

Our Existence is Resistance: Autistic Academics in an Anti-Autistic Academy*

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Autistic academics face endless ableism and scrutiny within the academy, even within disability studies. This post will present anti-autistic ableism across the academy, highlighting the impact of ableism on autistic academics, and gesture towards resistance efforts led by autistic academics and allies.

Anti-autistic ableism is manifest in autism research, rhetoric, and pedagogy within the academy. Research aims, ranging from cure and prevention to normalization and intervention, signal to autistic academics that we are not wanted or welcome in the academy and in society. Model organism research disappears the autistic human subject from autism research entirely, and even “good” research that seeks to support autistic children and adults can be co-opted for ableist purposes (see [Luterman, 2020](#)). Though seemingly antithetical to disability studies and principles of disability pride and neurodiversity, researchers in disability studies continue to promote ABA as an evidence-based, best practice regarding autism treatment, despite pleas from autistic activists to end this normalizing and sometimes traumatizing treatment ([Kupferstein, 2018](#); [Lynch, 2019](#)).

Ableist research in our labs, departments, and institutions is often the first sign to autistic academics that we are regarded as inferior, damaged, and in need of cure. At the same time, autistic researchers’ projects are met with resistance and skepticism. One acquaintance, an autistic graduate student, was told by a professor that disability research “isn’t sexy” after being accepted to a graduate program to perform disability research. Autistic academics studying autism are also accused of being too subjective, too close, or too invested in the topic. Our supposed agenda is said to interfere with our ability to conduct valid research.

Rhetoric around the war on autism (see [McGuire, 2016](#)) again signals to autistic academics that we are not wanted or welcomed in academia and in society. In disability studies and advocacy specifically, bygone rhetoric around neurotypicality and intelligence despite physical disability sends the same message. Autistics are also excluded from academia by perceptions of our diminished capacity for rhetoric. Melanie Yergeau explores this issue at length in *Authoring Autism* ([2018](#)), explaining how autistics are understood as arhetorical and therefore incapable of knowledge production.

Rhetoricity is even more contested for autistic academics whose work includes autism and disability; Yergeau defines demi-rhetoricity as existing, simultaneously, as too autistic and yet not autistic enough to be a credible source on one's experiences of autism. Autistic neuroscientist, Alyssa Hillary (2019) asks, "Am I the curriculum, or a student? Am I both? Could I be a teacher?" Being an autistic studying autism means blurring the line between student and subject, knower and known. Becoming the subject means constantly having our difference (re)emphasized, as is the case of one professor who unconsciously gestured to me every time she mentioned autism. While this action was unintentional and innocuous enough, it was a constant reminder that I was different than my neurotypical peers.

Pedagogy is also centered on neurotypical learning experiences, to the exclusion of autistic students and teachers. Fear of being misunderstood adds pressure for autistic and neurodivergent scholars to be hyper-intelligible and coherent, even while still learning, processing, and formulating ideas. Anti-Ableist Composition has released guidelines for reading and assessing autistic students' writing in anti-ableist ways that celebrate autistic communication practices.

Coping with academic ableism in our classrooms, labs, departments, and institutions takes an emotional toll on autistic academics. We are bombarded with messages that we are unwelcome, unwanted, and inferior. We may struggle to keep up in classes designed for neurotypical learners. We weigh our responses to daily encounters with academic ableism. Sometimes we speak up, but often we bear the burden of ableism quietly. Autistic academics and former academics relay our stories to one another, seeking solidarity and advice, and I know far too many autistics who have left the academy when they could no longer tolerate the environment. Academia will continue to lose autistic academics and their contributions so long as ableism is the norm.

How are autistic academics resisting academic ableism? By our existence and persistence in the academy. Those of us who remain and strive to be ourselves and to change, little by little or drastically, our academies push against academic ableism by our very being. More organized forms of resistance occur through collectives like Anti-Ableist Composition, the Chicago Coalition for Autistic and Neurodivergent Students, and the Autistic Graduate Student Network, through emancipatory research networks like AASPIRE and PARC, and through story sharing on social media using #AcademicAbleism and #AutisticsInAcademia.

During this Autism Acceptance Month, I challenge you all to resist anti-autistic ableism in your own departments and institutions. Show concrete, material support to autistic scholars, especially students and contingent faculty. Center autistic speakers and scholars as the experts of our experiences. Bring us in to your classrooms and events as guest lecturers/speakers. Meet us halfway. If you teach autistic students, and I guarantee you do, read Anti-Ableist Composition's (2020) strategies for teaching

neurodivergent students. Be explicit and structured in your supervision of autistic students and junior faculty. Make space for us, welcome us, and listen to us, without defensiveness, when we relay our experiences of ableism and hurt. Disability studies and the academy are made better, richer, and fuller by the presence of all kinds of minds.

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