized as reproducing both racism (Garcia, 2017) and colonialism (Eddy, 2020), to say nothing of deeply ableist paradigms (Jones, 2018). Most game systems rely on some level of ableist presumption, using spoken language as their narrative vehicle, and an often-inaccessible world of dice, books full of densely-packed text, and pages of character stats to play. Role-playing communities have been experienced by many as White and male-dominated (Mendez Hodes, 2019a, 2019b); sexism and heteronormativity pop up with alarming frequency, both in and outside of

game space. Even so, there seems to be *something* to celebrate here. Many of the harshest critics are also the strongest champions of role-playing games, even D&D.

"Hold lightly to your own ideas," advises game designer Avery Alder (2019), in a presentation about hosting and leading role-playing sessions. Perhaps this holds a clue to how role-playing games can contain such incommensurability? I read her words on the slide, wondering when I had last heard such a profound piece of advice as a postsecondary instructor? Perhaps I never have. I feel that is likewise unusual advice for parents and caregivers. It is under the slide heading "Sharing the Storytelling Spotlight," which I think is a good rule for living in relationship with others! Other bits of profundity on the slide include:

- Notice who is talking the most and the least

- Frame scenes that let the characters shine

- Ask questions and build on the answers

These all seems like worthy guidelines for teaching, if you hope is to create a space for mutual unfolding. And parenting. The final bullet point leaves me thinking: "Consider GMless games." But the GM, or gamemaster, is the one who is supposed to show up with a storyline, a plan, and a framework for the game? What might it mean to dismiss that role entirely? Where might the story go, and why does the prospect seem equally exciting and terrifying?

This thesis is an invitation to enter the storyworld of autism and neurodivergence as a collaborator and co-conspirator. As a parent, educator, and researcher, I am addressing this thesis to my peers and colleagues. It's an invitation to take a careful look at our own roles, and think about the ways in which we are always becoming-together (Braidotti, 2019) with our neurodivergent loved ones. It is time we recognize and question the ways in which we enact and reproduce "typicality" (Manning, 2020), and explore how we might support the folks we live with in resistance, in "neuroqueering" (Walker, 2015; Walker & Raymaker, 2021; Yergeau, 2018) our storyworlds.

And, with that, the adventure hook:

"As conceptions of neurotypicality grow stronger, their grip on our schools and care systems—even our personal relationships—tightens. A small but powerful and growing

community of neurodivergent youth and adults have grown weary of living under these pathologizing structures, and are demanding change. You realize that you are inevitably and always part of that system, and want to find ways to join their movement, or support their goals by making changes in your own practices and relationships."

This is an invitation to think about what it might mean to shift the focus of our transformative energy toward ourselves, and toward our relationships with those we know who are neurodivergent. I hope it might invite you to investigate the space of complicity with me, and explore our roles in maintaining oppressive structures and practices. I hope it might encourage you to interrogate what it means to be/come neurodivergent, in relation to human and more-than-human others. I hope it might inspire you to re-think the ends and means of special education, therapies, and interventions to which we subject children, youth and adults identified as normatively, problematically different in certain ways.

I hope you might be willing to join me in an exercise of trying to loosen my hold on my own ideas. Perhaps we can even consider the possibility of co-constructing a GMless game?

Chapter 2.

Introduction: A Rush of Stories—some notes on form

"To listen to and tell a rush of stories is a method."

-Anna Tsing (2015), The Mushroom at the End of the World, p.37

"As players define and re-define a game world, they must take apart some of its pieces, make new sense of them, and then communicate the new state to one another by reassembling the words and images used to conjure the world."

-Nicholas J. Mizer (2020), Tabletop Role-playing Games and the Experience of Imagined Worlds, p. 3

"I don't believe for a second that people have trouble reading philosophy. What I believe is that the education system's normative frameworks make people so afraid of not knowing that when they read an opening to another world, they panic. That's what we're seeing is that panic."

-Erin Manning (2021), Doing Higher Education Differently, Session 2

What would a thesis look like if it was also the story of an adventure?

A game, a childhood, and a walk in the forest, have some of the same ontological qualities. They leave tracings, meaningful only to those who know how to interpret them, Each of the participants in a person's childhood, in a game, and on a walk in the forest have a shared experience, although they often differ. In these pages, I will consider both childhood experiences, from a caregiver's perspective, experiences with role-playing games, and a walking practice.

"Game," "walk," and "childhood" are nouns in English, but very different from concrete, object nouns like "thesis." This thesis is a document. A thesis relies on explanation to communicate the author's points, in much the same way as our dominant, Eurocentric, systems of schooling tend to rely on explanation from a wiser or more learned other (Bingham et al., 2010). The form of the thesis–logical organization,

presentation of arguments, analysis of data or other materials–bears very little resemblance in form to a practice of immanence, such as a role-playing game or a walk in the forest.

When I signed up to learn Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) at the local game store, the other players assured me that the best way to learn was to jump right in and play— and then demonstrated this by starting the game with little or no explanation, playfully waving away my sense of panic over not yet having all the information. I had tried to play a role-playing game with my kids before this, following the advice of a salesperson in a different game store a couple years earlier, who sold me a thin, sixty-page guide, *Winterwolves: A Role-play for beginners* (Sinkjær, 2012), and after hours of pouring over the unintelligible tangle of rules and stats, gave up with the first character sheet only forty percent completed. I have since met plenty of others who, when they hear about my research, confess similar experiences. The understanding emerges through the play, and through letting go of the expectation of being prepared, of needing to "learn" through explanation from the right experts, before being approved as qualified for take off (Bingham et al., 2010).

As I wandered deeper into the inquiry for my doctoral project, it became clearer that the challenge I was facing was finding a way to *demonstrate* or provide some type of experience of role-playing games, and of living with neurodivergence in the family. It would not do to *explain;* I needed a way to invite the reader to become part of the action, to walk with me, so we could consider together how role-playing games might nudge us toward transformative learning.

This had presented as a puzzle I was having trouble finding my way out of! It was clear I needed some kind of glue to pull together the many moments of immanence and potentiality that made up my own and my research participants' experiences and stories into transmissible meaning of some kind. How could a thesis become tracings, and still be intelligible to those who had not been there? Especially when the tracings are collected from quite particular, and disparate, niche experiences like role-playing games, family experiences of neurodivergence, special education programs, and moment of contact with the diagnostic process?

And that is the moment when Matsutaki mushrooms came into the picture.

I had picked up *The Mushroom at the End of the World* just as I was beginning to write my thesis, assuming it would be a pleasant interlude to my "real" reading. Instead, Anna Tsing's simple words, *a rush of stories*, interrupted my process utterly. It was such a stark moment of realization that I can even provide a vignette of the exact moment:

I have just left the house on my morning walk. I am listening to the next chapter of a book I have just picked up, read aloud through a text-to-speech app on my telephone as I walked. I stop short, in the middle of an empty intersection in the quiet, residential area, dig my phone out of my pocket and put the app on pause so I can look over the chapter pdf, in written form, go over the words, and make sure I was getting the whole context.

The passage is short and simple. Like most ideas that strike us as brilliantly insightful, the words encapsulate a tangle of ideas I'd already been grappling with:

> "A rush of stories cannot be neatly summed up. Its scales do not nest neatly; they draw attention to interrupting geographies and tempos. These interruptions elicit more stories. This is the rush of stories' power as a science. Yet it is just these interruptions that step out of the bounds of most modern science, which demands the possibility for infinite expansion without changing the research framework" (p. 37, my emphasis).

It was the type of moment described by Elizabeth St. Pierre: an encounter with a concept that will "reorient thinking" (St. Pierre, 2019).I stood there with the enchanting idea of *a rush of stories* buzzing in my ears, a whole new landscape unfolded around me. I found myself at a figurative, as well as a literal, crossroads.

This thesis is a document that explores a rush of stories that had been tossing me about. There are my personal stories and those of my children; there are stories told to me by eager research participants and partners. There are also fanciful tales; stories of role-playing contexts, and of the happenings that spring from within them, and the journeys that emerge. There are the storyworlds we live within every day, that cast certain folks as competent or incompetent, typical or different. And hidden within this tapestry of imagination are also very real stories of transformative growth, revelations, and personal battles lost and won, that emerge through role-playing practices—the kind

of narratives that we educators might be tempted to single out as belonging to the *real world*, not "just" the imaginary. (As if fantastical stories are any less important!)

There are layers upon layers of story in the collaborative, imagined, and imaginative storyworlds that emerge whenever role-playing games happen. These are exhilarating and pedantic worlds of narrative, histories, language, dice rolls. A rush of stories within and among a rush of stories. But how to take up Tsing's implicit challenge and turn the rush of stories into "an addition to knowledge?" (Tsing 2015, p. 37)

The "central mystery of role-playing games," writes Nicholas Mizer (2020), is the way they allow us to "assemble disparate objects into worlds and to conjure worlds through disparate assemblages" (p. 2). This thesis attempts to allow a similar type of assemblage to unfold. I will present a particular slice of the rush of stories, told, imagined, and experienced. I hope to offer this rich, storied space for exploration and co-creation.

To fully appreciate the potentialities of a rush of stories, however, we have to reorient in relation to a few of the *stories we know* (Tsing, 2015, p. 18) about knowing.

First is what Tsing calls a "problem with scale." A rush of stories draws attention to "interrupting geographies," and challenges the precepts of what we tend to consider as [Eurocentric] science, which "demands the possibility for infinite expansion without changing the research framework" (p. 37). Education, special education, and psychology, as represented by our dominant institutions in the context from which this thesis is conceived, tend to be oriented toward large-scale explanations and solutions, and, in turn, to apply large-scale information to individuals. This produces the expectation of "typicality" and its counterpoint, "atypicality," as measurable against elusive glances toward the measures of central tendency (Pagano, 2013) that dominate the mathematical ontologies that shape our thinking (de Freitas, 2016b).

Such scaling up and scaling down are fundamentally at odds with the practices of education, or family life, which come down to relationships in a never-ending diversity of contexts. As a family member of a person identified as neurodivergent, finding my way in–or helping produce–research that is a link in that scaling process seems alienating, oppressive, and dehumanizing. This is what Tsing (2015) calls the "plantation model," invented just for the purpose of extracting, oppressing, dehumanizing. Anyone trying to

apply a "model" to a person with whom they have a caring relationship might well recognize this feeling. The messy multiplicities that emerge in a rush of stories can remind us of alternatives, in the best possible way, and push us toward the relationality and increasing complexity found in research based in very different "ethico-onto-epistemologies" (Barad, 2007).

Most of this thesis inquiry *came to be*, emergent, more than planned. It is the antithesis of the well-organized pedagogical encounter, the carefully formulated methodological choices. Instead, as the process went along, I recklessly tossed aside learning goals and either threw out or revised research methods, one after another, as they felt irrelevant or constraining. My plans were like stale cookies: it would be silly to eat them and then have to live with the indigestion. New practices emerged, including walking and playing methods through which role-playing spaces *and* neurodiversity might be explored and understood a bit differently.

As an example, walking emerged as a practice of inquiry entirely through an experiment in listening to reading materials as a pragmatic solution to a lack of time for study, exercise and parenting within the capitalistic education machine. Along the way, it became a central part of the thesis. Most of the following chapters were largely "written" on the hiking trails near my house, dictated into a speech-to-text app, just as most of the texts that are engaged were "read" on those trails, using earphones and the robot voice of text-to-speech technology. I am far from the first to have discovered that thinking through and with embodied movement is very different than thinking at a desk. Many people we acknowledge as "thinkers" are famous for their walking habits. In fact, as Tim Ingold (quoting designer Ralph Caplan) points out, the chair is "the first thing you need when you don't need anything" —and therefore is a "peculiarly compelling symbol of civilization," despite the fact that people in many parts of the world have done, and continue to do, without them entirely (Ingold, 2011, p. 39). Indeed, the title "chair" is given to a person in charge of a meeting, a department, a board of directors, which is an intriguingly inactive designation, one which binds them to a certain spot and certain, constrained activities. Walking and movement are integral to this thesis, and are explored from a variety of perspectives in most chapters.

It also became clear along the way that an inquiry in role-playing *games* seemed absurd to undertake as an observer, as *play* has never seemed terribly interesting as a

spectator. I had originally planned to be a participant observer for just a short amount of time, just long enough to gain some good contacts who could tell me about role-playing games and experiences. Instead, to my surprise, I "became a role-player," caught up in the storyworlds and playing five to ten hours a week in different games. I decided to try being a gamemaster, and began pouring through books and websites with materials, and joined various online groups about role-playing games, live-action role-playing (larp), and game studies. Parallel with (and connected to) my walking-as-understanding practice, I realized when I was first trying to write about methods, that a playing-as-understanding practice had also emerged. The material I gathered along the way in the form of interviews and observations, has become secondary to my own direct experiences and understandings as a practitioner, and in my conversations with other role-players and role-playing scholars as a (still inexperienced) member of the community.

It turns out there is considerable resonance between actual, physical walking and collaboratively imagined questing / movement in a role-playing game, particularly games like Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) that include quite a bit of travel and movement between imagined places. Or perhaps I just thought and read enough about role-playing games while walking that each became the lens through which I understand the other? The "truth" of that relationship is irrelevant, if it's even out there to be known. Together, they brought me to think about processes of emergent cartography, a relational and dialectic inquiry practice. Movement and collaborative, iterative becoming are, together, central to the substance and form of this inquiry, in various ways.

A second pillar of what we "know" is the question of who or what that knowledge serves. Rosi Braidotti (2019) and Aaron Kuntz (2019, 2021) question and problematize the hyper-individualized understanding of ourselves and our contexts. Psychology and education, which are two of the fields most strongly implicated in the field of neurodiversity and autism, are saturated with hyper-individualization and human exceptionalism, and a vision of growth and progress. Kuntz (2016) points out that the neoliberal capitalist project requires the coherent, humanist subject who sees themselves as hyper-individual, measures their social worth through their economic contributions, and is willing and able to exploit market conditions to improve their social standing (p. 34). Regimes of education and intervention are driven to support these goals, and neurodivergent persons are therefore described through, and their

experiences shaped by, such expectations. Role-playing games—and story-driven inquiry into the relational and collaborative potentialities they reveal—might be a practice that disrupts the "façade of coherency" that makes it all possible (Kuntz, 2019, p. 134).

Before I had children, I worked for an organization that provided shelter and services for people who were unhoused in Denmark. Several years of intense daily contact with persons experiencing extreme social marginalization made me acutely aware of what life can look like for people who are treated as "misfits" (Maier et al., 2020), and how they might come to lack a sense of belonging in the community, with limited possibilities to develop strong and reciprocal relationships. Despair, isolation, addiction, devastating health outcomes, and even death were part of the everyday life of the centre. Lonely lives with lonely ends. The research gaze, I believe, must be turned from such individual as the focus of study and site of description and analysis. We have described "differented" individuals in excruciating detail: developmental differences, Indigenous and colonized populations, disability, addiction, queer and trans, the list goes on. Specifying the type and degree of difference between them and the established, colonized, and capitalist-conforming "norm" will not keep them from being isolated and marginalized, nor will describing their "misery" in more explicit detail (Bozalek, Kuby, & Price, 2021; Tuck & Yang, 2014).

The focus needs to shift in a couple of important ways. First, we need to take a good, hard look at the contexts and relations of those who are "differented" (human and more than human), including ourselves, and place the onus for change on community rather than only the individual. Secondly, there needs to be an explicit research interest in other potentialities; of thriving, of relations of care and choice, of chosen contexts and playful encounters. The focus of this research is, in fact, carefully chosen, as it relates to all of these questions. There are not so much gaps in the existing research as there are whole landscapes largely disregarded as irrelevant. For instance, neurodivergent people seem only to be interesting to study and understand until they reach adulthood. The attention to understanding them and their lives dwindles through the teenage years to almost nothing. Of the small amount of research that exists, almost none of it is about quality of life: about what brings joy, builds community, makes friendship, love and connection possible. It seems a bit subversive to take on an undramatic study of a mainstream leisure activity that just happens to be a favourite practice for some

neurodivergent teens and adults. What brings folks joy? What are the conditions in which community building flourishes? How do friendship, love, and connection blossom?

Role-playing games may still seem a silly site of research; they tend to conjure up an image of an overenthusiastic adult who never quite grew up, dressed in a wizard's cape, spouting silly made-up magic words. Indeed, they are playful spaces, full of humor and mischief. But as any role-player can tell you, they are also sites of intense becoming, explorations of topics, concepts and identity. They are community-building spaces and important social networks, and a means to meet and grow new relationships. Role-playing games–playing them, designing them, experiencing and understanding the collaboratively imagined storyworlds–are spaces that can allow subversive re-imaginings, processes of emergence and becoming, pockets of resistance, and hints at what might be possible.

This inquiry is a form of research as resistance to the pillars of "what we know," or perhaps what we *can* know, and therefore has important resonances with neuroqueering (Yergeau, 2018), and anti-colonial (Coulthard, 2014; Simpson, 2017; Tuck & Yang, 2012) and anti-capitalist work, neurodivergent activism (Kapp, 2020; Walker & Raymaker, 2021), as well as critical game studies (Bowman, 2010; Garcia, 2017; Mizer, 2020).

It turns out to be marvellously interesting to put role-playing games and role-playing experiences into conversation with a diversity of perspectives. Role-playing games, which are all about collaborative imagination, allow us to explore how we might collectively and collaboratively (re)imagine emergent social practices. This provides some insights and reveals potentialities in regard to other, more general and high-stakes contexts: our schools, child-care centres, neighbourhoods, and places of employment. Role-playing games are played in an *intentionally* collectively imagined space, through the use of collaborative storytelling, reciprocal, mutual character development, and formula-driven interaction with human and nonhuman others. This has so much potential for considering what and how we might collectively, and perhaps subversively, imagine as other futures, other ways of solving problems and reshaping relationships of power and oppression.

With all that lived messiness as background, the context for the research is tabletop role-playing games and the folks that play them, neurodivergent and otherwise—and the games and artefacts that play them back!

2.1. Emergent Cartographies: The Dungeon Crawl

A rush of stories is a clear challenge to academic writing genres, and this is also an exploration of form. What if inquiry and research were a process of exploring the collaboratively imagined storyworlds through which we inhabit and interact with others? This record is an attempt to capture and follow some of the many threads of overlapping layers of stories. What happens if I fill pages with tales from the astonishing landscapes of emergent story-worlds, both those imagined and those that play out in "real life," with all their beauty, violence and compassion? I am not sure. I am, however, committed to storytelling as collaborative process, and to the experience of the text being different for every person who encounters it. It is an embrace of the curriculum without learning objectives, intervention without any specified outcomes, the zig-zag, anti-trajectory path of *unlearning*.

It seems every quest, just like any good hike, requires and/or produces a map. Indeed, maps and mapping are central to both practices. How does one describe a cartography of a collaborative, emergent, and imaginary space? How does one organize a patchy, unscalable, "anti-plantation" exploration, like picking a way through a forest, following patches of mushrooms? The practice is in focus here, more than any map that results, and which might lay out a distinctly different path than a linear, progressive framework implied by describing a predetermined "way forward." This type of exploration has been described as a sort of emergent cartography (Braidotti, 2010, 2019; Deleuze & Guattari, 2003; Ingold, 2011; Kuntz, 2019; Springgay & Truman, 2018), or a counter-cartography (Springgay & Truman, 2018). A cartography of spaces and connections that are beyond our control, and have no borders, and which generates unpredictably as you move.

I have sometimes joined my children, or watched, as they play Minecraft, the popular block-constructed exploratory video game. The cartographic practice of this inquiry is similar to the unnerving sensation of stepping into the unknown, the landscape that emerges, or becomes, as and with your character's movement! In Minecraft, the

platform generates the world as you move about in it, so you are creating the space as you explore it. You can see to the horizon, but must trust that beyond it, something awaits, and that you and your companions will be able to handle whatever comes. It is the exploratory educational space that teachers may dream of, but for which there are endless barriers within a system of pre-determined learning objectives, corporate interests and strict standardization.

In role-playing games, a map is also often drawn as one goes along—the "dungeon crawl" is a familiar type of role-playing scenario, that often is part of a longer campaign. The dungeon crawl sometimes takes place in a dungeon, but can in practice be any type of setting that involves a series of interconnected and unknown spaces for exploration, encounter, combat, treasure. It is the space where time slows, and the adventurers determine their own pace, their own path, engaging where and when they want. There is no knowing what is awaiting in each adjoining chamber, down any hallway or path, and what unfolds in each space will be dependent on what has already happened, and will shape the course of events to come. Characters are transformed, and the storyworld shaped in these spaces of yet-to-come. Player, character, dice, and gamemaster / storyteller all suspended in the becoming-together, and collaboratively imagining themselves into being, in a kind of "relational material-semiotic worlding" (Haraway, 2016, p. 13)

Unlike the colonial tradition of cartography, which is to create an (in principle) exhaustive, static representation of a place, meant for the purposes of conquering and claiming, such a practice has no fixed horizon, includes ever-expanding connections between people (human and nonhuman), and places, and past and present iterations of the same path, the same lands, the same story, the same character. It may allow us to orient as we go, but it is emergent, its boundaries are undefined, and it has no fixed scale. Instead of a compass and a ruler, a non-cartography requires a leap of faith, a flexible experience of time, and an acknowledgement of history and relationships. It does not refer to an objective counterpart in the real world, but imagines unlimited and unfolding iterations of the world.

This thesis journey has organized itself as the document tracing is organized, in ways similar to a dungeon crawl. Multiple foldings and refoldings, in the form of playing, walking, reading, listening, storytelling, have shaped iterative processes of inquiry. Each

chapter is a new encounter, and they can, in principle, be explored in any order. They are related, interconnected, a patchy (Tsing et al., 2019), fungal connectedness, that play into one another like the chambers of a dungeon crawl. The experience of reading each chapter will be shaped by the direction from which you have approached it.

This is only the beginning of a mycelial web that reaches its fungal threads into many disciplines, and has potentialities that can only begin to be addressed through the limitations of the pages of this thesis. Each chapter is a walk into the forest of this inquiry from a different trailhead; paths intersect, crisscross, some of them have a short leg in common, before branching off in another direction. They are the product—and the project—of iterative walking, playing, and humaning practices.

If I was to describe the different parts from the perspective of a role-playing adventure, this is what it would be:

The prologue / first chapter is the "adventure hook." It will hopefully wake your curiosity for role-playing games, and for neurodiversity, the way they did—and continue to do—for me.

This introduction is an orientation, a glance at the emerging sketch of the dungeon crawl as I, as gamemaster, have imagined its potentialities. The path through is our collaboratively imagined space; just as much yours as mine.

"Collaborative territoriality of imagined space" is a brief introduction to my entrypoint into role-playing games, the iconic gateway game Dungeons & Dragons in particular, and how collaboratively imagined storyworlds might allow us an oblique gaze into the way we approach special education.

"Research as resistance: A rush of methods" contains musings about the process of getting to this particular document. It is my journey, and discusses the choices made along the way that starts a walk away from the neuro in neurodiversity, and toward posthuman and postqualitative inquiry, shaped by relational ethic-onto-epistemologies. I invite you to explore the ways in which psychology might be asking all the wrong questions—or at least only a fraction of the possible questions, when it comes to autism and neuroatypicality.

This first part of the thesis essentially provides the "adventure overview" and "adventure background," which are important parts of role-playing preparation materials. Before plunging into the main sessions of the dungeon crawl itself, there is a "short rest" where the reader is invited to consider the terms "monster" and "monstrous," and how they relate to this thesis, before moving on.

The chapters that follow re/consider four mainstays of autism research, diagnosis, and interventions:

- Social-emotional reciprocity and empathy,

- Pathologized speech, such as echolalia vs so-called functional speech,

- Eye contact and gaze direction, particularly as an indication of sociality, and

- Repetitive behaviours

These sights of pathologized description are re/imagined diffractively (Barad, 2007; Murris & Bozalek, 2019b), through neuro-typical and -atypical storytelling, role-playing games, and various encounters in "real" and collaboratively imagined storyworlds.

Finally, the last chapter, "Endlessly Becoming Orc," is the debrief, something included in all transformative role-playing experience. The debrief considers my emergent practices as a postsecondary educator. I consider how my interaction with and within role-playing games has transformed my understanding and practices as an instructor. I invite the reader to join me in finding ways to playfully, creatively, and subversively re/imagine the premises that shape our educational systems—with a focus on postsecondary educational contexts. The debrief invites the reader to consider how neuroqueering our storyworlds about neurodiversity and a/typicality might transform the ways in which we encounter categorical and pathologizing systems, also within education.

Chapter 3.

The collaborative territoriality of imagined spaces

"What a long, strange trip it's been."

-Jerry Garcia

"It matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; … it matters what stories make worlds, and what worlds make stories."

-Donna Haraway (2016), *Staying with the Trouble*, p. 12

This thesis is not entirely about role-playing games, but you must understand a bit about them for it to make any sense. The idea of a rush of stories demonstrates the difficulty of determining where research begins, and forced me to think about how long this exploration had actually been going on, for years before I formally started my PhD work. It also brings an awareness of the extended network of stories and connections with other contexts and backgrounds that are both my own and more than my own. The landscape of role-playing games is one of those.

Role-playing games are many and varied, as are the communities that spring up in and around them. I am not a role-playing game expert. I have limited experience as a participant or player, and would call my area of study adjacent, with overlaps. There are innumerable forums, discussion groups, conferences (*Solmukohta 2020 Summary*, 2020), and extensive scholarship by and about these living and vibrant community, concerned with the art, expression and practice of role-playing (Bowman, 2010; Mackay, 2001; Mizer, 2020; Simkins, 2015; Williams et al., 2006). I am aware of some of them, follow along at the periphery, and know just about enough to get myself in real trouble. Instead of trying to say anything about the field in general, I will try to acknowledge my limitations, and refer readers to the real experts to understand the practice as a whole. This, then, is carefully and intentionally *not* a study of role-playing games, and I don't hope to say anything about their efficacy or use, or about them as an artform, or about participants in general.

My interest lies in and is shaped by the fields of education, neurodiversity and disability, as well as a growing interest in certain, specific role-playing groups and contexts as a participant and an observer of possibilities. I have always been a lover of games and stories, and find the magic of role-playing storyworlds just as captivating as a well-written novel. I'm like a moth to a porch light when it comes to exploring imaginative landscapes, and must admit to a certain level of obsession with the exhilaration and silliness of exploring and generating a narrative world together with a group of likeminded folks. Most importantly, I am captivated by the way I have seen people of all ages who generally tend to hang on—or be pushed toward—the periphery of many social contexts be drawn in, captivated and captivating, in this particular world.

My contact began with the Live Action Role-playing (larp) group that my children were in for a few years in Denmark, *Rollespilsfabrikken* (The Role-playing Factory) that ran different programs for children and youth. We had joined a bi-monthly group that played out in the fantasy story-world of Jarkwelt, with characters and stories inspired by fantasy literature. This is probably the most well-known type of role-playing world, peopled by elves, orcs, and dwarves, with medieval-type technology and garb. Many of these are they type of game known as "boffer larp," where there is stylized combat with elaborate rules and point systems, and a large part of the action is combat with role-play weapons.

The role-playing style in *Rollespilsfabrikken* bears the imprint of Nordic and Scandinavian pedagogy and child-centred philosophies regarding anti-competitive and socially supportive spaces. Although it included combat as a central activity, and the children were expected to keep some sort of account of the hits they took in battle, and "die" when appropriate, there was no competition, scoring, or point-keeping. The action was narrative-driven, with each season following an overall story arc, that could also change and adapt along the way. The framework was also influenced by the tradition of Nordic Larp, which is characterized by its focus on immersion and co-creation, and which is "not about winning, but about creating something meaningful together" (Stenros, 2014).

As my children became more involved with the group, I had more and more chances to interact with the other parents and caregivers. We gradually also formed a community, and began bringing food to share, and the means of starting a bonfire during

the role-playing afternoons, around which we would share stories and concerns about our children. It was there that I realized that Ash was not alone! I would estimate that most days, somewhere between one-fifth and one-quarter of the children and youth attending the sessions either had diagnoses like autism, ADHD, or anxiety, or were under scrutiny, often struggling socially in school and other social contexts. And yet, there seemed to be pretty much universally full and meaningful participation; the other parents and caregivers also expressed surprise and delight about way the community welcomed and embraced their children.

The summer when Ash was ten, we decided to go to role-playing camp for a week. It was there I came to appreciate the power stories held. Ash's sibling, Storm, tended to be withdrawn, quiet and uncertain in social situations, and still didn't always like to leave my side. They had been participating in the campaign sessions for over a year, but I imagined it was more a desire not to be left out of Sunday afternoon activities that was their motivation!

I was proven wrong. One morning I still remember clearly. The sun had not yet cleared the tops of the tallest trees at the edge of the clearing, and the interior of the tent was still dim when we awoke. My sleeping pad was too thin, I recall, and my hips hurt from four nights on the ground. It was the last day of role-playing camp, and the end of five days of intense activity for the one hundred plus eight to thirteen-year-olds, camped near the seashore, in and around the well-used buildings borrowed from the Scouts.

There wasn't much activity outside at that time of day; the last several nights we had fallen asleep to the ebb and flow of voices raised in planning, ambushes, and outright battles that play out in the hills and trails around the tent area. In the hours after dinner, when the role-play scenarios planned by the organizers were finished, the youth would grab weapons and set off to improvise their own wild scenarios involving zombies and soldiers, knights, and monsters, until long after dark. The night before, I had drifted off around eleven, and there was still the occasional shout or battle cry.

Ash had been awake and restless for a while, but Storm lay with eyes shut tightly. Ash asked what time it was, and began to fumble for clothing.

Storm's energy had been flagging since the day before. The camp was the first experience I had where they would be out of my presence for hours at a time, deeply

involved with the role-playing sessions. I had expected Storm to come search me out, asking to stay with me and help with the cooking or cleaning duties with the other parent volunteers. I suspected that today might be the day, when tiredness was enough to put them off the crowds of still mostly unknown kids. The first session of each day was a classic, fantasy setting with orcs, elves, and a kingdom at risk. It was the only scenario that was one long story arc that spanned the whole week; the others were standalone stories that concluded within the three- or four-hour time block. Storm finally opened their eyes and sat up slowly, cocooned in a sleeping bag.

"I'm so tired!" came the quiet moan, voice on the verge of tears and eyes circled with dark smudges. "Do we have to get up so early?"

"If you want breakfast before the first session starts, we need to get there soon." Storm nodded and reached for the green, home-sewn tunic. A few minutes later, we were dressed, and I was ready to glue a blond braided strand of fake beard onto their chin. It would transform them into the character created for this scenario: a dwarf named "Golden-Beard."

"Why does it have to be so early?" Storm asked, voice heavy with weariness.

"You can just lie back down and sleep a bit," I said. "Get up when you're ready, and join in after lunch. It's no fun if you're too tired."

"No," Storm wailed quietly, and lifted their face so I could paint on the spirit gum that will hold the beard in place. "Then I won't know how the story ends!"

A story is a wonderous and powerful thing.

Storm, I think, wasn't so much drawn in by the companionship of other children in the role-playing, but by the power of the story-worlds. A story with the possibility to participate, contribute to the action, and shape the outcome is indeed hard to resist!

3.1. An oblique approach: Wyrlding special education

As the first sentence in this chapter indicates, this is a brief orientation to role-playing games. It is also, obliquely, an orientation to how they might set us on a course through a project of "relational material-semiotic [re]worlding" (Haraway, 2016, p. 13) of

educational contexts. These tend to be based in understandings of typicality, built on psychologized, medicalized scientism, with the overall structure of "doing something to" folks who don't fit into the usual paradigm of schooling, or other social systems. There are real, material consequences that matter when our becoming-with emerges within a system where some of us are consistently "differented" in relation to normative expectations of intellectual and social competence—consequences for those of us seen as typical as well as atypical.

"It is my belief," writes Jonaya Kemperer (2020) "that larp affords us the actual ability to wyrd ourselves," Kemperer writes in the piece, "Wyrding the Self." They explain that it is a riff on the English word "weird," rooted in the Anglo Saxon "wyrd," meaning to control one's fate, or to become. Kemperer explores the personal, transformative potentialities of role-playing games as a space to "experiment with different selves."

"When we role-play," continues Kemper, "we completely shift who we are to fit the game." Kemperer distinguishes between the pre, during, and post versions of the larp storyworld, noting that the narrative, or post version is "only decided after the larp has taken place," is "personal to each player," and becomes their own embodied experience. "Wyrding" that experience is the process of becoming-other in intentional ways that break with the "mythical norm," alternatively enacting anticolonial, anti-racist, neuroqueer or other forms of resistance through the actions of one's character, or the structure of the larp.

The embodied practices of exploration of character and relations that happen within a larp storyworld create transformative and liberative potentials for self-understandings, and for challenging instead of uncritically reproducing normative expectations. While not as intensely immersive in the same way, tabletop games like Dungeons & Dragons create similar spaces of exploration of and through character, and similar opportunities for wyrding.

What if we turn our gaze from the individual player and consider the transformative potential of relational, collaborative worlding? Perhaps, to capture the magic and the potentiality of role-playing games, it might be a project of "wyrlding?" The intent of this thesis is to reorient our attention to include the *contexts within which*

normative self-understandings are produced and emerge, rather than focusing on the individualized processes.

Role-playing games offer an experiential practice which allows us to explore relational becoming-together in a space that encourages the enactment of a different set of values than the competitive, hyper-individualized, progress- and goal-oriented contexts that have emerged as schooling within neo-liberal capitalism.

What if we were to consider the experience of playing, contemplate the goals and practices of the Gamemaster, and the players, ruminate on the markers of "success" in a role-playing game context, and let it inform the way we think about the experiences of individuals identified as "different" in learning contexts? Would it nudge us to think differently about the goals and practices of those that lead specialized education program, or interventions? How might rethinking markers of success toward greater collaboration and an embrace of uncertainty destabilize our thinking about institutions of schooling? How might role-playing games offer ways to think about re-wyrlding special education?

This is not a direct look at education or schools, or at the individuals that populate specialized educational spaces and intervention programs. In fact, it offers very little in the way of special education history or theory. It offers an alternative, or perhaps more an addition to, the highly normative and standardized practices of our education and intervention programs, of measuring deficits and plotting trajectories toward the norms of improved test scores, gains in "functional" speech, reduction of non-normative sociality and behaviours. This thesis encourages the oblique gaze; a lateral glance, where we soften our focus, give up control, and let the shadowy silhouette materializes on the periphery. What do we notice if we look at such systems without looking at them?

The oblique approach is also how I stumbled upon the premise for this thesis. It was only through diffractively exploring my own experiences with role-playing storyworlds, both as a player and as a postsecondary instructor using games to rewyrld my syllabus and classroom practices.

I don't remember where or when I first heard about it, but I learned of a school in Western Denmark that teaches their entire 9-10th grade curriculum through larp. A few months later, I found myself on a train to Hobro, a small town that is the home of *Østerskov Efterskole*. "Efterskole" is a system of Danish-style boarding schools that somewhere around half of teens in Denmark attend for one of their last years of public school (which is grade 9 or 10, depending on the individual youth). Students at *efterskole* generally stay at the schools on Monday through Friday, sleeping there during the week, and leaving on Friday afternoons to spend the weekend with their families. I spent three days with them, talking to teachers, admin and students, and participating in classes.

This was my first introduction to the concept of "Edularp," or the use of larp or larp elements in classroom learning contexts. What struck me most during my first visit to the school was that it seemed like a strangely intuitive way to learn, considering how radically different it is from what usually happens in schools. The school was organized around a different theme each week, and I arrived in the middle of H.P. Lovecraft week. As one of the teacher explained, a theme week usually has one of three main formats: Either storytelling based, game based, or "atmosphere" based. In the storytelling weeks, the unifying theme was a narrative or storyline, which was often based on a historical or political event (some examples they named were World War I, the Salem witch trials, or Occupy Wallstreet). The game-based weeks were like another time I visited, where they had designed an elaborate Cold War-inspired, imaginary political landscape, and the students had been divided into delegations from the different countries, and were attending a series of meetings and negotiations in to determine the of their world and prevent a looming war.

Lovecraft week was an "atmosphere" based week, where they were trying to create a taste of the surrealism and horror in Lovecraft's fiction, and different teachers had integrated this theme in different ways into their subjects. I attended an English language arts class where the students were presented with a surreal painting and had to come up and present an artistic critique and interpretation, based on religious and cult symbolism they had learned. The teacher explained that they were, in fact, preparing for the grade 9 nationwide qualifying exams, because although the content was unusual, their presentations had them practicing the persuasive essay format that they would need to use in their oral and written exams. I have to say, I have never witnessed a

group of fourteen and fifteen-year-olds more engaged in outdoing one another with their extensive knowledge and vocabulary of art motifs and symbolism!

A significant portion of the spaces at the school were taken by students identified as having developmental and social disabilities. Staff and students alike described—and and demonstrated—how all the students played and learned side by side. The teachers, special educators, and support staff were all enthusiastic about the possibilities of Edularp, both for learning and remembering school subjects, and for encouraging social interactions. Of course, everyone there had chosen to attend or work at the school because of an already existing enthusiasm about role-playing games! Nonetheless, what I heard from both students and staff was that a large majority of the students came from very bad school experiences, including bullying and social exclusion, academic and disciplinary problems, and lack of interest; only in this very different community had they found a context in which to thrive socially and academically. Many had their educational trajectory completely transformed by attending the school.

And yet, their success wasn't due to an intensive intervention-based approach. The teachers were quite relaxed and hands-off. They led classes in a playful way, often in costume themselves, using games, stories, and silly incentives. Subjects that couldn't be as easily woven into the fabric of the week's theme often motivated students through participation in an ongoing game-based system, earning additional points for their team or class by completing homework or turning up for class. I found myself mystified by the description of these options and of the "game-based" theme weeks, unable to see how it all fit together. I could only see the young people eagerly bargaining with their teachers, occasionally with dice and story pieces. It was only after my own experiences playing Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) and similar tabletop role-playing games that I could begin to understand how this type of framework might be created.

3.2. In the beginning…

D&D, released in 1974, was the first comprehensive system of rules published to support the storytelling role-playing game in what Sarah Bowman (2010) describes as "a collision of Tolkien-inspired themes and tactical simulation games" (p. 18). Since then, role-playing games have exploded into a multiverse of genres and settings, including

vampire worlds, historical period contexts, science fiction settings, fairytale and mythology-based, zombie lore, and dystopian or post-apocalyptic, just to name some of the common types. A whole genre of "Magic Schools," based on Harry Potter-inspired settings, has sprung up in the last couple of decades, and is especially popular with children and youth (*Solmukohta 2020*, 2020).

Part of the reason for this diversity might be due to the publication in 1986 of the Generic Universal Role-playing System (GURPS) by Steve Jackson (*GURPS: Generic Universal RolePlaying System*, n.d.; Jackson, n.d.), which allowed any imagined or existing context to be imported into a game system and played as a collaborative story-world. Several of the role-players I know, and those I talked to in connection with my research, have fondly named GURPS system as an imaginative space that can be tailored to any interest.

D&D is the game system most people who have heard of tabletop role-playing games are familiar with. Although I have tried several other systems, it is also the one I have the most experience playing. Thinking I was "preparing to do field work" at the beginning of my PhD studies a few yeas ago, I joined a D&D game at the local game store where beginners were welcome. I was hoping to make some contacts with people in the role-playing community, as well as get some understanding of games. I was still mostly interested in larping, and knew there were sometimes a bit of crossover in the communities. Also, the game structures of larp had grown out of tabletop games (Bowman, 2010), so that would be helpful in any case. Little did I know that becoming a player myself would end up central to the whole thesis!

An intimate and complex world beckoned me in, with all the irresistible trappings. There was a secret language; I would take months to feel comfortable using words like *crit, charisma modifier,* and *dex save*. Player-characters sat around me, with surprisingly dense relationships to one another. They seemed to share a history and inside humor, even though it was a newly formed group. Not least, there was the sensuous decadence of hand-painted minifigures and polyhedral dice sets in every shade and texture imaginable. It seemed a small flight from the world of fantasy and science fiction literature that I had loved for decades. Indeed, there appears to always have been considerable overlap (Fine, 1983), something interview participants would also talk about later on.

What is it actually like to play D&D? How does the game work? D&D belongs to the school of role-playing games called "tabletop games," which as the name suggests, are played around a table. When I sat down for my first game, I had quite literally no idea whatsoever what I was doing. I had checked in with the store staff, and then announced my intentions as a curious researcher to Jeff, the group gamemaster (called a Dungeon Master, or DM, in D&D) and the other players. Only then did I stop and look around at the books, papers, and miniature figures spread out on the tabletop, and felt the sinking dread of someone who's just realized that they should have read more than the description on the back cover before showing up at book club.

No one seemed to care that I wasn't prepared. Before I could rally an objection, Jeff stuck a premade character sheet for a Paladin into one of my hands and a set of those gorgeous dice in the other, and plunked me down in a chair next to Gabe, one of the more experienced players. He proved to be a helpful soul. I flipped helplessly through four pages of text, daunting lists of stats and small diagrams that described my character. I was allowed to give them a name of my choice, but everything else was determined. This was the easiest way to start, I was assured. Gabe gave me a lightning tutorial of the first page of the character sheet and dice set. He also assured me that I could make do without looking at the information in the other three pages. The dice, it turned out, each had a different name to remember! I must have looked as shocked as I felt, because he just laughed.

"The best way to learn is really just to jump in and play." The chorus of nods around the table indicated that everyone there had done that too.

"This is the most important thing," Jeff added, holding up a twenty-sided dice. "The d20. That really is the basis of almost everything you will do." I located mine, with Gabe's help, and sat back in my chair.

"So," began Jeff, in a different tone. Silence settled over the table. "You find yourselves in Port Neyanzaru." He had a collapsible cardboard barrier with some dragon artwork on the table in front of him, blocking his equipment from the view of the rest of us. He used a clip to fasten a colorful fantasy drawing onto the cardboard DM screen. It showed a bustling harbor city street filled with creatures of all variety, going about their

daily business. "I have a picture of it here. The air is damp and muggy, and you are already sweating from the heat…"

Sitting there that first Sunday, I realized, with growing astonishment, that D&D was less a game and more a practice of collaborative storytelling. And it turned out that what they had been telling me about jumping in was not just a platitude. I genuinely got the sense that, despite my bumbling attempts to roll the right dice or find my place on the character sheet, I did not seem to be a burden to the more experienced and expert players. New participants, even novices, were genuinely a welcome addition.

My beginner's euphoria was enough to make Ash and Storm want to try it out, and role-playing games became a family passion for a few years. It's easy to get hooked, as committed role-players have discovered over the years. Storm and I play in a campaign that is in its fourth year, and that is not particularly long-lived compared to the legendary groups rumored to have been playing out a story-world together for decades.

Game scholar C. Thi Nguyen (2019, 2020) distinguishes between two types of play, when considering game activities. *Achievement play* is when you play "for the sake of winning," where as *striving play* is when you play "for the sake of going through the struggle to win" (Nguyen, 2019, p. 5). In striving play, one might say, the player "temporarily acquires an interest in winning for the sake of the struggle" (ibid.). A marathon runner, Nguyen says as an example, approaches the race as a type of striving play; if the destination was the goal, it would undoubtedly be quicker and easier to reach it by driving a car. However, it is the experience, the temporary, chosen goal of reaching that spot in a different way. The difficult way.

Role-playing game practices are this type of play, where there is no achievement, no end goal or specific way of "winning," like there would be in a boardgame, or a card game. I think that may be surprising for many people when they first enter into a role-playing game context. I know it was for me. It isn't the goal, it is the journey—and could likely even end in the goal you thought you started out moving toward.

Playing and gamemastering D&D has also been transformative to my own teaching practices. I have spent considerable time pondering what it is that makes games, and in particular collaborative storytelling games, so compelling. Avery Alder's words ring in my ears as I plan a syllabus that reminds me to "Frame scenes that let the characters shine." That is very different than a syllabus based in colonial, historical, and elitist ideas of excellence and rigor. "Hold lightly to your own ideas" is some of the most difficult advice to put into practice.

Could game spaces also offer us ways to enact the possibility of "holding lightly to our own ideas" of typicality, sociality, humanness? I wonder if that is important for keeping the attention of students, as well as creating smooth, less codified spaces (Deleuze & Guattari, 2003) in special education as well as my own postsecondary classes. As any academic, I am very fond of my "own" ideas, as I am fond of my own self- and socially enacted understanding of myself as "typical," intelligent, competent, articulate. Which, as I like to remind my students, is the position from which one should feel concerned! In teaching and assessment, as Erin Manning urges, perhaps we need to be less sure we know what the right answer is, to feel less insecure about not being the focus of attention, and the model of expertise (Bozalek, Kuby, & Van Hove, 2021).

It is important for a gamemaster to be willing to embrace uncertainty, dwell in the unpredictable, and allow the collaborative emergence of the yet-to-be-possible, which is a virtue those of us who lead educational spaces might do well to embody.

Creating character, creating world

Sarah Lynn Bowman identifies three central elements as being the defining characteristics of role-playing games of all types. Despite the diversity in medium, style and context, all role-playing games have in common the practice of "ritualized, shared storytelling" around which community forms, a game structure or rules that provide a "framework for the enactment of specific scenarios and solving of problems within them," and, finally, there is some level of playing or developing an alternate identity within the game (Bowman, 2010). In D&D, like most tabletop games, this mainly happens through negotiated, verbal storytelling. In larp, the participants embody and enact their characters, including clothing and appearance, and interact with one another in a form of theater. With online games, players interact through their avatars, which they move

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around in a virtual landscape, communicating via online chat options. In tabletop games, the characters are part of a collectively imagined story-world, and their actions and interactions are determined through the narration of the player-characters and the gamemaster.

Characters and story alike are created with an interesting combination of imagination, rules and chance. There are specific choices than can be made intentionally from a range of options, but much of the time, the world and the people in it are influenced heavily by the hand of fate, in the form of dice roles. In tabletop role-playing games, the unpredictability of the world is baked into the framework of the game using a tool that throws in an element of indeterminacy to choices and outcomes, and which play a role in all three of the elements of role-playing that Bowman identifies. In D&D, this tool is the dice.

The Player's Handbook includes step-by-step instructions and rules for every aspect of playing D&D, often in almost excruciating detail, and, indeed, discussing the technicalities of these rules is one of the adjacent pleasures to playing. For developing your own character, the book recommends to first "think about the kind of adventurer you want to play" (Crawford et al., 2014, p. 11), and suggests looking at the illustrations in the Player's Handbook or other D&D source for inspiration if needed, and only then following the steps for each detail of character creation. "Your conception of your character might evolve with each choice you make," (p. 11) the authors advise. Indeed, even in this pedantic, statistic-laden process, the character emerges in a dialogue between player, rules and prompts, and dice.

Once you have determined the main features of your chosen character type, namely the type of creature you want to play, and what their primary "job" is[2], you determine their "ability scores" randomly, using four six-sided (d6) dice. The player then chooses how to distribute the ability scores between the six "abilities": Strength, Dexterity, Constitution, Intelligence, Wisdom, and Charisma. These are more or less the attributes (strengths and weaknesses) that the character will have, and score distribution

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[2] D&D, like most everything else, is far from perfect! There are some aspects of the content, language and goals of the world that I (and others who have criticized them) find highly problematic from a critical race / decolonial perspective. For the moment, I will set aside this discussion, and return to it in a later chapter.

choices (with a possible range from four to eighteen for a beginning character) will depend on the type of character you want to create.

A clever team of role-players at Game to Grow have developed Critical Core, an accessible role-playing game system based on Wizards of the Coast's Open Game License version of the D&D rules. In the Gamemaster's Guide (Johns et al., 2020), they include a version of the "tomato rule," as a guideline to help understand how the different skill categories might be understood more concretely:

How do I help my players understand attributes?

One of the simplest ways to understand attributes is through tomatoes!

Strength is a character's ability to **crush a tomato.**

Dexterity is a character's ability to **dodge a tomato being thrown at them.**

Constitution is a character's ability to **eat a rotten tomato without getting sick.**

Intelligence is a character's ability to **identify that tomato is a fruit .**

Wisdom is a character's ability to **recognize that tomatoes don't belong in a fruit salad.**

Charisma is a character's ability to **sell someone a fruit salad that has tomatoes in it!** (p. 19)

New players tend to hope for high rolls, so that their character can be as powerful and "successful" as possible, and this is a play style that continues to appeal to some. However, as one gains experience playing in different contexts, many people begin to appreciate the opportunities an unusually low score can give for more complex character development and richer role-playing opportunities. In a group I ran for a couple years for my children and their friends, it seems that even these younger players began trending toward less "heroic" types when creating new characters after our first campaign.

Players must then choose—or let the dice decide for them—different traits, including personality, ideals, goals, and flaws. Again, the Player's Handbook and other resources offer premade solutions, and recommendations for how these can be used, as well as the template for creating one's own unique background. Often, DMs will create extra alternatives that fit a particular homebrew story-world as an extra option. But for each background, there are nearly endless combinations of personality traits, and the

array of different individuals that can show up in any game is mind-boggling! Finally, players are also encouraged to write a personal "backstory" for their character, to guide their choices and role-playing. Often, these are shared with the gamemaster, who has the option of weaving them into the story-world in some way.

"Rolling up characters" is a favorite pastime of many role-players. One player I talked to told me she had over two hundred characters in a database, many of which had never been used to play. Many were complete with backstories, often a drawing of their appearance, just standing ready to be brought to life in a story-world. Personally, I love making unexpected combination for my characters: Orc bards, gnome fighters, or tiefling (half-demon) clerics. The creation of new alter-egos, or what Bowman describes as possible "alternate identities," brings a whiff of adventures to come, comrades to meet and skills to develop.

Becoming other

So, you have a character! What now? The story-worlds of D&D are a landscape more akin to shifting sands than to solid rock. The active participation of players-characters and gamemaster, alongside and within the game framework, create a space in which the story-world emerges—and your character with it. The rough sketch at the beginning of a campaign, with ability scores and backstory, have to become themselves through the "ritualized storytelling" practices. Most often, this means ranging far from the original plan for the character, and beyond the scope of the gamemaster's intentions. Once again, the dice play a critical role in the way the story-world moves forward (or sideways).

The ability scores that were rolled for your character determine your "modifier," or bonus, for different types of actions the player-character chooses to take. As expected, a high score will give a larger bonus than lower scores, and some of the character's skills will likely have a negative modifier. These numbers are added or subtracted from the result of a twenty-sided dice (d20) roll. It works something like this:

"The mysterious figure you are chasing down the hallway disappears around a corner," the DM tells you. "When you round the corner, you see a flash of blue the same colour as their cloak, and hear a door slam. When you reach the doorway, there is a

heavy, oak door with no mechanism for opening it." This is an offering from the DM, a crossroads, at which the player-characters will determine how to move forward.

"Can I put my ear up to the door and see if I can hear anything?" you ask.

"Sure. Roll a perception check," the DM tells you, which actually means, "Roll your d20 dice and add the bonus you have for "Perception" skill (which falls under the skill category of 'Wisdom')." The DM has determined ahead of time what is going on behind the door, and the difficulty of being able to accomplish this task, and has a minimum number in mind for the player-character to roll, or perhaps several numbers that will determine different levels of success at . At this point, everyone around the table waits with breathless expectation to see what the outcome is! This is the moment where *anything* can happen. You roll your dice, and add (or subtract) your skill bonus, and find out if the fates are in your favor, or waiting to throw a banana peel underfoot. As the story progresses, most characters end up with an outrageous bonus on one or two skills. The chances of success much greater when you can add ten to your roll, and a group of adventurers quickly learns to lean on one another for different tasks.

Different groups I have been a part of practice different levels of dramatic enactment of their roles; this sort of negotiation can be played very mechanically, with a focus on stats, maps, using wording directly from the Player's Handbook to describe actions, spells etc. It is also possible to rely entirely on theatre of the mind, utilizing thick descriptions, and doing without maps and minis at all. In such groups, players give their characters voices, speech patterns, and mannerisms, movements, attacks and spells can be described in detail, and the story-world is more likely to emerge through in-game and in-character negotiations than out-or-character discussions between players and DM.

"My character casts Thorn Whip at the goblin," accomplishes the same in-game goal as, "I pull a piece of dried, brown stick out of my pouch, whisper a few words over it, and lash a magic whip of vicious, overgrown blackberry thorns toward the goblin," but the two contribute to a very different type of emergent story-world.

Different DMs and groups also strike a different balance between exploration, social interaction, and combat encounters, and likewise different game systems and story-worlds focus on different aspects of story. In D&D, the action of the story is often

moved forward through "encounters" that involve fighting. As in exploration, defeating enemies takes a combination of magic users, weapons fighters, and supporting characters, such as healers. Combat rules likewise make use of the d20 as the primary randomness-channeler, and any character can be the one who fails miserably or saves the day at a critical moment.

After accumulating enough experience, characters can go up in level. There are twenty character levels in D&D, and it becomes progressively difficult to reach the next level, as each jump requires a larger increase in "experience points (XP)." A new level means gaining new skills and abilities, more powerful spells, and more "hit points," or life, which makes the characters more difficult to kill off or defeat. Generally, characters in the same game will "level up" at the same time. It's considered bad form and a fun spoiler if there is too great a difference in expertise, or one player is too "overpowered." The fun is puzzling out ways to get out of danger, save one another, and generally make a good story out of things, all elements that an individual, overpowered hero makes impossible.

3.3. Virtual dungeons and digital dice

In the last decade or so, the development of online platforms allows for games to play out in virtual space as well, using video and audio chat along with virtual maps and character icons. In the campaigns I play in, we have used the online platform *D&D Beyond* to coordinate our campaign and store electronic character sheets. When public spaces were suddenly off limits and private gatherings strongly discouraged during the 2020-2022 shutdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic, our game moved further online, through Roll20's "digital tabletop," and otherwise continued very much as usual. Storm complains that it is not as interesting as in person gatherings, and we both miss the aesthetic experience of using our favorite dice and specially painted mini-figures, but it is nonetheless a welcome social outlet, facilitated by electronic technologies.

Role-playing games are also emerging as a spectator sport, with a growing number of podcasts and live-streamed games broadcast regularly, some with professional voice actors and a whole support team. The games have also gained increased attention from media portrayals such as the Netflix series Stranger Things.

Wizards of the Coast offers a wide range of games, storylines and merchandise that reflect and expand on the games, in a dialogical relationship with games in popular culture.

In short, it is an ever-expanding "multiverse," of which I have barely scratched the surface after several years of playing weekly! Many of these spaces, however, don't seem to contain the same messy, grassroots type of energy that is found in a group of everyday folks sitting down around someone's kitchen table and dreaming up an adventure together through a mish-mash of ideas. These are the spaces I am interested in. These are the types of games that are the focus of this thesis.

When I started playing, my hope had been that, as a newcomer, I could slip into the game-world without disturbing the flow of the game. I never imagined that it might not be a game—or a flow—at all, but a network of stories, with each character's movements so complex and multidirectional that no one point could be identified as a disturbance. It also took me by surprise to learn that I wasn't learning a game, but becoming part of a community, and a new player-character absolutely *does* disturb the storyworld. But it is a rich, diffractive disturbance (Barad, 2007; Murris & Bozalek, 2019a) that adds to the ripple pattern of the multiverse.

What does it mean to become part of a community in a role-playing storyworld? Is it different than becoming part of a classroom community, or a workplace? Those are some of the questions I hope to explore in the coming chapters.

The Covid-19 global pandemic, during which the bulk of this thesis was written, has drawn the attention of a broader public to matters of interdependence. There is a heightened urgency toward understanding collective subjectivity, the we-are-in-this-together (Braidotti, 2019) of collaborative becoming-together. We have a first-had awareness of the precarity and peril of compulsory capitalism, as well as its unsustainability and inherent inequalities. We've gained a tangible, virus-driven understanding of relationality, and a clearer sense of how we are all connected, everywhere and always, but how connectedness, in itself, is not an equalizing factor. We are in this together, "although-we-are-not-one-in-the-same" (Braidotti, 2019) Working in this particular time has undoubtedly shaped this thesis. Time will tell if it has perhaps also shaped its relevance to a broader audience.

Role-playing games offer a space that is intentionally created to be collaboratively imagined, undefined, emergent, and which allow us to enact and play out some aspects of a relation ontology. It seems a playful, fantastical counterpoint to the often firmly established, hyper-individualized institutions in which we do the serious work of life. Indeed, most people play just for the fun, or would at the very least not play if it wasn't fun! Might a close exploration of D&D story-worlds also provide the humus (Haraway, 2016) for a diffractive reading of other cornerstones of neoliberal capitalism, such as education and wage labour? What would happen if we used—or recognized when we used—a playful, storied approach, with a goal of purposeful transformation? How could our understanding of ordinary, everyday, and material contexts be transformed by discovering what they might share with collectively imagined storyworlds?

Chapter 4.

A rush of methods

> All that you touch,
> You Change.
>
> All that you Change,
> Changes you.
>
> The only lasting truth
> Is Change.
>
> God
> Is Change.

-Octavia Butler (1993), The Parable of the Sower

"A rush of stories is a method," Anna Tsing asserts. This thesis accepts and embraces a rush of stories.

But what is a rush of methods?

Long ago, I started out with a qualitative research project about neurodiversity and role-playing game contexts, in the "rush to application" (St. Pierre, 2018, 2019) that tends to happen in, and even before, the start of a doctoral program. Along the way, however, the path has twisted and turned in unexpected ways, and I now find myself, to my surprise, thinking and writing within the family of post-qualitative inquiry. This move has been both deliberate and incidental; different encounters with the world have nudged the direction of inquiry just as much as any intentional process. Elizabeth St. Pierre writes about this, quoting Deleuze & Guattari (2003) "the *long preparation* for post qualitative inquiry is thinking, writing, and living with theory in 'experimentation in contact with the real'" (St. Pierre, 2018, p. 604).

This thesis engages movement, process, and relationality, and is also about playfulness, storytelling, and imagination, all of which subvert the *pathology paradigm* (Smagorinsky, 2016, p. 8) through which autism is described, diagnosed, and intervened

upon in different ways. Bringing these disparate threads into conversation calls for a rethinking of method, or methods. To that end, I have begged, borrowed and stolen methods from different sources, as they became relevant through my process of inquiry, and in some cases I have invented my own where something seemed to be missing. In this thesis, you will find a rush of methods: something old and something new, something borrowed, and perhaps even something blue. Different methods are tried on, their rhythms taken up (St. Pierre, 2019) and perhaps cast aside, perhaps paired with a strange bedfellow, perhaps twisted into something monstrous (Cohen, 2020), in the hopes of transcending the usual taxonomies of quantitative, qualitative, conceptual.

As a way of conceptualizing, I am calling this a "rush of methods." By this, I mean, in a sense, it is an enactment of diffractive reading practices. Murris and Bozalek (2019b) encourage "reading texts through and around each other, rather than against each other" (p. 11).

Diffractive reading practices (Barad, 2007; Bozalek & Zembylas, 2017; Murris & Bozalek, 2019a) centres generative re-orientation, where the reader and writer "engage with the text productively to trace some of the ways in which their ideas are entangled" (Murris & Bozalek, 2019a, p. 2), rather than critique in the more familiar sense. It is a practice of reading texts, sometimes very different in genre, discipline, paradigm, with and through one another; finding resonance, connection, points of tension or trouble. It is the generative reading, in the spirit of "yes, and."

I have tried to set into motion some "propositions" (Murris & Bozalek, 2019b; Springgay, 2015) that go beyond diffractive reading (although there is also plenty of that in amongst these pages) and extend this into an embodied exploration of role-playing games, putting diffraction "into practice, thereby disrupting the theory/practice binary" (Murris & Bozalek, 2019b, p. 2).

"A study that begins as a qualitative study cannot be made post-qualitative after the fact" (p. 5) warns St. Pierre (2021) And yet, that is what I have done. I started with a rush to method, which rather quickly showed itself to be untenable, a story that will be told further along in this chapter. I hope, though, that I peeled back enough layers of my

original plan to let it unfold into something other. That something is an experimentation: instead, it became a rush of methods.

"We cannot know what our research demands of us," writes Stephanie Springgay (2015), "before we are in the midst of the research event" (p. 81). This was certainly true of my process through this inquiry. It is an unfolding I hope to, in some small way, recreate through the written (and read) document. Storm was asking about my thesis one day, part way through the writing process, and I revealed that my secret hope is for my thesis to sneak up on the reader. I have accomplished what I want to do if they think they are involved in an intriguing but warm wash of stories, I explained, and then, suddenly and unexpectedly, they will look up at some point and say, "Oh, *that's* what this is about."

At the same time, I do not, and will not, know what readers who engage with the document will take from it. Method "preestablishes what can happen and privileges human individualism" (Springgay, 2015, p. 78). I have, both consciously and unintentionally, moved away from, the preestablished idea of what can happen, and from the individual, representational framework. This movement has been a transition in favor of a more ethical alternative: a shift in our attentiveness "from interpersonal interactions to a more mangled orientation between bodies, things, and sensations" (p. 79).

"Practices of knowing," writes Barad (2007), "are specific material engagements that participate in (re)configuring the world" (p. 91). This inquiry engages not only text, but also landscape, movement, games, bodies, dice, digital text-to-speech apps, in and as method/propositions, diffracted through one another, into a practice of knowing. Diffraction is a way to "[pay] attention to the differences that matter without creating oppositions" (Murris & Bozalek, 2019b, p. 11). It is my hope that the rush of methods discussed, enacted and engaged throughout (including those where I take a more skeptical position in my discussion), might be read in not opposition, but in generative, affirmative dialogue with one another.

4.1. Research as resistance

This thesis is, importantly, about resistance and refusal as an ethical research position. It is grounded in a paradigm of ongoing struggle against oppressions pathologization, and for social, material, and political change.

Neurodiversity is a phoenix that arises from the ashes of institutional violence against people who are perceived as different, the "misfits" (Maier et al., 2020). This is the main reason I use the term throughout this thesis, despite the growing dissatisfaction with the term neurodiversity within both self-advocacy and scholarly communities. I think Erin Manning (2020) frames the tension very well in the introduction to *For a Pragmatics of the Useless*, specifying that the site of inquiry in that book is not the "*neuro* in *neurodiversity*." Instead, as Manning writes, this thesis aims to "sidestep neuroreductionism," and instead interrogate various systemic ways that neurotypicality, akin to structural racism, is "the (unspoken) baseline of existence" and "the neutral ground from which difference asserts itself" (Manning, 2020, p. 2).

From the beginning, this thesis, and my motivation to do work connected to neurodiversity, has been based in a personally engaged, ethical standpoint, that shapes both the focus and procedures of research, and in this way the current iteration seems to be the natural, perhaps inevitable, result of the direction and purpose of the course that was set long ago, the "long preparation." This approach to ethically-informed research practice, based in solidarity and relationality, takes root in and produces the collective subjectivity and affirmative ethical position of Rosi Braidotti's subject position of "we-are-(all)-in-this-together-but-we-are-not-one-and-the-same" (Braidotti, 2019, p. 43). Such a position allows for the breakdown of binaries such as researcher / researched / research, while still making possible the exploration of differences in experience, social position, and historical and ongoing injustice and oppression.

Aaron Kuntz (2021) encourages researchers to think about the "post" in post-qualitative research as designating an ethical enactment, in the sense of standing at one's post, rather than the more common conception of "new" or "after." The recent proliferation of post- methodologies is perhaps an indication of this willingness to "open-up inquiry to the ethical implications of new ways of becoming in our relational worlds" (p. 215). It is a move beyond technique, and a commitment to practice a "sustained

ethical engagement with the question of inquiry" (p. 215), which has, indeed, been of central importance since long before the boundaries of this thesis began to be drawn.

This is the inquiry that emerges from the "stumbles" that happen within encounters of everyday life, when objects object (Brinkmann, 2014). This is a deeper ethical commitment that leans into the stumble and listens to the objection of the objects. It begins with a deliberate *turn away* from certain aspects of research procedure and focus, and creates a framework for inquiry that is, at its core, defined through "analytic practices of refusal," (Tuck & Yang, 2014). The full goal of this ethical research position goes beyond simply including the perspectives of marginalized people into research, but objects, instead to "the very processes of objectification/subjection" (Tuck & Yang, 2014, p. 814).

The act of refusal, I have found, can itself become the emergence of method. It is like walking a path through a maze, where moments and sites of refusal are the dead-ends that make it necessary to change course. The researcher does not know when or where such points will emerge, until the moment of encounter, when it becomes clear that there is a crossroads and a becoming, and the only possible way forward is sideways: to refuse and change course. The wandering path that emerges both produces and is produced by relationality; it is a "deliberate miscalculation of what matters and what has yet to matter" (Kuntz, 2019, p. 145) and the refusal to accept the well-trodden categories and trajectories that the world presents to us in the form of research opportunities.

Resisting psychology

Within the frameworks of neurodiversity and mental health, refusal means, importantly, resisting the psychologizing gaze, and the pressure to let "statistical outcomes stand in for truths" (Kuntz, 2019, p. 101). This is a task filled to the brim with dilemma; the whole concept of developmental disorder/disability and mental disorder/disability is invented through the statistical methods and definitions of psychology, through the creation of a "pathology paradigm" (Smagorinsky, 2016; Walker & Raymaker, 2021), that must at the same time be accepted and resisted to make sense of work from this perspective. This thesis lies in the boundarylands of neurodiversity advocacy, disability studies, philosophy of education, and psychology, disciplines that

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tend to resist being herded into conversation, Much of the research would likely reject my claims to kinship altogether.

Scholars thinking and living at the intersection of neurodiversity and queer studies seem to manage this delicate dance with grace. "Neuroqueering" (Walker & Raymaker, 2021; Yergeau, 2018) is the queering of "neurocognitive processes … [and the] outward embodiment of those processes" (Walker, 2015); an act of resistance to the categorization and pathologization that define and characterize neurodiversity and mental health/mental disorder, and the behaviors and embodiments that signify and are signified by such categories. Neurodiversity, this perspective points out, both resonates with, and often literally intersects with, gender identity and sexuality categories. Nick Walker writes:

> The Pathology paradigm starts from the assumption that significant divergences from dominant sociocultural norms of cognition and embodiment represent some form of deficit, defect, or pathology. In other words, the pathology paradigm divides the spectrum of human cognitive/embodied performance into 'normal' and 'other than normal,' with 'normal' implicitly privileged as the superior and desirable state. (Walker & Raymaker, 2021, p. 6).

In essence, neuroqueering requires a sleight-of-hand: "belief in" or acceptance of the categories constructed through psychology, while simultaneously resisting them. It is the acceptance of a spectrum of diversity among bodyminds, *and* the rejection of the idea that these can (and should) be categorized, described, and ranked according to deficiency, wholeness, or worth. I've often described my relationship to Ash's diagnosis as the "ironic distance." Diagnoses and designations are ultimately essentializing tools, and navigating them as they apply to an actual person has resulted in a simultaneous embrace and rejection of the definitions, descriptions, and categories they offer.

While I don't identify as neurodivergent myself, I do identify as queer, and live with neurodiversity as a close companion. I will humbly and emphatically state that this does *not* give me the direct experience of disability or neurodiversity, and I am deeply aware of the all-too-often problematic role of "autism parents," and their claim to authentic representation that maintains systems of power and oppression, even within family relations. I believe it *does* mean that I have the embodied understanding of being the object of mis/classification, ranking, and the pressure to live up to normative expectations of personhood. These life conditions do not grant me expertise in

neurodiversity, but they do give me a position from which to understand the urgent necessity of rethinking the science that produces a pathology paradigm, and the systems that make such a paradigm feel necessary.

The positioning of this study as post-qualitative, and the ethical refusal at the centre of the inquiry, can best be understood by picking up a thread of the tale of my journey—another moment of stumble data. Research is porous. All of my life is both potentially, and inevitably, a part of my research, and there is a crowd of other stories pressing in, whenever I read or write. Research is also part of its own multiverse. Like any good adventure, I am not opening up a blank spreadsheet, but dropping into the middle of a tea party already in progress; anything I have to say is part of a rich landscape of lives past and present, and conversations already started. Even so, one must decide on an entry point; in this case, that place is the start of my doctoral studies.

I began in an autism research group when I entered the Educational Psychology program with a plan already in mind to research role-playing communities. While starting my coursework, I also followed the usual trajectory for a new PhD student rushing to method in that context: describing procedures, seeking ethics approval, and putting out notifications to recruit research subjects. I knew I wanted to talk to people. Listening to the stories neurodivergent people told me about their experiences in special and mainstream educational contexts was transformative during my MA thesis work, and I hoped to speak with role-players and their families and networks.

At that time, I had already spent a bit over a decade with interventions, advocacy, and daily life with my child, as constant companions. Furthermore, my background is in European critical psychology, social practice research and Nordic social pedagogy, so philosophy, disability, and psychology did not seem impossibly strange bedfellows. But it turned out that other psychological perspectives, where the use of many types of qualitative methods are still somewhat controversial, and the concept of neurodiversity still under debate, were not easy places to reside and explore.

"What about some of the views that challenge ABA[3] and behavioral therapies?" I remember asking one of my labmates early on. "I'm interested in including some of that."

"I don't think you'll get much support for challenging ABA," they answered with a chuckle. And indeed, that seemed to be that. Another time, someone asked me whether I was going to design my study as a comparison of interventions.

"Not exactly," I explained. "But kind of like that, I guess? But more of an exploration."

"Intervention studies take so much time!" they warned. "And it's almost impossible to get reliable results. The study just has to get so big."

This perspective did not easily encompass the project I was imagining, however willing my colleagues were to try, and however much, in other ways, our goals and ideals might be a match. I felt like there was a huge storm brewing on the horizon, that only I could see. If I didn't navigate it the right way, my work would fill and drown everything and everyone in the boat. And most likely, no one around me would even realize it had happened.

It's possible I could have worked through the complication of doing work so different from that of my close colleagues, if it wasn't for the other part of my program, which was to work as a research assistant on other projects. I was encouraged to collaborate on research that was personally problematic in ways that the vocabulary of "refusal" later gave me a way to describe. Let me be clear that my discomfort was not with any one individual, or with my colleagues, but with the *research paradigm* that was represented, and through which decisions were made. On a personal level, I was always allowed to choose which projects I worked on, and any discomfort with certain research was respected by my supervisors and colleagues.

One such study was intended to measure how well autistic kids were able to coordinate "joint action" with their peers, or with an adult. Participants were videotaped carrying out a series of tasks: individually, in pairs, and with an adult, they were to carry

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[3] Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA) is a standard "treatment" in autism, developed on the principles of Ivar Lovaas and his team. For some background and context on the critique of ABA (Gardner, 2017; Leaf et al., 2021; Lovaas et al., 1974; McDonnell, 2019).

a small table through a short, winding course, while balancing a toy on the tabletop. The videos had been made during a camp sponsored jointly by the lab and some of their collaborators at the university the previous summer. It was a camp run for families with ASD diagnoses, in return for their participation in some of the studies going on.

At the time I joined the project, it was being decided that the level of "action coordination" (an aspect of joint action) in the paired videos would be evaluated by counting how many of their steps were synchronous and not synchronous, as well as the amount of time they spent looking at one another, the table, or their path while they were on the course. This was to be paired with the amount of "wiggle" in the table, measured by a device taped to the bottom. I accepted a peripheral role in the research, and was given the task of rating a dozen or so of the videos of pairs, in the name of establishing "interrater reliability." Basically, I would watch the videos and count the number of synchronous and asynchronous steps, and changes of gaze direction. If my results were similar to that of the person set to the task of coding this, they could be considered reliable statistics.

I had a few questions that I felt were important to understand the context of the study.

"So the kids in the pairs didn't really know each other well?" I asked.

"No," I was told. "They were just at the camp together for a few days."

"Did they choose their own partners to carry the tables?" I asked. This question was met by puzzled looks. How was this relevant?

"No, I don't think so," was the reply. "I don't really remember. I think we just picked them out by size. Or just who was standing where."

"Do you think it might give a different result if they had chosen their own partners?" I asked. I pictured myself carrying a table through a labyrinth with a complete stranger. How would we decide who was going to go first? Would I notice if our steps were in synch? And what would it mean if they weren't? Would I feel comfortable asking them to slow down, or let me change my hand position? However, it seemed that the only relevant piece of information was whether or not each child had a diagnosis, and

this had been carefully recorded. I also got excited about some new ideas that might give more insight into the question of joint action:

"Wouldn't it be interesting to try this study with pairs who had known each other for a longer time? Or maybe different lengths of time?" I wondered. "Wouldn't that be interesting to know?"

"I think that would be way too hard to do," I was told. "How would you find the participants? Imagine how long that would take!"

I left the lab each day with a head full of such questions. What, exactly, *was* being measured? How could their sociality or social potential be indicated, when they had been randomly assigned a partner? In my experience, neurodivergent kids, for a long list of reasons that had to do just as much with a history of bad experiences as any innate characteristics, were often slow to feel comfort with others, and make social connections. Could it really be accurate or fair to measure things in this context, and conclude anything about the social potential of the participants? The questions began to trouble my sleep at night.

I spent hours on the video footage, giving myself headaches. The film never seemed clear enough to be certain how many steps were being taken at any given interval. It was hard to see eyes on the tiny, blurry faces on the screen. I felt more and more anxious; the stakes seemed so high, and I didn't want to miscount. The synchronous or asynchronous steps of these children would come to represent an aspect of the inherent social characteristics of an entire category of people! The results could be used to show that this group had—or didn't have—certain social potentialities. A few steps outside of view of the camera might be critical, and I agonized over each judgement call.

"Are you sure these videos are high enough quality? I'm not feeling sure that I'm getting everything," I asked at one point. They looked like most videos used in this type of research, I was assured.

This was work that would, in however insignificant a way, become part of the descriptive canon of autism, part of the way researchers, professionals, and parents would understand people labelled with autism. It would be used to shape future

interventions, educational approaches; the data points might go on to affect the lives of the participants, affect the life, in fact, of *my* child! Participants in such studies may consent to the research, and university-sponsored studies are subject to strict codes of research ethics. But they were still plucked at random from a room full of kids dropped off at a camp by busy parents for a few days.

I have also read enough psychology-based over the past decade to know how they work as building blocks. Such a study could well go on to be used in ways that none of us could predict or control. Table stability and synchronous steps may seem innocent enough, interesting without damaging anyone. But who knows what type of bigger theories it might come to prop up? We, as researchers, might look for indications of trouble coordinating or synching with the intent, as stated, of helping "learn how to create opportunities for more successful social interactions" (Trevisan et al., 2021, p. 73). But it also allows us to conclude, and promote, the idea that "successful action coordination may not be crucial just for performing goal-directed joint actions; it may also be critical for successful social and adaptive functioning" (p. 74). This implies that "some people" may have trouble achieving such successes, effectively throwing the ball right back into the court of those labelled as different or deficient, with the onus on them to get in synch. Such defining language has a powerful trickle-down effect on the understandings that ultimately shape practices. I've been given parenting instructions by professionals enough times to know exactly how such innocuous measurements of differences can grow into dogma.

I tried to find a way out of this dilemma, to focus on the ways in which such research might also help future children like Ash. But more questions came, and these circled again and again, as I lay awake at night. "What would I think if Ash read this article in a few years? How can I explain this when they ask what my research is about?" In the end, I withdrew from the project, and later the educational psychology PhD program, and requested that the others make sure my name was not attached to the publication. They were surprised, but seemed to understand why I wouldn't want to contribute to research from within the "deficit perspective."

The work has since been published in a respected journal; the individual act of resistance only changing my own trajectory. It was a collaboration between respected researchers; the first author now works at a research position at an Ivy League

institution, and is recognized for exemplary scholarship. Everything was done in complete accord with the framework of institutional ethics, research standards and protocols. It is in no way unique or unusual in the world of autism research. I also know, and acknowledge, that many individuals and families who participate in the research are often grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the understanding of autism and neurodiversity.

For me, such research experiences bring up more questions than they answer. I began to realize that what I had begun to challenge went beyond what could be addressed by including the perspectives of people with diagnoses into the existing frameworks of knowledge-gathering. The goal of resisting "psychologizing" the problem through the vessel of psychology proved untenable, as it was ultimately the framework itself was deeply problematic.

Psychology requires the "operationalization" of human behaviors and interactions into something that is measurable through statistical descriptions. The goal is to get rid of all the noise, eliminate confounding or mediating variables, cut to the chase and get at that one, pure variable. The data points collected are analyzed, mathematically, to determine how strongly they correlate into a linear-like relationship, or a normal distribution. If the relationship is strong enough to be convincing (which, to be honest, is not very strong in the social sciences,) a mathematical comparison is then made between two different groups. In the case of anything studied that is considered "disordered," one of the groups comes to represent what is "normal." The statistical comparison will tell you whether or not the "disordered" group is sufficiently different from the normal to not be the result of chance (Pagano, 2013). In defining what is different, we produce not only a "differented" being, but also end up with the emergence of a truly horrific being: the "normal" human. Such a mythical creature becomes the object against which we are all measured and all, by definition, found deviant .

This requires a simplification of the messiness of the world. While this may make sense in some types of research, I believe it is important to think closely about which tools we use for which job. It follows that a science based on statistics (which is mostly the case) is quite literally all about simplifying complexity. Within this research tradition,

the only knowledge worth getting is that which can be boiled down a linear relationship, or a normal distribution, that can be analyzed within a short period of time and reported in fifteen to twenty pages. And it certainly does not provide a platform from which resistance makes much sense at all.

Furthermore, unless they are themselves members of the academic community, as students, researchers, or faculty, the participants and their families would not even be able to access the research publications that came of the study. Research tends to be published for the good of other researchers; it becomes information circulated for the benefit of experts and the academy: producing more grant funding opportunities, promoting careers, supporting tenure for folks that have no systemic ethical obligation to the "objects" of their research. (I realize that many individuals do feel this obligation, despite it not being a systemic requirement.)

But the money invested in public institutions still all too often funds research that is unavailable, inaccessible, and out of the control of those it describes, and whose lives it ultimately impacts most. The biggest, unspoken, consideration of research design for most studies is, in the end, what will fit the arc of individual academic careers. I have heard the argument "but that would take way too much time. You only have a semester (or year, etc.)" used against studying more complex issues more times than I care to recall. If it can't be finished up neatly, and put on a resume to take along to one's next (brief) academic position, it is not worth the time and effort. This feels problematic to me, especially given the diminishing number of long-term, tenure-type positions available. Research is increasingly being done by overly busy researchers in short-term, precarious positions.

The "ethico-onto-epistemology" (Barad, 2007) of research itself was in question, and I needed instead to re/imagine a study where "the work of inquiry intervenes in normative process of knowing and being" (Kuntz & Guyotte, 2018, p. 665). I needed a form of inquiry that "assumes immanent practices guided by ethical determinations towards an unknown, open future—enactments for social change" (Kuntz, 2019, p. 60). Bumping up against the world reminds us that the personal is philosophical is political (Kittay, 2009), and a neutral research perspective is not possible.

Pain and suffering: Turning away from tales of misery

Anti-colonial scholarship (Coulthard, 2014; Simpson, 2017; Tuck et al., 2014; Tuck & Yang, 2012) has provides a language and conceptual framework for problematizing research that upholds and reproduces colonial structures, violence, and harm. This work has largely been taken on by Indigenous and non-white settler scholars, although there seems to be a growing interest within settler scholars as well.

In specific ways and important ways, my inquiry has resonances with the work of scholars such as Tuck and Yang (2012, 2014) and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017), but also some equally important differences. As activist scholars, Tuck and Yang (among others) are understandably critical of the ways in which the language of "decolonization" has been appropriated in education and the social sciences (Appleton, 2019). Using the term "decolonization" metaphorically, they write, separates it from its political and activist roots, and tries to sidestep the significant material and political changes decolonization struggles work for, including the return of stolen lands and recognition of sovereignty. It is important to remember these connections, and in this thesis, I hope to honour the ways in which decolonization is "a distinct project from other civil and human rights-based social justice projects" (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 2).

It is not my intent to use decolonizing language as a settler "move to innocence" (p. 9). I recognize and support the goals of Indigenous decolonizing work in the real world, and I try to be aware of how this thesis has points of contact with those goals, sometimes in complicated and problematic ways. Neurodiversity is another activist term that has been taken up within the scholarship and practices of education, psychology, and autism interventions, in some similar ways. It is not uncommon to hear such "inclusive" language being used in contexts where there is little or no work being done toward actually changing the material conditions or the paradigms of pathologization and oppression.

Here, my goal is not to apply decolonization as a metaphor, but to explore the resonances between neuroqueering and anti-colonial work as forms of resistance. It seems both projects have in common a momentum toward resisting certain structures, practices, and mindset of "colonialism and conquest" (Simpson, 2017). We are *all* compelled into relationship with the structures and systems in settler-colonial contexts,

although the historical and material consequences of this can be quite different. Certain historical and material practices of violence and oppression, such as institutionalization and normalization, have been forced upon the "mentally unfit," as they have on Indigenous persons, though in different ways. Both projects of resistance have in common the potentiality to question normative assumptions of anthropocentric dominance, and of the normativity of settler-colonial ways of being in the world.

Settler colonialism is steeped in Eurocentric ontologies of dominance and extraction, hyper-individualization, and compulsory capitalism, defining worth through the willingness or ability to produce "in excess of the natural world" (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 6). They use this description to specifically address the colonial mentality toward Indigenous peoples and their relationships with land and forced removal from it (as well as other practices of extreme and explicit violence, such as enslaving people), but I find it eerily appropriate for less explicitly violent, but equally harmful, types of institutional practices.

I would argue that the baseline motivation of "increasing productive capability" is also alive and well in many of our dominant intervention and educational practices, especially those we bring to labelled as neurodivergent or developmentally disabled. Eugenics may have officially fallen out of favour, but we are still surrounded by veiled attempts to rid ourselves of persons that are seen as a drain on resources, and a threat to our productive and growth-fixated systems. Outright violence has mostly been replaced by more subtly coercive and socially acceptable forms of force, such as intensive behavioral programs and interventions, which promise increased functioning and integration into systems of labour. These practices have been identified as abusive and harmful by autistic and neurodivergent self-advocates for a long time; professionals, parents, and researchers are only beginning to catch up, and be willing to hear their objections. Their efficiency in re/creating neurodivergent folks into something more acceptable to the compulsory capitalistic systems in which we live has proved too compelling.

Both colonial and pathologizing structures are part of storyworlds in which we are entangled, that "turn both humans and other beings into resources" (Tsing, 2015, p. 19) and "makes visible select ways of knowing and being even as it occludes others" (Kuntz, 2016, p. 35). Such a system devours land and people alike, producing certain subjects

as "more developed, more human, more deserving than other groups and species" (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 6).

This resource-based view seems to pop up rather explicitly in the words of Ivar Lovaas, the psychologist who developed Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA), a common intervention forced onto autistic and neurodivergent children, in the hopes of normalizing them. During an interview in Psychology Today (Chance, 1974), Lovaas stated:

> You see, you start pretty much from scratch when you work with an autistic child. You have a person in the physical sense—they have hair, a nose and a mouth—but they are not people in the psychological sense. One way to look at the job of helping autistic kids is to see it as a matter of constructing a person. You have the raw materials, but you have to build the person. (p. 76)

The autistic child is, through this lens, nothing more than a blank resource out of which a proper human can be built, using ABA methods to (re)shape them into someone who can comply with the demands of production and competition that are considered acceptable (Chance, 1974; Lovaas, 1993; Lovaas et al., 1974). They are nothing more than a site of possible claim and conquest for the forces of growth and production. There is a reason such programs are referred to as "interventions," which imply an act of interfering with the outcome or course of something (or someone), rather than "education." Although decolonization and de-pathologization are separate projects, in my view the imperative to confront both are linked in important ways; resistance to one implies the necessity of resistance to the other.

Neurodiversity, like decolonization, is a concept born of activism. It has likewise been embraced by many within the medicalized and psychologized establishment without much sign of material or structural changes as a result. It is entirely possible to speak the language of neurodiversity without any interest in or intent to question or transform oppressive, pathologizing, and normalizing practices, either in research, diagnostic processes and language, or education and intervention. There are pockets of resistance, but those are often led by self-advocates, and it seems the most common factor that attracts neurotypical attention is to have family or other close contact who identifies as neurodivergent.

As part of refusal, Tuck and Yang (2014) write about the importance of "active resistance to trading in pain and humiliation," pointing out that the stories most often

seen as "compelling" and "authentic" (p. 812) social science research, especially those involving oppressed and dispossessed people, dwell on their misery and helplessness. Reflecting on the role of research in Indigenous communities, Eve Tuck (Bozalek, Kuby, & Price, 2021) notes that there seems to be a hope among activist-oriented researchers that exposing the depths of misery and suffering, of bringing such stories to the attention of those in power, will wake outrage and bring about changes in policy and practices. Not so, claims Tuck. That information is out there, without the resulting will to make meaningful change. The focus of their own research is therefore on other stories, ones, for instance, of communities of resilience, of resistance, of alternatives.

Research about neurodiversity and mental health that *does* describe the lived experience of people who live with such labels are likewise rife with accounts of mental anguish (Dachez & Ndobo, 2018; Woodgate et al., 2020). Non-academic sources as well, such as social media, news sources, and material published by some advocacy groups (usually those that are parent-led), also focus on a pain and suffering narrative, often focusing both on the perceived pain of being neurodivergent as well as the misery and hardships of parents and families ("Horrific Autism Speaks ad," 2009).

While there might be some insights that could point us toward areas for radical social change, they often seem to focus the conversation back to individuals' abilities to withstand social isolation, exclusion, and oppression (Hedley et al., 2018; Mazurek, 2014). All too frequently, they end in some version of the familiar disability tropes of victimhood or "overcoming." I decided, somewhere along the way, that I didn't want to contribute to the many tales of pain and suffering. It is a form of resistance to focus on adults doing things that adults want to do and find meaningful. I have also refused to only talk to folks identified and identifying as neurodivergent, as that also contributes to the overall categorical and taxonomic work. The focus, I believe, should remain on the contexts and people around those with the label, and on how and why the labelling occurs.

Although there are some elements of qualitative methods, including interview, transcription, and field notes, this thesis is mostly what I would call "post-representational" (Stein et al., 2020) work. It is an attempt at "a form of objectless analysis, an analytic practice with nothing and no one to code" (Tuck & Yang, 2014, p. 812). This thesis finds resonance with that active engagement, and with a commitment

to "avoid building [my] career upon the pain of others," (p. 812), most specifically others who find themselves as the objects of colonial structures of medicine, madness, institutionalization, and normalization.

This type of work might help break a tendency to situate some people in a "never ending cycle of victimhood" and others in "never-ending cycle of self-congratulatory saviourhood," as Leanne Betasamosake Simpson describes, referring to research and social programs for Indigenous persons (Simpson, 2017, p. 80). There are similarities in the regulation, paternalism, and harmful benevolence enacted through the systems and paradigms of pathologizing work, that likewise need to be refused and rethought.

4.2.   What we know, what we need to know, and what might be knowable

Anna Tsing (2015) writes about the "stories we know" such as those she identifies as dominating narratives about our place in a capitalistic system: stories of progress, development, and the pioneer spirit. There are also, she insists, stories "we need to know" the counternarratives of stolen lands and destruction, of poverty, inequality and greed, lost livelihood and damaged landscapes. We have these stories within education and psychology as well. There are the familiar stories we "know," of content, standardized measurement, academic achievement. Among these are also stories of special and inclusive education, behavioural interventions, and Individualized Learning Plans (IEP) and adapted curriculum, academic excellence and personal success. There are also the stories we "need to know" about education: wide disparities in outcomes for students with different racialized and economic / class backgrounds, residential schools and ongoing colonial harms, elitism, self-segregation, White-flight, outrageous inequalities in school funding, and classroom structures that requires disciplining, or even medicating, children into compliance.

Autism is itself can arguably be called a "narrative condition," in the sense that there are no biological markers, so that "diagnoses of autism are essentially storytelling in character" (Duffy & Dorner, 2011, p. 201). However, the *stories we know* about autism are those narrated by experts, such as researchers, psychologist and psychiatrists, the media, and family members, and only rarely and ever incompletely by those who bear the diagnosis. Remi Yeargeau writes,

"We are bombarded with anecdotes of children who refuse to hug their parents, of children whose worlds are supposedly so impoverished that they spend their days spinning in circles, or flapping their hands, or screaming or self-injuring or resisting—ardently and fixatedly resisting" (Yergeau, 2018, p. 3).

Furthermore, argues Yergeau, "involuntarity dominates much of the discourse on autism, underlying clinical understandings of affect, intention, and socially appropriate response," which is used to "deny narrative capabilities—and narrative value—of autistic people" (p.7). In the rush to stories, the ones we *need to know* are, sometimes by diagnostic definition, are often those that are the most likely to be silenced, or not even seen as part of the narrative.

I like Yergeau's play on the word "resisting." They describe behaviours that would be narrated by others as painful, miserable, symptomatic in a clinical sense. They are part of the "pain and suffering" narratives of families and individuals, as examples of "resistance" to change and to certain foods, and to behaving like everyone else—of non-compliance, non-learning, non-persons. However, they can, from a perspective of refusal, also be stories of resistance that we *need to know*: resistance to painful and degrading treatments, segregated classrooms, insistence on behavioural changes and "masking." They might be removed from the autistic canon of pain and suffering, and turned around as necessary tales of resistance to classification, degradation, dehumanization. They could be a backdrop tapestry to a new set of stories: stories of becoming different in relation.

4.3. Some "Propositions"

Where does this leave us? It is not enough to refuse methodology, or resist a suffocating, objectifying, and coercive framework. It is also an important part of this thesis to offer some alternatives. It is, after all, research! Doesn't that demand a foundation; a perspective from which to gaze, and a framework from which to explain what the gaze captures and doesn't capture. I prefer to use the term "inquiry," rather than "methodology", as a form of resisting method, and in the spirit of post-qualitative work (Bozalek & Zembylas, 2017; Kuntz, 2021; Kuntz & Guyotte, 2018; St. Pierre, 2018, 2020, 2021). Post-qualitative inquiry resists methodological-based research choices, and sees research as something that happens in an iterative reading, writing, and living process (St. Pierre, 2021, p. 5), and outside of planned and prescribed methodologies.

Walking

The story of this inquiry is closely related to movement, particularly walking. Process, becoming, and ever-changing connections and relations are central to playing and walking practices, and might contribute an entirely different way of approaching neurodiversity and other perceived and pathologized "differentness." Moving does something for our thinking. I think this may be true for both actual, embodied movement, for instance a walk along a trail in the forest, as well as imagined movement through imaginary storyworlds.

I've spent many hours of my research time walking on the hilly trails of a conservation area near where I live. This is a wooded area, populated by large trees, full of birds, insects, mountain-bikers, other walkers, and their nonhuman companions, all of which vary from season to season. The mountain is host to an extensive network of trails that I've explored through the four years that I have lived nearby while attending grad school. It began as my commute. I would hike up the hill on one of the trails to the university campus, which was located at the top. Early on, I explored the possibility of using audiobooks and text-to-speech technology with pdf versions of articles, and found that listening to them through headphones during the hour it took to get up or down, was a very efficient way to get my readings done for the different courses I was taking.

It did take a while to get used to, and is not a perfect solution for every type of material I read. However, I also found that my focus on was much better while in motion. Listening to a text also builds a different relationship than sitting and reading, and all the texts I interact with have an embodiment and spatiality to them. Extending the range of the trail system I explored happened along with the expansion of my field of reading, the two experiences now inseparable. As I became more familiar with the different trails, some of my more travelled routes became associated with different texts, and my orientation to the written material is entangled with the physical cartographies of the trail system. I can often locate a spot in the written text by recalling where I was on the trail when I heard it—and in which direction I was walking. Certain texts recall a spot on the trail, the temperature of the air, the particular scents and sounds of one season or another. The exhilaration of a great idea, combined with the scent of forest, the sound of birds, the angle of light, the rocks underfoot, the sweaty feeling halfway up steep climb.

The more I walked, the more I realized how important it was. I concentrate in a different way. My mind doesn't wander in the same way it would if my body was at rest, sitting at home on the couch or in front of my desk. Even standing at my desk doesn't have the same impact on my ability to think that walking through the forest.

I think the connection between this inquiry practice and movement goes back further than these walks, however, at different times and places in my life. I have primarily used different forms of movement to get around in the world. As a child in Alaska, we were bound to the car. We lived far from school and work in the nearest town, far enough that the only actual practical way of getting there was a car.

I moved to Denmark in my 20s and lived in the center of Copenhagen, a city known for its bicycles. Indeed, over half of the people that traverse the city on their daily route, do so on bicycle, rather than motorized vehicle. Many of the others use the well-developed public transportation system. I brought my well used mountain bike with me on my Danish adventure, and was determined to become one of the bike commuters. There are parts of the city that are not suited to even the bulk and speed of a bicycle, and in such spaces, I would generally walk.

Moving through the world in this way creates a very different relationship with one's surroundings than moving through the world in the car, I discovered almost immediately. You are in touch with the smells, the air temperature, the sounds, everything around you. In a car, you miss most of these things. Traveling through farm country, you may get a whiff of manure, but most often not at the same time as you were actually passing the source.

I remember driving through the foothills of tall mountain ranges in Alaska, and the surprising bite of the cool air when we would stop for a scenery break and stepped out of the climate-controlled environment of the car. Stepping off the built road also exposed the illusion of a gentle, rolling, terrain, as one's feet sunk knee deep into dampness between the tussocks on the tundra. What looked like an easy walk was a laborious workout, best left to experts and the long legs of moose. Experiencing the tundra with all of one's senses is entirely different than driving through it in the safe bubble of a car interior.

Riding a bike is somewhere in between. You're exposed to the elements, and much more aware of details of the road and your surroundings, but you still have to follow the flow of traffic. It is much easier to get on and off at a moment's notice than in a car, without no need to search for parking. And in this way, you can more quickly become connected to your surroundings.

Public transportation offers yet another way of experiencing the world. You find yourself in a motorized vehicle, but with the luxury of being fully immersed in observing your surroundings, or in a good book. You are a passive passenger, rather than a driver, and can be attentive to other details. Buses travel more slowly, stop more frequently, and often require you to plan a complex, sometimes circuitous or indirect route, and also include a walk through different neighborhoods along the journey.

Walking is not a neutral activity, nor are the spaces in which walking happens. It matters where we walk, with whom, and in what way. Springgay and Truman (2022). suggest that, rather than a set of procedures, critical walking methodologies allow walking to become "an ethical and political accountability and responsibility for how we walk, who walks, and where we walk" (p. 2).

There are ableist assumptions intricately connected with the practice of walking, or moving through the world in different ways. There are places in which certain bodies and minds are welcomed to move about, and others are excluded through historical, architectural, and social material conditions. There are also spaces where walking is only possible for those who live up to a narrowly defined notion of mobility, including the trails where much of this thesis emerged.

The trails where I walk are stolen lands. They are the site of considerable historical and ongoing material oppression and violence for Indigenous peoples, as are the roads and automobiles I describe from my childhood. My relationship to the land, and the type of walking and moving I do in these spaces are all very different than those of the Indigenous communities that were pushed out during the violence of settlement projects, and than those who still live on the lands.

The walking practice in this thesis has resonances with what Taien Ng-Chan (2022) terms *marginal walking*, the "everyday practice of finding and being in marginal space, of mapping the relations of power, intervention, and relational entanglement" (p.

2). Choosing to stay in and describe marginal spaces, of staying with the trouble, as an act of un/learning, solidarity, and an effort toward an embodied and enacted understandings, is also a type of resistance. For me, a critical or marginal practice is part of my ongoing process of better understanding how walking is part of "legacies of settler-colonial harm, white supremacy, and functions to police and regulate bodies" (Springgay & Truman, 2022, p. 2).

Most visible in this text is the way that walking practice has helped me understand, and shaped my own process of moving through data, through empirical materials, through texts, sources, and streams of words. In a car, as in a quantitative study, we need a lot of space, and move through it quickly, gathering overall impressions and patterns, perhaps a sense of scale. Some types of qualitative data provide more granular information with stops and starts, and details here and there, as if on a bicycle. This inquiry approaches materials as a meander, or the journey of an adventure with not pre-determined route. Taking one path means not taking another; the weather, season, and frame of mind of the wanderer is part of the emergent wandering, which is all part of the journey.

Listening and talking

I did talk intentionally to some people, in what might be called interviews, in the course of this project.

Originally, I advertised for participants willing to grant a semi-structured interview, through the newsletter of the psychology lab at my university. I was interested in talking to folks who were role-players, or family members to someone who played role-playing games. Ultimately, over the course of about two years, I came into contact with four persons who were interested, and had conversations with them, mostly online, as we were in the midst of pandemic shutdowns at that point.

Along the way, I also connected with David, a counsellor who runs D&D-based group therapy sessions for folks with social anxiety. I was privileged enough to follow a course of 10 weekly sessions with one of his therapy groups, and participated as a researcher / participant player. Five of the participants also agreed to an interview, toward the end of the sessions.

Finally, I began along my own role-playing path, by joining a D&D group for beginners at a local game store. I listened, learned, played, and became more and more deeply entangled with the other players, their characters, and our common storyworld. I interviewed a few of them, and took copious field notes.

Finally, playing and learning about role-playing games got me reconnected with a few people from my childhood and teenage years, who I remembered had been role-players, or who had given me a nudge on social media, when they saw that I was embarking on role-playing research. The lovely conversations I have had with them, ostensibly interviews, but with plenty of nostalgia and sadness over missed opportunities, have been some of the most generative material for the inquiry.

This piece would never have happened if not for the Covid-19 situation, where we were all thrust into a new way of living, relating, and communicating. It was suddenly both possible, and also felt completely natural to connect and have a conversation online.

Any interviews I conducted, and conversations I used, were recorded, transcribed, and iteratively revisited throughout the inquiry, adding to the many layers of narratives that make up this rush of stories.

"What were you looking for?" asked David, my co-investigator and collaborator on part of the thesis, when looking through a draft of some writing. "How did you determine what was important? What were your codes?"

"Good question," I replied. Inwardly, I had a moment of panic. What was I looking for? Why had the moments in the transcripts jumped out at me? I had begun looking for themes, commonalities, trends, but ended up feeling like that actually got in the way of the process of "walking with" my participants, which is perhaps the best way to describe the inquiry.

My research ethics approval did not include storing voice recordings or full transcripts on unapproved apps on my telephone, (as well it should not have), which unfortunately prevented me from actually listening and re-listening to the interviews and session recordings as I was walking. But my movement on the paths was similar to the

way I move through the material brought into the inquiry through playing, talking, listening with participants. I know that, on any given day, choosing one path will bring a different experience than choosing another, even as there are a multiplicity of unfoldings happening in those spaces as well. It is impossible to capture all of it—or, perhaps any of it.

The path I choose is determined by weather, by season, by the time I have available on that day, by the health of those I am a caregiver for, and how far away from them I feel comfortable roaming, just to name a few. My relationship to the trails on the mountain are very different if I am commuting or if I am "just" out on a walk. My relationship to them is very different than the relationship of the First Nations peoples who used the land for very different purposes and goals. My access and rights to the secrets they disclose are likewise different. The layers of history, occupation, development, oppression, leisure, ceremony are all part of an inexpressible complexity.

Movement-as-research also drew my attention to the importance of movement-in-research. Keeping our attention on processes rather than the subjects of research (Vannini, 2015b, 2015a) allows patterns and becoming-together assemblages to emerge from the stories I heard, played, and told. I feel like this process also seemed to become more intuitive, the more I walked my process rather than worked from a fixed position. The dialectic of these many processes and becomings, the playful suspension in movement, is the source of unending fascination, delight, and discovery the inquiry still brings. Even in the hard moments and hard truths of uncovering what we "need to know."

Playing

Mostly, I played my way to this thesis. Over the past four years, I have played and gamemastered between five and ten hours of role-playing games, primarily D&D, each week. I am part of a core group that started out at the local game shop, and have found ourselves to be surprisingly compatible. Some of us have branched off into different games and groups, and play other places as well. Both Ash and Storm have been involved at different times. I also ran a group for two years every week for them and a few friends.

Playing role-playing games has been transformative, both personally, professionally, and as a researcher. I could use a lot of space here, narrating anecdotes, telling about role-playing theory, mapping the landscape so readers might feel comfortable plunging into something new. But, as any role-player will tell you, studying the player materials, reading up on rules, memorizing stats, and watching others play is not the way to go about it. You have to take a deep breath and plunge right in, willing to risk the ripples that you create, disturb, and magnify. Role-playing is everywhere in this thesis: theory, practices, anecdotes, rules, jargon, dice, and the humans entangled with these. There is nothing to do but trust that your fellow players and the gamemaster will be there to catch you.

Cartographies

A last comment about cartography, before jumping into the main sessions.

Mapping is important for hikers and role-players alike—and not least for researchers. The area of autism and neurodiversity is very well-charted; psychology and education seem to have an overwhelming interest in describing and mapping the terrain of neuro-developmental differences.

Aaron Kuntz suggests (counter- or resistant) cartographies as one way to approach post-qualitative inquiry, if one wishes to link it to intentional, ethical practices of resistance, recognition of historical and ongoing injustice, and effect material change (Kuntz, 2019, 2021). As Erin Manning (2020) poignantly describes, often through the words and worlds of autistic-labelled individuals, the field is in desperate need of some material changes. Neuro-typicality is the backdrop upon which we are all measured, the wall upon which we are all pinned. It is a storyworld in need of transformation.

In this particular cartographic exercise, I am especially interested in the oblique gaze. What emerges not in the description of the individual, but in the periphery of the field of vision? The "autistic individual" is constantly under scrutiny, and described in painstaking detail in social science and psychology literature. Smagorinsky (2016) suggests it is the space around the individual, the relational, opportunities for interaction, and emergent space of becoming, that could give much different and more interesting insights.

Kuntz (2019) suggests that to understand the monstrosity of the research machine, we, as researchers, must make ourselves and our research monstrous. I'm intrigued by the edges of the map, where "there be dragons." We seem insistent that the monstrous is in what we don't know, in what the comfort of our "evidence base" defines it to be. But what if we looked sideways, used the oblique glance, to consider more than the subject-position that emerges through scientism?

Instead, I'd like to invite you into a shadowy cartography of the edges, and a view in which such "monstrous" forms might emerge in what we know, and to explore what monstrosity is, or might be.

Let's explore the potentialities in the "[co]-activation of an environment … where we have to create the conditions for living", as Erin Manning asks, "Here, now. How do we create the conditions?" (Bozalek, Kuby, & Van Hove, 2021, 58:20). This is an invitation to collaborate. It is an invitation to try and understand the emergence of the group-subject (Guattari, 1995).

The cartographic practice of the Dungeonmaster (DM) is to try and imagine potentialities, and set up spaces in which such co-creation and collaborative understandings might be explored. The hope and aim of the dungeon crawl is to collaboratively imagine a storyworld, with a "quality of existence that erupts in excess of any one individual" (Bozalek, Kuby, & Van Hove, 2021, 1:00:12)

Perhaps a rush of methods can be such a collaboration? I hope you might be willing to join me—us—in an experiment! I can't, and in fact won't try, to tell you what you will take from the layers of stories, paths, dungeon denizens, and marvelous creatures. That lies outside of the edges of the paper, the edges of the known multiverse, and in the becoming-together of our collaborative cartography of re/imagined spaces.

A short rest: Musings on the Monstrous

All adventurers need to catch their breath now and then, take a few moments to rest, recuperate, and recharge their magical weapons or tend to their wounds and their comrades. In a D&D session, there are two types of breaks in the action, a long rest at the end of the day (requires time for uninterrupted sleep), and a short rest. Short rests are generally granted once a day in the storyworld, often after an intense moment of some kind. Most of the time, players will ask the DM for a short rest when their characters are in need of recovering some of their hit points or recharging their abilities or capacity for using magic.

A short rest gives a party the strength, capacities, and presence of mind to continue further on, into the unknown. It is, at times, also a moment where characters might have a conversations, share information, regroup, help one another. It is a space for emergent becoming in other ways; the experiences of one player/character can be shared with others, where some of the character types can perform some assistive magic or skill that supports another character or the group as a whole.

I am offering a short rest here. I would like to invite you, as a reader, into a brief respite from the main action, an interlude between our encounters with diagnostic language, with educational practices and theories of learning, somewhere in the middle of the flurry of stories and methods. Come, gather round, wherever we are, in whichever storyworld; a corner of a sunny meadow, on a chair-shaped rock, around a campfire in a dry and sheltered cave, or under the overhang of a decaying bridge in the roughest part of a busy city, or trapped on the ethereal plane, somewhere else in the multiverse. Let's take a moment to consider monsters and the monstrous. I believe it is important that we think together about what monstrosity means; what it is, what it does, what it might do or come to mean.

These are important discussions because "monster" and "monstrous" are decidedly problematic concepts, especially when writing in the context of disability. In the Western, humanist tradition, there is a troubling history of disabled or extraordinary (Thomson, 2017) bodies being labelled as "monster" (Godden & Mittman, 2019, p. 4). This is not However, neither "monstrous" nor "disabled" has any ontological status in itself; they are terms indicative or descriptive of an *encounter*, a collaborative becoming,

where "beings—human or otherwise—have meanings imposed upon them from without" (Godden & Mittman, 2019, p. 11). It is the encounter with alterity (Mitter et al., 2012), (or perhaps, I would argue, the experience or expectation of alterity) described and imagined in a certain context.

Nonetheless, there is no simple culturally determined connection between monstrosity, disability, and neurodiversity to either problematize, condemn or reject; it is not as straightforward as noting that our encounter with alterity in the form of bodies and minds that function differently than our own, or differently than our expectations of them, leads to monstrous othering.

There are monsters aplenty in the D&D multiverse! Monsters offer a space of generative creativity, even fun. What does this mean for other, very serious discussions of material oppression, violence, and harm that come from monstrous othering? What are the stories we know about monsters, about the monstrous? What stories do we need to know? What are the stories that are still emerging? How might they enrich and become part of the humus of our collaborative wyrlding?

There are a few ways in which monsters in D&D are interesting for our discussion. What comes to mind immediately is the wide variety of creatures that entered the multiverse as monsters to be fought and defeated. These are the monsters that can be used to populate encounters—the creatures and villains to fight, trap, outwit, or run away from, as player / characters choose. They also serve a purpose within the mechanics of the game, both by supporting the framework that moves the narrative forward, and providing something or someone against which adventurers can test their mettle and gain Experience Points (XP) in order to increase in level.

It doesn't take long to realize that a straightforward understanding of heroes vs. monsters, a focus on violence and combat encounters, and moving from fight to fight is not, in the long run, a very rewarding as a D&D paradigm. It creates an uninteresting story and makes for a simplistic storyworld with an unnuanced and unrealistic worldview, and very little room for role-playing. To serve up a more interesting and meaningful experience, there needs to be some added complexity in both the narrative possibilities, and also in the line between monster and non-monster. This, it seems, becomes

increasingly permeable as players and gamemasters challenge the limits of monstrosity. Monsters are able to become friends, companions, and heroes, and, on the other hand, character types meant to be designed as heroic adventurers are often definitely among the most vicious adversaries one might face! And then, of course, there are the un/intentionally monstrous/heroic characters we create, and through which we reproduce systemic and cultural violence, oppression, and harm, in a process which might give us insights into our own complicities.

The possibilities for the range of creatures that are included as player characters has expanded over time to include many types of beings that were originally only meant to be monsters. Teiflings (part demon), orc and half-orcs, goblins, and goliaths are among the categories of creature quite often included in characters choices. In fact, in the *Monstrous Races* compendium, available through the Dungeon Masters Guild, Tyler Kamstra (2016) transforms 228 creatures (ostensibly "every monster in the Monster Manual") into playable characters. This compendium translates the monster's statistics into a version that can be used for character creation and gameplay, including ability scores, actions for combat or magic wielding, special skills and resistances. Some of the more powerful monsters are intentionally limited in their abilities to put them on a more equal footing with the "usual" adventurers.

Kamstra has also included a wealth of playfully serious descriptive material for each monster. The goal of this is to help support multi-dimensional character development and nuanced role-playing opportunities. No creature is too absurd or too small to be left out of this!

Take the "Crawling Claw," for instance, a being that is the "severed hand of a murderer animated by vile necromantic magic" (Kamstra, 2016, p. 37). They are apparently quite nimble, and have a high score for dexterity. As a bit of role-playing spice, they are generally evilly aligned. "Because your only hand is your entire body," Kamstra writes, "you are unable to use hands and move at the same time, and you lack the capability to wield a weapon like a creature with an arm to swing." This, predictably, also limits the types of spells a crawling claw can cast, which sometimes require certain gestures or manipulation of objects.

The advice Kamstra gives for playing such a character is this: "Crawling claws are small and nimble, making them excellent rogues. Since crawling claws can be created from the severed hands of living murderers, decide if the rest of your body is still alive or not, and who the person was from whom you were created" (p. 37).

Another creature is the demilich—a "disembodied head of lich whose mind was drifted into near non-existence" (an ontological challenge in itself, which is carefully parsed in the limitations and possibilities of acting, thinking, and continuing to endure). The compendium advises dryly,

> "Demiliches normally don't depart the place where they first fell. Consider what suddenly motivated your character to stir from near-endless peace to a life of adventure. Also consider who your character was as a lich, and who they were before becoming a lich" (p. 42).

These interesting questions present a practical guide to the radical change in perspective needed to turn an interesting but personality-less opponent and plot into a first-person character that a player might embody, that might become a member of the community of "some of us" rather than "them." They also gesture to the space of becoming that monsters open, in a way that the usual backstory tropes of elven nobility, halfling street urchins rags to riches tales, or retired soldier-turned-mercenary

I find this an fascinating process, that illustrates how the monster inhabits and embodies a position that Jeoffrey Cohen (2020) calls an "ontological liminality" (p. 40). Monsters in D&D make visible, in quite a literal fashion, how monstrosity indicate a "category crisis" (p. 40). The *Monstrous Races* compendium provides the character statistics needed for the different actions in the game, including these delightful and thought-provoking descriptions that challenge us to think alterity itself differently.

There is fun in this mind-twist. The compendium also includes long passages that illustrate the author's process in changing monster stats into character abilities, where Kamstra essentially invites the reader / player into the process of exploring ontological liminality. One such discussion is in the "Design Notes" for playing a Treant, which are large trees awakened into magical life (in the human exceptionalist view of life).

Treant anatomy is a bit strange, which raises some questions about their capabilities," Writes Kamstra. "Can they wear armor? Can they use weapons? How many arms do they have? The art in the Monster Manual pictures a treant with four limbs

ending in what appear to be hands (one is on the right side behind the back, and you can see the hand hanging down between the legs), which is neat but not especially helpful. … Using weapons and armor tends to make False Appearance [another ability of treants] difficult to use, plus a tree carrying around a sword might look kind of silly. Still, this is a silly document full of things like sentient carpets, … so we can live with a bit more silliness" (p. 201).

Silly, yes, certainly, just like so many of the serious discussions of stats that delight D&D players. Playful, inventive, thought-provoking, and epistemically challenging as well. Not to mention the element of deadly seriousness here. How do we know what a treant might think, do, or find silly? How do we presume to think it is okay to speak for them? Why don't we find it ethically problematic to project onto them more recognizable, acknowledged, and expected "human" cultural expressions, like using a weapon or wanting to join a party of human adventurers, when humanoids have historically treated them and their society like other, less, like monsters?

No discussion of monster could be complete without a discussion of my personal favourite, orcs. The very first character I created was Dagmar, a half-orc bard. I chose this intentionally, as a difficult combination; orcs are known for their brutality and mindless violence. Orcs are one of the more problematic monsters in D&D. There is quite a bit of lore around orcs, including their social and political organization, beliefs, and history. I was driven to my character choice in part by a bit of righteous indignation that half-orcs are an infrequent choice. When they are chosen, their abilities bonuses are most often channeled in to skills and talents of ruthless and vicious fighters.

A bard, on the other hand, is a magic-using character, who channels their magical power through music, storytelling, poetry, or other form of artistic and creative expression. Dagmar was the product of an unusual love story between her mother, a minstrel, and a dashing young orc prince she met in her travels. Dagmar was raised in secret, hidden in a compartment of the walls of the conservatory where her mother worked. She grew up steeped in the music, lore, and magic that drifted in through the walls of her hidden room. As a result, she is also shy and uncomfortable in many social situations.

When I presented this backstory to the DM, they commented with a raised an eyebrow and a smile,

"A dashing orc, hey?"

The player materials do not provide the basis for much expectation of romance. Orcs are described as "savage humanoids with stooped postures, piggish faces, and prominent teeth that resemble tusks" (*Orc*, n.d.). Why not dashing, had been my thought. What happened to nuance? Aren't there many different types of people within any group? Why not a gentle and charming orc? Also, we all know well enough not to trust the description of one group from another with whom they are in conflict. The materials also inform us, "To this day, the orcs wage an endless war on humans, elves, dwarves, and other folk" (*Orc*, n.d.). Orcs, as "monsters," are presumably described from the perspective of the humans, elves, and dwarves that are more the expected "humanoid" characters.

James Mendez Hodes (2019a, 2019b) has written in depth about the origins of orc characters, starting from the world of J.R.R. Tolkein, from which the original D&D universe draws heavily.

Mendez Hodes details the intensely racialized depictions of orcs within some of Tolkien's work, which has had an important influence on the world of Dungeons & Dragons (D&D). Tolkien's thinking and writing was influenced by his experiences as an officer in the colonial British military, and the impressions and understandings of different racialized peoples that grew from this. He was drawing on a wealth of cultural and historical prejudices, and orientalist depictions of Asian coded brutality, tribalism, and aggression (Said, 2003) shape the characterization of orcs.

In D&D and other contexts, descriptions of orcs have responded to a growing lack of acceptance for overtly racialized references. The descriptions of orcs in recent iterations of player materials are less immediately recognized as a racialized caricature. Even so, the description of orc society in player materials that are somewhere in the gray area between uncomfortable and horrible. Almost a century later, it doesn't take much subtlety to parse out problematic language of "civilization" and "savagery."

This, I think, clearly says more about us than about the orcs! In the essay "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," originally published in 1996, Cohen (2020) suggests the possibility of "reading cultures from the monsters they engender" (p. 37). The seven theses suggest that there are not "monstrous" beings; the monster is "pure culture" (p. 40). They describe the contexts from which they emerge, and "must be examined within the intricate matrix of relations … that generate them" (p. 39).

Monsters escape our scientific taxonomies. That means that the non-category of monstrous comes to include those of us "exist outside of and in defiance of the structures of binary opposition" (Grosz, 2020, p. 274) and logics of human categorization. Elizabeth Grosz points out that *teratology*, the study or science of monsters, as part of the humanist tradition, was the purview of mysticism and superstition, until it became linked to medicalization of "bodily regulation" (p. 275), becoming more and more a category of illness or pathology. Monster studies tends to focus on the bodily manifestations of alterity, but as mental, behavioural, and cognitive processes have also become more closely studied and regulated within this medicalized framework, there are also resonances with diagnoses mental illness, neurodiversity, and similar. I wonder how much the difficulties in categorizing, and in shaping a dependable taxonomy, might be a part of this?

In a twist on this trope, "autism" has, at times, also been framed as having an ontological status as a sort of monster. A noteworthy example was the "I am autism" TV campaign by the organization Autism Speaks, from 2009. An ominous, horror-movie-trailer voiceover reads a message in the style of a ransom note, personifying "autism" as an evil force that will capture one's children, ruin one's life, bankrupt one's family.

"I will fight to take away your hope," the voice intones. "I will plot to rob you of your children and your dreams. I will make sure that every day you wake up you will cry, wondering who will take care of my child after I die?" ("Horrific Autism Speaks 'I Am Autism' Ad Transcript - Autistic Self Advocacy Network," 2009). Autism, itself, is here a source of terror, destruction, and pain, a being that intentionally and maliciously causes harm. The autistic or neurodivergent person is just one more of the innocent victims of the creeping, faceless horror. As the clip continues, parents, caregivers, and interventionists are portrayed as the warriors, the heroes who are not afraid to stand up to and battle "autism" to save innocent children. Or, perhaps, to save us from

encountering alterity? To save us from rethinking our own ideas of normativity and pathologization? To put the onus of transformation directly the autistic individual?

The fierce discussions of terminology, between identity-first (autistic person) or person-first (person with autism), with the first most often preferred by autistic self-advocates, and the latter the firmly entrenched favourite of parent advocacy groups and many professionals. Somewhere inside the human shell, this language promises, is a person we recognize as fully human, within the normative taxonomies of what our rigid taxonomies are wiling to define as human.

"Negative ideas about autism—not anything inherent to autism itself—lead to negative family outcomes," writes autistic author Sara Luterman. "We are destructive and ruinous because we are expected to be" (Luterman, 2019). The expectation of destruction, ruin, burden, and lives of unaccepted alterity, lives that don't fit into our normative expectations, can have dark and even deadly consequences.

I promised early on in this volume not to dwell on tales of "pain and suffering." I think, for the most part, I have held to that promise. I have tried to describe the hopeful in places where science and medicine tells us there is none, or that the only hope is to transform the person into something other than what they are. I have argued for potentialities rather than possibilities, for acceptance rather than awareness.

I do want to dwell in darkness for just a moment, because the consequences of our collaboratively imagined storyworlds of disability, and especially developmental disability and neurodiversity, can be dark and violent. There are serious, material and social consequences for lots of folks who live with such labels, and it is important that we keep these in mind, that we take them as our pot of departure, not turn away from them in naïve and unrealistic visions of hope, or in our playful experience of monstering. Changing these conditions takes serious, intentional, and persistent work, which often falls on the shoulders of neurodivergent people and organizations.

Since 2012, the Autistic Self-Advocacy Network (ASAN) and partner disability activist groups have recognized March 1st as the Disability Day of Mourning, encouraging members and supporters to hold vigils to remember "disabled people murdered by their family members or caregivers" (Autistic Self Advocacy Network,

2014), a situation frequent enough to draw notice. Self-advocacy groups point out a terrible pattern:

> "A parent kills their disabled child. The media portrays these murders as justifiable and inevitable due to the "burden" of having a disabled person in the family. If the parent stands trial, they are given sympathy and comparatively lighter sentences, if they are sentenced at all. The victims are disregarded, blamed for their own murder at the hands of the person they should have been able to trust the most, and ultimately forgotten." (Autistic Self Advocacy Network, 2014)

An additional piece of the work being done by ASAN and their partners to bring attention to such incidents around the world is a collaborative tribute/database of stories, including a short bio, any news or media about the murder, and outcomes for criminal cases (*Disability Day of Mourning, n.d.*) . The deaths listed includes both planned and intentional killings, as well as deaths as a result of violence or neglect. The perpetrators/families, when they give voice to their reasons, often cite the overwhelming burden of care, sometimes coupled with the perception of providing a "compassionate homicide" for someone whose life is perceived as too miserable to bear.

There are also plenty of examples of expectations of monstrous behaviour from neurodivergent, or other "differented" folks. One doesn't have to look further than any news report about mass shootings or other acts of unimaginable violence we hear about to find people immediately speculating about autism, mental illness, diagnosis, and neuroatypicality, as well as racialized or gendered readings (Ali, 2022; McCoy, 2014; O'Neill, 2021).

What is monstrosity, in such examples? What economic and cultural assumptions allow us to press or encourage people into self-eradication rather than providing them the support and means for a life of dignity and worth? What kind of assumptions create the conditions and contexts for justifying filicide? What cultural stories do we have about "difference" that makes us immediately speculate about the developmental, religious, and racialized identities of the monsters of our "contemporary cultural narratives," like the "psychopath (and his first cousin, the terrorist)" (Weinstock, 2012, p. 276)?

Ethico-onto-epistemologies of monstrous relations

"Monsters are our children," writes Jeffrey Cohen. "[T]hey bring not just a fuller knowledge of our place in history and the history of knowing our place, but they bear self-knowledge … They ask us how we perceive the world, and how we have misrepresented what we have attempted to place. They ask us to reevaluate our cultural assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, our perception of difference, our tolerance toward its expression. They ask us why we have created them" (p. 52)

Gesturing toward possible answers, interrogating how they might have emerged from our parentage, and why these monsters, specifically, can give us insights into our own normativities. It is a position, write Godden and Mittman (2019), rescues monsters from being "simple objects of plot, waiting to be destroyed and defeated" (p. 6). Looking carefully at monsters, taking them seriously, engaging with them, might provide some insights into how the co-construction of categories such as monster or disabled "implicate all of us in our fantasies normality and wholeness" (p. 6).

If we are to do as Kuntz (2019) suggests, and make our own research assumptions and methods monstrous, that means we must be ready to consider this question from them—our research-children. It is the why of our methods of categorization, description, and scientific knowledge that we might need to face, rather than the what works (Biesta, 2009). Why have we created, and continue to tend, the scientism from which a pathology paradigm emerges? It seems like a ravenous beast that would happily gobble up everything and everyone, soiling our nest with its foul tailings of neo-liberal goals. I don't like the answers to this question, and I think we may do well to question the ethico-onto-epistemological storyworlds that have produced this particular monster, and how it keeps us in its thrall.

"The monstrous offers an escape from its hermetic path, an invitation to explore new spirals, new and interconnected methods of perceiving the world. In the face of the monster, scientific inquiry and its ordered rationality crumble" (Cohen, 2020, p. 40). Making our research monstrous might mean bring research itself, rather than the object of research, into this place of alterity, of ontological liminality. That might let us turn our gaze back at the cultures from which research paradigms emerge, and reimagine post-

representational (Stein et al., 2020) research spaces where we invite one another in to a space of emergence.

Chapter 5.

Reciprocity of becoming together

"When an individual asserts their identity, it is the community's job to make room and support that assertion"

-Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance*, p. 133

"Becoming produces nothing other than itself. We fall into a false alternative if we say that you either imitate or you are. What is real is the becoming itself, the block of becoming, not the supposedly fixed terms through which that which becomes passes."

-Deleuze & Guattari (2003), *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 238

"Paying attention is an ongoing act of reciprocity, the gift that keeps on giving, in which attention generates wonder, which in turn generates more attention, more joy."

-Robin Wall Kimmerer (2017), *Braiding Sweetgrass*, p. 374

"Reciprocity."

I remember having to work for weeks before I could count on pronouncing it correctly. It felt important to become comfortable using it, because it just kept popping up in my reading about autism and developmental disabilities.

We don't generally seem to use the word reciprocity much in everyday conversation, which is a shame! It's rather fantastic once you get the hang of it, rolling softly off the tongue. The lovely surprise of placing the emphasis right on the middle syllable never ceases to delight, to say nothing of its meaning, which is warm, balanced and relational.

I'm pretty sure I'm not the only one for whom reciprocity feels like a mouthful when they first encounter it. For me, it was its weighty role in the literature of autism descriptions and symptoms, being central to the diagnostic language. It may seem silly

to dwell on the clumsy and unfamiliar feeling of a word, but I wonder whether the unapproachability of the language makes it feel more medical, more legitimate? Is it perhaps part of the weaponization of language that emerges in processes of pathologizing certain people?

5.1. A tale of two (or more) reciprocities

Diagnosing reciprocity

Uncovering a deficit in "social" (World Health Organization, 2019) or "social-emotional" (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2016) reciprocity in an individual is one of the hallmarks of diagnosing for autism. This specific phrase entered the diagnostic language in the DSM IV in 1994, replacing the phrase "reciprocal social interactions" (Schwartz et al., 2021, p. 25), and was part of the criteria carried forward into the current editions of both the DSM 5, updated in 2013 and the ICD 11 update, effective January 2022.

From my early reading, I learned that a lack of social-emotional reciprocity seemed to be a key factor that separated the autistic label not only the "general" population, but also from other developmental and emotional disorders (Adamson et al., 2012). It is, in any case, central to the labelling process, and to our storyworlds of autism and neurodiversity.

Social-emotional reciprocity proves to be a somewhat slippery concept, though. The ICD 11 refers vaguely to "persistent deficits in the ability to initiate and to sustain reciprocal social interaction and social communication," (World Health Organization, 2019, "Autism Spectrum Disorder" section). Diagnosing autism, especially in young children, requires third-party observation of behaviours, as there are no biological markers to use.

How does one determine whether a person is "lacking" social-emotional reciprocity? The DSM 5 helpfully gives some specific examples of the ways in which a lack of social reciprocity shows up. Persons being diagnosed with ASD must be observed to exhibit a range of traits such as "abnormal social approach and failure of normal back-and-forth conversation; to reduced sharing of interests, emotions, or affect; to failure to initiate or respond to social interactions" (APA, 2016, p. 23).

The obviously hurtful and accusatory tone of such descriptions is difficult to set aside, especially, I can imagine, when they are applied to oneself. I can attest to their being hurtful when applied to those one knows intimately as friends and family members. If you get past that barrier, they still seem awkward, confusing, and not very specific. What is an "abnormal social approach?" How do we know when "sharing of emotions" is reduced? I imagine that some of the difficulty lies in the conceptual acrobatics needed to pin the responsibility for a fundamentally relational concept onto one member in the interaction; it is the difficult ontological exercise of turning a verb into a singular noun. A new question arises: how can one individual be the singular site of an inability to "sustain reciprocal social interaction?"

It might be helpful to step outside of diagnostic manuals and tests for a moment, and see what reciprocity means in more everyday contexts, if we were to ask our mutual friend, google. Reciprocity is the noun version of the word "reciprocal," which we inherited by way of the Latin term *reciprocus*, a back-and-forth movement (Merriam-Webster, n.d.a). Reciprocal, according to Webster, is something "shared, felt, or shown by both sides." Some definitions favour a more transactional sense, a "return in kind." In any case, synonyms for reciprocity are collaboration, mutuality, cooperation, connection, affinity, understanding (Merriam-Webster, n.d.b). All of these, we might note, are built on the clear expectation that both (or all) parties make movements *toward one another*.

This cursory search might also point us toward another mutual friend, Wikipedia, where we might discover that reciprocity, in social psychology, is a "social norm of responding to a positive action with another positive action, rewarding kind actions" ("Reciprocity (Social Psychology)," 2021). This description would make reciprocity the "social norm" of response. It is payment in kind for generous actions. With this twist, we begin to glimpse how this might be measured, described, and evaluated. A look at some of the research describing neuro-atypicality will show how this might be, and has been, done.

These definitions come from google and Wikipedia, and the appropriate grain of salt should be applied. But philosophers like Eva Feder Kittay (Kittay, 2005, 2013, 2015, 2019), who has written extensively in the intersection of ethic of care, feminist studies

and disability, and who also has the lived experience as a caregiver to a child with disability, echoes and critiques this mainstream understanding of reciprocity.

"In standard relationships of parity, reciprocity requires that efforts I exert on your behalf will be met by some equivalent exertion on your part, immediately, at some specified time in the future, or when the need arises," writes Kittay (2013). "This reciprocity has the nature of an exchange—it is an *exchange reciprocity*. Connection-based equality eschews this exchange reciprocity for another sort, one based on different kinds of expectations" (p. 67).

"Reciprocity-in-connection" (Kittay, 2013), instead, is an awareness of mutual interdependence. This is also captured in the phrase "temporarily abled," which is sometimes used in the disability community to describe nondisabled folks, and questions the taken-for-granted assumption of typicality and hyper-individuality, and nudges us toward re-imagining our conceptions of autonomy and individualized life trajectories. Kittay describes that reciprocity-in-connection "invokes a set of nested obligations," in a way that links community members and "creates a sense of reciprocity between those who give and those who receive that raises the expectation that when one is in the position to give care, one will, and when that person is in need another who is suitably situated …will respond" (p. 68). This is not bean-counting, tit-for-tat, or return in kind. This suggests that the reciprocity and relationality we experience may not come where, how or from whence we expect it. In fact, it may not even be in a form we recognize, or even to us specifically, individually.

Playing reciprocity

Andrew is a long-time role-player with tons of experience as gamemaster, who has played in, run, and organized role-playing games and larps of many different types. Despite this, they continue to return to Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) as a favourite setting and game system. That seems to be the case for a lot of role-players, actually.

When I asked about Andrew to tell me about the best roleplaying experience they have had, this is their story, told about an experience as a gamemaster. I feel it's a compelling tale of reciprocity:

"It's one of those times where they've gone through fight after fight after fight, and they're finally just sitting down," Andrew tells me. "They're in the middle of a market square, with orcs everywhere.

"So, we'd just had this scene where one of the characters, Milla, had been in a fight. She got slammed up and down by this tentacle monster and it was horrible. But the worst part is, she got a hole in her backpack that she didn't know about. She was traveling with her mom's ashes, and now they've leaked out of the backpack—except for one finger bone.

"At which point, you know, Milla is horribly upset because she's lost her mom, and she's now convinced the only way that she can keep her mom is if she eats this finger bone and it becomes a part of her." Andrew laughs, and I join in. Absurdity and imaginative player characters are some of the best parts of D&D games. I'm wondering what to expect next.

"And then," Andrew continues, "there is this discussion, these three people just talking back and forth. I sat there for probably forty-five minutes and *never said a word* as the three of them acted out this scene!

"They eventually convinced her to use the bone to crush it up to make a tattoo, because tattoos are a big deal in this world. One of the others suggested that making a tattoo will give her power from her mom, and Milla was all for this. She's like, 'This is a great idea. Let's do this.' And there was a tattoo artist there, who said, 'No problem.'"

I nod, knowing that the players must have asked the DM if there was a tattoo artist available. And Andrew had clearly encouraged them to build the storyworld in this direction by allowing for it. He smiles and continues.

"They're going to do it—everything is ready. It's going to be just a terrible heart with an arrow through it that says 'Mom.' A cheesy tattoo, which was so perfect for Milla.

"Well, before all this had happened, there was a fight where Milla met a hornsaw, which is like a really hairy unicorn with a serrated horn instead of a normal straight horn. But, anyway, Milla fell in love with it, and she roped it and tied to a post, and it was going to become her new mount.

"Now, they're not good creatures, hornsaws. The orcs fight with them all the time. So, as she's [Milla] getting this tattoo done, she [the player] just looks at me and says, 'How's my hornsaw?'"

We both burst out laughing. There is a shared, mutual delight at the way all the elements of a role-playing game can come together: the world, the story, the unexpected directions the ideas of other players will push and pull the storyworld. I know that feeling of astonishment, and I wonder how I would react to this question, if I was DM. I'm part of their storyworld now, and can't wait to hear how it ends!

"I just rolled dice real quick, because I was like, 'I don't know,'" Andrew laughs harder. "So I rolled for the orcs, and I said,

"'Oh, you actually hear some orcs saying they're going to go out and see why there's this hornsaw tied up.' So she actually goes running out there, and the tattoo never gets finished! So now, Milla has this half a heart with half an arrow that says 'Mo,'" Andrew laughs again and shakes his head.

"I mean, again, for forty-five minutes, almost an hour, I just watched as these three played the scene. And it was *amazing*," Andrew says with something like awe. This doesn't seem like what most people would expect as the high-point for a Dungeonmaster, in a clunky, trope-filled world full of high-fantasy adventure and violence.

"It was just so much fun to watch them. There was laughter and there were times where there was, you know, solemnity and some sadness." Andrew chuckles at the memory.

"It was a whole roller coaster of emotions. Milla realizes her mom is gone. And, then, you know, the other characters, the half-orc, convinced her that, no, this is how you can preserve your mom forever. And we just get some really good scenes like this."

This story, about the best day of role-playing, requires something of and gives something to everyone, in a nested system of relationships of reciprocity, including characters, players, and storyworld. Even the Dungeonmaster—the ostensible leader—

is transformed in the process of the storyworld emerging. Players offer something, and their characters give something to one another, the gamemaster takes it up, offers something back. The gift of the gamemaster is to provide and describe a context, offer a space within which unfolding can happen. For Andrew, the gift in return is when the DM, who is typically the lead storyteller and referee, is not needed—the story and the storyworld emerge, in utterly unexpected ways.

This feels more like what Kittay is imagining in "reciprocity in connection." It is not the reciprocal of the expected response, the storyline where we know the ending. It is the unfolding, the unpredictable, the mutual becoming-together into something that benefits us all, not any one individually.

A few years back, Morton Ann Gernsbacher (2006), explored the question of reciprocity as described in autism, in a project that gives us a close look at diagnostic tools, as well as the ways in which autistic behaviours are approached by research and behavioural intervention communities. In the piece, Gernsbacher points out that metrics, such as the Social Reciprocity Scale, include questions about how *others* treat the person being diagnosed, such as the item "Is regarded by other children as odd or weird" (p. 2). There seems to be a strong tendency in research and interventions to assume the behaviours and speech of persons labelled autistic are meaningless and not communicative. This may be related to the expectation of deficient or absent social and emotional mutuality; we may be less likely to extend empathy to someone we expect not to be empathetic. The practice of reciprocity, Gernsbacher concludes, "needs to be developed more purposefully by non-autistics and applied more generously toward autistics" (p. 4).

That seems to me like a good start. The DSM examples are filled with words that seem like they *should* require more than one relational partner: *share, back-and-forth, response*. I've always been told it takes two to tango. Apparently, it is possible to blame a failure to dance on one of the tangoers, if only that partner has a neurodevelopmental disability diagnosis.

Going into a bit more detail, descriptions of social-emotional reciprocity under the heading "Diagnostic features," in the DSM 5 include "the ability to engage with others

and share thoughts and feelings." If some autistic people have "developed compensation strategies" for their social deficits, it is explained, they still "suffer from the effort and anxiety of consciously calculating what is socially intuitive for most individuals" (APA, 2016). Although this is described under the umbrella of relation, of "reciprocity," there is no mention of what those around them might be doing—or not doing—that could make such exhausting activity feel necessary. There is no mention of why those whom the neuro-atypical person meets might feel justified expecting that this person should "consciously calculate" their every move in order to be considered legitimate conversation partners. Why do we feel comfortable in our normative expectations of others? Why must they perform in this way to be judged worthy of becoming our friends, partners, colleagues?

If psychology-grounded researchers were characters in a role-playing game, I feel like they would consistently roll extremely high on their Sleight-of-Hand checks. Like any good pickpocket or card sharp, they seem to be able to convince us to keep our eyes on the individual being labelled, thus missing the bigger picture. Or perhaps they just have an unbelievably high Charisma score, a result of the "scientism" (Oolong, 2022; Timimi & MD, 2018) that pervades our thinking about the multiplicity of human experiences. They are repeatedly able to convince those of us who are framed as "neurotypical" to believe in and enact narratives of normality, deviance and pathology. In any case, it seems incredibly difficult to best them on an Insight check.

Social-emotional reciprocity is described in studies of neurodivergence as a "trait" (Schwartz et al., 2021) or a "skill" that can be "implemented" (Whitcomb et al., 2013); others suggesting that "teaching imitation" can be a building block toward social reciprocity (Ingersoll, 2007). In such studies, reciprocity is considered as an essentialized feature of individuals, not something that emerges in the space between creatures in relation to one another. I feel like "responsiveness" might more accurately name what is happening here; they seem to be answering question questions like, *Did the individual respond to a social overture in the way that meets certain expectations?* A more relevant question, were we truly interested in reciprocity as a relational and processual verb might be *Did a relationship of reciprocity begin or develop between the two individuals?*

A transactional understanding of the idea of social-emotional reciprocity as exchange reciprocity (Kittay, 2013) seems problematic when applied to someone with whom one might share, or consider sharing, an intimate relationship. It seems to me a cold, calculated, and performative approach to understanding relational interactions. Is the relationship with caregivers, family, teachers, partners, friends, and community built on the understanding that each party can expect to get something specific in return for their self-defined "positive actions?" If that is the case, those who hold definitional power seem likely to set the standard, both for what is considered a positive action, and for what counts as "payment in kind." It also strikes me as interesting that we use the language of economic exchange to describe our close relationships: We are "emotionally invested" with certain people (and wise investors only do so with the expectation of a return), and "indebted" to others.

In this type of equation, I expect many of us could be judged as wanting or burdensome. It seems an especially slippery slope for those who might experience and express social connection—reciprocity, if you will—in different, unexpected or non-normative ways. The bean-counting of back-and-forth interactions will inevitably end with one party or another in a "deficit" relationship to the other. Perhaps it is no accident that the word "deficit" appears in the diagnostic language!

When we feel we have reached a medical consensus about what constitutes a social response, the outcome becomes bleakly inevitable. What does it mean to enter into a relationship in the role of creditor? If reciprocity is a transaction, and some of us enter a relationship with a pre-defined "deficit," how can that ever be mutual and consensual? Folks labelled neurodivergent, then, along with a few other categories, would seem to be positioned and pathologized as the bearers of inherited and culturally defined poverty and indebtedness. Are those of us in the roles of caregiver, family member, intimate partner, teacher, sibling, friend, then positioned as having the right—perhaps even the responsibility—to be able to call in our debts? If I follow that thought to its end, the results seem quite chilling!

5.2. Quantifying reciprocity

There are a wealth of studies that measure and/or quantify the differences in kind and frequency between the responses of neurodivergent persons to the social (or

emotional) overtures of another (Bontinck et al., 2018; Ingersoll, 2007; Kaale et al., 2018; Schwartz et al., 2021; Whitcomb et al., 2013) Predictably, they score lower than their neurotypical counterparts, and are therefore defined as somehow "having" less social-emotional reciprocity: a deficit of reciprocity. I suspect there is a deficit of reciprocity in the interactions described in the studies, but it seem more fitting to look at both sides of the relationship.

Some studies have indeed found interesting chinks in this hypothesis, even as they maintain the overall premise. Such incongruities tend to be reported anecdotally, while the overall gist of the study remains: specifying the ways in which some individuals lack something. And the stakes are not small, in this case. Social emotional reciprocity, and its close cousin, empathy, are absolutely central to our perception of what makes us human. When a person is defined as lacking or impaired in this way, it feels like we are questioning their humanity.

Within these studies are, of course, movements toward recognizing reciprocity as more genuinely *reciprocal*, in the sense of a relational dynamic that develops through time and iteration.

One such example involves a series of studies of the characteristics of infant crying and adult responses to the types of cries (Esposito et al., 2011, 2017; Esposito & Venuti, 2008, 2010). Esposito et al. (2011, 2017) detail the ways in which the cries of babies with ASD diagnoses and developmental delays are qualitatively and acoustically different than those of typically developing children, and how adults respond to them. They found that the adults in the study "felt more negative states" and experience "mental states of uneasiness" (Esposito et al., 2011, p. 222) when listening to the autistic children's cries. The researchers suggest this leads to a "vicious circle" (Esposito & Venuti, 2008, p. 382), described in some detail in the 2011 article:

> "…children …experience problems in expressing their negative emotions through cry. These difficulties might be linked to brain anomalies and compromise various acoustic qualities of the cry, so that the cry may not be easily understood by caregivers. Problems in understanding their child's cries can created distress and make caregivers uneasy. In turn, distress leads caregivers to provide their children with inadequate feedback, which is ineffective in addressing the cause of crying. As a result, caregivers do not receive adequate response from their children and so they may start to feel inadequate and unable to foster in their children a sense of well-being.

Sensing something amiss, caregivers modify their parenting skills. For their part, children who cannot adequately communicate with their caregivers may engage in compensatory behaviors such as self-isolation, stereotyped behavior , or hyper- or hypokinesia.(Esposito et al., 2011, p. 1515)

While this explanation locates the emergence of the "symptomatic" behaviours of neurodivergence in a more relational space, it still seems that the important goal of the studies is to describe an innate, essentialized divergence from what is "normal." It still feels to me like finger-pointing, directing the attention back to the child's "anomalous" crying. Families, caregivers, and others in their network can breathe a sigh of relief: "It's not me, they *really are* sending indecipherable messages!" The wider network of people who are touched by the presence of such difference, can now feel scientifically vindicated if they experience increased "unease" in the presence of neurodivergent distress. "It's acoustics, man. I can't help it if your voice sets me on edge."

In another such study, Kaale et al. (2016), looked at play interactions between caregivers and small children diagnosed with autism, noting that "one third of the mothers did not show any positive affect, such as smiling, clapping, laughter, or cheerful comments during their time in joint engagement" (p. 316). This seems to them incongruous with the mothers of typically developing young children. However, when finding an explanation for why this might be, they speculate that the "children's atypical display of affect may influence the behaviours of the mothers" (p. 316). The study refers to several others that likewise support this as the directionality of negative affect.

If the study is picking up on the *responsiveness of the other person* or parties, as well as the person with the diagnosis, why is the neurodivergent individual always stuck with the deficit label? One explanation might be the move away from parent-blaming, and the long shadow of Bettelheim's *refrigerator mothers* (Korkiakangas, 2018; van Rosmalen et al., 2020). But the psychodynamic framework of autism was ultimately also a search for blame, even as it landed in a different lap.

Equally interesting is how their information about positive affect was gathered. Were the researchers counting and recording examples of predefined, culturally recognizable expressions of delight? What about the possibility that the parent and child were negotiating their own particularly suited, reciprocal language of mutual enjoyment, or finding meaning in some other way than glee?

There still seems to me to be a research fixation with blame-finding, and a tendency toward a sort of causal regression in the style of the chicken-or-egg dilemma. "Reciprocity" is still being investigated as something that "is." Part of someone's being rather, not something that emerges between bodies, in the becoming. Or perhaps the structure and premise of such research makes it difficult to capture process?

Why is determining where, or within whom, the origin of such a "problem" is located is more interesting than the relational dilemma itself?

There are a few targeted examples of psychology research that do, in fact, have the actions and attitudes of the "others" as their focus. Noah Sasson and a team of researchers at the University of Texas look at "how the perceptions, biases, and responses of non-autistic people contribute to social interaction difficulties" (*Social Cognition and Interaction in Autism Lab – The University of Texas at Dallas*, n.d., home page) in a series of studies that have been replicated in various other settings and versions, including one I was involved in during my doctoral work. The participants watched short, self-recorded video introduction of different people, some neurodivergent and some neurotypical, and afterwards rated the "likeability" of the people they saw in the films. They indicated the degree of interest they would have in the person, and how likely they would want to become friends with each of them. The research demonstrated that "typical" peers judge neurotypical people more negatively than those without a diagnosis (Sasson et al., 2017).

This seems to be a rather unflattering commentary about the subtle ways in which we judge and sort our companions. And, in turn, the way we socialize those who learn from us to likewise judge and sort others as acceptable companions, playmates, and friends.

Elizabeth Fein (2015a) reflects on ten years of experiences and conversations with adolescents labelled as neurodivergent. The title of the article, "No one has to be your friend," is a quote from one of the participants. Fein describes a vicious cycle that seems to emerge in many social contexts, leaving many of those she met and talked to feeling lonely and isolated. Fein suggests that viewing our community involvement and personal relationships through a sort of "free-market" lens leads us to sort certain people out of our relationship network.

Within sociocultural contexts that emphasize personal choice and mutual positive emotion or pleasure as the basis for non-family relationships, such as friendship, those who do not feel immediately "comfortable" to be with, under the social conditions we are accustomed to, can easily end up being rejected. Those of us with a learning pace, social rhythm, or even a particularly uncommon interest that feels too different, any sort of factor that takes some adjustment, in fact, are not chosen by their peers. This "personal choice" is supported by the overall social context, allowing for teachers, peers, and even parents to throw up their hands and accept loneliness as an inevitable fate for some people. Fein quotes one psychologist she talked to as saying, "Parents come to me and they say: my child has no friends. And I ask them: what are you doing about it? And they say: Nothing! What can we do? They don't like him!" (p. 87).

Alternatively, if we look for a solution among the usual offerings of interventions and special education, the answer is to "do something" that changes the behaviours, preferences, rhythms or interests of the individual labelled or treated as "different." In this way, we can make them more attractive to potential companions, who will experience greater ease and similarity. I have a visceral reaction to the idea of social modelling that seems to pervade this way of thinking. How is it helpful to ourselves, to others, or to society that we are encouraged only to spend time and develop relationships those with whom we have enough factors in common to have an experience of neutrality, ease and pleasure? It seems to me that leads toward polarization, segregation, discrimination of all sorts!

What would happen if we didn't encourage neurodivergent kids to watch and learn from other children being friends, or responding to adults' overtures, or hugging their parents in a certain way, in order to learn new ways of being? What if we explored new ways of becoming in relation, together, that might allow for the vitality of the moment of disorientation (Ahmed, 2006) that brings new insight and new becoming. What if friendship, and other important social connections, were driven by other factors than mutual positive affect—which all too often ultimately boils down to "those who are enough like me not to challenge my normativity?" We know from years and decades of experience that this pool of friends and acquaintances rarely includes those with racialized or class backgrounds, languages, or abilities different from our own, just to name a few factors. Social-emotional reciprocity is a slippery fish indeed, when it

becomes the responsibility of one particular group or another to reciprocate the explicit, normative expectations of the dominant group.

Double empathy as reciprocity

Damien Milton has named this dilemma as the "double empathy problem" in neurodiversity and social relationships (Fletcher-Watson et al., 2019; Milton, 2012). Milton is an autism scholar who both identifies as neurodivergent, and is the parent of a child labelled autistic. Milton questions the ideas of deficits in "theory of mind" and empathy as a specifically neurodivergent train, and problematizes the practice of pinning a lack of mutual social understanding on the neurodivergent person. The double empathy problem presents this alternative: rather than one party (those labelled neurodivergent) failing to live up to the required and assumed abilities to express and understand the social meanings and intentions of neurotypical social interactions, misunderstanding or lack of insight and empathy emerges in the space between persons with different interactions styles.

Lack of empathy is perhaps not, as positivistic methodologies and understandings would lead us to conclude, a one-sided affair, but is "actively constructed by social agents engaged in material and mental production" (Milton, 2012, p. 884). I feel like this can also be described as a question of becoming, instead of being. Milton proposes to reframe the question as one of "reciprocity and mutuality" (p. 884). I think it may be important to add that this also requires that we further re/conceptualize and practice reciprocity in other ways than described in the diagnostic and research frameworks!

I know many people identified or self identifying as neurodivergent, I get chances to meet many more, and I follow along in discussions on social media and other self-advocacy platforms. Among those, I have encountered in these spaces, I can honestly say I haven't experienced anyone with a "deficit of social and emotional reciprocity." I don't remember encountering people who seem to lack interest in or willingness to be part of a relationship of mutuality. I *have* met many who tell hair-raising stories of being treated with indifference, ignored, or having their own needs and wishes overlooked to an extent that brought despair, frustration, exhaustion, and sometimes extreme isolation. I *have* absolutely met people who are inclined to give up on "neurotypicals" at large.

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Various attempts to detect and quantify social-emotional reciprocity more precisely or accurately do not seem to have improved the situation of its lack (Schwartz et al., 2021). In a thorough look at the research base, Gernsbacher and Yergeau (2019), set a huge question mark to the whole project of scientific-based "evidence" of impaired or lacking Theory of Mind as an autistic characteristic. It seems the conclusions drawn through scientism remain ambiguous at best, insulting and damaging at worst. In my perspective, they ultimately lead to interventions that promote performative, behaviourally-centred foci that have little to do with either the social or the emotional. Perhaps the very way we conceptualize and approach reciprocity, empathy, mutual understanding, and relationships could use a rethinking, especially as it relates to neurodiversity.

What does it mean for the potentialities of relationships to emerge, if we assume it will be difficult or impossible to establish or maintain them, or that we need to "train" the other to perform reciprocity, as we have defined it? I think of my own selfish and ignorant impulses before my babies were born.

"Just not autism," I remember thinking. "I could handle anything else. But not autism." The ongoing, lived experience of being in relation to someone labelled "neurodivergent" has, for me, been an entirely different storyworld than the perceptions and expectations produced by coldly pathologized medical descriptions, and disseminated in research and mainstream media. Ash may respond, attend, show joy differently, but their relationships are most certainly not non-reciprocal.

Ultimately, I'm left to wonder what good it does for any of us to measure and quantify the difference in type or number of responses to certain predefined sorts of "social" initiative? What purpose does it serve to create a sense of expectation for reciprocity as something quantifiable? What does it mean to justify demanding certain behaviours, in acceptable quantities, as a sign that reciprocity exists somewhere, inside certain people?

The collective storyworld that seems to have emerged about autism and neurodivergence is that neurotypicality is the neutral, "given" and desired, and to which the neuro-atypical can be contrasted (Manning, 2020), and nowhere with more devastating consequences than in these normative ideas of reciprocity and empathy, as

well as the concept of mindblindness (Baron-Cohen, 1995). Just look at the many social media anecdotes, TV shows, etc. about autistic children who refuse to cuddle, or who appear to ignore or reject their parents' expressions of affection or romantic partners who don't live up to relationship expectations or norms (Yergeau, 2018).

This storyworld, in which certain people are giving something up and *not* getting enough in return, also seems to allow a widespread acceptance, or excuse, of violence against people with disabilities, who are many times likelier to be victims of violence and domestic violence compared to the general population (Lucardie, 2005; Mikton & Shakespeare, 2014; Sullivan, 2017). Violence, even deadly violence, from parents, family and caregivers is also much higher than with the general population (Autistic Self Advocacy Network, 2014; Lucardie, 2005), at times also ignored or diminished by the justice system.

Sullivan (2017) takes a close look at the sentencing language in cases of parents and caregivers found guilty of violence or murder against their children. Not infrequently, the person with disabilities is essentialized as an entirely different type of child, with needs "beyond the scope of what is considered the 'normal' experience of parenting" (Sullivan, 2017, p. 415). In one case, a judge spoke of the birth of a baby with disabilities as "obviously a severe blow" (p. 415) to the mother. It seems the culturally celebrated, joyful even of the birth of a child can be turned on it's head if the child has a disability.

I recall running into a parent from our "baby group" in Denmark shortly after Ash got a diagnosis. We hadn't seen one another in quite a while, and we were exchanging the usual updates of our children.

"Ash just got diagnosed with autism. So that explains some things!" I said. She knew I had been concerned about their well-being, especially around starting preschool. For me, a diagnosis had been a sort of relief, after over two years of trying to get the attention of care- and health professionals, and having other parents assure me that there was nothing unusual. It was an experience that made me able to trust my parenting instincts, that Ash was experiencing out-of-the-ordinary challenges with some things, and doing others very differently than many other children.

"Oh, really!" Her eyes widened in horror. "Isn't that really hard? I'm so sorry!"

"It's okay," I said hesitantly. Her eyes darted around, and I got the clear impression that she was looking for place to hide. Or maybe just a good way to end the conversation.

"It's really not so bad." I told her, wishing I knew how to reply to such condolences. I wanted to say, *"Yes, it's hard. But not because of the reasons you are thinking. Life with Ash is not hard. But dealing with the reactions of people like you is hard. Seeing how ill-suited most places and situations are to Ash's needs, and how uninterested most people are in changing any of that can be quite hard.* This conversation *is hard."*

She seemed so distressed, I wondered if I needed to offer some sort of comfort. It was the first time, but would be far from the last, that someone reacted in that way to news of Ash's DSM-certified "difference."

What might happen if we were to more fundamentally transform the way we think about reciprocity? How would that transform the way we experience being in relation with those in our families and communities who are labelled neurodivergent? What if we were to consider the loneliness and isolation—and the potentialities of reciprocity beyond the horizon of normopathy—as it relates to the individual labelled neuro-atypical? What would it do to change the focus from the expectations of those around them of payment with a certain type of emotional currency? What could this do for those who experience that their attempts to compromise, to follow normative "rules," are met with a "tightening up of normality" from those around them (Gustafson, 2015)?

Let's see where it takes us to re/imagine other parts of the diagnostic language, similar to the way that Milton encourages us to reimagine empathy.

5.3.   Reciprocity as becoming in relation

Before listening to Robin Wall Kimmerer read aloud in the audiobook version of *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2013), I had only occasionally heard a non-psychologist speak the word with any kind of comfort and intimacy. Now, the idea of reciprocity is indelibly part of my experience of sun-spotted walking trails, the towering shelter of tree canopies and the always changing landscape of berries and flowers on my daily walking route. On a purely personal and selfish level, this is a massive relief from associating it with the

language of diagnostic manuals. But more importantly for this discussion, reciprocity is central to Kimmerer's writing and thinking about the world in a way that reaches far beyond its clinical use, and might be transformative to thinking about reciprocity, and how we consider the relationships between and with persons labelled as neurodivergent.

In *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* (Kimmerer, 2013), as well as other essays and talks (Hynes, 2020; Kimmerer, 2017, 2021) Robin Wall Kimmerer offers quite different vision of reciprocity. Journeying through Kimmerer's work, as well as other scholarship grounded in Indigenous and relational ontologies (Braidotti, 2019; Coulthard, 2014; Murris & Bozalek, 2019a; Rosiek et al., 2020; Ross, 2006; Simpson, 2017), I have come to encounter the concept of reciprocity more often, with more diversity, nuance, and hope. I found myself speaking my excitement aloud to the ferns, slugs, and boardwalks on my walking route, as the course of such relational thinking played in my headset.

"Yes!" I would say fervently, adding an internal, "Take that, DSM." Sometimes what I was listening to would bring a joy and relief so intense, I would laugh out loud. It seemed that there was something very different about the idea within relational contexts, that resonated with my experiences with Ash, and with experiences I had heard of from my many neuroatypical friends and acquaintances, as well as those in autobiographical accounts and through self-advocacy and ally networks.

The diagnostic descriptions of autism focus intensely on relationality—or so it would seem. It is a diagnosis that sets an enormous, skeptical question mark over a person's ability and potential for being in relation with other humans specifically (which, by the way, is an interesting caveat that I will take up briefly a bit later). Nonetheless, as the preceding discussion demonstrates, that relationality is only based on the quantifiable and the immediate, and reflects a sense of one-way responsibility. The reciprocity that I found in these new (to me) contexts seemed to hold the seeds of a fundamental challenge to the pathologizing, medicalizing, gaze. (Re)thinking reciprocity with these writings has proved (trans)formative to my work in many ways.

Braiding Sweetgrass is a collection of essays discussing Indigenous and Eurocentric, settler-colonial science and traditions of understanding. Kimmerer is both a university educated botanist, and an enrolled member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation

with experience in traditional sciences and teachings, and draws on knowledge and experience from both aspects of her background. This thesis presents a rather different view of relationality, interdependence and reciprocity, as it is expressed in more-than-human human interactions and relationships. I listened with rapt attention as Kimmerer described a much more active and less selfishly expectant reciprocity than what I was used to.

This reciprocity doesn't seem to wait for certain, specific responses to overtures offered, but instead focuses on gratitude, on active relationality and a sense of responsibility toward the other, irrespective of who or what the "other" is. It includes accepting and fulfilling mutual responsibilities. It understands reciprocal movements between individuals as deeply embedded within an extended network of ongoing relationships, including the human and the more-than-human. Learning from the more-than-human world, in fact, shows us a reciprocity that is expressed in an astonishing multiplicity of ways that have nothing to do with quantifiable, or perhaps even detectable, movements of individuals. This also brings reciprocity into a very different horizon of time, which means it could never be adequately captured in a laboratory setting; it is the reciprocity of a lifetime, or more than one lifetime. Kimmerer encourages readers to consider multiple generations, extending far beyond one or two individuals, the persons in the room, and their present situation, and much more expansively than counting and tracking reciprocity as a sort of isolated, zero-sum relationship. It's the recognition that there will always be cycles of plenty and cycles of poverty within everyone's capabilities, and within any set of relationships.

This reciprocity has resonance with what Kittay was hinting at with reciprocity-in-connection. Kittay, like Kimmerer, also suggests that this vision of reciprocity is foundational for a just society. Perhaps we need to "expand the notion of reciprocity, and in so doing open a conceptual space for dependency concerns within social cooperation in a just society"(Kittay, 2013, p. 106). "Since society is an association that persists through generations, an extended notion of 'reciprocity' … is needed for justice between generations" (p. 107).

Care, reciprocity, relationship, dependence are perhaps not indicative of vulnerability, weakness, lack of ability or potential loss of revenue. Perhaps they are vitally important for resilient and just communities. But when we constantly navigate

contexts where interdependence is pathologized, how might we find our way to re-imagining those very contexts to include linking and nested interdependencies and linking relationships.

Attending to reciprocity: We are never bystanders

I think maybe becoming-with/in the storyworlds that emerge in and around D&D and other role-playing games can offer glimpses of relational becoming that have a resonance with the *reciprocity* that Kimmerer and Kittay describe. First of all, characters find themselves intertwined in and part of systems of inevitable interconnectedness, always ultimately dependent on others in their party of adventurers. Add to that entangled encounters, beings that bleed in from other planes of existence, and the reminder that every minute action is shaped by one's surroundings, in the simulated form of dice rolls. From such conditions emerge a sense of similar to *this* reciprocity. The storied landscapes, thick with interconnections, cooperation and interdependence, may offer experiences that (re)orient the way players think about and relate to and with human and more-than-human others, both of which are important components of role-playing practices, some more explicitly than others. Embodiment tends to produce deeper and more transformative learning than having something explained; practicing reciprocity—playing reciprocity—may likewise play a part in transformation, through our characters, into different ways of understanding reciprocity.

Becoming together, within relations of reciprocity, challenges the passive or "innocent" bystander position. Being an observer, without an active stake in the activities and relationships of the world is not a possibility. It means we are always and ultimately actively part of the lives of our fellow humans and non-humans alike, through our decisions and indecisions, our actions and inactions, just as they are part of ours. I think this is often hard to detect in our everyday lives, with our gazes directed toward ourselves, our immediate human companions, and our place in a consumption-driven and competitive sea of human exceptionalism. Sitting on our hands, letting things happen and unfold around us, nonaction, can seem like a legitimate choice that causes no harm or good, that has no effect.

Role-playing games are structured so that reciprocity is both inevitable and highly visible. The mutuality of any action—or inaction—is on full and minute display. There is

no such position as bystander, no false safety of passivity, neutrality, innocence. Doing nothing requires an active and explicit choice, and is clear to everyone in the game. The consequences of every choice, and the complex assemblages that emerge through them, are clear and traceable. This becomes especially noticeable during high-stakes moments, because of the flexible nature of time in the game.

When I started playing D&D, the other players carefully explained how time worked in the game, particularly during combat situations. I think they were being apologetic toward a rookie player about how long it can go between a character's turns when things really go down. But, instead, I was fascinated by this description. I liked the idea of time being a sort of honey-like substance, sometimes more viscous than others.

When the party has an "encounter," when they meet a turning point, a space of heightened potentiality, in the game, the storytelling format changes. This can be a puzzle to be solved, a person to be negotiated with, a monster to be defended against, any number of things. At this point, every creature involved in the encounter gets an equal number of turns. Everyone rolls their D20, including the monsters or other non-player characters being run by the gamemaster. Depending on the situation, this also includes constructed or magically conjured beings, particularly sentient plants, or other more-than-human aspects of the context that might play a role in shaping the storyworld. This determines the order in which "Actions" happen.

At such moments, time is stretched, almost to the point of ridiculousness. In an encounter, the rule of thumb for D&D is that one "round" (the time between each individual character's "turn") lasts six seconds in the storyworld. In practice, this means that one minute in the storyworld can last hours in "real time," depending on the complexity of the situation and the imaginativeness of the players! As a general rule, on their turn each creature has the opportunity to move, and to choose a main Action, and a Bonus Action, which is usually a minor spell, a chance to hide, etc.

The possibility of what these actions might include vary from class to class, and between types of creatures, and definitely change through time as characters gain level. But, perhaps most interestingly, they often vary depending on those around the character. The Rogue character, for example, can attack more effectively if one of their allies are nearby to distract the creature they are attacking. Some types of defensive

fighters give protection to those standing within range of them, and there are plenty of spells that are used on one's friends to give them a boost, rather than having an attack function.

Moments of high pressure are splayed out in a way that makes the minute decisions of individual characters utterly transparent. This slowing of time and careful picking apart of motives, consequences and hesitations is incredibly instructive in understanding relationships.

"Can I see how badly so-and-so is hurt?" a healer character might ask, as part of making a decision about whether to contribute to the bloodshed and get rid of the monster, or to prioritize helping a companion first.

"How are you doing over there?" the spellcaster could ask another character. "Are you okay if you get hit by the edge of my *Fireball* spell?" in a situation where getting rid of a threatening demon quickly, with a high-powered spell could help everyone out in the long run.

"Remember to stick close to me," the Fighter might say. "I've got you covered with my shield."

Players have equal opportunities to contribute to the outcome, and an equal opportunity to do so in a way that expresses their characters' individuality and personality. Nonviolence and trying to do things in alternative ways is also an option, and some characters—or parties of adventurers—are much more likely to try something other than bloodshed. Some gamemasters are also more likely to set up situations where non-violence is encouraged.

Ultimately, one never knows how the consequences of such a decision might ripple out into the storyworld and turn back up at a later time, which just increases the stakes of each decision, each relationship.

It also struck me early on that this seemed related to a game structure that was the most truly democratic context I'd ever experienced! I have yet to find a practice that makes my classroom a place where everyone has so legitimately equal possibilities,

short of handing out D20s to students and having them "role for initiative" when something needs to be discussed or decided.[4]

There are also situations in which days are collapsed into mere moments, if a party is travelling large distances, for instance. The DM can choose to have them encounter different situations along the way, but many times the bulk of travel happens through a quick skill roll or two. These, as well, are dependent on the combined skills and willingness of different players / characters to contribute to the party:

"So, after a long day of travel, you come to a sheltered meadow by the side of a stream. Darkness is falling, and you're pretty sure you have reached the area that the priest in the last town warned you about. Where there have been several travelers killed by undead in the last few months. Do you want to make camp?" asks the DM.

It is agreed that this would be the logical choice. Also, if the gamemaster suggests it, it is often a good idea to take the hint!

"Are there any fish in the stream?" asks the Ranger character.

"Do you want to check?"

"Yes. I go down to the stream with a fishing line and hook from my pack."

"Roll a Survival check," the DM might prompt. The d20 is rolled, the fish either detected or not. Another roll might determine how many fish are caught. The party's dwindling food supply is either safe for the night, or they have to go to bed after a small meal of their remaining rations.

Watches are set, and Perception checks rolled to determine how well the characters on watch are able to keep awake and focused on their task. Often, the night

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[4] I'm aware there are many practices outside of the settler-colonial dominated classroom and workplace frameworks that I am taking as the basis for this statement, that also embody entirely different values. I have only a passing familiarity with any of these, and have neither the right, knowledge, or authority to describe them, which is why I won't bring them into this work, but base it on my own experiences. Instead, I refer to other sources, and would encourage readers to explore such spaces through the rich body of scholarship and many organizations that exist to educate on such matters.

passes quietly, and travel is resumed the next day. All of this happens in a matter of a few minutes, although "uneventful" times like a quiet watch where "nothing" happens are often fantastic opportunities for character and relationship development. That is where friendships are formed, silly or emotional conversations are held, and the opportunities for mutually producing or becoming arise. These are often the richest times of the game, and those that create lasting memories.

A character might also use other abilities unique to their class to take care of their comrades. A Wizard would likely set an Alarm spell to alert for anything passing a boundary around the group. Sometimes *Leomund's Tiny Hut* is conjured into being, creating a safe and hidden spot for a number of hours. A Ranger's ability to hunt, fish, and check for tracks can help sustain the group, and allow them to travel more quickly; a Rogue might help scout out and sneak around danger, and a Druid can talk to the plants or animals around them for information.

Indeed, the party of characters in a D&D are often planned carefully, to make sure that there is enough diversity for characters to be able to support one another and accomplish all the different goals and tasks, and overcome all of the challenges that will arise. New players quickly learn that, even in a boss fight, where it is entirely possible that characters could be killed by the creatures they are facing, it doesn't work if everyone in the party is a brawny, action film type of hero. It takes all types.

"You don't want to go into this fight without a healer," is just as often a reason to postpone a game session until all player/characters are available as it would be to wait for the most hard-hitting fighter. In other types of games, where combat is not part of the landscape in the same way, it is still only interesting and meaningful when different types of characters are present, and players are willing to take many types of risks and actions, including those that embrace vulnerability.[5]

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[5] In fact, there are a growing number of game systems that play to this balance and nuance much more explicitly and strongly than the classic D&D-style, combat-centred game. An example of this is a duo of games by Avery Alder (n.d.) that incorporate game mechanics that specifically require characters to take actions that increase or highlight their vulnerabilities in order to leverage capabilities or action possibilities in other areas.

What do reciprocity and difference mean in a role-playing game? I think every interview participant who was a role-player described collaboration as central to the experience of a role-playing game that is run. The instances where a game did not work, or a player had a terrible time or sometimes even left a game were those where one person, usually the gamemaster, was too heavy-handed, when there is not enough room for reciprocal and collaborative actions that shape the storyworld. This resonates with what I have also found to be my own best days of roleplaying, when everyone contributes, and unexpected things happen.

The true magic happens in the moments that the gamemaster does not plan or predict. This is only possible if a DM is able to step back, allow for the unexpected, and hopefully adapt to and integrate into the storyworld. You would think, with a title like "Dungeon Master," that the role of head storyteller would require a heavy hand and a strict intolerance for dissent. The reality, as it turns out, is very different! Truly brilliant DM work requires flexibility, reciprocity, and the ability to find delight in *not* being the one in control, and instead surrendering to the indeterminate, generative chaos of wyrlding together. It is giving up the illusory sense of personal mastery—and instead embracing others' autonomy to determine their own course. It is playing with the relationships between others, both human and more-than-human, that emerge when we allow unfolding to happen.

I had a long conversation with Sam, a committed role-player and gamemaster, who had run a whole bunch of different tabletop games, often in unusual settings and formats. When I asked about their most memorable role-playing moments, they told about a campaign they ran, which ended with the high point of the story: a dramtic reveal from a non-player character, where the party members learn that the world they lived in was only one in the multiverse.

"It was this sort of revelatory moment, where I could talk these characters through what was happening," Sam explained.

"Was that something you planned," I asked, "or was that just something that emerged in the story?"

"Oh, it was planned from the very beginning," they answered.

"Wow!" I exclaimed in impressed astonishment. This was certainly a different way of planning a storyworld. "So, when you do plan a campaign, is that a typical way you would do it? Knowing where something was going to end?"

"I like to have an ending written before I have even session zero. I want to know what this story is going to be about, because I want to tell the players what I want the story to be about," Sam told me. "And they'll take it wherever the hell they want to, and I'll go with that. But I do like some sort of baseline established with the players, so I know what the players can recommend to me, and what I can give to them, and we can all prep our brains together in one big brain mush."

A "brain mush" seems an excellent way to describe how players and gamemaster might get on the same page, and enter a storyworld in a way that works for everyone, not just according to the DM's agenda. A surprise ending for the characters doesn't always have to be a trip into the entirely unknown for the *players*. After all, they are integral to shaping every aspect of the storyworld, along with the gamemaster.

"Do they always end where you thought they were going to?" I asked, curious about how this careful balance might work.

"Almost never!" Sam confirmed, and I joined them in delighted laughter.

"How do you know if it is going well?" I ask them a little later.

"Player engagement," Sam answers. "If everyone is doing stuff, if everyone is rolling, if everyone is throwing dice. If everyone is getting into it, and everyone is cohesive, I think things are going well. If there's a lot of silence, and not just when I'm talking about something, then I feel like I need to be hooking in people more."

This is indeed a description of a good day as a gamemaster. It is likewise not very different from the way I gauge whether things are going well when I teach. I do like the lively imagery of dice being thrown around—it seems much more exciting than the discussions in my classes. But otherwise, discussion, cohesion, everyone doing stuff. It seems familiar, until Sam adds a caveat:

"And my groups are good at telling me what they want, so I try to play to that above all." I'm afraid there's less of that happening in my classroom; indeed our educational structures are not well-suited for mutuality and reciprocity.

"A classroom is a non-consensual space," Evan Torner (2021b) reminded us during a small group discussion in a town hall presentation by the Transformative Play Initiative. We were discussing the difficulties of using role-playing games in teaching, specifically the discrepancies between the safety and consent considerations in a role-playing context and in a classroom. Torner's remark got me thinking about the many nonconsensual spaces that exist for children and youth, like families, and classrooms; for neurodivergent folks, there's also interventions and therapies. Resistance to instructions and expectations are all too often met with rigidity, rather than reciprocity. I once heard a parent of a teen with autism describe a strong emotional reaction their child had when they saw a person that reminded them of their behavioural interventionist. Showing fear of a familiar adult would likely be considered a worrying sign in a child not labelled as different, but the interpretation placed on this autistic person was that they associated the therapist with having to "work."

Where was the "brain mush" that might have helped this young person contribute to a common understanding? What did it matter that they were clearly telling their network of caregivers what they wanted?

Contrast this with the reflections of Val, another autistic adult who told me about their experiences with collaborative imagination and role-playing. Val, reflected about their experiences in childhood, and about therapeutic goals.

"If you took a neurotypical kid and made them play the way an autistic kid plays, that could be considered torture or something like that. But people don't see that the other way around," Val told me. This example brough up the absurdity of forcing a person into a situation in the hopes of triggering a specific trajectory of transformation, within a normopathic (Guattari, 1995; Manning, 2020) focus on non-difference with some shadowy "right way" of doing, learning, becoming.

5.4. Becoming autistic

This is perhaps a place where we can sense a hint of the "together" Braidotti intends in the subject position of "we're all in this together, although we are not one in the same."(Braidotti, 2019, p. 43). The path through such a storyworld, like the paths of our lives, as seen through the lens of a "process ontology based on immanence and becoming" (p. 44), is "neither linear nor one-directional, but is rather a multi-faceted experimentation with what 'we' are capable of becoming" (p. 37). The possibilities for what we allow children—and especially children labelled as developmentally disabled—to "experiment" with, and what we imagine them capable of becoming, is extremely limited and uni-directional. It is often largely determined by market forces and compulsory capitalism.

The attempt to essentialize behaviors, to describe ways of "being" seems to me to vastly underestimate the complexity of what is happening with neurodiversity, and atypicality more generally. What happens when we, instead, approach neurodiversity from a perspective of ontological relationality, including the "power to affect and be affected" (Braidotti, 2019, p. 44), in a state of mutuality and, dare we hope, reciprocity? Can we queer the idea of reciprocity into something that might actually be reciprocal? Where might we look to learn other models for reciprocity, from which potentialities for neuroqueer becoming as reciprocal process might be made possible? Where might we turn to see what this might look like?

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017) writes about "Indigenous queer normativity" (p. 119-144) in *As we have always done: Indigenous freedom through radical resistance.* In the chapter, Simpson describes their experiences with members of their own Nishnaabeg nation, as well as other Indigenous nations, and especially among those who engage with the "complexity of [their] ancient philosophies," in queer becoming-with young people. In a powerful contrast to the oppressive and stifling colonial binaries of gender and sexuality, Simpson writes, "When an individual asserts their identity, it is the community's job to make room and support that assertion" (p. 133).

That is a very different role for community than that encouraged by the pathologizing paradigm as the way to approach an individual who asserts their neurodivergent identity. For me, it resonates with the categorical questioning of onto-

epistemological neuroqueering. Behavioural responses, IEP plans, classroom supports that end up forcing a particular view of educational normativity, even medication, are the acceptable responses in the educational and social contexts I tend to meet. Simpson describes relational, community-based practices and contexts that seem radically different from this paradigm, where they have instead experienced the possibility of community response as "supporting an individual's responsibility to self-actualize and find their own path" (p. 133).

Queer Indigeneity, Simpson writes, goes beyond sexual orientation or gender identity. It refers to "a web of supportive, reciprocal, generative relationships that we often do not have names for in English, and that exist outside of the hierarchy and the imagination of heteropatriarchy" (Simpson, 2017, p. 134). Although I can't claim to understand or know the contexts from which Simpson's experience is drawn, I am drawn to what this gesture opens up: a rich space, full of possibilities and re-imaginings. I wonder if it might be possible to take up this rhythm and gesture not only beyond heteropatriarchy, but also beyond or beside psychologized normopathy, which is likewise a product of a Eurocentric paradigm of productivity and oppressively competitive and hierarchical normativity?

We tend to use a diagnosis of autism, cognitive disability, neurodiversity to render the bearer of the label as the site of focus, expectation and blame. As we have already explored, this seems to be the case in regard to social-emotional reciprocity. How might we re/imagine a similar web of supportive, reciprocal and generative relationships in a re/framework of neuroqueering, beyond the imagination of normative neurology? How might we make room for and support neurodivergent identities and becomings, in relation, and as part of community? How might we find a reciprocal reciprocity?

One of the adults from the autism self-advocacy group I worked with in Denmark during my master's degree told me how inclusion in a regular classroom could be nearly impossible. They described that when autistic children were placed in the classroom, they would do everything they could to follow the rules and expectations laid out for them. But the feeling of experience from the teacher and other children was not one of reciprocity. Specifically talking about teachers in this particular example, they said they found that, rather than moving towards a compromise or meeting in the middle with the

child with an autism diagnosis, they "tightened up their normality" (Gustafson, 2015) There was a sense of drawing back, rather than moving forward in a gesture of reciprocity, to meet the needs of the other.

This is an anecdotal story, although based on many experiences and conversations with families facing difficulties in schools. But it does seem to be supported by Damien Milton's double-empathy problematic and the work of Noah Sasson's research team. And it seems tragically at odds with the project of supporting becoming in community.

Ash's preschool was not a neighbourhood school. The first year, I didn't feel he was ready to take the transportation provided for the children in the specialized classroom, which would have meant driving quite a ways in a taxi with a stranger. At that time, Ash was still very hesitant meeting new people, and I felt it was an unrealistic and unfair expectation of a three-year-old child with limited speech. The teachers and other parents seemed to have a hard time understanding this. Nonetheless, I insisted on delivering Ash myself, via commuter train, for the first few months, as they adjusted.

Interestingly, this put me in a position to have my parenting critiqued in other ways as well. If I had waved goodbye to Ash in our courtyard, and waited for drop-off at the end of the day, the staff would never have seen that I spent a lot of time explaining and narrating what we were doing, and responding to what I noticed were curiosities, preoccupations or worries. My experience was that Ash seemed deeply anxious if confronted with a situation where they did not know what was going on. So, I would explain things in minute detail, often multiple times in different ways, until I could feel some anxiety being released. One day, after I had dropped Ash off at the doorway to the classroom, the leader of the institution pulled me aside into the office.

"You talk way too much to Ash," she told me. "People with autism can't understand that much language, it's just confusing to them. You need to be using simple commands and short sentences. There's just way too many words."

I nodded, thanked her for her time, and left for the day. This advice hung with me for many days. Maybe she was right? Was I contributing to my child's discomfort, making them more confused?

A couple of years later, Ash began using spoken language in earnest, mostly using this skill in a rush of questions about every detail of life. I began answering these at face value, even when I couldn't understand their purpose, or when they repeated in a cycle. The preschool classroom teachers also advised me to ignore these questions.

"I'm trying to reduce or stop the questions," the teacher told me. "I think they're some kind of nervous tic. Ash is quite an anxious child. I think it's a response to anxiety."

The last part I agreed with: it clearly seemed a response to anxiety! The difference was that what I sensed as most likely to relieve that anxiety was giving the information that was being sought. Ash would carefully observe everyday activities, which had recently gained their interest, like setting the table, packing a lunch, or getting to the elevator from the commuter train.

"What is that? What are you doing? Where does that go? Why are you doing that? What if someone does this? Why did so-and-so say that?" The questions sometimes seemed endless, and I did my best to answer them all. Often the next question would come before I could finish answering the previous one. It was delightful and sometimes exhausting. Once, Ash told me a joke they had overheard from another child. We laughed together. Suddenly, Ash stopped looked at me intensely.

"Why is that funny?" they asked.

I clung to my interpretation that Ash was seeking information and insights through their questions, not just uttering meaningless phrases to self-soothe. Ultimately, I dismissed all of the professional advice. I never could bring myself to do what felt like ignoring Ash's distress or denying an explanation. Later on, I have encountered the view among some neuro-atypical adults, that this might have been helpful—that such questions can be an individual narrating aloud their confusion about some things in the world. And concrete answers are perhaps what is needed.

The information from specialized professionals, from psychiatrists down to preschool teachers, tends to be a one-way stream. I believe they often have good intentions. I have professionals describe parents as the most important experts in their child. Very occasionally a particularly open professional might also describe the individual themselves as an expert in their own situation. But when it comes down to it, there's often an expectation that "real" expertise goes one way. These are people who know all the statistics, who know which models work best for most people to reach certain goals and develop certain skills. And, as minions to the formative, educational systems of the society in which they live, with the function of keeping things moving, these goals and skills tend to support the ravenous needs of compulsory capitalism. The always-present expectation of "production in excess of the natural world" (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 6), and defined by the crushing needs of extractive growth and progress.

Professionals often have short-term relationships with each person they meet or treat, within which they're expected to have moved the child toward a certain, predetermined endpoint. There's no real expectation that they might fundamentally be mistaken about what a child needs, and little interest in "supporting their individual responsibility to self-actualize and find their own path" (Simpson, 2017, p. 133) There's not much expectation of true reciprocity in finding answers, to treading a path to becoming together that allows that particular individual's potentialities to unfold.

Parents may be seen as experts in which specific tricks or bribes might elicit compliance, and children or youth might be seen as experts in a topic of special interest. But parents will never be the expert in understanding pillars of autistic deficit, as they are not only unschooled, but probably much too soft hearted about their child. They see things, and detect humanity, in places that the experts know they don't actually exist. And children may be seen as experts in one of their special interests, but the fact of their *having* a special interest, or becoming preoccupied with non-human things in a way that precludes them from showing reciprocal social interest could never actually be negotiable.

Taking the experiences and unique potentialities that emerge when a neurodivergent identity is asserted requires an openness to mutual transformation. Every good DM knows this. The storyworld you have planned is only rich, vital, and relevant for your players and characters to thrive if it responds, reshapes and rebounds

in unexpected ways, often beyond your own understanding and control. "Staying alive—for every species— requires livable collaborations," argues Tsing. "Collaboration means working across difference, which leads to contamination. Without collaborations, we all die" (Tsing, 2015, p. 28)

Growing reciprocity

This is an invitation, instead, to consider the reciprocity of trees, of plants, of the more-than-human world, in informing our understanding of reciprocity in connection. Taking reciprocity out of the humancentric laboratory setting might reveal a rich, heterogenous network every bit as complex as the dense multiplicity of organisms and reciprocal relationships going on under the ground in a healthy and thriving forest. Trees and their relationships began to interest me as I walked my way through this thesis, and as I read Kimmerer and Tsing's work, which focus on other organisms as teacher, metaphors and companions, in an assemblage of relationships. Trees, it turns out, have complex relationships with one another, and with other plants and beings; a forest is a multi-species community, not a bunch of trees growing near one another.(Wohlleben et al., 2016). Perhaps we need to see seeing the possibilities of reciprocity as reaching beyond the places we might be most used to looking for or seeing them? Maybe they are in the fungal connections between roots, not above ground, or over our heads in the pollen spread by the winds?

Maybe reciprocity, and the processes of becoming, of taking up the responsibility of supporting others to self-actualize and find their own path, happens likewise within unexpected temporal frameworks. In The *Hidden Life of Trees*, Wohlleben et al. (2016) argue that our human inability sense the interactions and community of forests is due in large part to the complexity of different temporal experiences, different speeds of growth, death, reproduction, friendship. We short-lived beings do not easily see the thoughts and the relationships of trees. If only we cultivated an experience of time as a honey-like substance with changing viscosities! In such sticky wash of golden sweetness, we might be better able to appreciate the complexity around us, from the lives of ancient fungi, forest denizens, and neurodivergent children.

Anna Tsing describes the patchy, nuanced form of becoming together that characterize a Matsutake habitat. "Pines and fungi work together to take advantage of

bright open spaces and exposed mineral soils. Humans, pines, and fungi make living arrangements simultaneously for themselves and for others: multispecies worlds" (Tsing, 2015, p. 22) Matsutake are only able to grow in the wild. They never been successfully cultivated, as its growth depends on this complexity, which cannot be reproduced in in monoculture, or large commercial agricultural type setting.

Each area where the mushroom grows is different, and produces different iterations of the mushroom, giving them distinctive characteristics. A certain set of circumstances, a unique storyworld, becomes the site of a Matsutake community that is distinctive, irreproducible, unique. Efforts to capture or describe them as a whole, fall short, in the same way that the specific language of a diagnostic description does not capture or describe even one person to whom it is attached. Neurodivergent adults are often quick to describe the adverse effects of monoculture thinking and practices. Behavioural interventions, restraint, parental and professional pressure, and medication use are all sites of blistering critique within much of the self-advocacy community. And rightfully so! The experiences of many in such spaces of intervention, if taken seriously, reveal, at best, stress and failure to thrive, and sometimes even abuse, violence, and lingering trauma (Eckerd, 2021; Gardner, 2017). Like the clever Matsutake, clever neurodivergent children will perhaps only thrive where there is a space of becoming together, where they are supported by the community in asserting their identity.

"[B]ecoming producers nothing other than itself," write Deleuze and Guattari (2003) in A Thousand Plateaus. "We fall into a false alternative if we say that you either imitate or you are. What is real is the becoming itself, the block of becoming, not the supposedly fixed terms through which that, which becomes passes" (p. 238). We need to find the becoming, the processes of collaboratively imagining ourselves and our storyworlds, rather than identifying the places where any single creature's becoming will land.

Persons identifying as neurodivergent are often alone in this identity within their close family or caregiving network. This is also true for queer-identifying people; the struggle for recognition, acceptance, understanding and support can hit us right in our most intimate—and unchosen—relations. With disability, and with queerness, you can easily be the only one in your family or near network walking through life in that particular embodied experience. As such, even where there is a wish to support, the

gravity of "normality" is incredibly strong, tugging the individual with the disability into that orbit.

The same is true of an inclusive classroom context. The intention in a classroom may be to be inclusive, and to have a space where everyone is welcome. However, the gravitational pull of normativity doesn't often allow for finding new ways of being and becoming together. "Becoming is not to imitate or identify with something or someone." Deleuze and Guattari (2003) whisper to us as parents, educators, peers; as adventurers in the storyworlds of our lives. "… Starting from the forms one has, the subject one is, the organs one has, or the functions one fulfills, becoming is to extract particles between which one establishes the relations of movement and rest, speed and slowness that are *closest* to that to what one is becoming, and through which one becomes" (p. 273).

Characters emerge into a role-playing storyworld with their own personal backstory. The connections and networks their player has imagined for them quickly become secondary to the emergent, collaboratively imagined and identity of "we are in this together." Likewise, a heavy-handed DM might find ways, such as nearly impossibly high dice roll requirements, to make sure the player/characters are not able to accomplish what they want. But those who shine are the ones who are able to step back and let the storyworld and everyone in it transform, together, in ways that are unpredictable, unexpected, subversive.

This complexity of storyworld: dice rolls, characters and players, DM, ready to catch their companions in the trust-fall of trying something new in relation, in their own small way play another type of reciprocity into being. Something like reciprocity-in-community, unfolding over time, and probably not detectable in a laboratory, because such networks, responsibilities and relations are subtle and extend far beyond.

Might they be transformative of the ways we describe and interact with neuroatypicality? Might reciprocity, as a practice rather than a trait, be a path to re-imagine and explore becoming? Not with the aim to become something or someone in particular, but perhaps, simply, together and in relation, to become, and become, and become?

What if reciprocity was embodied by every role-player's favorite response from the DM when someone wants to do something unexpected, to assert their particular identity:

"You can try," the gamemaster says. "Roll for it."

And you do. Because you know exactly who will be there with you, no matter how the dice fall out, and no matter the becoming-together they offer.

Chapter 6.

Echolalia, functional speech, and playing Arrow-In-Flight

One of the great pleasures of role-playing games is in the diversity of characters that can be created. This is also an important part of the transformative potential. It is a kind of magic in itself to create a being from a piece of paper and a combination of stats, and then breathe life and personality into them. Almost equal is the wonder of learning the quirks and personalities of others' characters, as they spring off the paper as part of a collaborative narrative. Already during the first session of play, they begin to emerge as themselves through encounters with one another, and the situations presented by the gamemaster.

Each character type has characteristics and abilities—and limitations—so that play only works collaboratively. It is only possible to navigate the challenges and encounters in the game when your own character is in partnership with other characters in a heterogenous group. Difference and diversity is actually a kind of goal: rewarded and encouraged in many ways, both structural and aesthetic.

However, with the recognition and celebration of difference comes the challenge of naming it, which is both fraught and necessary. In Dungeons & Dragons (D&D), the basic premise is the creation of "humanoid" beings that live and interact in a complex world. When imagining such a multiverse, we tend toward reproducing what we know, and the worlds and the societies that populate them can become burdened with the same troublesome patterns of oppression, prejudice ,and social hierarchies. If played thoughtfully, might those the same game structures also carry the potentialities of re-imagining and transforming such relationships?

Arrow-In-Flight is a character I created a few years ago, for the campaign Storm and I still play in. Arrow is a kenku, a raven-like, humanoid creature. Kenku are found throughout the D&D world, described as living on the edges of society. According to lore, the kenku have been punished by a mysterious, powerful entity they once served in another plane of existence, for plotting to steal a beautiful, sparkling (and *also* mysterious) treasure from their master. The entity discovered their plot and punished

them by taking away their wings, their voices, and their spark of creativity, to make sure they could never again plot, scheme, fly, or tell secrets. Then, they were banished to the Material Plane. (*The Kenku Race for Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) Fifth Edition (5e)*, 2016)

Kenku are one of the ever-increasing array of beings in the D&D multiverse of storyworlds that started out as a "monster," but which has since been adapted and adopted as playable characters in more recent iterations of player materials. This increasing diversity of character types is part of a series of interesting and hopeful movements in role-playing, and a demonstration of its transformative potentialities. D&D is experiencing these forces from within and without, slowly and unevenly; much is still dependent on the goals and attitudes of individual groups and gamemasters. There are many other game systems created with an intent of resisting reproducing oppression, but there are also many of us who believe in the possibility for resistance within and through the empire of D&D as well. I think maybe it is especially important to think about how this might work in relation to the monsters of the multiverse.

Creating and playing a "monstrous" character is both a rare opportunity, an honour, and a solemn responsibility. It is a playful way of embodying an important point of resistance against the ideals of humanism: a challenge to the idea of a universal conception of who and what is "human" (Braidotti, 2019). When done thoughtfully, the collaborative imagining of storyworld might create potentialities that move us to question the very idea of human exceptionalism.

From its beginnings, D&D offered storyworlds to players through materials that reflected and reproduced historical inequalities, racialized and gendered stereotypes, and prejudices. I imagine that peeking in on your average, everyday game of D&D in the 80s would be just about as filled with shockingly racist, sexist, and heteronormative tropes as many childhood movie favorites I've nostalgically rewatched with my children, only to be chilled to my core when seeing them three decades later. A close reading of the earliest player materials, released under the name *Men & Magic*, reveals a world likewise focused on and dominated by the White, heterosexual, male-identifying person. Many of the playable creatures, as well as the "monsters" that could be encountered, were, and continue to be, rooted in racialized, colonial, and cultural stereotypes (Garcia, 2017).

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Role-playing game designers and players, just like the rest of us, have not been immune to the massive work of resistance and change of oppressed peoples over the past century or so. Like the world around them, games and their storyworlds have been pushed toward a greater recognition of the ways in which certain people are dehumanized, upon the backdrop of the "invisible white standard of humanity" (Trammell, n.d.). Recognition does not always mean material change on the ground (Coulthard, 2014), but it can be part of laying the groundwork for transformation! In D&D, the gradual acceptance of different "races"[6] into the pantheon of playable characters is one reflection of the changing attitudes in the larger cultural contexts in which role-playing games are developed and played. They are also, I would argue, a nod to the generative potentialities of the liminal spaces of understanding occupied and produced by and around the "monstrous" (Cohen, 2020).

"The monster," writes Jeoffrey Cohen (2020), "is difference made flesh, come to dwell among us … Any kind of alterity can be inscribed across (constructed through) the monstrous body, but for the most part monstrous difference tends to be cultural, political, racial, economic, sexual" (p. 41). There is plenty of evidence, including material contained within the player materials and game structures of D&D and other role-playing games, that disability and neurodiversity might also be added to that list.

I think it is this liminal, ontological ambiguity that tends to draw me toward the "Monstrous Races" (Kamstra, 2016) as characters. Monsters embody an ontological challenge to our projects of human categorization and description (Grosz, 2020), and by extension, a challenge to the oppressive ways we enact them, both in and outside of role-playing storyworlds. When the growing diversity of characters is incorporated into storyworlds, and put into play in meaningful and purposeful ways, they might also have the potential to contribute to that work. Playing a "monster" mindfully can be an act of resistance and transformation.

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[6] The term "race" is itself deeply problematic within D&D. It is still used to describe different types of creatures and beings that can be used to create a character. I have generally tried to avoid using the term in this book, and instead try to use "creature" or "being." For more in-depth discussions of the problems of "race" in D&D, and role-playing communities, I can recommend the work of scholars and game writers such as Aaron Trammel (n.d., 2020; Trammell et al., 2014), Tanya Pobuda (Jones & Pobuda, 2020), Evan Torner (2019), Nate Whittingdon (2020), and Joshua Goldfund (2021), and James Mendez Hodes (2019a, 2019b) just to name a few.

I wanted to play a kenku character for a few reasons. First was a longstanding fascination with ravens, and the opportunity to play a character with raven influenced behavior and traits was just as irresistible as the shiny objects that draw the attention of kenku! Another reason was their unusual form of communication. Kenku can perfectly imitate any sound they have heard, including anything in their surroundings, and any human speech. "Arrow-in-flight" is, in fact, is the non-kenku version of my character's name, which is actually the sound of an arrow flying through the air, just shot from a bow. Kenku often have names that are a sound common in the area where they live, or that have some significance to them. Arrow was taken in by a gruff woodsman who taught her tracking and bow-and-arrow skills when she was a youth, and she took that name as she was becoming an expert marksman. This is all part of Arrow's backstory, that explains how a street kid might become a Ranger, the character class that features outdoor skills like tracking, foraging, and knowledge of the natural world.

The interesting challenge in playing a kenku is that they cannot produce "creative" speech in the form of independently constructed words or sentences, and instead must convey their intended meaning using speech and sounds they have heard and can imitate. This produces an interesting conundrum, as a kenku character knows what they want to communicate, but can get stuck expressing that to others in a way they understand. I remember reading the description of kenku in the player materials with equal parts excitement and nostalgia, and knew immediately that I needed to create a kenku character. This approach to language seemed so similar to the path Ash had taken in coming to communicate with speech.

Echolalia is the clinical term that describes the repetition of words, phrases, sounds etc. In the Oxford Languages online dictionary, it is defined as the "meaningless repetition of another person's spoken words as a symptom of psychiatric disorder" (*Echolalia Definition - Google Search*, n.d.). Indeed, it is part of the canon of autistic pathologized behaviors and ways of learning and communicating, and is an instantly recognizable "autistic" behavior, setting off alarms in families in the same way as lining up objects or staring at spinning wheels on toy cars. Echolalic speech tends to be considered a meaningless parroting of sound, condemned as a stereotyped (or involuntary, nonsensical) behaviour, along with activities such as handflapping, stimming, and self-injury. Stereotypical behaviour is part of the repertoire labelled "maladaptive" from a behavioral intervention perspective, and which are often on the list

of meaningless but disruptive behaviors that must be eliminated. Neurodivergent self-advocates, on the other hand, often describe the usefulness and intentionality of such mannerisms, serving a vast array of purposes for different people. Remi Yergeau describes them as part of the array of "autistic rhetorics," the use of actions and words that communicate in ways that become pathologized instead of taken as having meaning (Yergeau, 2018).

Like Yergeau and many other neurodiverse individuals who have spoken up or communicated in other ways about the purposes of so-called "stereotypical" behaviors and language, it seemed to me that it was Ash's clear intent to communicate. Ash's first partial sentence was "Smacking a snow-covered tree." They surprised me with it one day at the age of around three, a time when they otherwise had an expressive vocabulary of half a dozen nouns (their favourite things), a few self-created signs, and a handful of animal noises. The phrase was taken from the book *The Snowy Day* by Ezra Jack Keats, which we had read aloud many times, and spoken in the courtyard outside of our apartment on one of the few snowy days in Copenhagen that year. Ash was excited about the novelty of the snow, and was, indeed, smacking a tree with a stick found on the ground. From then until somewhere around five or six, Ash spoke in complete, grammatically perfect phrases, and eventually sentences, from different contexts, which were picked up and repurposed to say what needed to be said.

With time, Ash's repurposing of language became more nuanced, in tandem with my improved ability to interpret. I also discovered that asking a question like, "Ash, are you hungry?" would not get a response, but the version, "Ash, are you hungry? Yes or no?" could. I took this as an indication that my child was perfectly able to both understand my question, and determine their inner state of hunger. Furthermore, they also had an interest in communicating this to me, all three of which are examples of "human" social traits often put into question within discourses about autism. The stumble happened, for Ash, in a different part of the process, and a small reminder of the possible responses were enough in this case.

Arrow-in-flight offered me the opportunity to practice some good old-fashioned parental nostalgia, and who doesn't love that? But further, it gave me an opportunity to explore a different way of using words, sounds, and sentences. On the one hand, I was curious to try out the limits and possibilities of putting into practice what I imagined could

often have been a frustrating experience for Ash, and for others who use and develop unexpected methods of communicating. I had seen that not everyone was receptive, or immediately able to understand the intended meaning of Ash's words. But I was also drawn in by the playfulness and creativity of echolalia. In my game notes, I kept a log of certain things the other player's characters said, and used fragments to create a nickname that Arrow used for each of them.

"That guy better get ready, because the pain train is coming!" the brawny fighter in the group said jokingly, as we were heading into combat one session. Their name became "Pain train," spoken in that exact tone of voice. When the gruff druid in the group snarled,

"Nature's powerful. I'm not powerful," to another character, Arrow began to call them "Nature's powerful." Other times, I'd use the sound of a creature or person we'd encountered to try to confuse or intimidate us out of a confrontation. It proved fun, exhilarating, and added an element of spice to the storyworld. It also became very difficult to keep track of!

I recall Ash's inventive use of words and phrases as a source of delight. Perhaps this is because creativity and playfulness with language has always appealed to me. Finding just the right word, or discovering a clever pun or wordplay brings a sense of joy that only a few things in life do! It gave me a small glimpse into their perspective on the world, whenever Ash began to use an unexpected animal sound, or a seemingly unrelated phrase, to refer to a familiar object. I was always interested to see what had been noticed and recalled as useful or worthy of repetition.

Pronoun reversal, another feature that characterized their emerging spoken language, could create hilarious moments like the time Ash proclaimed to me, in a crowded commuter train, "You have a mosquito bite right on your butt!" Or when they sat on a swing demanding, "Push you!" to my friend's confused teenage child. I chose not to correct the reversed pronouns, but treat them to mean what I thought Ash intended, translating for others when necessary.

Max Alexander, a play therapist who is autistic and works with neurodivergent children, problematizes the extreme focus on "functional communication" in a series of blog posts about speech and play. "In spite of their wonder and complexity," writes

Alexander, "these forms of playing with language often go unnoticed and dismissed" (Alexander, 2019, paragraph 8). Somehow, as people are pathologized, the things that are generally valued and encouraged in others, like creativity, play, humor, and finding pleasure, become sites of worry and the focus of interventions. Ash loved to watch the spinning wheels toy trains and cars, and would spend a lot of time lying on the floor, watching as the wheels cycled by their field of vision. This is described as "nonfunctional" play, and it is common practice to try and break children designated as autistic of such activities, insisting instead that they play with a toy car "as intended" whatever that means. Using an object or toy in an unusual or unexpected way is, in many other contexts, celebrated as a sign of creativity. If a child labelled autistic does so, it is a sign of pathology, and something that must be corrected.

Jess Thom is a writer, comedian, artist and performer with Tourette syndrome, and the creator (and main character) of the organization Tourettes Hero. On the website, their goal is stated as "Changing the world one tic at a time" (Thom, n.d.). The home page announces that "Touretteshero.com is a place to celebrate the humour and creativity of Tourettes." In an example of this creativity, Thom can also be seen in a talk from a TEDx event that includes the performance of an experimental musical collaboration, based on several months of data collected about the type and frequency of the most intense tics they experience (Thom, 2013). Visitors to the site are invited to make art from the extensive list of verbal tics posted on the site, and also includes a gallery of artistic contributions from followers.

Unnoticed, dismissed, disregarded. Such expressions of language, speech and gesture are often set aside, or regarded with hostility, as meaningless noise that needs to be eradicated, so that we can have better access to the "real" person, to functional language. Alexander invites us to imagine such out-of-the-box use of language or words, (or objects, I would add) as something that brings immense joy and satisfaction. And, then, to further imagine being made to feel silly or self-conscious about it (Alexander, 2019, paragraph 10). Unusual activities are classified as "tics" and "stims," and seen as part of the tragedy and pathologization that frames neurodiversity. Is it possible that the tragedy and pathology might often be unnecessary?

Authors and activists such as Max Alexander, Jess Thom, and Remi Yergeau, just to name a few, clearly express that this is not the only, or even the best, way to

experience or respond to what we have named as "unusual." But does that mean it is okay for me to use as inspiration for my D&D character?

A difference in "functional" speech is undeniably also experienced as an important barrier by some people who are neurodivergent, and also by their families, networks, and caregivers. The challenges that such obstacles and "differences" can present for people in real-life contexts is undeniable. It is not unimportant to consider the implications of "playing" with a personality trait that is described as a symptom of a psychiatric or neurodevelopmental disorder. What does it mean for the player, and for the storyworld? What does it mean for people who express such "symptoms" outside of the imagined world, or for those of us who interact with them? What does it mean for our collaborative understandings of communication, relation, and becoming-together?

An oversimplified explanation might be that it allows me, as a player, to experience disability in game. I emphatically do not believe this to be the case. Playing Arrow has not given me insights into the experience of neurodiversity, not even close. I am in general rather skeptical towards attempts to simulate disability using techniques such as blindfolds, trips around the block in a wheelchair, or computer-curated experiences. These focus alone on the internalized, individualized understanding of disability, on what the social model of disability names as "impairment" (Shakespeare, 2014), and ignores the complex relationality of disability.

However, I am willing to agree that such experiences *might* serve a useful purpose if they are carefully parsed; if they are interrogated and reframed to understand what insights they *can* offer. As with playing any other character in a role-playing game, part of the transformative potential is to grow our general understanding that there are different ways of knowing and living in the world. Perhaps such experiences might push us to have some humility toward what we *think we know* about the life space of others, and to realize there is much more than our assumptions, to spark curiosity, to do the work of learning what those who experience disability have to say about their lives. You won't know what that experience is, but being jarred out of the comfort your own horizon may present new potentialities.

Playing Arrow-In-Flight has been informative and transformative for me, in a couple different ways. It has been personally interesting for me to experience the depth

of thought and creativity that went into producing even a single phrase or idea. It has likewise been eye-opening to see how easy it was to just *let* a discussion happen around me, without making the effort to assert Arrow's ideas. And, at times, it feels informative to my understanding of the dynamics of difference and structures of oppressive, colonial humanist ideals.

I think Arrow has pushed me toward a greater understanding of where the "monstrous" emerges.

6.1.   Producing Arrow, producing kenku

When I started playing Arrow as a kenku, it didn't take long to develop the sense that the group was waiting for me, that I was interrupting the flow of conversation. The result was that Arrow would often only participate when she had something to say that I felt was too important not to contribute to the discussion, or if I, as a player, knew there was something absolutely unique that Arrow would bring to the encounter. This gave rise to a new conundrum: to the others at the table, it could quickly be read as if I was not engaged as a player, not following the story, or maybe that I preferred not to be an active participant.

Being part of a conversation when I felt I was interrupting the flow of communication was troubling, and certainly did not encourage me to participate! It felt similar to when I first moved to Denmark, and was still learning Danish, and social events were exhausting and lonely affairs. I mostly took on the role of passive observer, or found myself at the mercy of someone willing to step outside of the group conversation to talk to me. How often, I wonder, do we leave out those with different communication styles, tempos, mediums? How often do we assume lack of participation indicates lack of interest or motivation, rather than a lack of opportunity? When and how do we expect others to "take up … rhythms" (St. Pierre, 2019, p. 25) of those around them, rather than exploring ways of transforming the context, becoming-together?

Seeking the monstrous

The creators of the player materials, acting on a desire to provide a nuanced storyworld and the possibility for enacting three-dimensional characters, include some

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caveats to the ways in which monstrous character types are integrated into the societies, and can affect the way the participate in the stories. These creatures are uncommon, and often have a peripheral role in society, and can be met with prejudice and suspicion. Gabe, our Dungeon Master followed these guidelines, and Arrow's attempts to interact with non-player characters in the game sometimes resulted in fear or confusion from them.

"Arrow approaches the woman and asks if she has seen any gnolls in the area," I might tell Gabe.

"How do you ask her that?" he wants to know.

"She uses the voice of a castle guard she overheard: 'Have you seen this man?' And then lets her know what gnolls are by imitating the sounds we heard in the distance yesterday."

"Hm," Gabe laughs. "She looks at you strangely, and her eyes fill with fear. 'I-I … No, I don't think so,' she stammers, and she looks at Nym, who is standing just behind you." Then I would roll the dice to determine whether they were able to understand what I was communicating (the mechanics of this are laid out in the player and DM materials). Most often, another player's character would eventually jump in and interpret for Arrow. I (and Arrow) quickly realized that many encounters were more competently managed by other members of the group, and would step back to let the relieved townspeople, priestess, or bartender continue the conversation with them.

Gabe is a thoughtful, thorough, and insightful DM. It was not an intentional act to exclude me as a player, nor Arrow as a character. In fact, quite the opposite! He was trying to create a realistic scene, where the non-player characters, who tend to be a bit wary of adventurers even at the best of times, were reacting to in a way that made sense in the context. He went to great lengths, at other points in the story, to involve Arrow, and her personal story and experiences, in important and meaningful ways, as he does with all the characters in the campaign. The other players, as well, were always willing to let Arrow step up and try to talk to people, and enjoyed picking up the pieces when things went badly—that's part of the fun of the storyworld!

It was the "neutral" neuro-typicality (Manning, 2020), the "normopathy" of the assumptions of the storyworlds we produce, and with/in which we emerge, that were reflected into the D&D multiverse. There was no question, there or in the "real" world of friendship and intervention, family lives and education, of what was different, and therefore scary, difficult, unacceptable. It felt like it wasn't Arrow who was "monstrous," but the world she inhabited, created to reproduce many of the same challenges of our own.

What it means to be Arrow as a character, and what it means for Arrow to be kenku are both negotiated and collaboratively produced by the whole party. What is the nature of a kenku, and how does this affect the rest of the party? What is Arrow's personality, and what is her nature? What is my role in her becoming, and what is the role of the others in the group, and the non-player characters we meet, in becoming-together? It is a deeply entangled combination of forces: standardized player materials, including their implicit and explicit biases, the particular world imagined by the DM, and, equally important, the dynamic of the group of players, the way they take up the storyworld as offered and mold it between them—and of course, the reckless influence of the fickle dice.

This seems to mimic the situation of real people in real contexts closely enough to be a bit heartbreaking. The player materials and game mechanics work a bit too well, and end up easily producing a scenario in which the expression of difference is feared, and the character misunderstood and excluded. Playing, committing to a "monstrous" character, can reveal the monstrous in the storyworld they are trying to inhabit. A storyworld that is shaped by our own world, and whose characters are brought to life by the collaborative storytelling of those of us who live in that world as well. We tend to slip into the comfort of familiar patterns.

Arrow has become a bit reclusive, preferring to interact mainly with her close companions. Talking to others tends to be difficult, time-consuming, often unsuccessful, and, as may be expected, seldom ingratiates us to the people we meet! Her personality is most clearly seen during the moments when she and another character, an impulsive adolescent glam-rock fixated Bard, manage to get on a night watch together, which they

often do. At those times, the two of them have a whole playful schtick. They mess around, testing out new and different spells, trying to make each other fly, telling stories, or generally being inattentive and unserious.

6.2. Playing with disability

Other developments in Arrow's personality and adventurer trajectory are a response to her frustration with trying to be heard. She knew she had something to contribute in many situations, and was determined to find a way to do so. The first solution she found, which I negotiated with the Gabe, was to buy a small slate she carried with her, to write and show people when she wanted to say something. However, this did not work in situations where action, response or precise communication was needed very quickly, such as a combat encounter. Once again, Arrow's path through the storyworld, and her becoming-with, was shaped by the other players' collaboration. It was in one of those memorable moments that a new opportunity would arise:

The party of adventurers were travelling down a lonely road, when they spotted something strange in the forest. Just off the path, at the top of a tree could be seen towering above those around it. It seemed to be attracting birds of all shapes and sizes, from miles around, who were flocking toward it in droves. The Druid in our group (a type of spellcaster whose magic is drawn from a connection with the earth and nature) was able to sense that it was a magical disturbance of some kind, and told the rest of us that the birds were unable to resist flying violently into the tree. We decided to approach and investigate, as we were not willing to let unknown magic affect the denizens of the forest.

Suddenly the trickster Bard character in the group said,

"Wait! Arrow is related to birds. Is she also under the compulsion?" Gabe looked shocked for a moment, then put their hands over his face and groaned.

"Oh my gosh, I never even thought of that!" he said. There was laughter from around the table, and I felt my own eyes widen with anticipation. This was the type of crossroad moments of unpredictability that role-players live for. Not to mention the delight of getting the best of the Dungeon Master's carefully laid plans! Gabe sighed and

decided to take up the rhythm that was offered, perhaps also anxious to see where it would lead.

"Yes. Arrow, you feel a strange pressure in your head, and find yourself compelled irresistibly toward the tree. Before you know what is happening, you leave the path and run as fast as you can towards it."

"Can I stop her?" asks Pain Train.

"You can try," Gabe laughs. "Roll an Athletics check. Arrow, I need you to roll a Dexterity save to see if he can get to you in time." My number is greater than his, which means he misses and Arrow continues her headlong scramble toward the tree. When she reaches it, she discovers an angrily throbbing, glowing red stone, and is compelled to drive it into her forehead! Arrow's mind is flooded with harsh, screaming voices. But the stone remains embedded and cannot be removed. The stone has effects, of course; it is imbued with dark magic, which would inevitably send us down some new and unexpected pathways.

When she found herself saddled with the mysterious gem, connected to a malevolent being, embedded in her forehead and invading her mind, I wondered if it could be the path to creating another possibility for Arrow. Might she be pushed to make a rash decision through exposure to the malevolent magic of the stone?

The rules of D&D allow characters a feature called "multiclass," which means to expand a character beyond just the one class, or type (some role-players describe a class as the character's "job"). When the characters gain level, a player (in consultation with the gamemaster) can choose to learn another profession, or branch out into a different character type, by adding one level from another class. From there, each time the group levels up, the player can choose which of their character classes to increase.

"Is the being connected to gem powerful enough to make a pact with?" I asked Gabe. "Would it make sense for Arrow to multiclass to Warlock because of the gem?" The Warlock class is one of the magic-user types in the world of D&D. Warlocks get their magic powers through making a pact with a powerful—and most often evil or chaotic—being, which always has some unexpected consequences. The magic tends toward the

dark, and warlocks are granted a couple extra skills or abilities by their magical patron, but it often carries with it some sort of trade-off downside. The patron I had in mind was *The Great Old One*, a "mysterious entity whose nature is utterly foreign to the fabric of reality," because the abilities gleaned from the bond with such an "unfathomable being" includes an *Awakened Mind*, or the "ability to touch the minds of other creatures." (Wizards RPG Team, n.d.). These limited telepathic abilities allow communication with another creature within 30 feet, as long as it understands at least one language (Crawford et al., 2014). Gabe agreed, so I multiclassed Arrow from being strictly a Ranger, to add a few levels of Warlock. Of course, this choice was also playing with fire. Being tied to an unbelievably powerful and unfathomable being is no small matter, but the ability to project a quick message into somebody's head at a crucial moment transformed Arrow's possibilities for action and interaction in interesting ways.

It also created a new conundrum. For me, it brings up problematic issues of the discourses of "cure" around disability. In giving Arrow telepathy, was I succumbing to the medical model of disability? Did it amount to a fundamental change, within the individual? Did it ignore the source of barriers to her communication, located in the social context and interactions? Was it a solution that transformed Arrow, in order to make her fit into society, rather than working toward social transformation that allow for participation regardless of ability? Was it somehow promoting a cure-focused perspective through my character choice?

I see Awakened Mind more as the use of a form of Augmentative or Alternative Communication (AAC), which is used by many neurodiverse individuals to supplement or replace the need for verbal language. AAC devices and methods include a range of technologies, from picture boards to sophisticated computer or tablet programs, that allow the user to point, gesture, use a touchscreen or type to indicate what they want to communicate. Some people type instead of speaking, other devices use a text-to-speech type of technology to give a audible voice to their words, and some rely on symbols or combinations of symbols. The possibilities vary depending on the needs and preferences of the person using them.

Some forms of Augmentative or Alternative Communication are not entirely accepted by the scientific and psychology community for different reasons. The authenticity of communication is questioned in some instances, especially when a

person whose network of caregivers, interventionists, and teachers had never discovered what they thought to be meaningful communication begins to type or point at letters to communicate their thoughts and ideas. The most well-known controversy is that around Facilitated Communication (Biklen, 1990; Biklen & Attfield, 2005; Biklen & Burke, 2006; Kliewer et al., 2006, 2015). Some individuals who communicate in this way use the supportive touch of another person to stabilize their arm or ground their sensory experience. Different levels of support from a third party make the typing or pointing possible, but also call into question whether the communication produced this way is truly independent. Perhaps a more pertinent question is whether communication is ever, in any form, wholly independent?

In the Player's Handbook, the telepathic ability of Awakened Mind is certainly not meant to be a form of augmented communication. That was just the way Gabe and I decided to bend the storyworld to meet a communication gap, to create an accommodation of some sort. In fact, disability is almost entirely absent within the diversity of D&D, a rather gaping hole which has only very slightly begun to be addressed(Jones, 2018). Exciting recent projects like the Combat Wheelchair (Schunk, 2021) are a welcome addition to this fundamentally ableist game system and storyworld and doesn't address disability directly at all. When disabilities appear, it is most often in reproducing the familiar tropes of making villainous characters more terrifying and inhuman (Jones, 2018). Also, it's a world of magic, rather than technology, which complicates the questions. Did Arrow magically transform herself into a non disabled person? I prefer to think that Arrow used the magic/technology available to her to help get her access needs met in certain conditions. Many neurodiverse people report using AAC in some situations and not others, in the same way some people with different mobility needs might use a wheelchair in some situations but not others. Disability is not an either/or proposition, as much as diagnostic manuals, educational designations and social services categories would like it to be!

Remi Yergeau (2018) discusses the strange dilemma created for people labelled as autistic, when communication difficulties are part of the diagnosis. To be autistic is to be "anti-rhetorical" as a category, and therefore not able (or allowed) to express things reliably. Therefore, when autistic-identified authors, scholars, or activists write about the autistic experience, it is often positioned as invalid in one of two ways: either, it is not a valid expression because the diagnostic description renders it impossible that autistic

communication is trustworthy, or it is an indication that they are not sufficiently autistic, and therefore cannot be an expression of an autistic experience. A person with a developmental disability of a type that is understood to affect thinking or communication is thus rendered uniquely unable to organize, advocate or express anything on behalf of themselves or the group they claim to represent.

I have heard this objection from many parent advocates, who are often in conflict with self-advocates, or with ABA-skeptical parents and professionals like myself. "You don't understand *my* child," they insist. "You can't possibly speak for our experience, because our child can't speak. Your objections against behavioural therapy doesn't count for my child, because being able to object with words means they are not the same *kind of* person."

I think maybe we tend to make those we know, or those we feel are similar to ourselves into the unique valuable exception to the dehumanized and diminished category of "other." What if, instead, it could become the uncomfortable example that could make rigid understandings of category dissolve in doubt?

6.3. Playing with the posthuman

Quite a bit later in the campaign, our adventurers are picking our way through a treacherous swamp. We are searching for the village of lizard folk that are being threatened by a dragon and some dragon cultists, who we are hoping to give a hand in fighting off. It's been a few days of dampness and tired wandering, so when Gabe asks us to roll for Perception, to determine whether or not they notice something or someone in the landscape around the characters, the adventurers are tired but relieved that the monotony of the swamp is broken.

"You notice some voices coming from two of the trees nearby," Gabe says to those who rolled high enough on their dice. They let the other group members know, and we all stand more alert, searching the trees for signs of an enemy, which turns out to be four kenku, waiting in ambush for us!

"Can I talk to them?" I ask.

"You can try. But they're actually hunting you. They're hungry because they haven't had a good meal in quite a while. So when they heard voices earlier today, they started stalking you." I am horrified. Arrow is horrified. This can't be right?

"But, kenku are humanoid! They don't hunt other humanoids as food?" I protest. I feel like Arrow and I have a pretty good handle on what kenku generally would or wouldn't stoop to. "That would be weird and cannibalistic. They're not generally cannibals."

"These are wild kenku. Arrow lives with others, is part of a city. These kenku are different. They're just living in the wild, and they're hungry. You're meat!"

"But," I object again, "Kenku aren't wild animals. They're fully sentient. They're people!" I find this weirdly unsettling; my body becomes restless and I look for ways to resist. It would be different if they were specifically *cannibalistic* kenku; a cult, or under the influence of something evil, practicing dark magic, whatever. At the same time, I understand Gabe's point. He wasn't relating them to Arrow. He was using kenku in their original, and probably still most common, role in the D&D storyworld: that of the monster.

The development of the "monstrous" and inhuman in D&D, as mentioned earlier in this thesis, is a story unto itself (Garcia, 2017; Goldfond, 2021; Mendez Hodes, 2019a; Sorolla, 2021). There are many volumes compiling different foes that can be used to create interesting encounters: from the original version of the *Monster Manual,* which was part of the original player material bundle published in 1977, and added to and revised in various iterations, through fresh volumes representing different versions and settings for D&D through time, like *Mordenkainen's Tome of Foes* (Wizards RPG Team, 2018) and *Volo's Guide to Monsters* (Wizards RPG Team, 2016), to name a couple of the more recent.

The goal of an encounter is to create the unexpected, to surprise your players. Kenku, like most of the monsters in the books, pose a unique and interesting challenge, as they can mimic sounds, and in that way trick and confuse their opponents. I should know. It's what Arrow sometimes does.

I decide that Arrow will avoid fighting them if possible. She tries calling out to them, appealing to their sense off kinship and what she knows to be their "fully human"

nature, but to no avail. They will not let themselves be positioned as non-monstrous in this particular context. I left the game that day still feeling disturbed! The episode stayed with me, and I kept returning to it in the following days. As I have noted at various points in this thesis, one of the more interesting characteristics of role-playing games is the way players become invested in characters, and the care and attention that are given to them and their relationships. It was both surprising and unsurprising that I had such a hard time letting go of this affront to Arrow-In-Flight.

Later that week, I was retracing the encounter as I walked a familiar path up the hill. Jumbled rocks under my feet, the telltale echo of a stream that makes the path less navigable in a heavy rain, recalled an experience of something I must have read along this way some time earlier. Rosi Braidotti (2019) interrogates the problematic tendency in much posthuman and transhuman work to ignore the historicity of the category of human, posing the question of who are 'we'? As this work notes, we are "situated across multiple fractures and seemingly irreconcilable power differences" (p. 37). The challenge Braidotti points out is finding a way to resist the unitary, Eurocentric, White, able-bodied subject in working toward a collaborative and collective sense of subjectivity: "we are in this together."

I looked ahead on the trail, where a familiar, moss-covered signpost and a large, smooth gray rock showed the juncture where two different trails met, and thought of the dense entanglements (Barad, 2007) of humans and nonhumans that shape the very ways in which we are able to understand, or even think about how we understand. That meeting in the swamp had brought up troublesome aspects of the multiverse, and of our own understandings of what it means to be "human."

Just as playing Arrow didn't give me the experience of neurodiversity, nor do I claim that this kind of encounter with the descriptions and expectations of "nonhuman" and monstrous races within D&D storyworlds, give me the experience of living as a dehumanized subject. However, it did alert me to the ease with which a kenku, for instance, might slip between the established categories of "human" or "not human." Thinking about the encounter through and with the diffracted perspectives of decolonial and anti-racist work enlighten me just a bit about how easily the individual relationship can be separated from a systemic problem. Taking cues from the materials, structure and prompts provided by the D&D system, there was no problem in both possibilities

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existing for a kenku at any given moment; a playable character, a stalwart companion, trusted ally and friend, or a member of a category of dehumanized monster. At the same time *without remark or explanation*.

If a kenku grows up without the "civilizing" benefit of contact with recognized, humanoid societies of the multiverse, they become something less than human. Or, rather, they will never become human, as their nature is otherwise. There are certain types of creatures in D&D for whom that could never be the case! A human, an elf, a dwarf or gnome could easily be evil in the framework of the game. They might be an enemy, could stalk a party of adventurers in cold blood. But it would be remarkable—the exception to the expected that would require explanation. For others, the alternative is true, and being seen as fully human is the exception instead of the expectation.

To understand someone as a categorized or "essentialized" subject (Coulthard, 2014, p. 142) is to deny them recognition as a fully human other. Allowing for, expecting, and accounting for, a full range of human behaviours, emotions and desires, in or out of a D&D game, is necessary to erase such categorical understandings. Expanding the category of humanoid to include the full spectrum of creature diversity does not mean erasing difference, as Braidotti's critical reading of posthumanism, along with anti-colonial, neuroqueering, and other such anti-categorical work will point out. Even as Arrow might help us understand that *kenku-as-category* are being dehumanized through the game structures and creation of storyworlds, *kenku-as-individuals* have been confined to the margins of society, live in poverty, are hated and feared.

How can a character like Arrow become an agent of change? The wonder of a collaborative storyworld is that, despite the constrictions written into it by the player materials, it is still a place that allows mutual becoming, for human and non-human creatures are like. In fiction, we can explore different worlds, experiences, times, but we are essentially trapped within the imagination of the author. The only way to re-order the constraints, prejudices, barriers and limitations of the world represented is through critique. Role-playing allows us to play with the very makeup of the storyworld, transforming it, one another, and ourselves. We are not obliged to let our imagined storyworlds play out in the same ways as the colonized and oppressive contexts we live in. I would say we must actively resist, and in fact have a responsibility to imagine different ways.

Let it not be overlooked that Arrow is also a badass. Arrow can resist the oppressive situations in which she is placed. She finds ways to work around the barriers that arise in the contexts where she is adventuring, and she is part of a group of companions that understand and support her. Perhaps most importantly, as a player, I can resist and shape the situations that might be offered to Arrow, and let her experiences inform my own approach to game design and my role as game master. This, in turn, might ripple out and have an effect on shaping other storyworlds, and other players' experiences. Arrow is not likely to let a little thing like others' perceptions of her language as "nonfunctional" get in the way of her goals.

But that is not the point! She should never have to be in that position, just like communication outside of a game should not be assumed "nonfunctional." Arrow is a playful opportunity to actively reimagine the confining storyworlds of pathologization that we collaboratively tell ourselves in every encounter.

Chapter 7.

The oblique gaze: Shifting our focus from hero to heroics

"…elements of play, as a practice of living, often escape critical notice; like the playground, they exist on the periphery of legitimate expression. Play is positioned as excessive to normative processes of meaning-making."

-Kuntz & Guyotte (2018), Inquiry on the Sly: Playful Intervention as Philosophical Action, p. 665

"The shop seemed to be full of all manner of curious things—but the oddest part of it all was, that whenever she looked hard at any shelf, to make out exactly what it had on it, that particular shelf was always quite empty; though the others round it were crowded as full as they could hold.

'Things flow about so here!' she said at last in a plaintive tone, after she had spent a minute or so in vainly pursuing a large bright thing, that looked sometimes like a doll and sometimes like a work-box, and was always in the shelf next above the one she was looking at."

-Lewis Carroll (2008) *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, p. 63

Autism research and interventions have long had a preoccupation with where autistic people are looking.

From early descriptions of children and families by Leo Kanner (1943) and Hans Asperger (Frith, 1991), the specifics of gaze direction, eye contact and unusual ways of looking—and not looking—at the world, and especially at other people have been central to pathologizing of "autism." The DSM 5 (2013) describes "abnormalities in eye contact" as a pivotal example of nonverbal communication behaviours that are used to diagnose autism, linking looking to the inherent sociality of a person.

The experience and importance of different ways of looking—and not looking—into other people's eyes was the first firm handhold I found when trying to navigate the chasmic difference between research and intervention materials on autism, and self-described lived experiences of neurodivergent persons. It didn't take me long to find

autistic-identifying adults describing what eye contact meant for them: uncomfortable, overly intimate, overwhelming, intense. That seemed to me to be a sharp contrast to the interpretation expressed by Kanner and Asperger, and generations of autism "experts" since. In these descriptions, eye contact was equated with an interest in social connection, and different or less eye contact was interpreted to indicate a lack of social interest, or an inability to get social cues or information from holding the gaze of another. This description was tied in with the overall failure to feel and empathize with other humans, and to generally take an interest in other people.

Explanations from autistics, meanwhile, tend to describe the experience as overly intimate; lots of folks describe, in a sense, picking up *too much* social information and being overwhelmed. This doesn't seem like *a lack of* empathy, but more an overabundance. It also resonated with lessons I had learned with Ash, already when they were very small. If my face became even slightly scrunched with sadness, or I was teary-eyed, Ash became so terribly distressed that I quickly learned to carefully school my expression.

What were Kanner, Asperger, Lovaas, and so many others doing when they "studied" their autistic subjects, starting more than 60 years earlier, I wondered? Had they ever actually asked any of their objects of observation why they didn't often look at other person's faces or eyes? There was no plausible justification I could find for having simply assuming a "social" explanation for difference in gaze; such researchers had interacted with a lot of children and adults. Many of their subjects communicated through verbal language, so they would not even have had that excuse to claim as a barrier! To me, it seemed as though it should have been a simple matter to clear up.

"Deficits in nonverbal communicative behaviors used for social interaction," the most recent version of the DSM explains, "are manifested by absent, reduced, or atypical use of eye contact" (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2016). Interventions, especially behavioural interventions, have historically, and many times continue to, insist on forcing children with autism diagnoses to comply with a demand for eye contact, even to the point of physically intervening in a child's body posture and forcibly turning their head to insist on facial contact (Ochs & Solomon, 2010).

The direction of gaze is understood to indicate the direction of attention and interest—and the inclination to coordinate this with another human, is interpreted to indicate whether the individual has "impaired joint attention" (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2016). I was left to wonder how often others initiate an interest in looking at what the autistic person is finding fascinating? How often the lack of "joint" attention could perhaps instead be described as "attention to things that don't interest many other people." I find it curious that the same literature tends to identify, often in demeaning ways, the "special interests" of neurodivergent people, somehow missing the irony that a "neurotypically" intense preoccupation with what other humans nearby us are doing and saying could be described as a special interest of another type.

Although behavioural interventions or training were not used by the teachers in Ash's school, they did contrive different games in the social skills training period each week during the early school years that focused on eye contact, such as having the children sit on the floor and roll a ball to others in the circle, communicating with their eyes alone. Ash hated these, and complained bitterly about the social skills training in general. Once, in grade three or so, they asked what the game was for, which started a conversation about mandatory eye contact.

"Well," I explained, "some research shows that autistic people don't always like to look in other people's eyes. Some adults have said it makes them feel really uncomfortable. Does it bother you?"

"I don't think so," Ash said.

"It's fine if it does," I told them.

"I will look at you," they said, and we tried out a few seconds of intense eye contact. "No," Ash reported. "That is okay."

"What about with other people?" I asked. Ash considered my question before responding.

"Maybe?" they hedged. "Why do we have to play the dumb game?"

"Is it uncomfortable to look at the other kids' eyes?" I asked.

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"No. It's just boring."

"Maybe there are others in your class who don't look at people's eyes. It can be important sometimes, so maybe your teachers want them to practice."

"Why?" Ash wanted to know, now concerned that something was wrong. I felt stumped, as I often did when confronted by the necessity of describing normative expectations they might face from others, but which I found ridiculous, constraining or sometimes even offensive.

"Sometimes other people feel it is important to have someone look in their eyes."

"Why?"

"They think it means the person is not paying attention, or that maybe they don't hear them or care what is being said," I explained. "It's not your fault, it's a dumb expectation." Ash thought that over for a moment. Now I started to get nervous.

"You don't have to look in people's eyes," I said, and offered a couple of suggestions I had encountered in self-advocacy material. "You can look at someone's nose or forehead, and they will feel like you are looking at their eyes."

"What if I look at your neck?"

"Well, that will work if you are not too close to the person. Like with Storm's teacher." We knew that Storm hated to look at people's faces, which I had only discovered when they came home angry and upset in one of the early classes at the teacher's demand that all students looked at their face during class time. Storm had been singled out, the teacher insisting on being looked in the eye.

"I was listening!" Storm had cried, outraged. "I hate looking at people's faces. I can pay attention without doing that."

"I know you were," I agreed. Even before I became attentive to neurodiversity, I had been deeply uncomfortable watching this fairly common practice by teachers and childcare workers, who would demand that a child being scolded look directly at them. In my paedagog education, we had even discussed whether or not it was ethical practice,

or at least perhaps unsuitable depending on personality, or the cultural or family background of the child.

"That's terrible," I had agreed with Storm. "What did you do? Did you look at their face?"

"I looked above their head. Or at their body," my resourceful child had answered. "They couldn't see the difference." I'd congratulated them on finding a good solution.

I reminded Ash of this discussion, and we tried it out. They looked at my forehead, at my nose, etc., and finally came to a decision.

"I will look at people's eyes," Ash proclaimed.

"You don't need to," I protested. This was not the outcome I had planned for this conversation!

"Will people think I'm not autistic?" they asked. I shrugged helplessly, totally unprepared for this particular question.

"That doesn't matter!" I said, panic starting to rise. "Don't do things that feel wrong to you! It's not that important. It's more important you are comfortable."

"It's not that bad. I will make myself look at eyes," Ash continued, unswayed by my arguments. I felt like I had let them down. I had handled the conversation badly—one of those parenting moments somehow completely derailed.

There are ongoing discussions in various autism self-advocacy contexts, and within scholarship, about the relevance of focusing on eye contact as the "measure of engagement" (Manning, 2020, p. 311) at all, or whether the idea of a "typical" form of face-to-face contact an ableistic expectation that should be cast aside entirely (Yergeau, 2018). It seems to me yet another form of culturally mandated coercion, that permits more violence toward neurodivergent people, and others who may not feel comfortable looking at others' faces. Storm maintains that eye contact is generational, insisting that their peers in general find it objectionable and awkward. I wonder how many of the pathologizing descriptions we rely on might, in fact, need to be updated regularly to

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accommodate changing social and cultural values, rather than reflecting improvements in science?

In any case, the prescriptive expectation of eye contact sees to clearly pathologize anything that isn't a specific, cultural and historical way of engaging with the world. If someone doesn't indicate a complete preoccupation with other humans, if they are not enacting and embodying the norm of human exceptionalism, they are seen doing something wrong, something abnormal.

As a young child, Ash could spend hours in close communication with the small creatures in the world, fascinated by insects, spiders, snails. They would sometimes lie awake in the evening, or cry themselves to sleep, with the thought of destruction of habitat for insects, and the unfairness that humans only considered their own interests. Sensing, appreciating, and relating to other aspects of our contexts, being attentive to the more-than-human, seemed their default. And Ash is not alone, or perhaps even atypical for a small child, in this fascination and concern.

"But what about animals?" Storm often asks us, outraged. "How come it's allowed to kill an animal, or keep it in a tiny cage? If we can keep animals in cages, we should be able to keep humans."

When described in this way, their position conflicts with some quite fundamental value, and I can feel how culturally unacceptable it is in my embodied response. When Storm says that in public, my body seizes up and I glance around to see if anyone else has overheard. Even so, I can't help but agree. We seem to have an exaggerated and unbalanced focus on ourselves, a humancentric "navel gazing" that is both a selfish and unsustainable way of life. I think it's fair to question whether expecting (or forcing and training) everyone to attend *only to other people*, has actually brought us to a very good place!

What if we looked closely at the criteria for an autistic diagnosis, and consider whether it might be, among other things, the pathologization of an ontological relatedness that doesn't always privilege or assume human exceptionalism as a given? What if, instead of "deficits in developing, maintaining, and understanding relationships," we were to consider whether neurodivergence might suggest to us a way of living within a wealth of connections, another way of embodying an we-are-all-in-this-together

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subjectivity? What if we actually *gain* a perspective in shifting our gaze away from the demand that human faces are our only focus?

7.1. A focus on visual perception

In the last couple of decades or so, there has been a variety of research efforts to understand the difference in the way people look at things and other people. Visual perception differences in neurodivergent people is a very thoroughly researched area. Eye-tracking studies have become quite popular, as the technology used to do such work has developed (Nadig et al., 2010; Sasson et al., 2011; Sasson & Touchstone, 2014). Neurodivergent and neurotypical persons have been asked to perform all manner of tasks, in both social and non-social situations, while wearing eye-tracking devices (Guy et al., 2019; Hellendoorn et al., 2014; Korkiakangas, 2018).

In fact, it was even discussed as a possibility at one point to collect material for my study, using a wearable device in role-playing contexts. I think it may have been interesting to find out a bit about where people are generally focusing their visual attention during role-playing games, if I hadn't decided to back out of the "comparison" paradigm of defining and quantifying difference.

This research sketches an interesting "different" profile of visual processing that seems to apply to autistic folks generally. Lauren Mottron and a team of researchers in Montreal that includes people identified as autistic, proposed that, taken together, these differences might indicate a profile of "enhanced visual perception" (Guy et al., 2019; Mottron et al., 2006), which is an interesting twist on the usual deficit perspective! The research team went beyond evaluating the expected social deficits related to gaze, such as "mindblindness," proposed by Simon Baron-Cohen (Baron-Cohen, 1995, 2017). Instead, their research breaks down different aspects of visual perception, as a profile of variable strengths, resulting to different processing approaches to many different types of visual tasks. I'm never sure how to take such research, and there is an explosion of neuro-cognitive studies as technologies and methodologies emerge; it is a welcome alternative to the fixation on social skills, but is ultimately even more atomistic and granular, and stays within the categorical difference paradigm.

One of the hypotheses proposed by Mottron's team does invite some new collaborative imaginings in a way that I found very intriguing when Ash was small and I first encountered the article: they suggest a possible relationship between a different profile of visual processing to the "looking habits" of autistic people. It's possible, they wrote, that looking at things from unusual angles, using peripheral vision, looking at things from between one's fingers, or via "lateral glances," might be a way of exploring and understanding visual input particularly well-suited to a "different" visual profile (Mottron et al., 2007). Lying on the floor, watching moving toy train wheels as they spin, peeking through cracks, looking at the person who enters the room from the side of your field of vision, all had potentially new meanings, secrets to be uncovered together. New meanings that may have nothing at all to do with social motivation or lack thereof.

This may or may not be the case. It seems that any research findings that suggest folks with developmental disabilities may be better at something is too much of a challenge to "what we know." This work has been picked apart scientifically; perhaps rightfully so (Guy et al., 2019; Neufeld et al., 2020), from that perspective. But in relation to the project of becoming together, that hardly seems the point! A more important point may be the potentialities created when we are encouraged to see the "strange" and "antisocial" activities of our loved ones in a different light. I know that for me, Ash's activities took on new meanings that opened up for exploration, together, into the unknown rather than toward a specific, deficit-driven end.

For me, as a caregiver who was new to the idea of autism and neurodivergence, I recall this—and similar—research as being a moment of refusal, a stumble, a stone that disrupted the ripple pattern of consensus in the pathology paradigm. It was a nudge to change course, to make that slip sideways and walk a different path. The transformative potential of considering that there might be vastly different ways of exploring and perceiving the world, right down to the way we *see* things and use our eyes, felt like an invitation to explore together with Ash. It seems like an opportunity, one that might pique the imagination, and push us into the generative state of doubt that allows for mutual transformation.

And the realization that scientists and researchers are willing to take that possibility seriously, to pursue another story of autism, was pivotal.

A recent advice column in the magazine Autism Parenting (Rohan, 2021) draws on neuro-cognitive research to explain what is happening in the "autistic brain," and encourage parents to use their child's peripheral vision to connect with them. "With a child with autism," writes Maria Rohan, "the brain throws a party when the child sees things out of his/her peripheral vision" (Rohan, 2021). While I find other aspects of this objectionable (mostly relating to the goal of such interaction, which is more effective behavioural training opportunities), Rohan has a point in contrasting this approach to what she notices often happens: "We constantly prompt the child's face straight into central vision to look at us."

John Elder Robison (2007), who is a neurodivergent author, titled his memoir *Look me in the eye* with that familiar phrase. "I cannot tell you how many times I heard that shrill, whining refrain," he writes. "I heard it from parents, relatives, teachers, principals, and all manner of other people. I heard it so often I began to expect to hear it (page 1). Robison was not diagnosed with autism (at that time more specifically Asperger's Syndrome) until well into adulthood, so for him that expectation showed up outside of therapeutic contexts. Just as Storm and I had observed, it reflects our expectations of being the center of every child's attention, neurodivergent or otherwise.

I wonder what would happen if we were to turn this oblique gaze back upon a system that spends enormous time and energy looking at autistic people, and determinedly looking away from those around them—the neutral, neurotypical, given, assumed, normal—in an attempt to understand a relational breakdown from a "first person singular" perspective (Manning, 2020, p. 309). What happens if we transform our own research gaze by concentrating on something other than the object of research? What if we centre our peripheral vision, focus not on that one person, but on the dense network within which they become, in relation? Perhaps even attempt a slip sideways far enough to direct our attention off the map?

It strikes me that the oblique gaze, the practice of attending to the "peripheral" is perhaps a good exercise for us in general! I am reminded of the wealth of species that are becoming extinct, blinking out of existence, just outside of the range of our field of vision as we focus on the structures and systems that support compulsory capitalism and human exceptionalism. It is a perilous sort of tunnel vision that we employ.

Looking, being looked at, and returning the gaze

I will admit to a strange enjoyment of the irony (or maybe the infinite regression?) of the "focus" on eye-gaze, looking closely at where folks are looking, to determine if their way of looking is normally or pathologically attentive. The individual either diagnosed or being diagnosed is the main recipient of this probing gaze: how often do they look where their parent or the professional are pointing? Do they bring things for others to look at? How often is there eye contact, and with whom? But the field of attention is also extended to the individual's intimate network. I think all parents and caregivers experience the feeling of being the object of judgemental observation, but perhaps more so when children don't conform to the normative expectations of development.

Ash was almost three years old when I first felt the heated scrutiny of the pathologizing gaze turned toward myself. I had contacted the family psychology centre that supported private daycare workers, and told them of my concerns for Ash, who would be required to start in preschool a few months later, as their third birthday approached. I knew at that point that there was no way they would manage preschool for even a couple of hours a day—and certainly not without me being there to help translate, navigate and facilitate. At that point, I knew that the worst possible nightmare for Ash would be to be trapped in a room full of other preschool children!

Lene, the seasoned psychologist with more than two decades of experience, agreed to come to our home to meet Ash and see if there was cause for a response. I had written several pages of observations in a document that I sent with the letter, describing Ash in different contexts.

"Yes, I can see there is a 'different' form of contact," Lene told me after 20 minutes or so of interacting with Ash and Storm. "I've worked closely with small children for twenty-five years." I remember Storm sitting in a high chair at the kitchen table, eating a snack while Ash played on the floor. I nodded in agreement. It was the moment every parent dreads and hopes for: the professional agreement that something is making life different or difficult for one's child.

"And," she continued, looking at Storm. "I can see that there is normal contact with the other child, so I know it isn't you." I let out an astonished laugh, somehow

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unaware until that moment that I had been under at least as much scrutiny as my child. Of course, I thought, reflecting on it after she had left. They did not know me, and differences in contact styles can also be the result of early trauma or neglect. I wonder if it was also my second-language grammar mistakes in the document and foreign accent on the telephone, as well as Ash's non-Danish name that made alarm bells ring for her and her colleagues? Ash was clearly looking at the wrong things, but I had also been rather willfully obtuse in assuming that I would be above the suspicious gaze.

All parents and caregivers of children who are singled out, scrutinized, noticed as different or not following the established norm of development know that they walk a knife-edge. Your child, your family, need accommodations in order to live up to the accepted and acceptable compulsory capitalistic system of normative life in which we find ourselves. And yet, to draw that medicalized, professional Eye of Sauron is to risk being blamed, bullied, considered no longer an adequate caregiver. If it wasn't so terrifying, I would find it amusing that the same set of behavioural indicators that were once blamed on cold and distant "refrigerator mothers" (van Rosmalen et al., 2020) now tend to be described as the result of overly indulgent and permissive parenting, where there is not rigid enough discipline and structure.

At the same time, caregivers and families are also subject to the desire to fulfill societal expectations of normativity, sometimes to such an extent that they are willing to subject their own children to harsh and even violent treatments and interventions, or to relinquish caregiver responsibility to an institution. I think we need to cast our nets wider than the nearest, most intimate network with our peripheral gaze, and see what comes up.

7.2. The oblique gaze

The oblique gaze, if considered in its simplest or most straight-forwardly sideways sense, might encourage us to move our focus from the neurodivergent individual as the center of the inquiry. Instead, we are encouraged to be attentive to the space and relationships around that person. It is to keep our attention on immanence and becoming processes, rather than the autistic person and their different way of being. This, in itself, is an important shift, as it is a well-known, if mostly anecdotal, truism that the challenges or barriers that neurodivergent people experience vary immensely due to

the context in which they find themselves, and the people by which they are surrounded. It is in large part the attitude accommodations and agenda of communities that make life and thriving possible—or not.

Beyond that, however, there are other, playful and trans/formative aspects of a "decentered inquiry" that come into play when considering an oblique gaze as a contribution to methodology.

Kuntz and Guyotte (2018) explore the possibility of decentered or peripheral gaze as a sort of playful philosophical inquiry that "escapes rigidity and conformity, and … might playfully escape the strictures of hegemonic normativity" (p. 667). "Action and play," they suggest, "take place in the periphery," in opposition to the static, scientific center (p. 666). Kuntz and Guyotte refer us to Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* to more fully explore this possibility.

In chapter 5, Alice visits the White Queen. Kuntz and Guyotte write about the potentialities of the part of the encounter that takes place in the Queen's shop. Alice discovered that the objects on display do not conform to the ontology of looking that we would expect. Alice is never able to look at any of them directly: instead of being able to focus her gaze on any of the exciting merchandise, Alice experiences that the shelves at the center of her vision remain always empty, while the objects always move to the periphery of her field of view, dancing just out of reach of her gaze (Carroll, 2008, p. 63), like the trickster.

The impossibility of looking intentionally at the periphery is that with each new glance, a new periphery is created (Deleuze, 1990). It is space both created by and unclaimable to the centered, scientific, and capitalistic gaze.

"Such a periphery will always exceed knowing," Kuntz and Guyotte muse. "In this landscape, the clarity of scientifically based work (and a *methodology-of-the-past*) stands centered while others (playful work and *methodologies-of-the-immanent-now*) become in relation to this center" (p. 666). When we avert our eyes from the autistic-as-object, decenter our gaze, are we perhaps giving them the opportunity to "exceed our knowing?" That, I believe, could be the ultimate parenting, and hopefully interventionist, goal! The methodologies of science (and pseudo-science) can be helpful, and even necessary; I'm not suggesting we back away from trying to gather evidence in helpful

and supportive ways. However, the playful, off-center inquiry may also be necessary to invite transformation.

The shelves of objects receding from view is playfully generative, but what if we extend our visit with Alice and the White Queen beyond the bounds of the shop? There are other elements to this encounter that might add further layers of understanding to the experiment of the oblique gaze.

The White Queen exists outside of linear time. She explains that she "lives backwards," which "always makes one a little giddy at first." Alice is astonished, and the Queen continues:

> "'-But there is one great advantage in it, that one's memory works both ways.'
>
> 'I'm sure MINE only works one way,' Alice remarked. 'I can't remember things before they happen.'
>
> 'It's a poor sort of memory that only works backwards,'" the Queen concludes (p. 57).

The Queen seems to present a sort of magical allegory, living backwards, or outside of progressive time and fixed shape. This is perhaps another trick of looking that we can, and do, employ in the service of neurodivergence. It seems often that, when we have identified difference embodied in a young person, our expectations put them onto a sort of parallel track to the shadowy "typical" child we anticipated, or would perhaps prefer them to be. They must "overcome," or perhaps indeed, revert into a state of normative human-ness, to the child we knew them to be before knowing them.

This sense of "living backwards" is something I recognize happening in insidious ways, as part of my own experience. I remember clearly a moment when Ash was very young, before there was a diagnosis or any plans made for education or intervention, when past, future, and present all ran together. Our gaze can slip sideways in other ways, presenting a complex backward and forward look, putting potentialities in the centre, giving glimpses of possible and actual futures and pasts.

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When Ash was in the process of being diagnosed, I was voraciously consuming anything I could find on neurodivergence, neurodevelopmental diagnoses and disability.

One day, in the weary moments after toddler bedtime and before my energy ran out, I stumbled upon Kate Blewett's documentary, *Bulgaria's Forgotten Children* (2007) being shown on Danish television. Blewett follows the lives of a handful of inmates in a closed institution for children with disabilities in Bulgaria, just a couple of years before. The film is admittedly sensationalized investigative journalism, but even so is a jarring look at the shockingly inhuman, abusive, and horrifying conditions under which some children with disabilities were permitted to live. And this in a country that had joined the European Union the same year the documentary was filmed, despite the EU's proclaimed requirements for human rights compliance in member states!

The story that drew me in entirely, however, was that of Dede, a teen described in the film as "mildly autistic," who had been sent to live in the institution a few months before, by a mother who no longer felt able to care for her. Until then, she had lived at home and attended a regular, mainstream school in Bulgaria. Dede spent her time in the institution helping with chores and looking through a magazine on celebrities she had brought with her. She also wrote a letter, with perfect penmanship, to her mother every day, convinced that she would soon return for Dede.

As I listened to her talking about the changes in her life after being sent to live at the institution, my own past, present and future were suddenly right there with me, in the dim living room. Even in Bulgarian, Dede's speech patterns and intonation were eerily similar to Ash's at that time. I knew this particular form of systemic institutionalization was not in his future; we do live in enough privilege for that not to be the case. But even at the age of two, I had become aware of more subtle, insidious forms of domination, rejection, and marginalization that Ash might well face.

Something about Dede's voice also reminded me of Leonard, a periodic visitor to the drop-in centre where I worked before Ash was born. I hadn't thought of Leonard in months, and I don't think the fact that he'd had an autism diagnosis had ever really registered as relevant to me before that moment.

Leonard often made use of the needle exchange program that we ran. But the complexities of national, regional, and local funding agreements, meant we, as a publicly

funded organization, were officially required to deny services to him, and encourage him to return "home" to where he had official status. He was not the only one for whom this was the case, and the policy of open- or closedness was an ongoing gray area of ethical dilemma for facilities that operate within a system of care! Getting a cup of coffee or food, accessing to the used clothing we kept in stock, or the clinic, was often up to the individual's powers of persuasion, and the ideology, whim or goodwill of the staff member they encountered.

In Leonard's case, charming did not seem to come easily. He often needed more support than we were able to offer at a drop-in centre and outreach program. In the chronically under resourced environment of outreach work, it felt like he pushed the limits of our capacity.

But honestly, I thought most of the problem was that Leonard didn't feel easy to be around. It was hard to put a finger on; his voice was perhaps a little too loud, or maybe his timing just a bit off? Maybe it was because he asked the same question many times, without seeming to notice that it was interrupting the flow of the place? For whatever reason, he was someone who challenged the normativity of the centre.

It was discovered that Leonard had an autism diagnosis and a home in an assisted living facility. The concerned staff were happy to hear from us, and eager for his return. It was agreed that we should completely refuse him services, freeze him out until he "chose" to return home, in a strategy that was not uncommon.

I wasn't part of the decision, and it never did sit well with me. I tried to speak out against it, though not forcefully enough. The pressure to fall in line and "back up" such decisions was intense, as it tends to be in such contexts. And, frankly, it sometimes felt easier to say no than it was to spend an evening with Leonard adding to the general chaotic busyness of the cafe.

So I became complicit, supporting the rule, against my own misgivings, and with growing heartache each time he met a closed door.

One day in February, the police brought the news that Leonard had been found on a nearby street, dead of exposure after an overdose. The lives of those who came to the centre were complicated and often dangerous, and many struggled to care for

themselves and stay safe; overdose was tragically common. But Leonard's felt different, somehow. More preventable. His rejection had seemed harsher, more rigid, more personal. To this day, I'm sure his case was treated more strictly because we are used to—and comfortable with—rejecting those whom we experience as socially difficult, who fall outside of our narrow expectations of socially normative behaviours.

In that moment, it was as if Ash, Leonard, and Dede bled into one set of overlapping potentialities. Multiple timelines—Ash's possible futures, Dede's possible past, Leonard's possible future—all telescoped into one living forward, living backward, becoming. Leonard's death, at my hands, was suddenly not only my past but Ash's potential future. I was parent, social worker, and political activist, struggling and equally ineffective for them all.

I returned to the film, shaken and restless, to discover that Dede appears again toward the end, when Blewett and the crew had returned to the institution a few months after the original filming. This time, instead of writing letters, pitching in on chores and chatting with the film crew Dede has begun to sit in a chair for hours, arms wrapped around her torso and rocking back and forth in the same motion as the other children. A few months of isolation and lack of stimulation has produced the "stereotyped" and aimless behaviors that a look in the diagnostic manual might have predicted for someone with autism, as if it was part of their atypical nature, and not a response to an atypical context.

An oblique gaze, and a sideways-and-backward slip of time can reveal the unexpected. Perhaps it isn't in the nature of the individual to "be" autistic, to be an outsider or a misfit. It is in the becoming with others, with us, that marginalization, isolation and exclusion occurs. It is potentially so much more informative to keep our attention on what is dancing around the edges of the scientifically proven differentness, the pathologized center, the evidence base.

The barriers and exclusion that Leonard had faced, and ultimately failed to navigate, can easily become a reality for people labelled—and treated—as "different." In

a society that proclaims itself committed to the ideals of "inclusion," some of us still end up dreadfully alone and isolated, and face mental health challenges related to loneliness. An overrepresentation of those of us in this situation are neurodivergent (Deckers et al., 2017; Gotham et al., 2020; Hudson et al., 2019; Lasgaard et al., 2010; Mazurek, 2014). Well-meaning social and care workers, teachers, and even parents or intimate caregivers, are complicit in carrying out the edicts of a "pastoral power" (Foucault, 1982, p. 782) that requires such folks to accept their differentness, and conform to the life situation that has been deemed the most wholesome and appropriate for them. This is usually a life separated from the rest of us in some way. And then, we can also shrug our shoulders in resignation when it ends tragically.

Ultimately, and with the clarity of standing outside the situation, it seems clear that it wasn't Leonard's responsibility to fit in. It was all of our responsibility to become something new in relation to one another, and in that we failed. He was "collateral damage" of the rigid normativity that pervades our social systems of care, education, and intervention. What if we were to apply the oblique gaze to such practices? What if we attend to the movement at the edges of out gaze—the dynamic context of suspension and potentialities? Perhaps our educational practices could learn something from Alice's adaptability, radical acceptance, and willingness to transform. What if we strive to gracefully and creatively take up the surprising, playful, and non-normative rhythms offered to us, to move obliquely and "make room" when a member of the community asserts their identity, not only allowing but supporting and becoming with their potentialities?

7.3.   Heroic / monstrous becoming

Let's return to Alice and the White Queen for a moment, another reading that brings us again beyond the magical shelves, to find what else we can learn. They first meet when Alice finds and returns the Queen's woolen shawl, which has blown away. Alice drapes it around her shoulders and helps pin it into place. In the course of their conversation, the Queen's shawl blows away again, and is then re-pinned by the Queen (or, perhaps, by virtue of her backwards living, this is in fact the first time?). When Alice looks at her a bit later, the Queen suddenly seems "wrapped up in wool," and then fully transforms, before-and-outside of Alice's field of vision, into a sheep (p. 62).

If we let her, the White Queen's journey might model something else interesting. If we continue her playful allegory, as one of intervention. With the help of another, although ultimately by her own hand, the Queen transfigured entirely. In an ironic twist, she becomes a sheep, an animal that is literally a symbol of conformity: part of the flock, not diverging, not stepping outside the bounds of the expected. It seems as though accepting the mantle of the shawl has the effect of a sort intended by an intervention at its worst (or best, depending on your perspective and goals).

Even after being pinned into place, the White Queen and her shop continue to surprise Alice and the reader.

"'Things flow about here so,'" Alice complains. She is trying to fix the objects in the shop into some sort of ontological certainty with her direct gaze, trying to focus one in particular that "sometimes like a doll and sometimes like a work-box, and was always in the shelf next above the one she was looking at" (Carroll, 2008, p. 63). Despite her best efforts, everything continues to flow, breaking free of the onto-epistemological perspectives that allow for fixed and dependable description.

In fact, the sheep / Queen herself once again defies descriptive and onto-epistemological expectations. When Alice gives up her perusal of the shelves and next looks back at the sheep, she is in for an astonishing surprise. The Queen has sprouted no less than 14 pairs of needles, with which she is knitting all at once, in a sort of multi-dimensional explosion of creativity. The woolen shawl itself has become the site and source of creative transformation! Like the objects on the shelves, the Queen is undefinable, unable to be pinned down with scientific accuracy!

Is this an intentional act of resistance? Or does the story simply illustrate the impossibility of holding transformative processes of becoming-other in check? It seems a line-of-flight., and, as the body-without-organs (Deleuze & Guattari, 2003), a becoming together with intervention, intervener, subject, world. The Queen will not—can not—remained confined by the woollen cloak of the shawl, finding ways to transcend and transgress an imposed transformation into one where she is central to the action, and the course of the narrative. Soon, she gives one set of needles to Alice; they become oars, and she tells Alice to row. The sheep continues with her other sets of needles "all

the while," now on a collaborative adventure in a whole new story, knit into existence as they negotiate a storyworld of marsh rushes and crabs.

Through the Looking Glass is an adventure of becoming in a fluid and playfully unstable context. We are, like Alice, ready and willing to accept that it may sometimes be difficult to know for certain whether something is a *doll* or a *work-box.* Alice or the Queen / sheep never manage to stay in focus in this part of the tale; we are constantly shifting focus, gazing obliquely, aware of them only in the periphery, with processes of becoming in the centre of the tale.

But this is a silly tale of sheep and knitting needles! What does it mean to apply a surrealistic children's novel to the serious challenges some of us face in life? How do we make the transition from the bleakness and violence, the seriousness of the issues faced by real people experiencing exclusion, systemic oppression and violence, without making light of their very real situations?

"Through play, inquiry becomes critical," note Kuntz and Guyotte (2018) "absent play, inquiry all-too-easily becomes a normalizing process, reinforcing the dominant status quo" (p. 665). This is the strength of an inquiry that looks askance, and applies a decentered, indirect, playful gaze. Understanding the fluidity of transformative processes requires a light touch. Pinning down a culprit, defining and identifying bully and victim can only get us so far, as they are only part of the picture—the periphery-in-motion seems every bit as important to capture! Huizinga (1950) reflects on the seriousness of play in *Homo Ludens: A study of the play-element in culture*. Here, play is central to human and more-than-human relations alike, and Huizinga rejects the idea that play is only a frivolous endeavour or, I suppose, a disrespectful way to approach understanding complexity and marginalization. "The play-concept as such is of a higher order than is seriousness," Huizinga writes. "For seriousness seeks to exclude play, whereas play can very well include seriousness" (p. 45).

Play, it is also implied in *Homo Ludens*, is much more than games, also in the language we use. The "play" of light on water, or the "play" of waves on the beach capture another aspect of how it might shed light on a serious topic. In this sense, play is an onto-epistemological way of understanding. It is the back-and-forth, the

indeterminate, the suspension of certainty, and that which is not capturable, photographable, describable.

 "Whatever else play is," writes Huizinga, "it is not matter" (p. 2). And yet, this thesis, like Carroll's slippery and transformative descriptions, are just that—it is text. It is not play, but perhaps a sort of tracing of play. We can join Carroll in watching and being inspired by the transformational potentialities and processes of the characters, or by the way that Alice gracefully "makes room" as the White Queen asserts her identity. But we are still operating within the imagined world of first-person singular (Manning, 2020), and in the traces of play.

What if the author, storyteller, characters, reader all become multiple? What if we take another slip sideways and decenter the authorship of the becoming together? How might intentional "becoming," such as a therapeutic or intervention context be re/imagined from this place of the oblique gaze, the decentered inquiry? What might an "objectless analysis" with "nothing and no one to code?" (Tuck & Yang, 2014, p. 812) look like, if it were turned toward a context where subjectivity is usually everything?

Becoming Hero/ic

As part of my doctoral journey, I was able to be a research participant in a D&D-based therapy group for folks with social anxiety. Role-playing games are becoming increasingly popular as a model for social therapies (Abbott et al., 2021; Causo & Quinlan, 2021; Daniau, 2016; Henrich & Worthington, 2021). There are also groups designed specifically for neurodivergent participants, sometimes with an eye for intervention or social learning (Fein, 2015b; Johns et al., 2020). There are various reasons that both therapists and folks seeking therapy express how and why tabletop role-playing games offer a space of therapeutic transformation, and social anxiety is one of the mental health challenges that have found the most fruitful foothold in gaming.

David, the therapist I was collaborating with as co-investigator on this aspect of the thesis, repeated some advice he'd been given about running roleplaying therapy groups. The harder you try to force it to be therapeutic," he was told, "inevitably, the less therapeutic it's going to be for people." This was, of course, not entirely true, and he built both the story and the individual sessions very carefully, and spent a good deal of time

preparing the participants to create and run their characters in a meaningful way. It was definitely a carefully curated, intentional, therapeutic context.

However, there is an element of something interesting in the idea that role-playing games are inherently transformative. If you ask any gamer, larper, or game researcher, they will tell you this is the case! Even the fears of satanic influence, violence, and psychopathology that crop up around games like D&D every so often point to the same sort of sense that they contain the power to transform. Why else would they be seen as a dangerous pastime?

Mostly, as a casual participant, we just played D&D, with a few modifications. Each ninety-minute session included a check-in round, where we were each invited to set a character-personal and a player-personal goal for the day, and a post-session check-out, where we reflected on our experiences and goals.

One of thing that was very clear to me, both in the interviews toward the end of the ten sessions, as well as the transcripts of individual sessions, was the lack of focus on the individual. This seems antithetical to therapy, which is (at least at face value) about intentional, individual transformation! But what strikes me that might be different about a role-playing therapy group is that the focus is not on a collection of individuals, but on the group, on process. What might a therapeutic, or other transformative, context look like, if we apply the oblique gaze to the process—and away from the individual player/characters that are seeking transformation?

D&D is, in a sense, about heroes. No one joins their first party as a hero, but many have entered the roleplaying realm with hopes of becoming one! But what does the path from hesitation to heroics look like? How is a beginning adventurer met in the face of such doubt and confusion? Most of the players in this group were beginners, just learning the rules of role-playing games, becoming familiar with the dice, the game mechanics and the terminology. To say nothing of becoming familiar with the pages of text and numbers that described their character.

Becoming a hero, it turns out, takes a village. That is not the way those of us brought up in a culture of action film characters are used to thinking. It is the collective

effort of many player/characters with their skills, knowledge, and not least, dice, that breathe life into a set of numbers on a page, and into the storyworld.

Consider the path of Ron, a novice player, and his brand new character, Del. Del was about as close to an action hero as we had in the group—a former gladiator turned sorcerer. We were hesitantly following our chosen route out of the Underdark, tasked with safely delivering a young drow elf girl to the surface.

We arrived at the Haunted Well, a long-abandoned holy site of some kind. We have heard there is a portal to the surface here. The four crumbling pillars around the well each hold a puzzle of some sort. When Menna, another character, touched one of the puzzles to solve it, some kind of mechanism activated, and the room was quickly filling with re-animated skeletons!

It was our first serious fight, and time slowed for us all. Especially those who were not experienced with the rules and mechanisms of D&D. David has given the players space to sort out a plan against the skeletons.

"Who wants to go to the middle?" Asks Stephen, playing Carthus.

"I mean, he's pretty close to the middle," Jessica says, indicating Ron's position on the battle map.

"Yeah, I can go," says Ron. Jessica takes a glance Ron's character sheet.

"He has a fairly high armor class," she reports.

"Yeah. Okay, uuummm...?" Ron mutters, not sure what that means. He looks at Del's character sheet and the battle map spread out in front of us.

"I can go and help him?" Marjorie offers in voice quiet with uncertainty. "Since... I'm over there." Ron nods, and looks around at the rest of us.

"Do you think I should just move there? Or do you think I should, like, just attack?" he asks.

"Um, just..." Stephen hesitates.

"You can attack, and then move towards it," Amy suggests. Marjorie seems to support this.

"There's a lot of skeletons there," she says.

"Yeah," Ron agrees.

"If you move while a skeleton is next to you, he will attack you, as you are moving away." Stephen warns. He is the only player with much prior experience, and the rest tend to look to him as a sort of living lexicon. "So just worry about that."

"Oh?" Ron exclaims in surprise. He thinks it over for a few seconds, then asks,

"Could I do Magic Missile?"

"Absolutely!" David jumps in, ready to greet the emerging hero, who is ready at last ready to jump into the fight.

"Oh, so do I roll a dice?" Ron asks with a laugh.

The mechanics in D&D doesn't exactly allow for first-person singular, individual heroes. Instead, we can all participate as characters like Ron and Del *become hero/ic* as part of the collaborative imagining and collective becoming of all the character/players as a group. It is only possible through the collective knowledge and support of all players. If we tried to get a fixed view of Del in this scenario, he would blink and sputter; the oblique gaze is needed, the view of the peripheral activity that allows heroics to emerge.

Later in the fight, Ron is once again putting a voice to his process:

"Yeah. I'm debating... ah, how I should attack this skeleton. Um, do you think I'm better doing the light crossbow, dagger...?" Then, flipping back and forth between pages of their character sheet, their eyes could land on the long and indecipherable list of spells, and they might add, "Or maybe... ah, Firebolt?"

"My sense is that most of the time, Firebolt is going to be the best option for you," explains David. It is perhaps an implicit reminder that Ron has created Del, his

character, as a sorcerer. Most of the time, that would mean he was most proficient at magic. After a bit more page flipping, Ron asks about the dagger anyway.

"The dagger is a good option in close range," David answers, "but it's only going to do a d4 plus your strength modifier."

"Or Dexterity. Whatever is higher," chimes in Stephen from across the table.

"Okay. Sure. So, do ... that?" he asks. He looks around at the rest of us before he rolls the d20 he has borrowed from me. As it comes to a stop, David coaches him in the next step.

"Then add your modifier. Probably your Dexterity is going to be a bit higher than your Strength?"

"I don't know," Ron admits with a grin and a shrug, and looks back into his character sheets. "That would be a … nine?"

"Nine total?" David asks.

"Yeah."

"Okay, the dagger bounces off the skeleton's ribcage without hurting it," David narrates, rapping sharply on the tabletop to demonstrate the sound of dagger hitting hard bone. Ron sighs, then looks at his dice. He leans toward me and asks in a stage whisper,

"Is this a six?" I look down at the die lying between us on the table.

"It's a nine!" I tell him.

"Oh, it's a nine!" He turns back to David. "Then I got a twelve."

"Oh, well a twelve would hit," David says. The small, stuffy room fills with laughter, all the way around the table. "So, go ahead and roll the damage. And feel free to help yourself to your own dice."

Playing other

These moments might tell us about how we become a hero in an imaginary storyworld. But what might these many layers of meaning and practices, and overlapping narratives tell us about how and where someone might become, or un-become, a "person with social anxiety?" With the oblique gaze, the playful, decentred inquiry it is less important to describe "what happen*ed*" and much more to capture "what is happening now and what can happen;" less about the story of our ten-session campaign, and more about "what new stories it can generate" (Vannini, 2015, p. 12).

Marjorie, when asked about how similar her character was to herself, answered, "For Noll, I see just like, an opportunity or a chance … more possibilities? Rather than think that 'Oh, Noll was like this and I was like this.' It was more of a place for me to kind of just explore."

The role-playing storyworld is generated collaboratively through play. In this way, exploration is actually a creative process, where the participants are not a person exploring a place or context that exists, but knitting the very world, along with its inhabitants and their relationships with one another and their contexts, into existence in much the same way the White Queen does. Producing the storyworld can be playful and boundary-breaking,

Breaking boundaries is like the time we were in a tense moment, escaping the dungeons of the temple where the Yuan-ti snake-people were keeping the characters for magical sacrifice. This was at the beginning of the campaign, before any of us really knew one another very well!

We were fleeing across a narrow, crumbling bridge over a deep chasm. Only Noll was left. Marjorie had rolled a low number for her Athletics check, meaning Noll had slipped and nearly fallen. She was still dangling a few feet from the edge of the bridge.

Leaning forward in her plastic chair, Amy asks David if her character, Rowan, could use the spell *Thorn Whip* to help, because it pulls the target ten feet toward the person who has cast it. This suggestion immediately grabs my attention!

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David agrees, and Amy/Rowan warns Marjorie/Noll that this will hurt. Marjorie reports that Noll is willing to take the risk. Rowan casts the spell, but rolls a low number on her dice. A long, vine-like whip, covered in thorns, snakes out toward Noll, but not far enough.

"Dara offers a song," says Elinore. Dara is a bard, and her magic is musically powered, the song giving extra potency to Rowan's spell (adding a d4 to the dice roll). Even with this help, the vine does not reach where it is meant to go.

This news is greeted with scattered gasps and laughter from around the table. David steps in at this point with DM's taking the liberty of game and rule flexibility, and grants an extra dice roll.

"Noll was not trying to avoid the spell," he explains. "That means she would have been easier to hit than if it was in combat." He grants Rowan "advantage," meaning Amy can roll the d20 a second time, and use the highest number.

"Sixteen!" Amy exclaims.

"That's enough," David says. We breathe a collective sigh of relief as the rope of thorny vines wrapped around Noll and pull her to safety at the last second! The moment she is safe, the bridge collapses into the bottomless gorge.

Both Amy and Marjorie both described this moment, later in their interviews, as a highpoint in the game. Amy named it as one of the best moments for her as a player.

"I think Rowan's really proud of that," she said. When I asked Marjorie, she recalled the moment with a laugh.

"I wasn't overly panicked about it. I was very grateful. Even though she did hurt me a little bit, I didn't mind," she reflected. "I think that's when I started to think about how the group mechanics were going to really help with social anxiety. Or I started to become aware of that slowly. I was like 'huh, interesting. This is what it's gonna be about.'"

For myself, I remember the elation of creative and unplanned experimentation in that moment as well. Saving Noll from plunging to her death took the combined

cooperation of Marjorie/Noll's willingness to be hurt during the rescue operation, the goodwill of David in allowing an unusual use of an attack spell, Elinore's quick thinking in offering magical support. Finally, David, as DM, recognized how this could contribute to everyone's experience, and enhance the storyworld. He was able to redefine the interaction with a re-roll that changed the weave of the world. The knitting needles became oars, and we were able to continue our journey together. Not to be neglected, the dice themselves were also central to making the daring rescue possible!

Is this what could happen in a space designed not to reward competitive or individual, goal-driven behaviours? The in-game incentives are for the best possible story to emerge. The "success" of the game is measured by the collective experience, not the individual. It is not relevant whether Noll was nimble enough to cross the bridge on her own, or whether Amy was a powerful enough magic user to save her, just like it was irrelevant whether Ron was good enough at reading his character sheet, or identifying which way the number on the unfamiliar die was oriented.

Our "success" was dependent on whether the players, characters, storyteller, and dice were able to collaboratively imagine a path forward together. It was up to all of us to save Noll, to get Del into position to be heroic, to let Menna know she didn't need to feel guilty for accidentally loosing skeletons on the group.

The D&D group reports consistently results in reducing participants experiences of social anxiety, and the sessions I attended were no different. The average score on the Severity Measure for Social Anxiety Disorder (SMSAD), where participants rated themselves before and after the ten weeks, went from 22 to 14.2, a 19.6% drop. Even in a semester with considerable upheaval and uncertainty due to pandemic response. On a scale of ten, the participants scored the group at an average of 7.1 for being helpful in helping them reach their counselling goals.

A very common reason they gave on their feedback was simply that it was the opportunity to connect with others, and many of the critique points were that folks wished the sessions were longer, or perhaps that they had opportunities to be in touch with the other participants outside of them.

When I talked to them about it, the ways in which different participants found the group helpful and supportive, and the examples they gave, were many and varied—just

as many and just as varied as the number of people I interviewed! A couple of them mentioned the storyworld as a place for exploration, just as Marjorie had in her example earlier. It was a place to explore with a character that was *not exactly themselves* but through whom and with whom they could live and feel a whole range of experiences. But that still begs the question of *why* exploring in a collectively imagined story world produces experiences this transformative.

Several months after the sessions ended, I was contacted by one of the players, who let me know that four of the participants had continued to play together, starting another storyworld with different characters, with one of them taking over the role of gamemaster. I asked how it was different than the therapeutic game I had been part of.

"We have as much time as we want," Amy replied, "so it's less constrained."

"Several people mentioned the time thing," I agreed.

"Yeah, that's something that can't be really avoided," she said, "But it makes a big difference, I think, when you know that this is all going to end at this time." I nodded in agreement. That was the way of counselling sessions. One of the ways in which becoming intentional actually interferes with the playfulness, which, as Huizinga (1950) reflects, happens outside of real time.

"So you can't spend a half hour talking about bribing people," Amy went on, "which is where a lot of the fun actually happens, right? That's when ridiculous things happen."

She launched into a long story full of antics from their last session, which reminded me of the misadventures of my own group with a very free-style "evil" campaign we started, and the two of us were soon laughing and inspired by our experiences of creativity. The group dynamic, she said, had been impacted by the culture developed in the therapy sessions, where participants were "intentionally extra supportive" of one another, and of themselves. It was not allowed in the group sessions to criticize themselves, their characters, or their roles or actions, either in-game or as players. That spirit carried into the new campaign, and made for a gentler tone, and, I suspect, even more collaboration.

This experience of explicit and expected collaboration, and planning for the unplanned, is very important, I believe. It's also the becoming-together-with that grows in a space where cooperation is so much stronger than competition. That is perhaps where the oblique gaze is most valuable. Without a focus on the measurable centre, there is nothing and no one to compare. Instead, the dynamic periphery, where moments of unexpected lines of flight, and explosions of creativity become impossibly possible.

I think maybe I was expecting the participants to tell about more dramatic moments of personal transformation than they did. The impact of the group seemed, in most cases to be more subtle, and less individual, than that.

Marjorie described how important exploration was for her, having a space to gain confidence. It was such a different type of group experience, that for her the important takeaway was that "group work isn't all bad," which she carried into her educational context. Through his character, Stephen had found himself able to back down from a leadership position in the party, when the others seemed like they might be starting to have that expectation. Amy was likewise able to discover that she was able to take on other roles than usual in a group—she had generally felt the need to be a leader or "the responsible one," and Rowan allowed her to find comfort in giving up some of that control. Ron used the group activities and game play to recognize and reflect on his own past strategies, as they showed themselves in the other players.

Jessica told me that playing in the group felt like an "eight-way mirror." She frequently experienced enough resonance with the others, that it felt like they were all reflecting and giving feedback in recognizable ways, through their relationships and interactions.

Glancing sideways can give some insight into what might be happening. The oblique gaze might be a way for us to attend to the collective and collaborative processes that produce "becoming together" in ways that result in anxious, excluded, othered, marginalized, or differented. This is largely missing from our understanding of neurodiversity, psychiatric disability, developmental differences. The gaze of psychiatrists, or psychologists, is firmly affixed to the individual experience, the categorical difference.

It's a truism among my friends in college during my undergrad who were psychology majors, that they would experience any number of psychiatric or psychological symptoms—or even disorders—during the course of their studies. We have a tendency to look inward, or to try to look inside other people, to find their difference or similarity to us, and to assign that meaning.

While it might be informative, and the research and conclusions drawn from this view can be helpful, it is an essentializing and simplifying gesture. It can also become "scientism" —the only recognizable way to define and describe someone, the only way of looking (Oolong, 2022). It can block us from noticing what's happening on the periphery of our gaze, in the processes and the slips sideways that can inspire us to see in new ways.

Chapter 8.

From repetitive behaviours to iterations of increasing complexity

"We step into and we do not step into the same rivers. We are and we are not."

-Heraclitus

"Role-playing games are the Tricksters. The game itself is a Trickster. In the context of the role-playing game, we are constantly being invited to transform."

– Allen Turner, The Trickster's Dance

Characters in role-playing games often go through transformations, like my Fighter-turned-peace-Paladin. Branwen Slatespire is a fierce, noble-born Fighter, and the only human character I've ever played. Branwen entered the D&D multiverse with a family heirloom Greataxe, which was her prized possession, and became the centre of our world as player/character. As a player, I even gained a point of inspiration on one of the first sessions of the game, through our unwavering focus on the ax, named "Shadowslayer, Bringer of Storm." I believe Branwen was the first character in the campaign to be knocked unconscious, and the other characters were a little shaken. When she was revived, Mark, the DM, asks what she does.

"She opens her eyes, and looks to make sure that she's still clutching her ax," I responded. Everyone laughs.

"Inspiration point, says Jeff. "You're really bringing that heirloom ax out as part of the character's personality." And, indeed, I thoroughly enjoyed playing around with the axe as the central point of Branwen's character. I began inventing a new, ridiculous, and bloodthirsty war-cry every time she would swing the ax in battle.

"Shadowslayer, Bringer of the Storm!" she would cry. Or "Shadowslayer will drink the righteous blood of her enemies!" if she was feeling particularly, bloodthirstily poetic. "Beware the storm!"

Branwen was delightfully insufferable to play, and leaned in to all the worst aspects of the D&D world: overt violence, aristocratic and hierarchical societal structures, Eurocentric cultural dominance. The sort of character that I only felt comfortable playing in a way that made sure the ironic caricature was obvious to all. She fully believed in the entitled, paternalistic duty of bringing "civilization" to the small communities where the party settled. When they discovered a crumbling manor in the countryside, it became her solemn goal to acquire it and restore it to it full glory, to bring honour to her family name at the same time that she righteously brought the "improvements" and "culture" of the nobility to a wild and lawless area of the storyworld. It was terrible and wonderful, and I relished every moment of decadent snobbery.

"Bring me an ale," one of her companions would ask in the country inn they had come to.

"I'll have a glass of your finest vintage," Branwen would counter, then look down her nose in astonishment as the innkeeper listed the beverages available.

Then came the session with a moment of crossroads for Branwen, and for me as a player. We were exploring an underground system of tunnels when we encountered a gelatinous creature of mysterious origin. We were low level adventures, which meant none of the characters had much experience with the many different monsters we might encounter. But Kari, from another campaign I had gamemastered, knew very well. This is a moment known in role-playing games as "meta-gaming." When you have the opportunity to make your character act in a way that reflects your knowledge as a player, rather than theirs as a character. It is definitely considered bad form, and is the sort of thing that doesn't often go unnoticed by your fellow players—and sometimes doesn't go unpunished, depending on the DM.

I knew that an Ooze would irrevocably damage any metal it touched. Shadowslayer would never be the same again. I didn't ponder for long.

"Branwen would go for it." I said to Jeff. Branwen is always shouldering her way to the front of the group tried to get in the first blow protecting the others thirsting retro progress but I knew before that happened Storm Bringer would never be the same. I wondered what that would mean for Branwen.

"Oh no," I said to the other players. "Well, here it goes." I sighed and picked up my d20 die.

"Branwen strides forward and takes a mighty swing, shouting 'Taste the wrath of the Bringer of Storms!'" I crossed my fingers and hoped for a dismal role. But no such luck. 15.

"You hit!" Jeff says. "As soon as your axe comes in contact, the metal on the blade begins to sizzle. Your greataxe now has some nicks and chunks out of it, and you reduce your attack bonus by two." We all laugh; this is just the type of disaster that everyone loves. The worst possible outcome makes for the best, most transformational moments for characters.

Branwen is devastated. She spends some hours trying to polish and resharpen the edge, to no avail, of course. Alex, who plays a dwarven cleric, hauls out a battleaxe I don't even remember them picking up.

"Thordek brings the axe to Branwen. 'I wasn't using this anyway,'" Alex says in Thordek's gruff grumble. "It's a plus one battleaxe," Alex explains. "A magic weapon. Thordek uses a different weapon. I have just been carrying it because it was a treasure." Branwen looks glum, but takes the weapon, marking its heft. She gazes at Shadowslayer, Bringer of Storms. I remember that Branwen had rejected the battleaxe when it was discovered in an earlier session, insisting in outrage that she would never replace her family heirloom weapon.

"Branwen says, 'Alright,'" I say. "'Thank you. I'm gonna have to learn how to use this thing.' Branwen straps Shadowslayer onto her back."

She continued to carry shadowslayer into battle as a talisman, but she used the magical battleaxe for fighting. I quickly discover the battle axe is actually better in a fight, and allows me to make use of more character-based fighting skills. But Branwen was changed. The elation she experienced, using the clumsy greataxe, channeling her

family's honour, and the fun and creativity for me of tying her identity, values and personality so closely to the axe.

I don't actually know if Branwen is a sore loser, or if I am. Swinging Shadowslayer around with paternalistic entitlement and the righteous indignation of noble ancestry was a horrifying kind of fun. Somehow, the more efficient magical axe, even though it was both more powerful, *and* a generous gift from an in-game and out-game friend, was never quite the same. Branwen and I needed to move on; we needed to transform.

"That's one of the great things about the dice," Nat, one of my research participants, told me. "You never know if things are going to go really, really well or really, really badly." Or, like in this particular situation, where a dice role going well ended up really, really badly.

"I find that the best stories come from failure," Nat continued. "Have you ever gone on a road trip and you had a plan to get somewhere in a certain amount of time, and either you blew a tire, or you took a wrong turn, and you ended up having an even better adventure than you would have had if you've gotten where you were planning to go? I think that failure and unfortunate situations tend to lead to good stories, because it's about overcoming that unfortunate aspect, you know. Fixing the tire, or chasing down the kidnapped princess."

The fateful encounter with the ooze did, indeed, present a possibility for transformation. The trickster dice had ruined my greataxe, but given Branwen a chance to grow and become something new. Perhaps it was the heirloom axe that had been the focus of her bloodthirst the whole time. I'm not sure. But without it, the brash and brawny fighter became a little two-dimensional for my tastes, and I decided to multi-class, adding another character type to her portfolio. I spent some time flipping through source material, and determine that Branwen has spent some of her free time visiting and praying in a chapel of one of the gods of peace and life. (D&D is a poly-theistic multiverse, with a broad array of deities to suit every need!) She does some serious soul searching, and thinks about her past deeds, and her role in the community. By the end of the campaign, she has decided to commit to the righteous path of a Paladin. Paladin's dedicate themselves to a god, to whom they swear a holy oath, and follow the guidelines

that god sets out for them. Branwen's is the "Oath of Redemption" which specifies which specific subclass of Paladin her character will follow in the player materials.

Those who follow the Oath of Redemption are holy warriors, who "use violence only as a last resort." The player's handbook instructs that this type of Paladin will "face evil creatures in the hope of turning their foes to the light, and … slay their enemies only when such a deed will clearly save other lives." (*The Paladin Class*, 2016) They will, at times, defend themselves if needed, but will never initiate an attack. When I imagined this Branwen in conflict, I knew she could insist on using at least one turn to try to negotiate and proclaim the merits of peace.

I also imagined the other characters' surprise at this—and the DM's! Branwen's usual approach was to shoulder her way to the front of the group in any conflict and be the first and most aggressive fighter. The change would be fun to play with, and would disrupt the routines of the game mechanics in unexpected ways. Branwen's transformation might also transform the whole group.

The campaign ended soon after, and we, as players, decided to go a different direction entirely, with new characters. I may come back to Branwen someday, though. I'm interested to see what the peaceful iteration of the single-minded fighter might become. Paladins are generally just as insufferable, and I know that Branwen is likely every bit as convinced of her own virtue and righteousness as she ever was—just with a different focus and under new leadership! Who knows? Losing the focus of her existence might be the best thing that ever happened for the pair of us.

This constant disruption and reinvention is a familiar story for Allen Turner. In the talk "Disrupting Monkey, Laughing Raven: The Magic of the Tricksters' Dance," (Transformative Play Initiative, 2021a), Turner explores the transformative potentialities of interrupting the idea of the "hero's journey" arc for understanding ourselves and our experiences.

Turner is a role-player, story-teller, artist, dancer and composer with a vast experience with games and storyworlds. He encourages listeners to explore non-linear, trickster characters, as they embody a particular way of exploring, disrupting and

producing / becoming something new. Trickster's approach, he says, is to "ask some fundamental questions of the world around them:

- *Why?*

- *How?*

- *What the fuck? and*

- *Why not?"* (28:50)

Trickster thinking offers us "a different take on growth, which is less about conquest and battles and self-annihilation and elixirs, and instead, one of movement in co-creation: The Tricksters' Dance" (15:56) Branwen could not in any way be described as a trickster, and yet she/we were also invited to transform, in our relation to the storyworld, the dice, the potentialities presented.

"The game itself is a Trickster," Allen Turner explains. "In the context of the [role-playing game], we are constantly being invited to transform" (Transformative Play Initiative, 2021, 41:15).

Leaning into the trickster-ness of character and game is both interesting and generative. It allows us to sidestep the "same old narrative," which, Turner reminds us, often doesn't work:

> "For many of us, we don't have personally singular journeys. We explore and we molt like beetles, and do not just go from caterpillar to butterfly. We move and recover, we do it over and over, so many times that we lose count. Each pass brings us closer and closer to the truth of us in our expression, and we find that voice. We find the thing that makes the world take notice" (Transformative Play Initiative, 2021, 24:50).

This, I think, captures something fundamental about role-playing games, and the practice of immanence and mutuality that could be interesting to carry with us out of the game and into our everyday contexts. What would happen if we brought the spirit of constant transformation into our practice of cartography?

8.1. Iterative folds of adventuring

I love boardgames. My family and friends know I can always be persuaded to stop what I am working on for a game! Except one: I refuse, absolutely and without

exception, to play Monopoly, or anything like it. What, exactly, is different about Monopoly than about role-playing games? First of all, and most obviously, Monopoly is a game that has no collaborative potential, unless you play it with an entirely new rule set. The game mechanics try to simulate a hyper-individualized, neoliberal worldview, centering conquest through private property ownership, competition, and exploitation. A game like Monopoly is terrible to lose, and even more terrible to win; it is not merely a race to the finish, but in some insidious way, any player's positive outcome is directly tied to another's ruin.

But in role-playing games, I am able to find meaning in embodying a multiplicity of characters, including those with values *very* different from my own. I embraced playing Branwen, a bloodthirsty, paternalistic and self-righteous aristocrat that I absolutely shuddered at. I'm currently—and gleefully—playing a wizard with an obsession with his ancestry that borders on elven-supremacy. I regularly participate in mowing down scores of "enemy" creatures, despite holding some very cherished views of human and more-than-human rights, pacifism, and equal worth. In these contexts, I am able to put aside my own aversion. Playing such characters is an exercise in holding space for them and their ways of walking in the world that I find deeply problematic. There is a stillness and a suspension, an investigation. It is an exploration of where this worldview would take me; how the storyworld, my character, myself and my community of players endlessly produce one another in a space of immanence. I hold these terrible characters close to my heart.

I think what makes playing Monopoly a completely different experience is that it brings a horrible, claustrophobic sense of *repetition*. The outcome is predetermined and inescapable. Each horrible trip around the board increases the inevitable march through increasing inequality. You know where it ends: someone has all the valuable property and a lot of wealth, and one by one, the other players are crushed under the wheels of this machine of progress. You may not know who that will be, but you do know this path. It is the unfamiliar becoming more and more dreadfully familiar; each iteration becomes more and more determined and simplistic, rather than opening up to new potentialities. There is definitely no space for "What the fuck?" or "Why not?" in Monopoly, other than rejecting the whole premise.

At first glance, role-playing may also seem to be a practice of repetition. We play on a regular schedule, we enter and re-enter the same story with the same character, and with the same group of players, sometimes for years! What is so different from a game of Monopoly?

We can watch—and participate—as the ever unfolding, collaborative narrative shapes our characters and ourselves, even as we shape them.

I was in the middle of looking over the transcripts from a ten-session D&D therapy group I had participated in as a player and researcher when I first began to consider the elements of rigid structure and utter unpredictability that make up a role-playing game system. As I skimmed the various sessions, I noticed some of the important rites of play that seemed to repeat each session. One of these, among the most important responsibilities of the DM, is what I call *The Invitation*.

The gamemaster, or lead storyteller, guides the players, setting the stage and linking to the mood from the previous week. This is what allows players to sink back into the story-world, to become something more than a group of people sitting around a table at a game store, or in someone's basement. Suddenly there is a whiff of mushroom grove on the breeze, a glimpse of the shadowy corpse of the giant spider and the soft rustle of worn cloth as the Underdark elves once again flicker into existence, with their bows drawn and aimed at us.

Like any magical realm, the story-world must have a point of entry and re-entry. A magic cupboard or a portal. In D&D, it's the DM's sacred duty to extend this invitation to enter and re-enter the story-world for each session. The format is different, depending on the personality of the gamemaster, the nature of the game, and, more recently, if the game is in-person or online. But this recurring ritual lies in their hands, and can either draw folks in, or not.

The Invitation contains a paradox that would delight Heraclitus and his question of whether we can ever step twice into the same river, or if the motion of water and passage of time means it—and us with it—will forever be different from one moment to the next, even as the phenomenon of "river" remains. Although the elements of ritual are repeated, and attended by the same players and characters, and the storyworld is more or less the same each time, I don't know if it can rightly be called a repetition. The

story-world has and is transformed each time the players step into it. It is the eternal return (Deleuze, 1994), a gesture repeated, always and never the same, and ever unfolding.

Are we D&D players perhaps united in a love of the repetition *and* the unrepeatable, in the same gesture? The game-world is made up of rules and rituals that provide the backdrop for the emergent unexpected, moments of the euphoric leap into the unknown. Is it not the repetition, but the promise of transformation, of becoming something new, the lack of resolution and determination, that brings us back to the table week after week? There seems to be a subtle but profound difference between *repetition* and *iteration*. Perhaps the iterative form of role-playing games is important to their trickster-ness, and their endless promise of transformation and becoming?

Perhaps we need to consider, as Deleuze suggests, another ontology of individuation and distinctness. What happens if we imagine—and plan—not for repetition, as a repeated chain of isolated events or actions, one following the other, but instead connected and continuous flow of iterations? Each iteration layers onto and within the others, always increasing in complexity; notions of linear time, and trajectories of progress might be interrupted. Specific, defined, predetermined goals dissipate in favor of potentialities, the course of which is unknowable, and which becomes in process.

"Processes of individuation," writes mathematics education professor Elizabeth de Freitas (thinking with Deleuze and Leibniz) "by which identities and subjects and institutions come into being, are not acts of disconnection or separation, whereby the one is cut off from the rest, but are continuous topological folds of the whole" (de Freitas, 2016a, p. 5).

It's interesting to watch the different iterations of characters form and reform relationships throughout and across role-playing games, through the "continuous topological folds" of the multiverse, as it weaves itself through our real-life communities. In the campaign we started after Branwen and her companions retired, the player group decided to start as a group of seasoned adventurers who already knew one another, since that felt more natural for us as players. We've only ever known each other through the game, and our characters; still, it felt false to start with brand-new characters,

brought together by chance, and outside of existing relationships. Indeed, there are echoes of our old party in the current storyworld, resonances that add to the complexity of our layered relationships.

A living cartographic practice of such a role-playing game community allows us to see what might emerge when such transformation becomes explicit, and indeed expected. Role-playing games are a space where the in-game responsibility of player/characters to one another is to make room and support assertions of identity (Simpson, 2017), again and again and again. Different iterations of a character, player, of storyworld.

In contrast, an intervention mindset encourages us to lead—or force—an individual down a known path on a well-worn map. This path leads out of the forest, and on to familiar places: a job, a skill, or certain other markers of independence from family and community support. It leads, of necessity, to a place with some specific and predetermined sense of contribution and consumption in our society. This is a linear, progress based trajectory: the "hero's journey." There is not much room for "What the fuck?" or "Why not?" in an interventionist framework. But what might happen if there were? And how might that happen?

"[M]athematics is a rich and diverse field of disparate practices, each entailing radically different forms of calculation," writes Elizabeth de Freitas (2016b). "Some of these practices are taken up in mainstream quantitative methods, and some are not." The social science paradigms of quantitative methodologies, centered on repetition, replication, individuation, are perhaps part of what leads us down this path when we think of interventions. It is linear. The data in social science research can be conceptualized as a normal curve, or as a distribution around a linear "normal." What happens if we rethink with a very different conceptual end?

As de Freitas also reminds us, "different mathematical practices are aligned with different ontologies, and therefore it matters what kind of mathematics we bring to bear in social theory" (p. 462). What if one brings in the sort of fractal (Maier et al., 2020) conception proposed by Remi Yergeau and other autistic, trans, and neuroqueer advocates?

What does it mean to take an oath of peace as a fighter? To resist or refuse the expectations of those around us who are counting on us to uphold the group's collective function in some way? Does it transform the fabric of the multiverse? For Branwen, and me, it is a space of fun. There's nothing more "real" than that at stake. But if our companions can make space for different iterations of our characters in a role-playing community, with the storyworld ever increasing in complexity, it might be worth taking note of, and thinking about why and how.

Let's remove this discussion from the back rooms of game shops, or basement hideouts, and out onto a well-trodden path. What might happen if I look at the same trail, not with an expectation of sameness and familiarity, but as a series of iterations, increasing in complexity? What if we are attentive to the ways in which this "sameness" is not at all the same? What if it is not repetition we are after, but iteration?

What might we learn from ferns?

8.2. A wilderness interlude

I'm walking this morning on a familiar trail, one of my favourites. It's a bright, gorgeous fall day. There was frost on the ground this morning that the early sun melted into tiny, sparkling droplets that adorn the ferns. I am surrounded by the sharp scents of decomposing foliage and autumn fungi helpfully devouring everything they encounter. I usually relish the solitude of this path, and the expectation that I will meet very few other people, but plenty of slugs, birds, ferns and fungi.

My feet carry me away from traffic sounds, but the long exhale that usually brings is clouded by some mixed feelings. Today, the path that I've walked so many times before is somehow not quite the same. I cross a newly awakened stream, full of October rain, and choked with fallen maple leaves of every color. The sound of rushing water is the sound of change we always live within.

Today, this trail takes me farther away from home—and from Storm—than I feel completely comfortable. Storm has spent most of the past month in hospital after a sudden and still unexplained illness. Until today, I've planned routes that never took me more than a few minutes from a trail link to a road. On this particular stretch, there are a

few kilometers between connections to the imagined safety of our automobile-based existence and expert medical attention.

I have become very aware that wandering on trails is not an innocent alternative to the digital bondage of graduate studies, and a space to do my thinking and reading with movement. Suddenly, it is also, possibly, not fulfilling my responsibilities of care. I feel a bit of panic as I imagine Storm's teacher or principal trying to reach me if something happens. Part of it is also performative: what would the school think, or the hospital, if I showed up late because of something as self-indulgent as a walk?

And yet, from another angle, moving away is actually strengthening and making visible *other* relationships of care, as it requires me to let go and allow others to be vigilant, and provide care if needed. I find I have to consciously work to re-trust the network of other caring relationships. Although such relationships are constantly in a process of being shaped and reshaped with each new encounter, we don't tend to notice. Small pebbles don't cause ripples, but a large stone like this, unexpectedly placed, causes wave patterns to shift and change in more profound ways. It feels odd, this duality of relinquishing and reaffirming relationships, like I need to adjust to the fit of a new jacket.

An unsolved health scare, in the middle of the second year of a pandemic, is a step off the map, even for a neurodivergent family! The word *autoimmune* stared up at me from the hospital discharge slip that was sent home with us; the "what," "why" and "how long" still unanswerable, to say nothing of "what the fuck?" I haven't really let myself look around from this edge yet, but I knew it was here. We are navigating the monstrous and mysterious, in places out of place and time out of time. This iteration of a very familiar trail is somehow completely different in an unexpected way, and I feel wildness gathering around me as I walk.

Perhaps wildness is everywhere, and relation is everywhere? The idea of wild space, of "wilderness" is extremely colonial; it has a troubled and violent past of forced removal, settlement, and erases the presence and claims of Indigenous peoples (Cronon, 1995; Simpson, 2017; Tuck et al., 2014). The idea of charted and uncharted territories, claimed, unclaimed, and claimable land, are part of colonial, binary structures that frame the way we describe the view from where we're at. There is no untouched

wilderness, no place separated from our humanness, no place that isn't part of a set of complex relationships. The patch of weeds growing out of the sidewalk is just as wild as the deepest part of the forest; wildness, familiarity, unfamiliarity, and relationality change and transform through many iterations of our experience and our stories. This is not the wildness of place, of the colonial challenge, waiting to be domesticated by a pioneer spirit. The wildness I feel here this morning is not forest, path, birds, and water, but what I bring with me in my experience of them. Today I wear wildness like a cloak.

I'm rereading Aaron Kuntz's (2019) book *Qualitative Inquiry, Cartography and the Promise of Material Change*. It feels like part of the conversation with myself and my longing to be near my child in a moment of uncertainty. I re-explore with Kuntz, rolling around the ideas of cartography as a practice that takes us into the spaces of the not-yet-known. "The important artistry of cartographic work," Kuntz writes, is that it "seeks to map out spaces where what-was meets what-might-yet-be" (p. 85). This is a space of what-might-yet-be. We don't know if Storm is done with hospitals and blood tests, or if chronic illness might now be a companion in our lives, and today I'm aware of new ways in which that will need to be a part of our becoming-together relations.

Iteration isn't repetition. It's a becoming of the familiar-unfamiliar. On my walk today, a new perspective, a new concern, has made the familiar unfamiliar. I rush where I might usually linger, on the part of the trail farthest from the connectors to human settlements, and my tension releases as I approach a road where I know a car could pick me up as needed.

At the same time, there is familiarity in this path; there are resonances here that feel like old friends. Time sucks at me again, a golden pool, honey-like and viscous, and the wildness falls into a shape I recognize from when Ash was little. Within the storyworld of Ash and autism and family is a moment of realization, sometime when Ash was in the process of being diagnosed, that I would need to be a caregiver in a different way than what I had been imagining. Neurodiversity was a companion, a way of living together. There was no way of knowing if there might be a time when intensive attention was not called for, and it wouldn't do for me to run out of energy and ideas while there was still a need. Intensity, longevity, pace, supplies were all going to need to be adjusted. The trail we were on was a through-hike, not a sprint.

Eurocentric healthcare, which finds its most grotesque caricature in the United States, is yet another system, like our research and educational constructions, that is not calibrated for disability and chronic illness (Douthat, 2021). (Indeed, I might suggest that concepts like "chronic illness" and "disability" arise as a product of this atomized and linear framework of thinking about human wellness and flourishing.) In a conversation on the Ezra Klein Show podcast, journalists Ross Douthat and Megan O'Rourke discuss their work and personal experiences with chronic illnesses, and what that reveals about the US healthcare system. Black-and-white, binary thinking about "health" and "illness," along with a highly specialized and siloed medical establishment, where further binary distinctions between "patient" and "expert" are reinforced, characterize a context in which the only possibility is a linear progression of illness that follows a story arc of the "hero's journey." The possible course of illness, unwellness, pathologized conditions, must unfold within very narrow parameters within such a system.

"We don't have a popular cultural narrative of chronic illness," Megan O'Rourke tells us in the podcast. "No one wants to listen to that.… It's a hard, chaotic story to hear" (Douthat, 2021). Douthat and O'Rourke critique the "war model" of medical thinking: that our bodies are attacked by a pathogen, which is identified by experts, and then we receive treatment that helps us "fight off" the pathogen—and that the treatments are going to work the same for every body, because this medical warfare is scientifically driven, and therefore must be generalizable and knowable. Anyone who has looked at a list of symptoms of chronic, autoimmune conditions, or of neurodevelopmental disabilities, that they or a loved one have been designated as having, can tell you that they are paradoxically both overly comprehensive and miserably incomplete in describing the individual case.

It is this approach that also gives rise to the need to "treat" certain ways of being in the world. The possibility of being asked to live indefinitely in a state of uncertainty and unpredictability is unsettling to the point of impossibility for someone conditioned within the framework of health / normality vs illness / aberration. For those of us who dance in this grey, who flourish in the indeterminate, the prospect of a life at odds with the rigid system is what seems most exhausting. O'Rourke and Douthat also bring up the problematic of health as an individual rather than a collective responsibility. In such a system of care, we "celebrat[e] those individuals who overcome, while not looking at the

structural and systemic reasons that others are not overcoming and are sick in the first place" (Douthat, 2021).

There is often quite a bit of privilege present to being one of those who "overcomes." There are global, racial, and class inequalities that determine who has access, who is taken seriously and listened to, who has the resources and possibility to "perform at lower levels" and still keep their jobs and maintain their lives. In the podcast, the participants also reflect on what it meant for their treatment to have been trained for research as journalists, and have the time to find information independently, and to learn to speak in the vernacular of the medical professionals. It is vital, O'Rourke tells us, to present oneself as "reasonable" and believable patient, so one's experiences are listened to and taken seriously instead of discounted. Presenting as "reasonable" is, as they note, also strongly influenced by racialized and class background, gender, and language fluency, among many other factors.

This has been the case with Ash, and in my experiences and research with neurodiversity more generally. There is generally uneven access to autism services and supports, and social and cultural factors can even shape which diagnostic label "differentness" is given in certain individuals and communities. It is widely recognized that designations and services, including the opportunity to get assessed, or to choose not to, and opportunities to leverage its influence, often fall along gendered, racialized and class lines (Durkin et al., 2017; Hegelund et al., 2019; Kelly et al., 2019; Thomas et al., 2012). The specialized school we were lucky enough to attend in Denmark was populated by those families with enough cultural and educational resources to advocate for access. In an IEP meeting not long ago, I was told that when things might arise, it is great to know that Ash has a lot of resources and support at home. Since I have never met the individual I was talking to, I assume must be referring to my ability to formulate myself well on paper, in ways that are found to be culturally intelligible, and to speak authoritatively on the telephone. Basically, I suspect it might be because I sound White, middle class, and well-educated.

During the field study for my master's thesis in a specialized vocational education program, one of the teachers, who also himself had an autism diagnosis, described the students that attended their classes. This was before 2013, when the diagnosis of Asperger's Syndrome was eliminated from the DSM and ICD. "The students in our

program are labelled 'autistic,' but they're actually no different from the students as at the 'Aspie' secondary school nearby," he told me with an impish grin. "The parents of our youth are just working class rather than academics." Historical and cultural inequalities, class, racialized, and gendered identities and affiliations, all are part of the thick soup of a system we'd desperately like to believe is neutrally scientific.

The wilderness deepens and spreads out around me, stretching as far as the eye can see.

Kuntz' words fill my earphone, and remind me where I am, "[T]he cartographer dwells within the openness of the present and can only do so by placing a contingency on the past" (Kuntz, 2019, p. 85). I try to orient myself within this new way of looking at the landscape around me. I need to adjust my gaze from wildernesses, and see the contours of what we *think* we know. It might be good to learn through the realizations Kelly O'Rourke describes in the podcast. First of all, it can be very helpful to realize when one is "at the edge of the map" of medical knowledge. In fact, there may not be an answer out there, or at least not one that we recognize. I think it's interesting that O'Rourke visualizes the experience as teetering on the "edge of the map," as a sort of contrast to the discourse of conquering the "frontiers" of medical knowledge that is often used to describe this liminal space.

The second point was that it can be important to (re)define what it means to be "well" (Douthat, 2021), outside of the medical binary. This is probably part of the resonance that lands chronic illness within the camp of disability in the imaginary of some scholars, advocates, and organizations, or at least finds points of commonality and political alignments. The hero's journey will not serve us here. From this perspective, the "difference" we experience is an adjustment in a way of living, not a condition that must be cured and moved on from.

If we let them, the messiness of living with chronic illness or disability might disrupt the sense of mapped space, of linear time, of developmental or "cure" trajectories, and the expectation of a predictable arc of recovery or treatment. Perhaps we should quietly unravel the expectation of an intervention taking an individual somewhere in particular, within a carefully planned and mapped landscape of illness, wellness, disability, and normality. Instead, let us knit ourselves into a cloak of

wilderness, gather it about us and step off the map, letting ourselves become part of its iterations of increasing complexity (Maier et al., 2020). Perhaps we should embrace wilderness as a place of relationality and even belonging.

What if we allow the un/familiar to emerge in a different ways than we expect? Healthcare, interventions, education, want to embrace the hero's journey. What if, instead, we try to imagine where movement and co-creation might bring us? What could a developmental trajectory look like, if it is not a trajectory at all? What might become of "wellness," "illness," "disability" when we stop trying to distinguish wilderness from mapped space? How might we think about growth as transformation, when linear conceptions of time and clear goals for learning are removed?

What happens if we use the idea of transformation to transform the model, and embrace the complexity that emerges through iterative folding and unfolding rather than an idea of "progress?" What happens if we dance ourselves an entirely new, tricksey pathway?

8.3. Of iterations and tricksters

The field of autism has what I would consider an unhealthy focus on repetition.

Repetitive, and stereotyped behaviors, are another pillar of the autism diagnosis. The ICD describes "restricted, repetitive, and inflexible patterns of behaviour, interests or activities" (World Health Organization, 2019). According to the DSM 5, autism is only diagnosed when "the characteristic deficits of social communication are accompanied by excessively repetitive behaviors, restricted interests, and insistence on sameness" (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2016). This seems interesting in a document which has the explicit function of cataloguing and problematizing the multiplicity human diversity into certain unacceptable categories of "difference" and describing these in great detail. Is this not just an "insistence on sameness" of another sort?

It also reminds me of one preschool I visited when Ash was young, where they proudly proclaimed, "When they (the autistic youngsters) join the rest of us for lunch, you would never be able to see the difference between them and the other children!" As if that was in and of itself a marker of success. This was, perhaps unsurprisingly, also the only preschool that indicated an interest in using behavioural interventions.

Indeed, the most widespread and generally recognized methods of "breaking" autistic individuals of their routines and insistence on sameness, often require the interventionists or caregivers to outdo the neurodivergent person in rigidity. In my experience, it is seen as helpful to become even more insistent on sameness and fixated on repetition and routine than the individual you trying to intervene. In fact, many self-advocates in the neurodivergent community describe the restrictiveness, inflexibility and personal coercion involved in having been "treated" with behavioural interventions as abusive, or even a human rights violation.

For whatever reason, Ash never built unshakable routines, despite the warnings that were everywhere about parenting autistic children. There were routines of questions, and they played according to their own plan, that was often unshakeable and not always easy to know how to join. Ash spent hours lying on the floor, watching the wheels spin on the wooden train set as it rolled past. They also loved being in the red twin stroller. We intentionally bought one that was strong enough to carry two children up to a very solid size, so there would never be a rush to leave it. Ash also happily sheltered in the cargo bike, perched on the small bench seat with Storm and cocooned by the canopy of the rain cover. We could go most anywhere in those vehicles. For us, the routine was less about the route we had to take and more about the comfort of people and things that were familiar. Ash seemed comfortable not knowing where we were going, as long as wherever we went, there would be the safety of companions they could trust.

I decided early on never to use intensive behavioural approaches in our household. Even so, I felt encouraged, even pressured, to strictly structure and regulate, as the predominant paradigms of understanding autism recommend. Ash may not have developed rigid and unshakeable routines, but I know I did!

Ash hated the pictograms and charts that are a staple of specialized preschool classrooms. We were strongly encouraged to build such an environment around us as well. "TEACCH inspired" (UNC School of Medicine, n.d.) was how the leader of the preschool described the classroom, because apparently it was difficult to get Danish parents and caregivers to sign on and commit themselves fully to a model in the same way that parents in the US classrooms they had visited and learned about it. TEACCH emphasizes adapting the environment to meet the needs of the individual, which seems

at first glance to be a good place to start. Predictability, structure and adapted activities are the cornerstone, and that is where things begin to be a bit rigid.

TEACCH encourages professionals and caregivers / families to create supportive environments for people through the use of "structure" in various ways, including structuring the space, and creating schedules. This should be communicated with visual cues that support the intentions and wishes of the teacher, parent / caregiver or other authority. A structured space means having a designated area for certain activities, often coded with colors or symbols, and generally free of other distractions. The schedule of each day, or each activity, is planned, and this plan is communicated to the neurodivergent person in some sort of tangible manner. Often, this is through the use of small, removeable pictogram symbols or photographs / drawings that are arranged in order from left to right, or top to bottom. One metaphor used is that of plants growing in a garden, which requires careful planning and arrangement, as well as supports for some of the plants (*Structured Teaching by TEACCH Staff*, n.d.).

"Structure, repetition, and predictability," I was told again and again by the preschool staff, and later at Ash's specialized school. And, indeed, for us a daily routine of very closely timed bedtime, mealtimes, etc. were extremely important. Ash was always resistant to any outward signs of this, though, and often complained about charts.

"Push chart," Ash would say, push being the way to indicate something should be kept far away. With time, Ash was able to specify their objections more clearly. They complained about the appearance of the drawings on the pictograms ("They don't have any faces, and they look weird."), as well as the irritation of having someone else structure the day for them. Having a schedule at home did not create a secure environment where they could relax, because they knew what to expect. This seemed at odds with the reports of the professionals and some of the other families we met, so I resolved to keep on trying.

Instead, when I half-heartedly tried to implement them as a sort of informative piece about what to expect for days when there was no preschool, Ash eventually got me to agree that we would *never, ever have a schedule in the weekend*.

The staff never did agree to allowing unstructured time; the closest they could come was to add a "choice" symbol to the schedule, where Ash could determine which toy they would use for one of the timeslots, rather than referring to the schedule to find out what to play with. It was a nature-based preschool, and they always spent a great deal of time outside in the large playground, and in the rambling park adjacent to it, so the less structured outdoor time was always a highlight of their day. It was therefore with some surprise that I discovered the vocational program at my field study site didn't subscribe to much of this!

"No," I was told. "We don't have a schedule or standardized expectations for any student. We do what works from case to case, in a very personalized way."

"And they don't have trouble understanding that?" I asked. I had been told in no uncertain terms that the kids wouldn't understand making exceptions for others; everyone had to have a schedule, and they needed to look quite similar.

"Don't you have a model?" I insisted. "What about the structure and predictability?" I was, by this time, well-trained in the ways of autistic programming. No and no. It seemed that attention, flexibility and constant readjustment was what they found worked best.

After a close reading of the principles of TEACCH, and conversations with other professionals, I am not convinced that this is the only interpretation of structure and predictability. I don't know that a schedule must be created by the professional and followed by the individual, in effect limiting their lives and their abilities to become flexible, responsive, and collaborative humans. Instead, it seems to me that the central idea is to communicate information using a variety of media, not just spontaneous verbal instruction. It means that an environment should have clear clues about the possibilities of what can happen in that space, and there should be some sort of system and level of continuity in the way things are communicated and, hopefully, learned. It does not require that someone else *must* make a schedule that the neurodivergent individual *must* follow, but should be used to improve communication. Rigidity is something that happens in the way we use such tools.

"[When] it comes to working with vulnerable people," writes Psychologist Andrew McDonnell (2019), the founder of the Low Arousal approach to care work, "it is not the

method that is the most important factor, but the individuals who apply it" (p. 20). The article is titled "The recovering behaviourist" and chronicles McDonnell's path from behavioural psychologist to his present preoccupation with having relationship and compassion in focus, and working with professionals to develop non-coercive and non-violent practices.

As a young child, Ash was utterly uninterested in certain activities, and nearly impossible to coerce into paying any attention to them. That was fine for the most part, but some were things that needed to be done, such as putting on clothes and eating meals. The way that Ash was dressed until age four or five was that I would join whatever activity they were doing and remove and then replace clothing one limb at a time, in a way that interrupted the flow of play as little as possible. Anything else caused resistance, screaming, and would require physical coercion, or punishment, which I wasn't willing to do. And yet, Ash undeniably needed to learn the skill of getting dressed!

I decided to follow the advice of the TEACCH-trained professionals, and got a hold of a few identical plastic boxes. I created a visual schedule with each step of getting dressed, and coordinated it to each of the boxes with a color and a piece of clothing.

"Ash," I said enthusiastically, the day that the system was ready. "Let's get dressed! Here is a chart so you can remember the steps." I proudly pulled out the boxes and the visual support chart, ready to describe the system. Ash threw themself backwards onto the floor and screamed.

"Dumb chart!" they insisted. There was a lot more glaring and screaming, as I tried to convince my child. Convince them not that getting dressed was a useful activity, but that the boxes and chart were useful to the process. The many parenting guides and books on autism looked on approvingly. It was natural for an autistic child to resist a new way of doing something. I just needed to persist, and success would be ours! I don't remember exactly how things ended that day, but over the next week or so, I did eventually strongarm Ash into some level of cooperation with the box system, although I don't think we ever progressed much past socks. I'm pretty sure any self-dressing that happened was intended to spite the boxes and colour-coded pictogram chart, rather than because of it's helpful support. It was me who moved the symbol from box to chart

when a step was completed, while the erstwhile subject of my intervention pointedly ignored or resisted them. All in all, the smart system of supports seemed to make the process of getting dressed much longer, more difficult, and significantly less pleasant than ever before!

We finally reached to a truce of sorts, where I promised not to use the system, if they would agree to be helpful with putting clothes on. Ash was willing to try and participate in dressing, without the boxes.

I do clearly remember the day, not long after, that I finally threw the schedule out.

"Ash, it's time to get dressed. Let's get your shirt off." Ash ignored me and continued working on their block construction. It was, admittedly, much more interesting than putting on clothes.

"Ash," I repeated, "Time to get dressed." At that age, it usually took four or five tries to get their attention. I used a touch on the shoulder to support my request.

"Ash, can you help me take your shirt off?" Ash continued to ignore my voice. Once again, I felt the collective gaze of those mountains of parenting books, this time looking on with distinct disappointment. I felt guilt seeping in. Why wasn't I willing to try harder? What kind of "autism parent" was I, anyway, not even willing to put in the time and energy to create a structured environment? Several of our neurodivergent acquaintances had implemented them, and the walls of their homes were covered in charts, and shelving systems full of color-coded boxes. They insisted it made worlds of difference for their children.

Would all the hard work of the professionals at the preschool be for nothing? Didn't I need to put the systems they had taught my child into practice at home? At least the chart and bins had the advantage of grabbing Ash's attention, more than my conversational tone! I could feel the agreement I had made with my child dissolving into insecurity. Or was it maybe desperation? In any case, I needed to take charge here. *Predictability, structure, repetition*. Wasn't this what that meant? I straightened my spine.

"Ash!" I commanded. "Stop for a minute. You need to get dressed!" My raised voice elicited a glance.

Ash!" I repeated, holding a pile of clothes out at eye level. The building project continued. Insecurity dissolved into irritated resolve. I could do this! I stepped out of the room and grabbed the baskets and the cheerful chart, which were nestled within one another, waiting. After all, they were only tentatively taken out of commission, and still close at hand and ready to be put to work. I stuck my head back into the bedroom and brandished the plastic bins at them.

"Ash, if you don't start getting dressed right now, I'm going to get out the chart!"

That was when I finally heard the absurdity of what I was saying. I lay the plastic baskets back down and took a few deep breaths. Whatever else may be the case, I was pretty sure this was not the way the chart was meant to be used! I straightened my spine a second time—this one felt harder—and stared down the autism parenting guides and TEACCH manuals crowding around. *This is not for us. I'm not suited to these charts and bins.*

I made a new plan, figuring out how we could work in collaboration to learn something that so clearly seemed irrelevant to Ash. We found a new way to compromise, by breaking the task down into a "one limb at a time" approach that took several months, but almost no resistance. Ash was not ready to use the time it took to learn a full routine of getting dressed. They were, however, willing to pause in their investigation of more interesting things in the world long enough to figure out how to put their head through the top of a shirt, when I promised that was all that needed attention. Within a couple of weeks or so, this had become an automatic gesture, and we moved on, adding one arm. And so on.

Iteration

In a carefully curated way, role-playing games allow us the same opportunity, to experience ourselves, one another, and the world we inhabit, as iterations and layers. It is a different mathematical configuration, requiring us to let go of the linear equation, the normal curve, the isolating of variables. Each iteration of a storyworld, from session to session, with the same character or with a different one brings new layers of insight, new understandings of the world we're co-creating and the relationships that are the true substance of the world.

The world itself will often be equally malleable. When asked to tell about their best experiences with role-playing games, this is what came up for my participants time and again. The unexpected, the surprising; the decision or event that creates a new iteration of the storyworld, and relationships of increasing complexity.

Nat described some of her favorite gaming groups through several decades of playing role-playing games, across many different genres and game systems. D&D is also a favourite of hers.

"We were trying to sneak into a cave full of goblins," Nat recalls, "And one guy said, 'I'm gonna disguise myself as a hobgoblin, convince the guards that they need to go inside and then I'm going to follow them.' Well, when that happened. And it worked! As he was following them, we were sneaking behind him, and we immediately hit complete darkness. And only one of us has dark vision.

"But then a bunch of wolves that were chained up in a side passage noticed us and started barking at us, which pulled the attention of the goblins, who started attacking. So we started attacking them back. And *then*, our Ranger steps up, and says,

"'Puppies! Hello buddies! Who's a good boy? Who's a good boy?' I'm like, 'I am shooting arrows for our lives here!'" I laugh along, recalling similar situations in games I have run.

"Animal Handling?" I guess.

"Yes. She rolled Animal Handling and calmed them down and got them to stop snarling at us. It was like, *oh my god, I love this*!" Nat finishes, voice breathless with delight. The storyworld has shifted and reconfigured, enemies have become allies Nat recalls that the Ranger character/player is also transformed in the encounter. From then, her tactic is to always try to befriend any animals they encounter; the party now has a direwolf that trails along behind them, living off their scraps.

We transform our storyworlds as we are transformed, iteratively, in a process of mutuality, weaving in and out of the wildness that we bring with us in discovery and rediscovery of ourselves and all of our relations.

Chapter 9.

The Debrief: Endlessly Becoming Orc

"We become-with each other or not at all."

– Donna Haraway (2016), *Staying with the Trouble*, p. 4

"Truth is a matter of imagination."

– Ursula K. Le Guin (1979), The Left Hand of Darkness, Introduction

"To whom do we listen? The autistic or the nonautistic? Can there ever really be an in-between? What of my shit? What of my unhuggable body? What of me? What of autos, the self that so consumes the presumably autistic? Where the fuck are we?"

--Remi Yergeau (2018), *Authoring Autism*, p. 4

Among the many examples of role-playing groups, conferences, and scholarship I have encountered there is one point upon which participants and organizers alike seem to be in agreement: the most important elements of play are the pre-game and the debrief, particularly if there is a goal of transformation. With larping especially, you must properly prepare in order for things to go well, and in order to keep yourself and others safe in the game. The after-play conversation, where you can process your experience, together, is equally significant, especially to meaning-making.

While there is less focus on this aspect in tabletop games, it is still important. A good "Session zero" is vital for character and world cohesion, game play, and supporting collaboration. This seems particularly the case when playing a game with sensitive content, or with a specific goal of transformation. I think it is central to the process of the becoming-new-together, and of wyrding/wyrlding our comfortably (for some of us) normative systems and practices.

In the conclusion, or debrief, of this thesis I will turn my attention to one final layer of diffraction. In this chapter, I would like to invite you back out into the light. We will probably blink a bit, as we emerge from the dim rooms of the dungeon crawl. If you shield your eyes with your hand, you can probably still see the edges of the forest. With the experience still fresh, let's consider, together, how it might nudge us toward transforming our teaching practices.

9.1. The Debrief

A lot of this thesis has circled around experiences as a parent/caregiver, and a role-playing game participant and leader, a researcher and student, and occasionally an advocate. The piece of my own experience that has had less airtime is my work as a postsecondary teacher. For the past ten years, I have spent most of the time working with postsecondary students, in one capacity or another. Of course, postsecondary students are just as much a multiplicity of humans as any other group, and an important part of my teaching is concerned with the many ways in which continuing education is built on a premise of neurotypicality, and is a space of exclusion and injustice for those that are "atypical." Just as my parenting and research are always, continuously, often in uncomfortable ways, in a process of becoming-in-relation, so is my teaching.

Somewhere along my path of becoming-role-player—probably in a role-playing blog or social media group—I read a playful truism that stuck with me:

"There's always at least one player at the table who is having identity issues. If you can't figure out who it is, that probably means it's you."

That always brings a laugh if I mention it to another role-player, likely because it seems eerily accurate. Role-playing games are, for me, a space where I continue to work through not only personal identity issues, but also re/think the way I embody teaching, learning, and being-with my students, colleagues and collaborators as a postsecondary educator. The more I learn about and experience different game systems and mechanics, the more I rethink my syllabus and classroom structures. Each time I play, I embody another perspective, which helps me consider the many and varied ways to approach any situation, conversation, relationship. When I am a gamemaster, I am forced to find new ways to encourage participation, and practice "holding lightly to my

own ideas" with less fear. All of these experiences continue to profoundly impact the way I embody the role of instructor and classroom advocate.

At the role-playing table, if you can't figure out who is having identity issues, it is probably you. I wonder if our education systems might be a better place if, as teachers, we were *always that person*? How can we remain unsettled and open, and embody a teaching practice of wyrlding the institution, along with our students, colleagues, and collaborators?

I began my teaching with courses on Nordic Pedagogy for students who were spending a semester or year in Copenhagen in a study abroad program. I had the dubious honour of teaching a class with the highly problematic title of "Children with Special Needs." My first self-appointed task was to redirect the syllabus of the course from a focus on "special education" to a curriculum on disability as a social and political category. The first and most natural way I found to do this was to make changes to the content. If I could just give my students the "right" texts about neurodiversity, disability, show them the right TED Talks by folks with disabilities, they might question their own roles as future teachers, I was convinced.

I suppose the first real chink in this smug plan came the following summer, when I taught the class in a shortened and intensive timeline. There was a student in the class who needed some significant accommodations. To my shame, it was the first time I had *truly* considered what it meant that the structures of our institution—including my own teaching—were quite inaccessible. For the student, the challenges had started long before they entered our classroom, when the student had been told by their home university that they would not be able to participate in a study abroad program. They had mobilized considerable personal resources, and were able to advocate to change that decision. Listening to this story, I wondered how many had been turned away before, due to disability. I hope their struggle has meant more lasting change, opening the door just a bit for others as well!

Most noteworthy for me was our own classroom community. A whole group of students who had intentionally chosen a class on disability because they were interested in "inclusive education" and "helping" folks with disabilities, went out of their way to avoid

their disabled classmate. It was as if their career goals and emerging professional identity were utterly at odds with their actions and attitude on the ground, with a peer.

I tried hard not to feel enraged. "This is *my experience*," I imagined them thinking. "I deserve to have it on my own able-bodied terms. I'm not going to compromise my summer abroad. This might be my only chance to see Europe."

At the same time, I was painfully aware of the hypocrisy of my "progressive" outrage. Through a fortunate accident of fate, I had become a close family member to a neurodivergent person, but before that happened, I would likely have behaved in much the same way. It is the unhappy truth that our institutions, our lives, our relationships, are shaped as if disability and chronic illness is atypical. It is the realm of someone else, somewhere else, and not a companion with which we are already, always, in relation. Being a passive bystander, looking the other way, is not a neutral state, but an active choice with consequences for others, each time we take that action during our turn in the round.

Just as a role-playing game breathes life into certain ways of being together, it seems the emergent space in the classroom might be a potentiality where we could learn this, *along with our students.* If we let them teach us.

I am trying to learn, slowly and imperfectly, and to be frank, mostly through my experiences as a parent. Those of us who find our home in education have often sought out the role of teacher because it is a place we feel comfortable and happy. It is a place where we know, in and out, what success looks like, and how to identify and define failure. We know what an assignment should look like, and we're not in doubt of how to assess their quality and worth. We are so often the very same students we complain about as teachers, those who are afraid to take a risk and do something outside of the box, those who are focused on grades and perfection within the normative academic expectations, and those we ultimately reward for displaying skills and ideas similar to our own.

Research is porous. There's no way I could have gone down to this rambling research pathway, for five years in a doctoral program, and unofficially for much longer before that, without every aspect of my life being affected. In the words of the great

Afrofuturist author Octavia Butler (1993), "All that you touch, you change. All that you change, changes you."

My inquiry, including writing this thesis, has helped me along the path to recognize and unlearn some of the impulses that come from being part of a schooling system where I have been consistently rewarded for performing "excellence." I am deeply aware of the uncomfortable irony of writing this in a *doctoral thesis*, but I also think that is the ironic place where we need to linger, to try to do better. Instead of identifying rigor, excellence, individual value, it seems it might be more relevant to focus on the question of why some students never seem to shine, and on identifying the ways in which labelling folks as categorically atypical continues to relieve us of the imperative of collaboratively re/wyrlding our institutions and communities into spaces of mutual becomings.

Collaborative territoriality: "Challenge them so they can shine"

This thesis has mostly described role-playing games through the lens of Dungeons & Dragons (D&D), the iconic (and problematic), high-fantasy world where the games, and many players, started. I think I learned most about the bigger scope of role-playing games from a conversation with a childhood friend I got in touch with during my research. I remembered that Vince had started playing D&D way back when we were still in primary school together, long before it was cool.

"I got interested before you did, I think," Vince said with a laugh as we started our conversation.

"I think it was more fringe when we were younger," they speculate. I hedge, not wanting to admit that, yes, I was probably too concerned for my none-too-robust reputation back then to get involved, even though I spent plenty of time enjoying other fringe activities. But, looking back, I'm sure they are right, which is a shame. I would have loved it.

Talking to Vince is like a whirlwind of names, stories, and jargon, and I am surprised at how much of it I don't understand or have never heard before! It is truly an eye-opening experience, like when you have learned a song on a new instrument, but then go to a concert with a master musician and realize the vastness of what you didn't

even know you didn't know. Revisiting our conversation again now, as I write, reminds me of what a generative place that is in which to dwell. We long to be expert, to be competent, comfortable, certain. I think we need to resist that urge, because the place of learning and growing is not that place—it is instead a place of doubt and uncertainty, where you have to be willing to stick your neck out and try to do better.

In addition to feeling humbled, I also notice that Vince picks up several themes that *have* become familiar to me, through my own role-playing practice, and conversations with participants. They describe the work of the DM:

"It's like you plan a little bit, and what will happen is nothing like you plan, but it's still fun. I think that's something that some people miss sometimes," Vince told me. "They think a successful adventure is, you did goal A, goal B, goal C, and then at the end, you get this huge weapon or shield or something. And it just, to me, kind of loses the aspect of 'Hey, this was an entertaining thing that we did that made our characters special.'"

They had previously experienced players getting angry because their character died in a game they had DM'd. The death had happened because of decisions the players had made, and which, at the time, seemed to Vince to be the consequences of a game system that had "naturally" produced that outcome. Vince could have left it at that; after all, they had just been following the rules printed in the system. Instead, after all their years of expertise and experience, they were still, intentionally, learning to be a better DM. At the moment, they were working through some material on another system and had learned some great tips.

"You want to do what you can to keep the characters, because they *are* the heroes of the story," Vince told me. "You do want to accentuate that. But at the same time, you want to challenge them so that they can actually shine, right?" That seems like a kind of balance I hope one day to find in a classroom. How might we create opportunities for heroics, and challenges that let our students—all of them—actually shine? I don't think there's any one good answer, and certainly we shouldn't turn our classrooms into role-playing games. But what might we take with us, from the learning of a world-weary DM?

Diffractive propositions: a note about binaries

Along the path to this thesis, I sent an early copy of a chapter to a good friend and collaborator, who is a support worker for autistic adults, and a fellow Deleuze enthusiast. They asked a question that continues to haunt my revision process: In an attempt to shed light on the problematics of pathologization, categorization, and "differenting" some folks, is this discussion inadvertently just setting up *new* categories, of "good" special education or intervention programming and "bad" (behavioural) programs and approaches?

"I love your dissection of Monopoly," they laughed. "And I'm *so* interested in the bit about iteration. But are you sure you're not setting up a new binary?"

Is process, immanence, neuroqueering, being presented here as an alternative, an "instead?" In service of the explanation, rather than the demonstration, I will counter with "that is not my intention."

The aim of this exploration, as Murris and Bozalek (2019a) encourage with diffractive practices, is to "engage productively" (p. 2) with a set of concepts, and a path of inquiry, drawn from and around relational ontologies, including Indigenous scholarship, posthumanist and new materialist inquiry, role-playing games and scholarship, and neurodivergent / autistic scholarship. My hope is to dwell, in all playful seriousness, within the layered storyworlds of my own experiences and observations as a parent, as a role-playing game enthusiast, and also within my encounters with special education, intervention, and diagnosis, and to "trace some of the ways in which [these] ideas are entangled" (p. 2).

At times, I use stark examples as counternarratives to what I have experienced as a very strong, and in certain contexts unchallenged, view of *difference in need of intervention.* But ultimately, my hope is to offer diffractive and "affirmative readings" of the field with onto-epistemologically infused, refusal-oriented inquiry. I hope to draw y/our focus away from the "atypical" individual and toward processes of becoming-with. My goal is to invite the reader to explore with me in a project of neuroqueer wyrlding, through the entanglement of human and more-than-human participants in research, education, neurodiversity, compulsory capitalism.

This rush of methods aims to hold the space of the *irrealis* (Vannini, 2015a), the possible-but-not-yet that we need to try and to imagine, in order to settle in to the hard and dirty work of every transformation of our everyday contexts and storyworlds. An inquiry of walking and playing is intended to provoke us out of expectations of "research as usual," shifting the focus, if fleetingly, toward action, process, becoming.

Wyrlding autism, wyrlding schools

In the rest of this debrief, I will briefly revisit the four tropes of autism and neorodiverstiy that we considered while we were still deep in the dungeon: Reciprocity, Functional speech, Eye contact and gaze direction, and Repetitive and stereotyped behaviors. How do we enact collaborative become-together with our neurodivergent loved ones, and how can this help us in wyrlding projects in our schooling and education, that might trouble our unquestioned normativity and expectations around neurotypicality?

Autistic scholar Remi Yergeau (2018) describes the impact of having autism always presented through the "shitty narratives" (p. 3) asserted by parents, caregivers, experts, and advocacy groups. "What of me?" they ask. "Where the fuck are we?" (p. 4) A very good question.

Reciprocity-in-community

Perhaps the best argument I have heard for presenting radical inclusion in any postsecondary classroom is that many of our students are those who will become caregivers and parents to the coming generation of children, including those who will be identified as "atypical." As a beginner parent, I can attest to being extremely unprepared for disability. It is a harsh introduction with a steep learning curve. How can that be? I ask today. There are many of us who embody and en-mind disability. But this is a question that arises from a different point on our journey. I feel dismay for my struggles to adjust, because they were very real at the time, and because they inevitably contributed to harm for Ash, and probably others as well.

Disability shouldn't feel like a shock or a surprise. Nor should it be met as a tragedy or a problem to be fixed. In a community of mostly young adults, growing into

their professional lives, we are meeting the most intimate networks of people yet to arrive into our world, and the professionals they will meet during the process. Eva Fedor Kittay (2013) encourages us to think of reciprocity-in-connection as a foundation for a just community. As well as parents and caregivers, we need radically inclusive delivery room doctors and midwives, pediatricians and speech therapists, early childhood educators and babysitters, neighbors and aunties. I wonder how that might change the way we could become-with, holding lightly to our own ideas of who they are or might be, and welcoming the transformative potentialities they offer our storyworlds, from our very first meeting? I think typical and atypical babies alike might benefit from such a wyrlding experience.

"Functional speech" and intelligibility: understanding what our students are communicating, and knowing what to value

"Assessment is killing my students." Erin Manning's (Bozalek, Kuby, & Van Hove, 2021) words surprised me one day on my listening walk. It was a moment a little like my first encounter with Anna Tsing's rush of mushroom stories; the idea didn't so much surprise me as the suddenness of someone saying it out loud, someone encapsulating something I had been sensing for the last several years, but didn't quite have the right phrase for. I immediately shared it with one of my colleagues, part of our continuing struggle with assessment as instructors. Central to this struggle is the learning processes of teacher as well as students; I sometimes feel like assessment of my students is also killing me. Wyrlding can only be a collaborative endeavour of ongoing reciprocity and relationality.

"The problem is when we think we know in advance what has value. And where value becomes so endemic, that we don't even know that we're valuing any more. And that's … Whiteness, or neurotypicality." Manning goes on "If we want to shift the conditions of value, we have to be less sure we know what they are" (Bozalek et al., 2021, 29:30).

An environment of learning is a space where "there has to be uneasiness around not knowing what is valuable." We collaboratively imagine ourselves in classrooms where students are, in general, getting something specific out of our teaching, where they are taking some"thing" useful away, and some folks are just the wrong kind of

containers to be able to hold it properly. Or they don't have the right ways of giving it back to us in the forms we have worlded to value.

When I do focus on letting my students "choose their own quest" in my classes, there are inevitably some of them who become uncertain, and ask for specific feedback. "Do you think I learned what I should have learned in your class?" I was asked once, directly, at the end of a semester. The idea that learning could be embodied, non-standard, individualized, seems almost universally scary for my students.

Gazing obliquely at postsecondary accessibility

Responding to the call for greater diversity and openness in the postsecondary institutions, the solution is accessibility services. Here, students have to "prove" themselves disabled in specific ways, in order to earn the right to have accommodations in our classrooms. The accommodations themselves are designed to be a sort of prosthetic that will aid them in being able to be enough like the other students to manage in a classroom.

"Accommodation carries a presupposition that other ways don't exist," says Erin Manning, quoting blind-Deaf poet and disability activist John Lee Clark. Don't get me wrong, I have utmost respect for my colleagues in accessibility services, and their work is absolutely vital to forcing the heavy door of the postsecondary institution to stay ajar as far as it is.

But what if we were to ask, instead, what would need to happen to make accessibility services redundant? How might we to shift our focus, gazing obliquely, at such practices and standards? This might help us recognize how and when a context could become so rigid that its monstrous that "no … accommodations will mitigate" for its oppressive, exclusionary practices.

How might we transform them, together, to spaces where that type of exclusion was not necessary? To spaces where the worthiness, and the success, of potential students, might be expressed on different terms? How might we think about wyrlding educational spaces, in collaboration with those whose fundamental competencies and right to be in the space have been, and continue to be, questioned?

Various movements, most lately inclusive education, has tried to do this in public schooling contexts. Even there, it seems to me students and teachers continue to embody and enact storyworlds that only recognize and value certain, narrow, qualities, in the same way that speech therapy sometimes encourages us only to see "function" and communication in one specific way. And in so-called "higher education," it is still completely acceptable, and in fact expected, to exclude. The individual student is the target of the evaluating gaze; how might an off-centre, sideways look toward the structures, systems, and communities they engage with create other potentialities for becoming-together?

Embracing the mystery in our students: Iterations of increasing complexity

Disability, and I think especially neurodivergence and intellectual disability, are somehow also a shock to our systems of schooling and education. I found the following statement on the website of a prominent postsecondary institution near me, a place my own children might one day apply to attend, under accessibility services, for folks identified with "Moderate to severe intellectual disability": *No disability related accommodations will mitigate for this disability in a post-secondary academic educational environment*. This institution has not invented that particular standard; they are not particularly closed or more likely to reject certain students. It is surprising to see it written in starkly, but it is the premise on which our postsecondary education is built. It is a place where, by definition, some of us are completely excluded. We use markers like grades, IQ, assessments of functioning, standardized tests, to provide a basis of "data" upon which to make such exclusions possible. But the result is a space where certain people are allowed in, and others are not.

What if the metrics, the mathematics we used to frame conversations of quality and learning, helped us imagine processes of increasing complexity, rather than increasing simplicity? What if we saw our students learning as in iterative processes of becoming, unpredictable, unique, and a bit mysterious? What if we allowed ourselves not to fully know whether and how they had been transformed, and were okay with not being the centre of that transformation?

All in all, it still seems like a pretty "shitty narrative" we are using to guide our storyworlds about education. The DMs of our educational system are doing their level best to set up narrative storyworlds of "usefulness" (Bozalek, Kuby, & Van Hove, 2021; Manning, 2020), progress, and production. This encourages us to create backstories that include "functional" speech, empathy disturbances, and deficits in social-emotional reciprocity, and which are woven into the exclusive tapestry of the storyworlds. I would find it very discouraging to play a character with that kind of negative ability modifiers.

What does it mean to be an authority? What does it mean to be an expert, or to challenge students so they can shine? How can we, in relation with them, also challenge their experiences of learning and education, and our expectations? And do all of this while still being mindful of the ethical responsibilities of doing so in the "nonconsensual spaces" (Transformative Play Initiative, 2021b) that classrooms are, and within the overall framework of the institution they will still be part of as they leave this particular classroom community? This is a journey that, I'm afraid, will not reach an end within my career. It's easy to be discouraged, and to grab for my calculator and tally some points

But then I remember, reciprocity is a generational endeavor. We may not see or recognize the ways in which our efforts ripple outward. But that's not the point; it's wyrlding with our students, every one of them atypical, that has value.

9.2. Epilogue: What we might become-together

This thesis began with orcs, and I would also like to end it with orcs.

As if it is not already apparent, I will confess to an obsession with orcs, kenku, and other "monstrous" characters in D&D. I'm outraged and fascinated with their troubled alterity, by their problematic lineages, often related to racialized, ableist, sexist, colonial and pathologized understandings, and the ways that might trouble the way we embody our taxonomies. I'm horrified what descriptions of "orc society" or kenku origin stories reveal about out own cultural and ontological understandings. Mostly, I'm constantly inspired with their ongoing journey of collaborative transformation with/in role-playing games, and the potentialities they bring with them—potentialities both for those categorized as monsters, and for our collective storyworlds. I'm intrigued by the way "monstering" is a doing, relation, rather than a being.

I tried (unsuccessfully) to nudge Ash into orc society every single season of larp where we participated. The highpoint of role-playing camp for me personally was during the final epic battle, when the organizers asked for parent volunteers, and I was gleefully able to don full orc armour, face paint, and battle gear. I think the poorly lit photo I got someone to snap of Ash, Storm and I at the end of the session that evening, makeup smeared and sweaty, is my favorite family portrait.

The monstrous is not in the creature, itself, but in what they reveal about us, about the game, about the storyworld in which they were created, and through which their monstrousness is enacted. The monstrous characters of D&D create openings for playing entirely new potentialities into being.

D&D, and other such high-fantasy, often D&D-based, role-playing contexts are also kind of like the problematic uncle at the holiday table. They are the former-activist-artist-turned- corporate-web-designer sellout. The tenured professor telling the new hires, "Oh, we've tried that before." Should we reject this world altogether and refer players to less problematic game systems? But D&D is, for many, a sort of gateway game; it is ubiquitous, hard to avoid, and builds on materials that many people are familiar with, which gives a boost to imaginary storyworld building. It also risks reproducing the same problems as those materials offer.

High fantasy is not the only place to find problematic storyworld-building. Reading the layers of ableist language on the websites of postsecondary institutions, or looking at the smugly conclusive language of levels, quality, and standards on the website of the Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Training (Training, n.d.) gives me a similar, jarring feeling to flipping through the D&D Player's Handbook (Crawford et al., 2014).

Short of "burning it all down and starting over," which I'll admit sometimes feels tempting in both contexts, what might we do in the service of wyrlding institutions of learning, education, training? How can encounters with collaborative becoming inform the way we might approach educational structures and classroom practices? How do we continue to walk in uneasiness, teach and learn through uncertainty, endlessly practice a process of wyrlding? How do we enact a subjectivity in which we are in-this-together

(Braidotti, 2019), within contexts in which we are so clearly *not* all in this together? How do we become monstrous, and walk in ontological liminality?

Role-playing games are, as Alan Turner so beautifully points out, a sight of constant and ongoing transformation. Even such imperfect worlds as D&D still seem, somehow, to be spaces of potentiality and transformation. They are monstrous. They are tricksters.

I've had many conversations about role-playing games—including D&D—where people have described them as a key part of very important, real-life transformative journeys, in a variety of ways. I've watched it happen in others, and felt it in my own becoming-with. Several of the participants in this thesis study, including myself, found role-playing to be an important step in understanding, accepting, and living their trans- or queer identities. Others had found ways to accept different people in their lives that had been difficult to understand. Some found role-playing was a way to explore, understand, and navigate mental health challenges, such as anxiety, in therapeutic and leisure contexts. There is a rapidly growing body of work exploring role-playing games and their transformative potentialities (Bowman & Hugaas, 2021; Kemper, 2020; Transformative Play Initiative, 2021a).

Aaron Kuntz encourages researchers to make their work "monstrous" to the established research community (Kuntz, 2019). But what is that, in practice? It is in doing something that is unrecognizable and unrecognized within the boundaries and categories of the possible that new potentialities emerge. The same might hold true, in our classroom practices.

James Mendez Hodes suggests that as D&D players and DMs, we can re/imagine orcs. Sometimes this can be simple. Create orc characters that transcend stereotypes, Mendez Hodes suggests. Gamemasters can set up scenarios where orcs or orc society are nuanced and balanced. You can play your orc character, or non-player character, as "fully human." If you're a dungeon master, you can tweak bonuses to skills or abilities assigned to different races, and other monstrous beings, to make them more versatile and nuanced. You can also build stories in which orcs, or other monstrous characters, are allowed the full range of humanness.

What might be salvageable, what we might take with us from the ruins and into a wyrlding project, walking in the generative marginal spaces (Ng-Chan, 2022).

Might we even lean into the ontological liminality of monstrousness (Cohen, 2020), and rethink brutish, orcish anger as justified? Is it perhaps righteous indignation? Legitimate, instructive resistance? Recognize, honour, and encourage the possibility that monsters are not mindlessly violent, but rather smoldering with discontent, the result of lifetimes or generations of systemic and institutionalized violence, harm, and oppression.

I feel like Orcs should have the last word here:

"Orcish violence is the violence necessary for decolonization," writes Mendez Hodes.

"Orcish anger is the righteous indignation of the downtrodden and unheard.

"Orcish hatred is the hatred of systemic oppression.

"… Every orc is a person the way every human is a person. Orcs can get it wrong and go too far and fall to evil just like humans can and do. But the orc as a symbol of decontextualized violence is over. The horde is the community. The axe is the tool that breaks chains.

Orcs punch Nazis."

Reimagining our world and our everyday lives, and our shitty narratives, is perhaps not so different from collaboratively reimagining fantastic storyworlds.

Instead, what might we learn about resistance from and with orcs? What might we learn from embodying orc-ness, becoming-together with orcs, relationally wyrlding our classrooms in monstrous ways, orcing our becoming-together, and re-imagining contexts where orcs might also shine?

If "we" are truly in this together, we won't know what might emerge, or when, or if it will be recognizable. In fact, when I look around, I think we might do well to strive toward orcishness and orcish reinvention in our storyworlds. They could do with a bit of monstrous transformation, beyond our individual imagining. We can use the materials we have inherited to collaboratively play out storyworlds in new, unexpected, and

radically different ways. I know what good DM advice would be in this situation: "You can always try."

Go ahead. Roll for it.

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