

REVIEW

Tracing Autism; Uncertainty, Ambiguity, and the Affective Labor of Neuroscience by Des Fitzgerald (University of Washington Press, 2017)

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Autism is everywhere. As of this writing, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) states that one in 68 children is diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) (CDC.gov). Not only that, but retrospective diagnoses abound: most recently in the spotlight have been not only Alan Turing (O'Connell and Fitzgerald), but also Nikola Tesla, Albert Einstein, Charles Darwin, and H.G. Wells (Fitzgerald and O'Brien). Since *Rain Man*, there has been an explosion of films featuring autistic characters and documentaries about autism. There is a proliferation of books, both fiction and non-fiction; there is even a Broadway play currently touring based on a best-selling novel that centers an autistic teenage protagonist. There are now more than a dozen academic journals devoted to studies of autism. And in 2018, The National Institutes of Health (NIH) will spend an estimated \$181 million on autism research (Report.nih.gov).

Autism is everywhere, and yet, not exactly anywhere, at least in terms of etiology. A stand-alone biological marker continues to elude

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neuroscientists who nevertheless insist on autism's recognizability. And this is a point that Des Fitzgerald wants us to understand in *Tracing Autism; Uncertainty, Ambiguity, and the Affective Labor of Neuroscience*: not so much that autism remains an enigma — it does — but that neuroscientists working on autism embrace its instability. What was initially a planned contribution to neuroreduction literature, *Tracing Autism* instead describes the “definitional ambiguity at the heart of autism neuroscience” (p. 29). Fitzgerald draws out uncertainties, including the categorical instability of “neuroscience” (p. 20) and its sometimes vexed relationship with psychology (p. 67); the inadequacies of brain imaging (pp. 59-67); the heterogeneity, or perhaps multiplicity, of autism(s) (pp. 34-35); the diagnostic authority given to the *feeling* of interaction (p. 51); researchers' fascination with autism (p. 45); and their collective unease with its unknowability (p. 73). In enacting research practices through these entangled ambiguities, neuroscientists “feel their way” (p. 140), crossing epistemic borders between psychology and biology, guided by a sense of familiarity: they know it when they see it (p. 48). Fitzgerald argues that it is this tangle of tensions between the biological and the social, the genetic and the environmental, between a brain scan and a clinician's feelings that together “enabl[e] a firm neuroscience of autism” (p. 29).

Indeed, in *Tracing Autism*, Fitzgerald argues for the possibility that this entanglement constructs autism itself. Drawing on feminist materialism, in particular work by Karen Barad and Elizabeth Wilson, Fitzgerald explains that autism coheres as an object of inquiry by means of neuroscience's uncertain pursuit. To trace autism by following the genetic to the environmental to the similarities between autisms to brain scans is to insist there is something being traced (pp. 11-12). In this way, autism illustrates a feminist materialist interrogation of the assumption that entities exist distinct from their interaction with each other (Barad, cited p. 76); we can understand autism as a product of its relationship to neuroscientific research on autism and to autism/s as a broad diagnostic category or set of affiliated differences. Autism's stability is contingent

(Haraway, cited p. 152), then, on the uncertain neuroscientific pursuit of autism.

The neuroscience Fitzgerald encounters fails to deliver the reductiveness social scientists have been trained to call out because it refuses to position uncertainty and heterogeneity as obstacles to an objective neurological account of autism. We find researchers admitting to the “fluffiness” (pp. 42-43) of their research, allowing feelings, intuitions, and the “softly subjective” (p. 135) not only to inform diagnoses but to enable them to continue in their pursuits despite myriad uncertainties. They are fascinated, hopeful, disappointed, distressed, tearful, anxious, self-critical and otherwise embodied subjects for whom a gut feeling (p. 100) determines a course of action or a diagnostic parameter. What emerges from Fitzgerald’s observations is movement: the way autism brings different brain science disciplines together (pp. 154-155), the collaboration between a researcher’s feelings and autism’s shape, and the interconnectedness of the social and the biological both set in motion by, and productive of, autism.

Fitzgerald’s project itself indicates another movement. He writes, “We start [with relations, interactions, interpretations, and ambiguities] not to destabilize a scientific endeavor, but with *precisely the opposite intention*: to gather together the components from which a stable scientific object might actually come together” (p. 144, my emphasis). Fitzgerald does not engage in a paranoid reading of neuroscientific accounts of autism research, one that would inevitably yield the “all-conquering neuroreducer” (p. 97) already assumed by skeptical social scientists to be toiling relentlessly over brain scans and data sets. Following Sedgwick, Fitzgerald asks what we might gain, instead, from an ameliorative, perhaps post-critical, approach to his subject and to social studies of science more generally. This reparative tendency emerges almost immediately in the text, when Fitzgerald describes his method (an “unfashionable” (p. 22) interview study) as one that generously enables a non-paranoid engagement in that it takes “*seriously*” the interviewee’s account of her field and her experiences (p. 24, emphasis in original).

Fitzgerald wants us to take *his* project seriously, despite his own self-criticisms (including his unfashionable methods (p. 22) and his “slightly stupid description” (p. 115) of neuroscience) and the bare process of writing he allows us to observe (e.g. “I was about to write...but...actually...” (p. 39). Social scientists have come to expect this sort of reflexivity and affective engagement in their fields; and I think this is what Fitzgerald wants us to consider: how might we also come to understand, to engage with, and perhaps even to expect the same complicated humanity to emerge from the stories neuroscientists tell about their own work?

Fitzgerald’s questions have important political implications. As he points out, the neurodiversity movement and disability justice activism have mobilized in opposition to those sciences that frame autism (and other physical, cognitive, or sensory atypicalities) as defect or lack. How, he asks, can we do reparative social studies of science and clinical practice when the affective work of scientists and clinicians is often motivated by an investment in cure (p. 113)? It is an insightful question, and one Fitzgerald does not answer. It also, perhaps, overlooks the contributions critical disability studies has made to scholarship in new materialisms, affect theory, and embodiment, and how this work has, in turn, informed the politics of disability (I am thinking particularly of the expansion of “disability” to include chronic pain and mental illness). Nevertheless, I am not that interested in being suspicious, and Fitzgerald’s book, carefully conceived and beautifully written, reminds me that I need not be.

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Bio

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