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"ALIENS" SPEAKING OUT: SCIENCE FICTION BY AUTISTIC AUTHORS[1]

Abstract: This article discusses depiction of autism in science fiction based on three recent American novels written by autistic authors: Ada Hoffman's *The Outside* (2019), Kaia Sønderby's *Failure to Communicate* (2017), and Selene dePackh's *Troubleshooting* (2018). The novels are discussed in the context of debates about diversity in science fiction, depiction of disability in the genre, and disability and autism studies, particularly in reference to concepts such as authorship, self-expression, and rationality. This is followed by an in-depth analysis of the use of utopian and dystopian impulses in science fiction and tropes such as first contact as well as the specificity of autistic perspectives, particularly in Hoffman's *The Outside*. The texts propose visions of futures that include disability, specifically autism, and use the narratives of alien encounters to reflect on potential benefits of neurodivergent forms of communication and perception of the world. The article argues that the novels employ science fiction tropes to engage ideas about neurodiversity and cross-cultural communication, contributing both to inclusion of marginalized communities in science fiction and to an expansion of the genre's repertoire of cultural representations of disability.

Keywords: science fiction, autism, disability, neurodiversity, diversity in science fiction, Ada Hoffman, *The Outside*, Kaia Sønderby, *Failure to Communicate*, Selene dePackh, *Troubleshooting*

The debate about what science fiction is, who it is for, and what topics it should take on, has most recently focused on disability, as the genre has been criticized for its limited representation of this experience and insufficient inclusion of people with disabilities themselves.[2] This article discusses how issues critical for autism studies, including authorship, self-expression, and representation, are thematized in some of the latest American science fiction (sf) novels featuring autistic characters: Ada

[1] This article is a result of a research project entitled *Representation of Autism in Science Fiction* [*Wizerunek autyzmu w science fiction*] carried out at UMCS and funded by State Fund for Rehabilitation of Disabled People (PFRON). Project no. BEA/000042/BF/D.

[2] Thank you to Marta Usiekniewicz, Jędrzej Burszta, and Agnieszka Kotwasińska, for their comments and insight.

Hoffman's *The Outside* (2019), Kaia Sønderby's *Failure to Communicate* (2017), and Selene dePackh's *Troubleshooting* (2018).[3] I situate them in two cultural contexts: that of debates about diversity in science fiction, and about self-determination and agency of autistic people in disability and autism activism. As novels written by self-identified autistic authors, they contribute to a more complex representation of disability in sf, implement the calls for self-advocacy in autistic activism, and offer a new take on some well-trodden sf tropes, such as first contact narratives and the human/non-human divide. This is not to claim that the sole fact of the authors' identity makes their writings unquestionably emancipatory; after all, a minoritarian identity cannot ensure an unproblematic access to marginalized experience, due to its complexity and changeability.[4] The three authors under analysis are examples of how a minority perspective can be included in sf, but the novels also reflect the limited array of tropes about autism available in the genre and reinforced by its conventions. I begin the article with a discussion of diversity in sf, followed by a close look at the problems inherent in representation of disability, and more specifically autism, in the genre. The next section of the article engages with issues of self-advocacy and authorship, central to autism studies. I then offer an in-depth analysis of the novels, in particular Hoffman's *The Outside*, situating them in the context of sf publishing and tropes typical of the genre, including its utopian and dystopian impulses and the first contact narrative, where "otherhood" is employed to mark marginalized groups.[5] I argue that sf authored by autistic writers expands the boundaries of the genre but at the same time remains limited by its tropes, stock characters, and narratives.

Diversity in Science Fiction

As a genre employed to scrutinize the past and present through speculations about the future, science fiction is in some ways uniquely suited for engaging with political debates from a local and global perspective. It can be – and is – used to think about how the future (or futures) involving particular political outcomes can be imagined, as well as who, and on what terms, is assumed to be a part of these futures. Despite the genre's conservative roots, including legacies of racism, colonialism, and sexism, sf has become more welcoming to the ideas of social justice and voices of racial, sexual, and gender minorities.[6] The possible connection between sf as sites of (re)imagining

[3] A. Hoffman, *The Outside*, Angry Robot, Nottingham, UK 2019; K. Sønderby, *Failure to Communicate*, The Kraken Collective, Coppell, TX 2017; S. dePackh, *Troubleshooting*, Reclamation Press, Columbia, SC 2018.

[4] Cf. J. Puar, *I Would Rather Be a Cyborg than a Goddess: Intersectionality, Assemblage, and Affective Politics*, "Philosophia" 2012, Vol. 2(1), p. 59.

[5] On "otherhood" in the context of race, see I. Lavender III, *Race in American Science Fiction*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 2011.

[6] For criticism of conservative legacies of SF see e.g. I. Lavender III, *Race…*, *op. cit.*; J. Russ, *How to Suppress Women's Writing*, University of Texas Press, Austin 1983; J. Rieder, *Colonialism and the*

possible futures and social change is hinted at by Gloria Anzaldúa: "Nothing happens in the 'real' world unless it first happens in the images in our heads."[7] In this formulation, speculative work of literature is a necessary precondition to political mobilization, whether achieved through utopian visions of possible futures, or dystopian outcomes to avoid. This project of imagining more just and equal futures has led to significant expansions of the genre, which met with opposing reactions, including the 2015 controversies about Hugos, sf's most prestigious awards.[8] While this conflict may seem to be of limited importance, it is indicative of larger questions asked in the sf community: what is the place of politics in the genre? What is the importance of identity? How does the genre reckon with its conservative past, and what does it owe its minority readers in terms of representation?

The answer to these questions increasingly seems to be that identity politics is important, and that in fact the "good old science fiction" of space adventures was not devoid of political agenda but, to the contrary, it promoted deeply conservative, if not outright colonialist and racist values.[9] The critical acclaim and popularity of authors such as N.K. Jemisin, Ann Leckie, Nnedi Okorafor or China Miéville indicate that sf readers and critics are interested in stories told from marginalized perspectives and engaging in progressive politics. The inclusion of new voices does not make sf "political" where it was not so previously, but makes it a more diverse genre, promotes stories that had previously gone untold, unacknowledged, or unpromoted, and creates space for writers and readers who had felt ignored or excluded. One example of a tongue-in-cheek commentary on the position of marginalized groups in the community is a series of special issues of the *Lightspeed* magazine, entitled "Queers Destroy Science Fiction," "Women Destroy Science Fiction," and "People of Color Destroy Science Fiction." The titular "destruction" refers to the accusations made by self-professed gatekeepers, but also alludes to the idea of creative destruction, necessary to enable the reshaping of the genre.

Emergence of Science Fiction, Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, CT 2008; J. Larbalestier, *The Battle of the Sexes in Science Fiction*, Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, CT 2002.

7 G. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Aunt Lute Books, San Francisco 1987, p. 87.

8 A. Wallace *Sci-Fi's Hugo Awards and the Battle for Pop Culture's Soul*, "Wired", 30.10.2015, https://www.wired.com/2015/10/hugo-awards-controversy (accessed: 17.09.2020).

9 Such conflicts in sf date back to the negative reactions to the New Wave of the 1960s and 1970s, criticized for introducing progressive politics and minority voices in the genre. See S. Delany, *Racism and Science Fiction*, "New York Review of Science Fiction" 1998, August, Iss. 120, https://www.nyrsf.com/racism-and-science-fiction-.html (accessed: 17.09.2020); J. Burszta, *Radykalne głosy, marginalne spojrzenia. Spory o współczesny kanon fantastyki*, in: *Narracje fantastyczne*, eds. K. Olkusz, K.M. Maj, Ośrodek Badawczy Facta Ficta, Kraków 2017, pp. 159–174.

Disability in Science Fiction

A group most recently advocating "destroying" science fiction from the inside out are people with disabilities, as suggested by the 2018 issue of the *Uncanny* magazine, "Disabled People Destroy Science Fiction." The issue serves as a manifesto on the position of disability as a topic in sf and disabled people as authors and readers of the genre: "Destroy. That's the brief of this issue. Destroy science fiction. Why? Because disabled people have been discarded from the narrative, cured, rejected, villainized. We've been given few options for our imaginations to run wild within the parameters of an endless sky. This issue destroys those narratives and more."[10] The biased and limited portrayal of disability in sf is a gap to be filled with new stories, told by disabled people themselves. In sf, as in other types of literature, disability is often used as a metaphor, a "narrative prosthesis," with little interest in the lived experience of disabled people or the complex possibilities and implications of including disability in the imagined social worlds of the future.[11]

Due to the genre's investment in technology-driven progress, many sf texts depict disability as a problem to overcome on an individual level or to eradicate on the societal one. The common approach to disability in sf is best described in the title of the most comprehensive academic analysis of the topic, a volume edited by Kathryn Allan, *Disability in Science Fiction: Representations of Technology as Cure*.[12] This title is indicative not so much of the perspective taken by the authors of the articles, who draw on disability studies and employ a critical lens in their research, but of the tendencies apparent in sf itself. Technology often functions as a potential solution to all sorts of problems, and disability tends to be seen as just that – a problem to be solved. Despite the criticism of the "ideology of a cure" and "curative imaginary" in disability research and activism, the idea that disability needs to be cured, eradicated, or otherwise "disappeared" from society remains one of the dominant perspectives, drawing on the medical model of disability and "common sense" assumptions about the unquestionable superiority of life without disability.[13]

Whether because it is cured individually or eradicated through technologies of controlled reproduction and eugenics, disability is rarely found in the imagined fu-

[10] E. Sjunneson-Henry, D. Parisien, *The Disabled People Destroy Science Fiction Manifesto*, "Uncanny Magazine" 2018, September/October, Iss. 24, p. 8.

[11] D.T. Mitchell, S.L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor 2000; A.C. Buchanan, *Design a Spaceship*, "Uncanny Magazine" 2018, September/October, Iss. 24, p. 179. For an analysis of disability in science fiction that purposefully avoids the pitfalls of metaphorical reading, see S. Schalk, *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction*, Duke University Press, Durham 2018, pp. 33–57.

[12] *Disability in Science Fiction: Representations of Technology as Cure*, ed. K. Allan, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2013.

[13] E. Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure*, Duke University Press, Durham 2017; A. Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 2013, p. 27.

tures of sf. Disability-less futurity is the topic of Alison Kafer's study, where she argues that the unproblematized and seemingly depoliticized assumptions about what constitutes good life and happy society have rendered a future including disabled people unthinkable.[14] She notes that even in the supposedly progressive imagined space of a feminist utopia, such as Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*, there is no place for disability.[15] This exclusion is deeply felt by disabled readers and writers of science fiction: "I grew up reading science fiction and I found no mirrors. Imagine what that feels like. Imagine what that feels like, specifically, in the context of bright and infinite tomorrows. […] This is the future, my books told me. You do not belong here, either."[16] The fact that sf does not offer much in terms of representation of disability is not just a problem of inclusivity as it may be in other genres, where minority readers want to see their experiences reflected. It seems to run deeper in this case because sf is meant to envision alternative worlds and futures, unbound by the realities of the here and now. This particular erasure suggests a critical failure of imagination when it comes to disability and confirms the power of ableist narrative, as noted by Kafer. The novels under analysis in this article – Ada Hoffman's *The Outside* (2019), Kaia Sønderby's *Failure to Communicate* (2017), and Selene dePackh's *Troubleshooting* (2018) – react to this problem, as they tell stories about futures that include disability, specifically, autism.[17] The autistic perspectives must be analyzed in the context of debates about authorship, self-advocacy, and subjectivity crucial to this community. At the same time, as a disability whose popular representation centers supreme rationality and ontological strangeness, autism is a subject uniquely suited to sf's concerns of technological progress and alien intelligence.

Autism and Authorship

Cultural representations of autism reflect some of the most widespread assumptions about the condition, such as the notion that it robs people of empathy, renders them incapable of self-reflection, and coexists with genius-level math skills. These cultural constructions of autism do more than just (re)create a limited range of narratives about this disability; they are also engaged in competing political and activist agendas around autism. Thus, literature created by self-identified autistic authors needs to be considered on two interconnected levels: that of (re)inventing and reflecting tropes

[14] *Ibidem*, p. 3.

[15] *Ibidem*, p. 73.

[16] M. Nijkamp, *The Future Is (Not) Disabled*, "Uncanny Magazine" 2018, September/October, Iss. 24, p. 229.

[17] For more on the connections between autistic and science fiction communities see chap. 6 of S. Silberman, *NeuroTribes: The Legacy of Autism and the Future of Neurodiversity*, Avery, New York 2015.

ubiquitous in autistic representation, and as an example of self-advocacy, fulfilling the mantra of disability activists, "Nothing about us without us."[18]

It comes as no surprise that a lot of narratives about autism focus on the ways and means of curing it, as does a significant proportion of organizations founded to help autistic people.[19] As Anne McGuire notes in her analysis of the rhetoric employed in autism advocacy, contemporary organizations in this field actually tend to advocate *against autism* rather than *for autism*, or autistic people.[20] Autism is depicted as a bad influence that takes over the "real" person underneath, which closes off the possibility of approaching autism as a way of being, an identity, and a lived experience that, while different from neurotypical, is not in any way worse, in line with the neurodiversity paradigm.[21] These two visions of autism: as a tragedy, an individual and social crisis to be solved, or as a benign expression of human diversity in the realm of thinking, feeling, and experiencing the world, form the fundamental tension in cultural depictions of autism and activism around it.

In a study of early twenty-first century cultural representations of autism, Stuart Murray notes the surprising consistency in the way the condition is portrayed.[22] The trope of the "autistic savant" is so ubiquitous that savantism becomes almost synonymous with autism.[23] Thanks to popular cinematic depictions such as *Rain Man*, autistic genius is assumed to be supremely rational, often involving almost super-human logical and mathematical skills.[24] This image of autism lends itself rather well to sf, a genre invested in stories of mad scientists, technological inventions, and human and non-human intelligence. Some of the most popular sf characters associated with autism and even claimed by autistic people include the Vulcan Spock, the android Data, the genius victim of governmental experimentation River Tam, and other alien or ar-

[18] For a discussion of how this slogan came into being in disability rights, see J.I. Charlton, *Nothing About Us Without Us: Disability Oppression and Empowerment*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1998.

[19] A. McGuire, *War on Autism: On the Cultural Logic of Normative Violence*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor 2016, pp. 5, 126; S. Silberman, *NeuroTribes…*, *op. cit.*, pp. 13, 15.

[20] A. McGuire, *War…*, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

[21] *Ibidem*, p. 7; N. Walker, *Throw Away the Master's Tools: Liberating Ourselves from the Pathology Paradigm*, in: *Loud Hands: Autistic People, Speaking*, ed. J. Bascom, The Autistic Press, Washington, DC 2012, p. 228. There is a significant debate in the disability and autistic communities about the efficacy of "people first" language, i.e. referring to a person as "a person with autism" rather than an "autistic person." While there are undoubtedly good reasons to promote the former, as a way of stressing the fact that the people in question are not defined by their disability, I am convinced by self-advocates claiming that in the case of autism, the adjectival version is better because it does not allow for a separation of the condition of autism from the person experiencing it and treats autism as an inherent element of one's subjectivity (A. McGuire, *War…*, *op. cit.*, p. 7; J. Sinclair, *Why I Dislike 'Person First' Language*, in: *Loud Hands…*, *op. cit.*, pp. 223–224).

[22] S. Murray, *Representing Autism: Culture, Narrative, Fascination*, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool 2008, p. 22.

[23] *Ibidem*, p. 65.

[24] *Ibidem*.

tificially-modified characters who need to learn to process emotions and control their overly-rational tendencies to become "fully human."[25] Autistic characters in sf literature also often fall into the same category: the protagonist of Elizabeth Moon's *Speed of Dark* (2002) makes professional use of his unique ability to recognize patterns but eventually chooses to be cured of autism, supreme logical mind notwithstanding.[26] In Peter Watts' *Blindsight* (2006), a protagonist with autism-like characteristics is the only one who can communicate successfully with non-self-aware yet intelligent beings that come into contact with the Earth.[27] While the association of autism with genius may seem to contribute to a positive image of autism, it has some negative consequences as well. Firstly, it obscures the internal diversity of the autistic community, as this one particular image of an autistic person, additionally identified with a particular demographic of white, young men, dominates in the public imagination.[28] Secondly, depicting autistic people as "beyond" human in terms of mental capacity relegates them to the blurred edges of humanity.[29] This, in turn, especially in sf, may result in comparisons between autistic people and non-human beings, thus advancing the philosophically and politically repudiated debates about disability and "limits of humanity."[30]

Cultural and medical discourses contributing to dehumanization of autistic people are in many ways a continuation of similar attempts aimed at mentally disabled people more generally, but they also rely on certain assumptions unique to autism. One of the major paradoxes in how autism is understood is its connection to rationality. On the one hand, it is a disability particularly associated with a high level of rationality, often to the (presumed) exclusion of emotional life and empathy, as evidenced by the "autistic savant" trope.[31] On the other hand, some of the most popular theories of autism seem to deprive autistic people of the ability to reason, including the Theory of Mind (ToM), attributed to Simon Baron-Cohen.[32] According to ToM, the ability to recognize and understand the mental states of others, or empathy, is a typical feature of human nature, and in certain cognitivist approaches it is even seen as the defining

[25] Temple Grandin described herself to Oliver Sacks as "an anthropologist on Mars" (O. Sacks, *An Anthropologist on Mars*, Albert A. Knopf, New York 1995), see also R. Groner, *Sex as 'Spock': Autism, Sexuality, and Autobiographical Narrative*, in: *Sex and Disability*, eds. R. McRuer, A. Mollow, Duke University Press, Durham 2012, pp. 263–284; I. Hacking, *Humans, Aliens & Autism*, "Daedalus" 2009, Vol. 138, No. 3, pp. 44–59.

[26] E. Moon, *Speed of Dark*, Orbit Books, London 2002.

[27] P. Watts, *Blindsight*, Tor Books, New York 2006.

[28] S. Murray, *Representing…*, *op. cit.*

[29] *Ibidem*, pp. 5, 65.

[30] Cf. E. Clare, *Brilliant…*, *op. cit.*, pp. 29–30; L. Carlson, *The Faces of Intellectual Disability*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 2010.

[31] O. Sacks refers to autism as "disorder of affect" in O. Sacks, *An Anthropologist…*, *op. cit.*, p. 291.

[32] M. Yergeau, *Authoring Autism: On Rhetoric and Neurological Queerness*, Duke University Press, Durham 2019, p. 12; S. Baron Cohen, *Theory of Mind and Autism: A Review*, "Special Issue of the International Review of Mental Retardation" 2001, Vol. 23(169).

feature of humanness.[33] The consequence of applying this to autistic people is incredibly dangerous: "Humans are human because they possess a theory of mind, and autistics are inhuman because they do not."[34] These discourses deny autistic people their humanity based on their supposed mental limitations. Due to the legitimacy they accrue as a result of the domination of medical perspectives on disability, they have far-reaching consequences for the politics of autistic activism.

Debates about autistic people's capacity for self-reflection and self-expression translates into changes in autism rights movement, where self-advocacy organizations such as Autistic Self Advocacy Network and Autism Network International have gained visibility by centering neurodiversity, accommodations, and support for people living with autism in their political goals.[35] This shift in autism advocacy is also reflected in an interest in autistic autobiographies, including books by Temple Grandin and Donna Williams.[36] As Yergeau points out, this popularity is somewhat paradoxical, considering the fact that autism is assumed to "[contrast] with language, humanness, empathy, self-knowledge, understanding, and rhetoricity" – all qualities that would seem necessary to successfully produce an autobiography.[37] Indeed, such is the reluctance to accept autistic autobiographical accounts that if they are too successful, or the people producing them too articulate, they are deemed "insufficiently" autistic to be representative of the condition, or already cured of it.[38] Yet it seems that the autistic perspective must be centered in any research on narratives about autism. As Murray notes:

> It is the presence of the person with autism, in whatever form, that stops the condition being only subject to the workings of metaphor and fascination. Those autistic individuals who speak, write or communicate in some other way make their presence felt through their entry into the domain of cultural representation, and they inform everyone who makes the effort to listen what living with, and in, the condition can be like. And, of course, those who do not communicate in these ways are no less a presence.[39]

For autistic people to speak for themselves and be heard is crucial to changing the limited and often harmful representation of autism, and to conducting ethical and rigorous research into this topic. That is why my analysis of portrayal of autism in sf must also be informed by the identities of the authors of the novels under scrutiny.

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33 A. McGuire, *War…*, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

34 M. Yergeau, *Clinically Significant Disturbance: On Theorists Who Theorize Theory of Mind*, "DSQ: Disability Studies Quarterly" 2013, Vol. 33(4), https://dsq-sds.org/article/view/3876/3405 (accessed: 17.09.2020).

35 J. Sinclair, *Autism Network International: The Development of a Community and Its Culture*, in: *Loud Hands…*, *op. cit.*, pp. 22–70; A. Ne'eman, *The Future (and the Past) of Autism Advocacy, or Why the ASA's Magazine, The Advocate, Wouldn't Publish This Piece*, in: *Loud Hands…*, *op. cit.*, pp. 88–97.

36 S. Murray, *Representing…*, *op. cit.*; M. Yergeau, *Authoring…*, *op. cit.*

37 *Ibidem*, p. 2.

38 *Ibidem*, p. 21; A. McGuire, *War…*, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

39 S. Murray, *Representing…*, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

The three novels I have chosen to focus on in this article: Ada Hoffman's *The Outside* (2019), Kaia Sønderby's *Failure to Communicate* (2017), and Selene dePackh's *Troubleshooting* (2018), were all written by authors who identify as autistic.[40] The publication history of these novels offer an instructive glimpse into the routes taken by autistic authors to find space in the sf publishing industry. *Troubleshooting* was published by Reclamation Press, a small publisher specializing in books of authors from diverse disability communities. Kaia Sønderby self-published her novel, whose main character was first introduced in a story published on Wattpad, a social storytelling platform connecting writers to readers willing to share their feedback on works in progress. Ada Hoffman is the only one who was noticed by a traditional publishing house – *The Outside*, her debut novel, came out in Angry Robot, a global imprint specializing in speculative fiction.[41] This anecdotal evidence suggests that publishing science fiction in which autism takes center stage is not easy. At the same time, getting stories authored by autistic writers into the hands of the readers is the basic condition for increasing the inclusivity of sf in terms of its representation of disability.

The recent sf novels displace the prototypical autistic subject, which tends to be a young, white man, in favor of different autistic identities.[42] The protagonist of *The Outside* is a queer woman of color, Xandri from *Failure to Communicate* is a queer white woman, and Scope from *Troubleshooting* is a queer person of color whose portrayal suggests nonbinary tendencies if not outright trans identification. Since their gender, sexuality, and race affect the situation of the characters along with their autism, an intersectional perspective is required when analyzing their positions as disabled characters.

Autistic Utopias and Dystopias

The novels with autistic protagonists can be seen as part of the project of imagining future worlds that include autistic people outlined in "Disabled People Destroy Science Fiction." Some of them, for instance dePackh's *Troubleshooting*, engage in decidedly dystopian modes of storytelling by using near-future settings as an opportunity to extrapolate the oppressive policies, institutions, and ideas of the contemporary ableist world, emphasizing the discrimination of people with disabilities and the threat of eradicating disability. Others, such as Hoffman and Sønderby, create worlds in which disabled people are included and their contributions appreciated. While

[40] See their websites: http://www.ada-hoffmann.com/about/, https://www.reclapress.com/books/selene-depackh/, https://twitter.com/kaiasonderby?lang=en (accessed: 17.09.2020).

[41] Hoffman is involved in raising the profile of autism in sf through a long-running series of reviews of speculative fiction that includes autistic characters, entitled *Autistic Book Party* (http://www.ada-hoffmann.com/autistic-book-party/ [accessed: 17.09.2020]).

[42] On white men as paradigmatic autistic subjects see S. Murray, *Representing…*, *op. cit.*, ch. 4; A. Willey *et al.*, *The Mating Life of Geeks: Love, Neuroscience, and the New Autistic Subject*, "Signs" 2015, Vol. 40(2).

even the more positive visions are not free of problematic elements, most importantly presenting the productivity of the autistic characters as the condition for their acceptance, all of these stories show what it might mean to imagine disability-full futures.[43]

The Outside and *Failure to Communicate* incorporate a positive vision of autism in the future into space opera, a sub-genre of sf whose staple tropes include space travel and aliens. To call attention to their utopian elements is not to say that they lack darkness; *The Outside* makes significant use of Lovecraftian horror, and in *Failure to Communicate* mentally disabled people are expected to disappear soon. However, when it comes specifically to imagining a place for autistic people in the world, they offer inspiring possibilities. The autistic protagonist of *Failure to Communicate*, Xandri, finds a community that values her perspective and is willing to accommodate her needs. Living on a multi-cultural spaceship and serving as an interpreter between various species of aliens, Xandri contributes to her crew but also to the political system at large by facilitating crucial negotiations. At the same time, not only does she encounter people who judge her non-normative behaviors, but she is also quite possibly one of the very few people with mental disabilities left in the universe. Her neurodiversity is a result of her parents not making use of the available reproductive technology that would allow them to screen for disabilities before birth; since Xandri's birth, such solutions have been universally employed in order to eradicate mental disability. Still, on its small scale as a story of found family and small community, *Failure to Communicate* acknowledges that an autistic protagonist may find a place where she would be valued for her unique talents and perspective.

In Hoffman's novel every society has a different way of approaching mental disabilities. The villain of the story, Evianna Talirr, had been a victim of corrective therapies as a child, which has led to her eventual vendetta against humanity, as predicted by her therapist: "If a mind like little Evianna's does relapse, and remembers the way that we treated her, I can only guess what horrors will then be unleased."[44] Indeed, Evianna ends up a villain bent on destroying humanity in the name of an epistemic truth that contradicts the official religious and political doctrine, but equally, it seems, for revenge. Her medical files indicate negative outcomes of the supposed therapies as she is diagnosed with "the usual side effects: depression, fearfulness, social withdrawal, loss of interest in friends or in play."[45] They are clearly symptoms not of the original condition, but rather of misconceived treatment, designed to "break the child down utterly to build them up again."[46] Such rhetoric is chillingly reminiscent of the ideas put forward by one of the most famous behaviorists actually working with children with autism in the mid-twentieth century, Ole Ivar Lovass: "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

[43] A. Kafer, *Feminist…*, *op. cit.*, p. 3.
[44] A. Hoffman, *The Outside*, *op. cit.*, p. 255.
[45] *Ibidem*, p. 254.
[46] *Ibidem*.

in the psychological sense. […] You have the raw materials, but you have to build the person."[47] Much like the dystopian landscape in *Troubleshooting* or the eugenic eradication of neurodivergence in *Failure to Communicate*, Hoffman's take on the future of autism involves a critique of contemporary issues faced by autistic people.

At the same time, the social and cultural framework of neurodiversity in *The Outside* is hardly clear-cut. While Evianna had undergone oppressive therapies, the protagonist, Yasira Shien, comes from a society that promotes accommodating the needs of its neurodivergent citizens. This is achieved through policies such as service of neurotutors and social training aimed not at changing the autistic person but rather allowing them to function in a neurotypical society, as well as robust systems of medical and social support aimed at mentally disabled people. Her condition is known and for the most part treated as benign variance. While Yasira is still made uncomfortable at times when she interacts with people from other places, the society she comes from serves as an example of appreciating the value of neurodiversity. *The Outside* thus offers a complex depiction of autism in sf: acknowledging the horrors and traumatizing consequences of violent therapies, while also opening up a space for neurodiversity experienced in positive terms.

Autistic "Aliens"

Autistic authors reveal the complexities of autistic experiences while making the most of sf as a genre. Two of the novels use first person narration (*Failure to Communicate* and *Troubleshooting*), while the third is written in close third person (*The Outside*), all to emphasize the centrality of an autistic narrator or focalizer. This point of view allows the authors to depict autistic ways of being in the world, including experiences and reactions to sensory stimuli. Sf settings are used to engage with tropes typical of the genre, including first contact with aliens, and reveal the advantages of unique autistic perspectives. At the same time, comparisons between autistic characters and non-human others perpetuate the problematic sf tendency of using minorities as metaphors for broadly understood "otherhood," or associating various sf "others" (aliens, robots, cyborgs) with real-world minorities. In either scenario, the presence of marginalized communities in the genre becomes symbolic rather than actual.

The novels might serve as a primer of the ways in which autistic people experience the world, particularly in terms of interacting with their environment. Of course, one of the problems with depictions of autism (or disability more generally) is that no single experience of autism is indicative of any others, as expressed in the famous statement by Stephen Shore: "If you've met one person with autism, you've met one person with autism."[48] My point here is not to claim that the representation of autism

[47] Quoted in M. Yergeau, *Authoring…*, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

[48] *Leading Perspectives on Disability: A Q&A with Dr. Stephen Shore*, *Lime Connect*, https://www.limeconnect.com/opportunities_news/detail/leading-perspectives-on-disability-a-qa-with-dr-stephen-shore (accessed: 17.09.2020).

in these texts is universal. Quite the opposite; these autistic authors are invested in portraying the variety and complexity of the autistic experiences, which is achieved largely through detailed descriptions of the characters' thoughts and behaviors. Yasira, Scope, and Xandri are not one-note creations with one special quality meant to remind the reader occasionally that the character is autistic; instead, their portrayal feels lived-in and complex. At times they have trouble processing overwhelming auditory and sensory input, feeling unpleasant textures and materials, reading others' emotions, and expressing their own. They find accommodations to these issues or ways of releasing the tension through echolalia, stimming, and therapy. They also clearly see autism as central to their sense of self. When congratulated for successfully hiding her autistic traits, Scope responds: "Autism is what I am, Tom – it's not something I can beat any more than I can beat being small. I can compensate, come across as what you want me to be for a little while at a time, but I can't keep it up."[49] This statement reflects the approach to autism represented by Jim Sinclair and other self-advocates, who claim that "Autism is a way of being. […] It is not possible to separate the autism from the person."[50] The autism of these characters is not just a collection of symptoms typically associated with the condition, but it permeates the characters' points of view. Such an approach seems consistent with the goal of ensuring a complex representation of disability in sf, though these statements of fundamental ontological difference may also contribute to the alienation of the reader, or exoticization of the autistic perspective.

Alien encounter, one of the most popular tropes in sf, offers a direct link between the genre and autism, since autistic people are at times compared to aliens and some also apply this metaphor to themselves.[51] Aliens populate sf in various roles: as allies, enemies, or potential points of reference in more philosophical considerations of the limits of humanity and the possibility of communicating with a fundamentally inaccessible intelligence. The epistemological uncertainty about the status of non-human actors is a central theme of texts about aliens, but also human-made beings such as cyborgs or robots. Some of the novels explore the similarly liminal position of autistic protagonists, when they serve as mediators and facilitators of communication between humans and aliens. Xandri is hired to be a communications specialist; in a universe where different species of aliens must cooperate, her experience in reading body language makes her a good interpreter. As she had to fit in with a neurotypical society by necessity, she worked hard to learn verbal and non-verbal communication. She comments on this experience: "I'd learned to communicate with my own species, which was the hardest thing I'd ever done; understanding other species was, at times, a snap in comparison."[52] The outsider perspective equips her with instinct and sensitivity necessary to decode messages produced by utterly foreign types of intel-

[49] S. dePackh, *Troubleshooting*, *op. cit.*, p. 211.
[50] J. Sinclair, *Don't Mourn For Us*, in: *Loud Hands…*, *op. cit.*, p. 16.
[51] See note 27.
[52] K. Sønderby, *Failure…*, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

ligence. While the idea that an autistic person must prove useful to be accepted by others promotes deeply problematic notions about economically-driven productivity as a condition of inclusion, this trope also offers a new perspective on the (dis)abilities of autistic people, showing that qualities assumed to be their weak points may in fact carry a different meaning in appropriate contexts.

Both of the main characters of *The Outside*, Yasira, the protagonist, and Evianna, the villain, are autists who share a certain ineffable understanding and are uniquely suited to communicate with an alien force, the titular "Outside." From the opening pages of the novel, Yasira feels a connection with her former teacher and mentor: her dreams of Evianna provide a premonition about an upcoming tragedy. Evianna, in turn, places confidence in Yasira alone, first choosing her to work together, later sharing her secrets and hoping to make Yasira an ally in a fight against the rest of the humanity. This unique link is partly a result of their shared neurodiversity, but also includes a more uncanny and personal element. As Yasira explains to Evianna, "I suspect the two of us have an understanding others lack, even others of our neurotype."[53] This connection makes them potential allies, and eventually – when Yasira refuses to cooperate – well-matched opponents. It also allows them to understand and communicate with the "Outside," an unknown realm beyond the reach of the rational and techno-driven order of the world.

Any contact with the Outside requires a fundamental questioning of the acknowledged reality and is said to result in madness. Yet it seems that the autistic characters are able to access the Outside and not only remain "sane" (or as sane as they were before the contact), but also affect this other dimension. Their mental disability provides them with a certain distance to the officially accepted religious vision of the world, and thus paradoxically allows them mental space to approach the Outside with a clearer head. In Evianna's case, the prolonged contact with the Outside, with its ontological and ethical relativism and complete indifference towards human life, has led to her similarly disregarding the human cost of her vendetta. As she admits to Yasira, "Life is a lie; death is a lie; from their perspective, why should it matter? It barely matters to me, these past few years."[54] On the other hand, the connection to the Outside makes Yasira a possible mediator between the two worlds. Of course, the marginalized figures whose special abilities allow them to communicate with "the enemy" often pay the price of mistrust and even doubt their own sanity, as was the case with Frodo being affected by the Ring in J.R.R. Tolkien's saga and Harry Potter speaking parseltongue in J.K. Rowling's books. Similarly, Yasira is at once a tool used against Evianna and the Outside by the powers that be, and an object of deep suspicion, seen as unreliable in terms of mental stability and consistent allyship. The representatives of the political order who manipulate Yasira into helping them hold her well-being in disregard: "We already have an abundance of mad people. I want

[53] A. Hoffman, *The Outside*, *op. cit.*, p. 261.

[54] *Ibidem*, p. 262.

a madness that works. […] She needs to be able to work with [Evianna's theories] intimately and effectively. […] It will increase her efficacy with Outside; with any luck, the presence of a mentor who remains functional and able to work in the face of Outside symptoms will keep Yasira that much more functional as well."[55] Though contact with the Outside is equated with madness and heresy and thus deemed criminally dangerous, Yasira is expected to withstand it and remain "functional" as an instrument of the people in power. This dovetails with the idea that neurodiversity may only be tolerated when it coexists with unique talents and makes people productive for the society at large.

Hoffman offers an interesting take on the issue of autistic logic and rationality, or lack thereof. Evianna's and Yasira's autism supposedly leaves them open to the influence of the irrational, horrific Outside, a realm associated with madness. Yet eventually it is the binding political and religious system that is at fault, covering up the actual complexity of the world and obscuring the alternative dimension of the Outside. While their contact with the Outside involves Lovecraftian horror, loss of subjectivity, and deep trauma, ultimately it seems that Yasira and Evianna have a unique access to the truth, because they are not limited by a conventional view of the world. Of course, such a depiction is also a double-edged sword, as it contributes to the notion that disability, through pain and marginalization associated with it, may lead to a super-human insight into reality.[56] While this narrative is thus quite ambiguous, sf tropes allow the author to center the autistic perspective as ultimately more clear-eyed than the neurotypical one.

Conclusion

In many ways, science fiction could be a site of fascinating reinventions of disability representation. Unencumbered by the limitations of realism and primed by debates about inclusion of marginalized voices, it is a genre whose themes, aesthetics, and narratives can easily incorporate disabled and neurodivergent perspectives. While a significant part of this process is practical in nature and involves renegotiations of economic, social, and cultural privilege that results in access to the publishing industry, as well as community institutions such as magazines, conventions, and awards, the purpose of this article was to look closely at some recent novels as examples of such efforts on the part of autistic writers. What is at stake for this particular group is not only a complex and appropriate representation in the genre, but also access to authorship of their own stories. Due to the discriminatory assumptions about autistic people's subjectivity discussed earlier in the article, stories written by self-identified autistic writers should be approached as both a statement on the importance of inclusion of minority identities in the genre, and a literary expression of advantages of

[55] *Ibidem*, p. 252.

[56] This idea may be related to the figure of supercrip, see A. Kafer, *Feminist…*, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

employing autistic perspectives in sf. In other words, it is not just about what science fiction "owes" the autistic community in terms of representation; the question is also what innovations the autistic creators bring to the table. While conventions of the genre, expectations of the readers, and the experience of living in an ableist world place some limits on the authors' creative expression, I would argue that the three novels prove that autistic points of view can be employed in sf to great success. As such, these autistic writers and, more broadly, disabled people in general, contribute to expanding the horizons of science fiction fans, as any offering in the genre should.

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