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Literature and Medicine, Volume 33, Number 1, Spring 2015, pp. 202-221
(Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: 10.1353/lm.2015.0009

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In his controversial 1979 novel, *Autisterna* (The autistics), Swedish author Stig Larsson makes an explicit attempt to present a man who moves on the fringes of what a character can be. The male protagonist is described as socially, geographically, and temporally boundless, and also as unpredictable and unrestricted, which during the course of the narrative produces an increasingly frightening effect. In one chapter, he is attending a party with Brezhnev in Moscow, in the next he socializes with prostitutes on the street in an unknown city, in another he rapes little children. Lacking in personality and social rootedness, the main character appears potentially immoral and violent, devoid of an inner moral compass and following only his own agenda, inexplicable to others in his surroundings. Furthermore, as in one sequence where without provocation he bites and tears apart the sofa in the room where he is staying, it is apparent that his lack of essence moves him towards the limit of Western, modern conceptualizations of the “human,” and rather positions him as an animal or monster.

With the title of this book, which translates into English as “the autistics,” Larsson signals a cultural understanding of autism as a condition that means total isolation from human interaction and community, rendering the person completely void of emotions, social connectedness, and subconscious. A connection between violence and autism (or other neuropsychiatric conditions) is recurrent in media, despite scientific evidence that there is no link between autism and premeditated violence.¹ For instance, during the trial against mass murderer Anders Behring Breivik in Norway in 2011–12, a possible autism spectrum disorder (ASD) was at one point suggested as the cause of his violent actions.² Such speculations are refuted by experts, for example by the Swedish professor Niklas Långström, who in his work with Ulrika Landblom Hiscoke and others has studied risk factors in persons on the autism

spectrum judged for crimes of violence, and found them to be the same as for persons without such a diagnosis—that is, for the most part related to drug abuse.³ Also “crip” activists on the Internet reacted critically to the way people with autism spectrum disorders were demonized in the trial against Breivik.⁴ All the same, these examples clearly indicate that Western popular culture’s understanding of autism spectrum diagnoses largely relies on the same stereotype as the one that is depicted in *Autisterna*.

Although more nuanced fictional representations of persons on the autism spectrum can be found, such as Mark Haddon’s well-known novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* (2003), we begin with these stereotypical images of autism as something non-human. We are interested in the ways in which this stereotype relies on normative conceptualizations of the cognitive and emotional functions of the “human,” and of being a “real” and “normal” person. In the life writing of autistic persons, a recurring theme is the attempt to pass as neurotypical. This might include interpreting and communicating one’s thoughts and feelings in ways that are recognized by nonautistics (neurotypicals), but also situating oneself and others in categories that are intelligible in our Western contemporary context as normal and human, and interacting with them accordingly. However, this writing also contains a critique of normativity (or of the neurotypical) and here we can see possible points of resistance to cultural stereotypes. The continuing interpretation of autistic identity in relation to human functionality is carried out both in life writing and in fiction, and includes both positive identifications with non-human positions such as that of “animal” or “alien” in life writing, and the stereotypical renderings of the autistic individual as exceeding the limits of the modern, humanistic subject, as in the previous example from *Autisterna*.⁵

A starting point for this discussion is the assumption that “human” is a category each potential subject has to qualify for, in ways that are intelligible within different social contexts. This means we locate this study within posthumanist philosophy, according to which the category of “human” is a product of the Enlightenment, for which embodied subjects have to qualify.⁶ According to cultural theorists Judith Jack Halberstam and Ira Livingston, this process of qualification can be seen as a struggle to gain membership in “the exclusive club of the Human, complete with all the rights and privileges pertaining thereunto.”⁷ As Judith Butler, among others, has claimed, the dynamics for this process lie in intricate interactions between different social categories such as sexuality, gender, race, social class, age, species, and

functionality.⁸ However, from this it follows that the category of “animal”—within a humanist context often conceptualized as the opposite or negation of “human”—is equally fluid and negotiable, which means that a similar process has to be gone through in order to qualify for the “animal club.”⁹ Failing to succeed in the process of becoming a legitimate human, the subject can be demonized or animalized, as the fictional example from *Autisterna* shows, or medicalized, as a disabled and pathologized—for example autistic—subject.

In this article we focus in particular on emotional and cognitive normativity and functionality. Catherine A. Lutz and Lila Abu-Lughod argue for a poststructuralist perspective that critically explores emotions as phenomena materialized through discourse, saying that this happens simultaneously on two different levels, “discourse on emotions—scientific or everyday, Western or non-Western—and emotional discourses, that is, discourses that seem to have some affective content or effect.”¹⁰ Following Lutz and Abu-Lughod, we include both levels in the discussion of disability, specifically autism, in an exploration of how normative notions of emotions and interactions are active in the construction of the categories of “human” and “animal” in a number of scientific and autobiographical texts.

Scientific Discourses of Autistic Emotionality and Notions of “the Human”

The well-known psychologist and autism researcher Uta Frith describes Asperger Syndrome as “an extreme form of egocentrism with the resulting lack of consideration for others,” which leads to “a huge difficulty in forming successful long-term interpersonal relationships.”¹¹ She states that the spouses and family members “can experience bitter frustration and distress” and “are baffled by the fact that there is no mutual sharing of feelings, even when the Asperger individual in question is highly articulate.”¹² In describing the impairments of persons with Asperger Syndrome, Frith underlines their inability “to put themselves into another person’s shoes and to imagine what their own actions look like and feel like from another person’s point of view,” that is, their “failure of empathy.”¹³

Frith’s language here illustrates a scientific discourse of *autistic emotionality* (emotions and emotionality experienced and expressed by people with autism). It is an example of the *affective deficit* perspective on autism, representing people with autism as having an absolute and

global absence of emotional responsiveness.¹⁴ Within this discourse people with autism are represented as “mindblind,” a term coined by Simon Baron-Cohen, a professor of developmental psychopathology. It signifies the lack of emotional understanding and the failure to understand other people’s mental states displayed by people with autism.¹⁵ They are also characterized as having a general inability to empathize or identify with other people, and thus having problems entering emotional relationships.¹⁶ This can be referred to as the general affective deficit discourse of autistic emotionality, focusing on autism as impairment. As Majia Holmer Nadesan says of cognitive approaches to autism (as represented for example by Frith and Baron-Cohen), they “express particular interest in the deficiencies, eccentricities and irregularities” characterizing autistic persons.¹⁷

The social and cognitive skills emphasized in the affective deficit discourse of autistic emotionality are also present in discursive notions of humanity or human emotionality in general. Firstly, a certain advanced level of Theory of Mind is considered a necessary condition for adult humanity, authorizing distinctions between human and non-human (animal) cognition, between typically developed people versus people with developmental disabilities (most often people with autism), and between children in different development stages.¹⁸ Secondly, reciprocal social and communication skills (social emotions)¹⁹ and emotional recognition through facial expression (most importantly via the gaze) are stressed in human communication.²⁰ Lack of facial and bodily mimicry or decoding of body movement, emotional recognition, and expression are commonly used to express difference between neurotypical individuals and people with autism.²¹ Thirdly, abilities to form interpersonal relationships—represented as a centrally important aspect of human life—are used as a distinction between “human life” and autism. In autism, Lisa L. Travis and Marian Sigman conclude, “the basic building blocks for interpersonal relationships are known to be impaired, including communication, social understanding, and emotional responsiveness.”²²

In the deficit discourse referred to above, neurotypicals are constructed as humans, and neurotypical emotionality—emotions and emotionality experienced and expressed by neurotypicals—as human emotionality. However, there is another discourse within the autistic emotionality research field, which may be referred to as the *affective difference discourse* of autistic emotionality. Within this discourse, the ability to recognize or process emotions is said to be essentially intact yet different among people with autism. Autism can thus be

understood as both a possible strength and a weakness—as a nuanced difference—rather than just a one-sided shortcoming or deficit.²³ The neurological difference discourse of autism includes a definition of autistic emotionality as affective difference. Alternative sensory perception and ways of recognizing, expressing, and processing emotions is interpreted as a processing difference or an alternative “cognitive style” rather than as a social deficit.²⁴

The affective difference discourse allows for more variation in the way of processing emotions, for example focusing on mouths rather than eyes,²⁵ on a particularistic rather than a holistic way of understanding facial expression,²⁶ or on a rule-based strategy rather than the neurotypical template-based strategy to perceive emotional facial expressions.²⁷ In line with this, people with autism are also represented as having difficulties with emotionally incongruent information, for example when emotional expressions in the voice and the face diverge.²⁸ Similar to the general affective deficit discourse, the affective difference discourse produces people with autism as a distinct human Other to neurotypicals. But instead of understanding autism as an affective deficit or even an absence of emotionality, the affective difference discourse relies on the notion of an alternative sensitivity or sensual perceptuality. Within the affective difference discourse, some researchers have suggested that the reduced eye contact in ASD or the tendency to avoid eye contact in ASD can be understood as an expression of an “enhanced physiological arousal when looking at another person’s eyes.”²⁹ Consequently people with autism are represented as having a “hyper-emotionality,” experiencing less variation in the intensity of feelings.³⁰ Violent emotions or avoidance of eye contact may thus have sensory origins, since the different sensory-perceptual functionality can lead to emotional overflow. The difference discourse might seem less normative than the deficit discourse, and of course being described as different might be more acceptable than being described as being deficient. Nevertheless, human neurotypicality is not essentially challenged by the scientific difference discourse. It remains intact as the norm from which deviations or differences can be measured.

Becoming Human and Animal in Autobiographical Discourses

Discussions about autistic identity and experience in autobiographical accounts written by people on the autism spectrum often refute dominant scientific and popular discourses. The number of such

autobiographies has recently grown to an extent that they are now being referred to as a separate genre, “autiebiographies,” designating autobiographies written by people with autism, in contrast to those written for example by a neurotypical parent of a child with autism.³¹ Thomas Couser notes that the increase of published autobiographical narratives of living with illness and disability during the last three decades also includes “*autobiographical* accounts of conditions that would seem to preclude first-person testimony altogether—for example autism, locked-in syndrome and early Alzheimer’s disease.”³² Apart from these and similar published texts, the Internet has turned out to be a powerful medium for autistic self-advocacy, activism, and community building. The proliferation of published life writings corresponds to a rapid increase of blogs, video logs, and web communities where autistic identity, personhood, and citizenship are major subjects.³³

As Joyce Davidson and Mick Smith have pointed out, “relations with non-human others constitute a significant emergent theme” in autobiographies by people with autism.³⁴ In fact, in some of these texts the posthumanist process of negotiating the relationship between the categories of “animal” and “human” is highly visible. Autobiographies by the American authors Temple Grandin and Dawn Prince-Hughes are part of this field, which however has also formed elsewhere.³⁵ In a Scandinavian context, Swedish “autiebiographies” such as Gunilla Gerland’s, Iris Johansson’s, and Immanuel Brändemo’s are part of this development.³⁶ In the following, we will primarily discuss examples from these authors’ autobiographies that deal with interpretations of and qualifications for obtaining “humanness,” in some cases made visible through narratives of relations with non-human others, as previously discussed by Davidson, Smith, and Wolfe.³⁷ Indeed, Grandin describes herself as a young child “like a little wild animal,” and furthermore outlines her cognitive similarities to animals.³⁸ Prince-Hughes explains what humans can learn from gorillas, based on her experience of being socially accepted and welcomed for the first time by a family of gorillas when employed as a zookeeper. Her autobiography narrates how she, as an autistic person, could be included and understood in their society more easily than in human society. Wolfe has pointed out that animal studies and disability studies have intersected in the writings of “people who claim that their disability has enabled for them a unique understanding of non-human animals and how they experience the world.”³⁹ Besides this, Grandin and Prince-Hughes have in common that they not only *describe* how autistic thinking, perceiving, and interacting are prerequisites for human-animal understanding, but

they further destabilize the categories by identifying with animals, or describing themselves as animals. Although the Swedish examples do not discuss relations with animals to the same extent as Grandin or Prince-Hughes, they certainly question the concept of being "human" from different perspectives.

The purpose of autistic life writing is in many cases to promote an understanding of specific ways of thinking, perceiving, communicating, and interacting that differs from what is generally conceptualized as "normal."⁴⁰ In the cases presented here, this experience also means not being qualified as a "real" person, or even a "real" human. As the title of the Swedish author Gunilla Gerland's autobiography *A Real Person* indicates, the problem of not qualifying as a real person is dealt with at length. At one point, she describes herself at the age of fifteen: "I had done nothing praiseworthy, or even interesting, I wasn't musical, I hadn't been confirmed, I wouldn't be taking finals, and I wasn't polite, caring or well mannered. I was not a real person" (179). This passage clearly reveals that personhood is a social construct, containing many culturally specific properties and common practices. The narrating "I" in Gerland's autobiography is working hard to gain access to normality and to pass as a "real person." The narrative, which is chronological, beginning with childhood and moving through school and adolescence to adulthood, is focused on the painful experience of not belonging, not understanding, and not being accepted. As in many other autobiographies by persons with autism spectrum disorders, the story ends with a new understanding of identity through the diagnosis. In this case, the diagnosis means an end to the futile efforts to "imitate" normality. Still, the subject does not fully embrace the difference offered by the autism diagnosis. There is a tension between resistance to being normal and the sorrow of never being able to become "a real person," and she finds it impossible to identify with the medical language of a clinical statement describing her as a "high functioning autistic woman" (249).

Compared to Gerland's autobiography, both Johansson and Brändemo are less occupied with normality and more directed towards an exploration of non-normal or even non-human ways of existing. In Brändemo's autobiography *Trollhare*, the theme of becoming human is central, especially in the narration of childhood, but is contrasted to a distancing of the narrating "I" from what he perceives as "human." As a child he sets up a collection of rules on how to be a human, but adhering to these—"play[ing] human"—proves a tremendous effort (39). He learns that it is not an absolute prerequisite for becom-

ing human to understand everything, but “most important is not to hurt other people’s feelings” (35). The social interaction and correct emotionality thus seems to be at the core of the “human,” which is confirmed by the scientific discourse previously discussed. The book’s title is not easily translated—it consists of a combination of the two words “troll” and “hare.”⁴¹ The book begins with an explanation of the name: “My name is Trollhare. I choose that name to remind myself that I don’t have to run anymore. A Trollhare has no need to escape, it takes control over its own life” (9). In the context of Swedish folklore, “troll” can be interpreted both as an ugly caricature of a human, usually designated as mean and stupid, and as a powerful being with magical or superhuman powers. The immediate similarity between the subject and the “hare” or rabbit has to do with its being prey for other animals, constantly ready to escape from attacks. But this animal also has a specific significance for the narrating I, as a non-human subject possible to identify with and develop a relationship with. Brändemo’s pet rabbit, Maine, is described as follows: “I am so like Maine. We both dislike loud noise, and sharp light. We are the most awake at five o’clock in the morning, when everyone else is sleeping. We hate involuntary body contact. And we can speak without words” (43). We will return to the subject of speech shortly.

The identification with the rabbit in Brändemo’s autobiography is founded on similarities like the author’s recurring spasms, which he experiences as shameful in relation to humans, but natural in relation to the rabbit’s similar twitches. As in the case of Prince-Hughes, emotional and bodily closeness is also possible in relation to the non-human subject (gorilla and rabbit respectively). The adaptation to gorilla or rabbit behavior is described as much less demanding than adaptation to human behavior. “I grew to understand and identify with the gorillas, the way other human people did *not* identify with them; indeed they treated them in ways similar to how I had been treated all my life,” Prince-Hughes writes.⁴² As this quotation indicates, “human” and “animal” are constructed in close connection to different asymmetries of power, pointing out the normative foundations for these categories. This is also evident from Brändemo’s phrasing of the different conditions for what is conceptualized as human versus non-human: “Humans don’t have to earn their license to exist; only non-humans have to. Rabbits are put to death because they have the wrong color, or because they are not young anymore. Their license to exist is dependent on how cute they are” (62). Transgressions of what Bruno Latour calls the “Great Divide” between human and

animal subjects thus take place in these autobiographical narratives.⁴³ Furthermore, they also make strong cases against the “human exceptionalism” Donna Haraway criticizes in *When Species Meet*, with her detailed descriptions of how human and animal subjects can become “companion species.”⁴⁴ In this case we would, however, like to point out that the process of becoming animal or human happens in relation to the loss or gain of various cognitive functions often referred to in discussions about autism spectrum disorders.

Becoming with Things and Animals

In *Thinking in Pictures*, Grandin describes herself as a two-year-old showing symptoms of classic autism: “no speech, poor eye contact, tantrums, appearance of deafness, no interest in people, and constant staring off into space.”⁴⁵ She then goes on to elaborate on the reason for these symptoms: tantrums were triggered when she was stressed or overloaded with perceptions, at a certain age speech was comprehensible to her only when she was directly spoken to, and so on. In *A Different Childhood* Johansson also describes a cognitive and emotional universe very different from what is regarded as developmentally normal. Her autobiography is, like Grandin’s, to a large extent her translation of a range of what, in the social context of her childhood, was seen as deviant and incomprehensible behavior. Johansson writes that her universe as a child was divided between “the real world” and “the ordinary world.” The latter designates the conventional world, the one in which “human beings were ordinary persons with faults and imperfections, where we are in connection to others, becoming friend, lover, or enemy” (35). Like Grandin, Johansson was a child “staring off into space” and, when doing so, she inhabited “the real world” that she considers to be her native world. In “the real world” there is no subject, no I. “The real world” signifies being in a specific condition, where there are no boundaries between human, animal and object. “In my world, I was together with the others. . . . I thought I was participating when I hid under the table or in the lumber room, or when I sat on the milking stool with the other children playing around me. In my world I didn’t think of ‘participating’ as any other thing than sitting and watching what was happening in the atmosphere” (60–62).

The significance of speech, participation, and social interaction put forward by Grandin’s and Johansson’s texts as distinguishing traits of being human or animal is also crucial in the struggle to become a

real person in Gerland's autobiography. She describes a state of mind very similar to Johansson's description of being in "the real world," enclosed in herself, not thinking but watching, a kind of "emptiness," which released her from the feeling of always being in the wrong (20). This corresponds to what Brändemo describes as being in "the Bubble" (64), a place or mental state disconnected from the social world—consequently a place to be safe and calm. This passive watching or disconnectedness from the social world would seem, from an autism deficit perspective, to be a lack of reciprocal social and communication skills. But at the same time, this ability to "watch" clearly gives access to aspects of reality overlooked by "normal" subjects. Johansson describes being able to understand animal behavior, when experienced animal handlers were at a loss, because she could "see" the communication between humans and animals (179). Her father often placed her in the pen with the calves, where she would spend hours stroking them. The "normal" interaction with other humans may not be present, but other modes of interaction, for example with animals and things, are.

To Johansson, likewise, the inability to distinguish between herself and different kinds of subjects and objects, although seeming lonely from the outside, would from the inside feel quite the opposite. Johansson displays a different way of relating to the world where there is no "human exceptionalism," and where everything is experienced on the same level of relevance: "People didn't exist for me in any substantial way. My existence was inhabited by all things between heaven and earth—chairs, tables, plants, animals and humans—and I had to relate to everything equally. People were harder than animals and things, because they changed all the time and wanted things from me that were incomprehensible and often painful and disturbing" (48). Here one step further is taken in the pulling down of the hierarchies, as the world is inhabited not only by people and animals, but also by things, which seem to have an existence in their own right. Prince-Hughes reports a similar engagement with the physical world: "To me, each flower, tree, building, and hill was a person, a being with its own personality."⁴⁶ Gerland also experiences unclear boundaries between human and non-human. When she learned to draw at the age of two, the humans were completely outlined with nostrils, eyebrows and the right number of fingers and toes, but the houses she drew had the same features—the door being the mouth, the windows the eyes. "To me the difference between people and houses was not obvious" (20). The same inability to construct adequate hierarchies between humans, animals, and things is visible in other parts of Gerland's autobiogra-

phy as well. Her childhood fascination for mechanical cranes is one example—"I was convinced that cranes were alive" (36)—and her passionate interest in earthworms is another—"I fondled them, and kissed them" (36). This points at a subversive "becoming with," to borrow Haraway's concept, not only with ordinary companion animals (such as dogs), but also with "a wide range of organic beings such as rice, bees, tulips, and intestinal flora, all of whom make life for humans what it is—and vice versa."⁴⁷ In view of the critique of animal studies' zoocentrism, the world-view put forward in the autobiographical accounts discussed here seems even more posthumanist. From a normative point of view, neither Gerland nor Johansson and Brändemo interact in appropriate ways with humans, things, and animals, and they show an inability to make distinctions between these categories. They are simply overlooking humanist categories and the social order.

The two most significant relations developed by Johansson in her childhood are also placed at the very margins of the human community. Emma, an older relative, was almost deaf and had a deformed arm, disabilities that excluded her from the other adults' life on the farm. Her other companion, Fil, was a recluse believed to be mad, living in a cabin with an earthen floor close to Johansson's home. In contrast to most people, Emma's and Fil's lack of expectations of normal behavior made them able to be with her without being disappointed or disturbed by her. Emma and Fil "saw things the way I did, we were in the real world, and therefore I could communicate with them and be completely safe with them" (86). As Johansson describes it, the ordinary world is the "world of values" (88), but since neither Emma nor Fil promoted these values of normality they were free to elaborate interaction on their own terms. People living in "the world of values" were isolated from the endless possibilities of "the real world," constricted by what were considered correct thoughts, behaviors, and emotions. One of the possibilities of "the real world" is the imaginary. For Johansson, there were inhabitants in "the real world" not visible to anyone else blurring the boundaries between the existing and the imagined. She describes being kept company by two immaterial beings, one dark and one light, playing with her and keeping her company (36, 76). As a child, she would rather stay in the "great field possibilites" of "the real world" than be pulled into the cramped space of the "world of values" (87).

Saying Things with Sounds and Bodies

The examples discussed above show how the failure or resistance to navigate the social world correctly, to make the necessary distinctions between things, animals, and humans, real and imaginary, positions the individual as impaired with respect to social understanding and emotional responsiveness. There is however another important aspect required for human normality: verbal communication. All three of the Swedish authors report difficulties in using verbal language, as do Grandin and Prince-Hughes. They also display “abnormal” use of language. “The way I said ‘siiiiillverrrr dooooolllaaarr’ was only the start of a profound pattern I had throughout childhood of saying words and phrases in peculiar, experimental ways and having a complete fascination for words,” Prince-Hughes writes.⁴⁸ This was not a meaningless nuisance, as her family interpreted it, but a complex way of creating order in relation to the environment. She first understood its significance for her as a child, when watching the rituals of the gorilla family, who also coped with different situations by means of repetitive sounds.⁴⁹ Later, she tries to learn their vocal language, the “hoots,” “wraahs,” and the happy “grunts” of contentedness.⁵⁰ In much the same way, Brändemo finds it easier to understand and communicate with his rabbit than with humans. He uses the rabbit’s crunching sound when happy and satisfied, and makes it his own sound of contentment, annoying to humans when accidentally made in public, but perfectly understandable to the rabbit (42–43).

For Grandin, human language (that is, verbal language) always requires translation to visual thinking, which she describes as her primary way of thinking. This visual thinking is also what she describes as the key to her understanding of animals: “I use my visual thinking skills to simulate what an animal would see and hear in a given situation.”⁵¹ The development of vocal, but not conventionally verbal, ways of interacting with the environment, like that of Prince-Hughes, is also expressed in the Swedish autobiographies. As a child, Gerland annoyed her family by constantly singing in the car: “I had to sing in the car—quite simply, it was essential. That was why I liked going in the car so much, because the buzzing sound in the background helped me sing about what I could see” (30). This could also be read as a work of translation, making it possible to transform the visual and sensory impressions into verbal expression. Johansson writes that she began speaking when she was three years old: “My own voice kept me company, and I liked the effects created outside of myself when

I let the words out" (45). Johansson's babbling, Brändemo's crunching and Gerland's singing are not the kind of speech that help in the process of qualifying as a person, but rather something that, in its social inappropriateness, qualifies them for the "animal club." "To be regarded as human you have to speak as they do, both with words and body language," Brändemo concludes (48). All these examples emphasize the use of sounds as a language for inner life, or as an expression of sensory experience, rather than specific messages directed at specific receivers. Another autobiographer, Donna Williams, argues that there are two languages, one of sensing and one of interpretation, that are not intertranslatable: "Both on the level of verbal language, facial expression, body language and singing, the language of the system of sensing does not conform to the rules of the language of interpretation and it would be irrational to expect it to."⁵² There are different conceptualizations of the world, some interpretive and verbal, others sensory and nonverbal, and the difficulties in translating from one language to another is a common topic in many autobiographies about autism. Gerland's singing in the car might be made out of words, but could never be translated into meaningful sentences and was consequently not acknowledged as language at all.

Considering the ability to understand animal behavior displayed by Grandin, Prince-Hughes, and Brändemo, the discussion about the difficulties in reading body language in persons with autism spectrum disorders must also be put in perspective. Prince-Hughes claims to have learned to interpret mimicry and body language from the gorillas, since it was more direct, honest, and consistent than human communication, so fraught with hidden agendas and double messages. However, this doesn't imply that human communication is more sophisticated: "It is clear to me that not only do apes have a language that is complex and holistic, but by communicating with us, they illustrate that it may be we who are less skilled at the art of sharing true subjective experience."⁵³ To return to the scientific discourse on communication, for example, Frith's statement that "there is no mutual sharing of feelings, even when the Asperger individual in question is highly articulate," there seems to be an inability to assess the sharing of feelings taking place through other types of communications than the neurotypical.⁵⁴ In the words of Brändemo: "Texts about Asperger written by ~~humans~~ neurotypes indirectly reveal how neurotypes are expected to function" (92, ~~strikethrough~~ in original).

Conclusions

Medical discourse regarding the autism spectrum diagnosis evidently relies on a normative model of human functionality, especially a particular kind of *social functionality*, and constructs deviations from this norm as impairments. When failing to perform typical human emotions and interactions, the subject risks failing to qualify for the “human club,” and instead is seen as something other than human, in some cases coming close to the category of animal. When it comes to autism and emotions, the scientific discourse defines this impairment (to return to the words of Frith, cited at the beginning of this article) as a “lack of consideration for others,” a “difficulty in forming successful long-term interpersonal relationships” and “a failure of empathy.”⁵⁵ Of course, medical discourse does not explicitly argue that people with autism spectrum diagnoses are any less human than others. But it does pathologize people whose behavior deviates from normal human behavior, labeling them in this case with the diagnosis of “autism spectrum disorder.” This normative aspect of classifying humanness is central in many autobiographies written by persons with autism, in the sense that it is challenged. The limitations described by Frith and others are proved to be valid only within a narrow framework of human normality. Brändemo makes a mental note to himself that “Humans are bad at reading other people and understanding others’ emotions. Because of prejudices and lack of imagination it is difficult for them to understand that everyone doesn’t function like they themselves do” (86). Put in a less normative discourse, the “failure of empathy” can be reinterpreted, as indeed can the “difficulty in forming successful long-term interpersonal relationships,” since it too presupposes an adherence to the human norm. As for the alleged “lack of consideration for others,” it is also possible to ask—who is the other? In the autobiographies, the lack of consideration for the autistic subject on the part of the neurotypical subjects is blatant. Interestingly, the autobiographies challenge human normativity in two ways: firstly, by making it visible that from another set of norms, the deficit model might equally well be used on neurotypicals. This is a fairly common argument in the neurodiversity discourse.⁵⁶ Secondly, they also challenge the notion of separateness between human and non-human subjects: Prince-Hughes by being welcomed into the Gorilla Nation when she was excluded from the human nation, Brändemo by communicating effectively with his rabbit though not easily with humans, Johansson by establishing as a child no difference between human

and animal beings, and Gerland by showing affection to a worm. In relation to companion species, to use Haraway's concept, we do not find a "failure of empathy" or "difficulty in forming successful long-term interpersonal relationships." The autobiographical texts written by people with autism thus present a forceful critique of the "human" as something natural and self-evident.

NOTES

1. See Gunasekaran and Chaplin, "Autism Spectrum Disorders," 308–13.
2. *Daily Mail*, June 8, 2012.
3. See Hiscoke et al., "Self-Reported Personality Traits." See also Ghaziuddin et al., "Brief Report."
4. See Brown, "The Dangers of Misrepresentation."
5. See Murray, *Representing Autism*, for a discussion of the construction of autism in popular fiction, and Hacking, "Humans, Aliens and Autism," for the alien metaphor, which will not be discussed further here.
6. Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* xiii–xiv.
7. Halberstam and Livingston, "Introduction," 10.
8. Butler, *Frames of War*. See also Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*.
9. Lönngren, "Between Metaphor and Materiality," 59.
10. Lutz and Abu-Lughod, "Introduction," 10.
11. Frith, "Emanuel Miller lecture," 676. The new edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)* has removed Asperger Syndrome as a separate diagnosis, folding it into the autism spectrum disorder category.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*
14. The affective deficit discourse is present in autism research from Kanner, "Autistic Disturbances," through the psychoanalytical tradition; see Bettelheim, *The Empty Fortress*, and the cognitive psychology that Frith represents.
15. See Baron-Cohen, *Mindblindness*; Hillier and Allinson, "Beyond Expectations."
16. See Travis and Sigman, "Social Deficits"; Hobson, Lee, and Hobson, "Only Connect?"; Losh and Capps, "Understanding of Emotional Experience in Autism."
17. Nadesan, *Constructing Autism*, 120.
18. Assessment of Theory of Mind also presupposes language ability. See Wolfe for "the too-rapid assimilation of the questions of subjectivity, consciousness, and cognition to the question of language ability" (129); see Bauminger, "Expression and Understanding," for a discussion of different developmental stages.
19. See Downs and Smith, "Emotional Understanding."
20. This view of human emotionality and communication is present even in Darwin's biological and psychological scientific discourses; see Darwin, *Expression of Emotions*; Ekman, *Darwin and Facial Expression*; Emery, *Essentials*.
21. See Sims et al., "How Reward Modulates Mimicry"; Doody and Bull, "Asperger's Syndrome and Decoding."
22. Travis and Sigman, "Social Deficits," 65.
23. Some examples are Bumiller, "Quirky Citizens," and Davidson, "'In a World of Her Own.'"
24. See O'Connor and Kirk, "Brief Report"; Baron-Cohen, "Is Asperger Syndrome Necessarily Viewed as a Disability?"; Happé, "Autism: Cognitive Deficit or Cognitive Style?."

25. See Krebs et al., "Face Processing"; Rosset et al., "Typical Emotion Processing."
26. See Happé, "Autism"; Krebs et al., "Face Processing."
27. See Clark et al., "Autism and the Extraction of Emotion," 804.
28. See O'Connor, "Brief Report."
29. Kylliäinen et al., "Affective-motivational Brain," 790. See also Joseph et al., "Affective Response."
30. This is referred to as "The Intense World Theory"; see Markram and Markram, "Intense World Theory."
31. Couser, *Signifying Bodies*, 5.
32. Couser, "Disability," 531.
33. See Bagatell, "From Cure to Community"; Murray, *Representing Autism*.
34. "Autistic Autobiographies," 898. See also Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?*
35. Grandin, *Thinking in Pictures* and *Animals in Translation*; Prince-Hughes, *Songs of the Gorilla Nation*.
36. Gerland, *A Real Person*; Johansson, *A Different Childhood*; Brändemo, *Trollhare*. Gerland's book has been translated into English and that translation will be used. Quotations from Johansson's and Brändemo's texts are translated by Jenny Bergenmar. Subsequent references to these texts are cited parenthetically in the body of the article. There is a second part of Johansson's autobiography, *A Different Life* (2013), which will not be cited in this article, since it deals less with the central questions here.
37. Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?*; Davidson and Smith, "Autistic Autobiographies."
38. Grandin, *Thinking in Pictures*, 33 and the chapters "Connecting with Animals" and "An Understanding of Animal Thought."
39. Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?* 110.
40. Smith, "Taking It to the Limit"; Hacking, "Autistic Autobiography."
41. The full title of the book is *Trollhare. Ur en bokstavs vuxens transpersoners ordgarderob*, which in an approximate translation means: "Magical hare. From the closet of words of a literal grown-up transgender person."
42. Prince-Hughes, *Songs*, 94–95.
43. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 1–12.
44. Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 32.
45. Grandin, *Thinking in Pictures*, 33.
46. Prince-Hughes, *Songs*, 19.
47. Haraway, *Companion Species Manifesto*, 15.
48. Prince-Hughes, *Songs*, 17.
49. *Ibid.*, 19.
50. *Ibid.*, 132.
51. Grandin, *Thinking in Pictures*, 168.
52. Williams, *Autism and Sensing*, 102.
53. Prince-Hughes, *Songs*, 136.
54. Frith, "Emanuel Miller lecture," 676.
55. *Ibid.*, 676.
56. See for example Bumiller, "Quirky Citizens."

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