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Kids Across the Spectrums

Growing Up Autistic in the Digital Age

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2 IDENTITY

Casey, a 6-year-old White girl, sat perched on her bed with her mom, Jennifer, both of them facing a propped-up iPad as they watched *Free to Be . . . You and Me* for the umpteenth time. *Free to Be* premiered in 1974 as an hour-long televised special in the United States, starring actress Marlo Thomas and a multicultural cast of children and celebrities who sang, danced, and performed sketches promoting gender equality. The moment with Casey and Jennifer was bathed in color: awash with the lime green walls of Casey's bedroom, light shining through the pastel stained-glass window above her bed, the rainbow striped leggings she wore, and the faded pink streaks in her long brown wavy hair (figure 2.1). Both mother and daughter had a strong affinity for *Free to Be*. "I had that on ever since [Casey] was little and never turned it off because I loved it so much," Jennifer shared.¹ Considering the educational element of *Free to Be*, I asked Casey if she had learned anything from watching it. "That we're all free to be ourselves. You and me, free to be," she replied, echoing the title song's lyrics.

Casey and Jennifer exemplify the gender freedoms championed by *Free to Be*, while extending its titular meaning to the realm of neurodiversity. In addition to being autistic, Casey is transgender. The former was verified by clinicians through a lengthy process when Casey was two and a half years old, and the latter confirmed in a short talk between mother and child a year later. Jennifer explained that one day, she had asked Casey, "'Oh, how's my sweet boy?'" and she's like 'Mom, I'm a girl.' I'm like, 'Okay, how's my sweet girl?'" and that was the entire conversation." Jennifer thought, however, that Casey being male presenting when they sought an autism diagnosis had



FIGURE 2.1

Sitting on her bed, Casey selects *Free to Be . . . You and Me* to watch on her iPad. *Source:* Meryl Alper.

advantaged her within the health-care system. “More boys are diagnosed than girls,” Jennifer said, “so her, at the time, presenting as a boy, she was able to receive her diagnosis. [Otherwise] it would’ve been a lot harder.” The underlying reasons why are unclear, but a growing body of research suggests that autistic people may be more likely than the general population to identify as LGBTQ.² Jennifer herself identifies outside normative categorizations of gender, sexuality, and disability; specifically, Jennifer said, as “genderqueer around to femme” and “autistic but undiagnosed.”

The particular words that Casey and Jennifer each use to refer to themselves matter. Some of the identities that they claim, as child and adult, are marginalized in different but intersecting ways. Their stories are also important because they highlight various features of identity—a complex sociocultural and psychological construct that concerns the traits and characteristics that one assigns to the self. Identity has many components. It spans the role of self-concept and self-awareness in a child’s personal development and how people on the spectrum come to see themselves and others like them as

autistic. It includes the ways that media enables people to understand who they are, who they have been, and who they want to be, as well as how technologies identify, classify, and sort groups and individuals.³ Questions of identity are also core to the sociotechnical shaping of sociality. The ways that we associate with others are tied to how we understand ourselves and also to the tools and materials at our disposal to develop and maintain a sense of self.⁴

In this chapter, I explore how autistic kids like Casey develop their identities in relation to and sometimes in tension with neurotypical social expectations and norms. I also look at the everyday role of technology and media in this continually evolving process of becoming within their families, among their peers, and in their communities. While some research has explored how mass media representations of disability impact the identity of disabled adults, the same cannot be said for children.⁵ I focus primarily on how school-age young people on the spectrum (ages 6–13) co-construct their idea of what it means to be autistic alongside other aspects of themselves (e.g., gender identity) as well as part of the disability community through their creation, circulation, and consumption of media content. Among younger autistic children (ages 3–8), for whom the cognitive, social, and emotional aspects of individuation and identity development are still nascent, the discussion centers on their parents' interpretations of popular autistic characters and individuals featured in mass media and how this impact the identities that they imagine and enact for their child.

As I detail in the pages that follow, children on the autism spectrum have limited opportunities to see autistic people positively and accurately represented in mainstream media. Only a limited range of autistic traits are reflected in media tropes (e.g., “quirky” girls and “robotic” boys). Despite these constraints, they find ways to learn more about themselves through a media universe that includes online platforms, books, and movies, as well as media characters that are not explicitly autistic. This exploration is significantly shaped by having parents, friends, teachers, and other social partners who facilitate and enable such play and curiosity. Better understanding the role of media and technology in autistic children's personal and social identity formation may ultimately help inform programs and services that support their mental health and well-being. Though we do not currently live in a world in which all of us are truly “free to be you and me” without repercussions of stigmatization and discrimination, we can still learn a lot from

autistic kids like Casey—and autistic parents like Jennifer—about recognizing and honoring more expansive claims of personhood and dignity.

FRAMING IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT THROUGH THE LENSES OF MEDIA AND AUTISM

For the purposes of this chapter, identity formation can be divided broadly into two interdisciplinary areas: the development of identity in childhood and the role of media and technology in a child's evolving sense of self. Autism, and the experiences of autistic youth, offer important insights into each, specifically the development of autistic identity across the lifespan, as well as how different forms of media play a part in identity development for young people on the spectrum.

IDENTITY AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Identity development occurs over our entire lives. It begins at an early age when, according to psychologist Jean Piaget, children use their senses to gather information about the world, including their own bodies.⁶ Most kids can recognize their reflection in a mirror by their first birthday and identify themselves in photographs by age 2. Over time, children become increasingly more sophisticated in their understanding of distinctions between the “self” and “other.” Throughout the toddler and preschool years, they learn labels and terms that represent themselves (e.g., their names). At around age 7, kids can think more abstractly about social categories (i.e., race, gender, disability), their identification with them, what these categories mean, and why they matter.

There is no single unifying theory that explains identity development. The fields of social psychology and sociology do offer a number of useful insights. Psychologist Erik Erikson, for instance, considered the end of adolescence to be the completion of a critical process of becoming who we are for the rest of our lives.⁷ It is in adolescence, Erikson argued, that one solidifies their identity through personal exploration and builds a cohesive sense of self that guides future actions, beliefs, and behaviors.⁸ Psychologist Carl Rogers theorized that self-concept is our overall conception of who we are as people, which comprises self-image (how we see ourselves), self-esteem (how much we value ourselves), and the ideal self (who we wish we could be).⁹

Psychological theories of identity development can be understood not only in terms of personal identity, but also who we are in relation to others.

James Marcia's identity status theory explains that adolescence is a critical time for exploring and committing to particular identities and ideologies (e.g., religion, political beliefs), and that this process involves questioning and potentially distancing oneself from the values and expectations passed down from parents and authority figures.¹⁰ Besides individual identities (i.e., "Who am I?"), we also develop collective identities (i.e., "Who are we?").¹¹ Social identity theory, proposed by psychologist Henri Tajfel and colleagues, posits that humans have a propensity to define themselves based on group membership, and that the positive feelings that one derives from such affiliation results in a greater sense of well-being and self-esteem.¹²

While psychologists are generally focused on how the mind influences identity development, sociologists and those in allied fields (e.g., sociolinguistics) concentrate more centrally on the role of society and social interactions.¹³ Sociologist Erving Goffman, for example, argued that there is no stable self, only the identities that we present to others in the moment (using a theater metaphor, on the "frontstage" of our lives) and the identities that we draw upon depending on the social context (from the "backstage.")¹⁴ Sociological theorist Anthony Giddens contends, however, that in order to have an identity, there must be a self to begin with.¹⁵ Our ability to maintain a stable sense of self is anchored in our relationships and resulting feelings of trust and safety, or what Giddens termed "ontological security." Without that secure attachment, we are more likely to "play to the crowd" in order to seek acceptance.

AUTISTIC IDENTITY

We can apply this dual psychological and sociological framing to how autistic people incorporate autism into their identity and sense of self. "Autistic identity" means very different things among autistic people and with respect to their individual, social, and political identities. Disabled people may perceive their disability as both positively and negatively affecting their identity and see being disabled as more or less central to their self-concept.¹⁶ As a disability category, autism is inherently unstable; how it is defined and diagnosed has changed significantly over time. These fluctuations have a direct influence on those who have been identified or who identify with autism.¹⁷ Philosopher Ian Hacking refers to this mutual shaping of category and identity as a "looping effect."¹⁸ Part of the challenge of grappling with the complexity of autism as a category is that it is difficult to say anything definitive about it.

The life stage at which a person receives an autism diagnosis impacts their autistic identity formation. Some individuals get diagnosed as children, and others, much later in life. Diagnoses are often difficult to receive once a person has aged out of formal schooling.¹⁹ An official diagnosis has both material and symbolic effects for an autistic person. It is generally required to gain access to support services and can also authenticate one's identity, or what feminist disability scholar Ellen Samuels terms "biocertification."²⁰ Without official documentation, a self-diagnosis of autism may still be part of a process of identity formation and reconciliation for autistic adults, resulting in improved well-being and quality of life.²¹ Sociologist Catherine Tan refers to this process of developing an enriched sense of self, one that is reconciled through clinical explanation as "biological illumination," which inverts a narrative of diagnosis as loss or disruption.²²

Beyond the individual, an autistic person's identification with autism shapes and is shaped by their social interactions. Having a positive collective identity can buffer some of the negative psychological impacts of ableism.²³ Research has found, for example, that the more positive attributes an autistic adult associates with autism (e.g., unique problem-solving skills), the more likely they are to identify with other autistic people.²⁴ Stigmatization, however, can be a negative social influence on an autistic person's self-concept. Pressure to appear more neurotypical to nonautistic people, known as "camouflaging" or "masking," requires a significant psychological effort and can take a toll on mental health.²⁵ Autistic girls and women are more likely to camouflage than boys and men because they are socialized to "fit in."²⁶ This performativity echoes, but also complicates, Goffman's "frontstage/backstage" metaphor. As one autistic YouTuber notes about her proficiency in masking, "Life is a stage, yeah? To me it really is, and I'm a really good actress."²⁷

Lastly, autistic identity is also political. It allows people on the spectrum to build coalitions and enact change.²⁸ Neurodiversity, as both a social paradigm and political movement, has provided many autistic people with a cultural identity outside of a purely medical model of autism focused on deficits.²⁹ Autism can be understood as a "neuroidentity," or an identity based on distinct, though not fully defined, neurological differences.³⁰ The politics of autistic identity also play out across complex intersections with racial, gender, and sexual identity.³¹ Intersectionality theory, rooted in Black feminism,³² explains how the various identity categories that a person inhabits never combine in a purely additive way.³³ For instance, some autistic people

embrace their “neuroqueerness,” a term encompassing neurodivergence and sexual and gender variance.³⁴ Ultimately, it may be helpful to think about identification with autism in the plural, as in multiple autistic identities.³⁵

IDENTIFYING WITH AUTISM IN AND THROUGH MEDIA

In developing their sense of identity, individuals on the spectrum have to navigate a media landscape populated by more stereotypes about autistic people than autistic people themselves.³⁶ As a social institution, media plays a powerful role in organizing society. It represents a version of reality that is at once reproduced and contested by users and audiences.³⁷ The characters, plots, and lessons depicted in mass media are not automatically understood in the ways that producers intend. The meanings that audiences infer depend on their own lived experiences, or what cultural theorist Stuart Hall termed the encoding/decoding model of communication.³⁸ Popular presentations of people on the spectrum in media are largely inconsistent with autistic people’s sense of self and their identification with autism because they are created and intended to be consumed by nonautistic people.³⁹ People with disabilities live in a world that perceives what Samuels calls “fantasies of identification” as reality, in that media (e.g., literature, movies, news) have heavily shaped societal ideas about disability, but these schema have little relation to actual disabled people and their identities.⁴⁰

As a case in point, the majority of autistic roles in mass media are not developed or portrayed by people on the spectrum.⁴¹ The media production with the largest and most enduring impact on popular conceptions of autism is the 1988 film *Rain Man*, in which the lead character of Raymond Babbitt, an autistic man, is played by nonautistic actor Dustin Hoffman. At the 1989 Academy Awards, *Rain Man* was awarded Best Picture and Hoffman won Best Actor. Thirty years later, musical artist Sia, who is not autistic, generated controversy in the autism community for jokingly describing her 2020 movie *Music* as “*Rain Man* the Musical, but with girls” in an interview with *Variety*.⁴² Sia was seemingly unaware of the damage that *Rain Man* has done over the years by perpetuating the misconception that all autistic people are savants (as Babbitt was portrayed) and by insinuating that those on the autism spectrum are better off institutionalized (as happens to Babbitt in the film) than living in their own communities.⁴³

Putting *Music* aside, there have been some positive shifts in the entertainment industry in recent years with respect to autism representation.

Characters are being developed alongside autistic self-advocacy groups and portrayed by actors on the autism spectrum, such as Madison Bandy, a nonspeaking autistic girl of color who voices the lead character Renee in Pixar's 2020 animated short film *Loop*. Black autistic boys are superheroes in the educational TV show *Hero Elementary* and the 2017 film reboot of the *Power Rangers* franchise. Queer autistic media figures like comedian Hannah Gadsby have gained prominence and acclaim not despite their autism, but by centering their specific disabled experience in their creative work.

Besides autistic media characters and entertainment figures, individuals on the spectrum may identify with fictional characters who are “autistic coded.”⁴⁴ One such example is Abed Nadir on the TV sitcom *Community*, who possesses traits associated with autism that are recognizable to mass audiences, including a tendency to fidget, difficulty picking up social cues, and a love of routine.⁴⁵ This interpretive flexibility, which members of other marginalized groups also engage in, allows autistic people to see themselves more fully represented in a media text. These readings are also known as “autistic headcanons,” in that people on the spectrum create their own interpretations outside of what is official or canonical, such as fan fiction. As autistic writer Sarah Kurchak argues, “Headcanon after headcanon, autistic people are demanding—and envisioning—more from an industry that’s increasingly profiting from our lives.”⁴⁶ Such interpretations are not met without resistance though. Media creators of autistic coded characters may distance themselves from an obligation to portray autism in a fully fleshed out manner.⁴⁷ Autistic fans who claim existing characters as their own sometimes encounter vocal opposition among other fans who associate autism with stigma and resist coupling beloved characters to what Goffman termed a “spoiled identity.”⁴⁸

Beyond mass media, the internet has been central to many speaking and nonspeaking autistic adults’ identity development as a space to reclaim the power to identify with autism, confront stereotypes, manage their visibility, engage in activism, and circulate new narratives.⁴⁹ Despite claims by some autism researchers that “in a sense, everyone is autistic online” (due to the lack of nonverbal social cues in online environments),⁵⁰ the relationship between being autistic and being online is far more complex, including challenges in performing disability “authentically” in relation to the social and communicative affordances of digital platforms.⁵¹ Self-representations and expressions of autistic culture are created, consumed, and shared through social media and online platforms like YouTube, TikTok, and Twitter.⁵² As artists and media

makers, autistic people may use online tools and platforms to express creativity in a manner that defies neurotypical conceptions of originality (e.g., employing repetition). There is no universal way in which autistic people encode and decode messages about autism in media or employ communication technology as a means of self-expression and identification.

IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT AMONG AUTISTIC YOUTH

Thus far in this chapter, the research presented on autistic identity development and how it is articulated through media has tended to focus on adults more than on young people.⁵³ Not a great deal is known about how children and adolescents who are diagnosed with autism develop their own sense of autistic identity and selfhood.⁵⁴ The work that does exist primarily focuses on older cisgender White boys on the spectrum without communication and intellectual disabilities, and less so on younger kids, girls and gender nonbinary youth, non-White children, and those who are nonspeaking or minimally speaking.⁵⁵ In some ways, how diverse autistic children and adolescents learn to think about themselves may have much in common with their neurotypical peers,⁵⁶ but there are also specific considerations for how they understand autism as a part of their identity.

Identity development can be particularly challenging for autistic youth because of the multiplicity of autism's meanings.⁵⁷ For example, adolescents on the spectrum report being unsure if autism is a disability.⁵⁸ The ways that children of different ages understand their diagnosis is not straightforward either.⁵⁹ Some autistic children's comprehension of autism may be basic, while others are self-aware and recognize how their behaviors distinguish them from others in various social contexts (e.g., compared to siblings or classmates). They may struggle with what to make of how autistic people are perceived negatively within society.⁶⁰ Some express ambivalence and work to reconcile their challenges with the strengths and assets that are also part of autism.⁶¹ They might ultimately embrace, contest, or reject the use of autism as an identity marker.⁶² Recent research with autistic college students in the United States suggests, though, that learning one is autistic at a younger age is associated with heightened well-being and quality of life.⁶³

There are a number of social factors shaping autistic children's overall identity development, including parental acceptance of a child's autism diagnosis and if or how they share that diagnosis with their child.⁶⁴ Non-autistic parents of autistic children sometimes struggle with how to explain

autism, and few report receiving advice for how to do so.⁶⁵ The language, terminology, and approach that they use can directly impact their child's self-image and self-knowledge.⁶⁶ The voluntary disclosure of a diagnosis by parents influences if an autistic child sees their autism in a positive or negative light.⁶⁷ Some caregivers may not initially make an autistic child aware of their diagnosis due to challenges in processing their own emotions about their child's disability.⁶⁸ Parental disclosure avoidance can lead to internal confusion for autistic children in the long-term about the reasons for their differences.⁶⁹ In discussing an autism diagnosis with their child, the experiences of autistic parents and nonautistic parents are similar yet different. Both groups of parents think it important to individualize the discussion to their specific child. Parents who are themselves on the spectrum, though, are less likely to think that telling their child that they are autistic will have a negative effect on them, and these parents feel more equipped to discuss autism with their autistic child without the help of professionals.⁷⁰

Beyond the family context, the level of autism acceptance in an autistic child's classroom, out-of-school activities, and community also impacts their self-esteem.⁷¹ Peer groups for autistic kids that are centered around shared interests can cultivate a positive sense of individual and collective identity.⁷² In Australia, for example, nonprofit organization Yellow Ladybugs runs informal social events for autistic girls and gender diverse children ages 5–16 in order to foster belonging, connection, and pride in being autistic.⁷³ Children whose autism goes undetected in the early years, which is more likely to be girls and children of color, may miss out on developing a positive sense of autistic identity.⁷⁴ It is important for all kids to learn to be comfortable with who they are, but for young people on the spectrum, developing an autistic identity can help them especially to feel understood, supported, and included.⁷⁵

AUTISTIC YOUTH, IDENTITY, AND MEDIA

Print, screen, and interactive media provide kids in general with endless materials and tools for developing their own self-concept, and emerging research suggests that this is also true for young people on the autism spectrum.⁷⁶ Examples of media shaping children's identity development include the fictional characters that preschoolers adopt in their pretend play, the virtual spaces and digital games that school-age children use to explore their interests and talents, and the online communities in which teens take part to find people who are like them.⁷⁷ Digital media have significant implications for how kids develop self-image and cultivate self-esteem throughout

childhood, particularly for youth who might feel uncomfortable expressing themselves in offline spaces due to pervasive ableism, racism, xenophobia, and homophobia.⁷⁸ The role of media in the identity development of autistic children may or may not be congruent with the way it is for young people from other socially and culturally marginalized groups, including those with other disabilities.⁷⁹

Autistic children encounter both unique barriers and opportunities to using media and technology to develop a stable, coherent, and meaningful sense of self. The dominant media messages about autism that autistic children and their peers absorb are largely negative and harmful to their mental health, well-being, and self-esteem. These messages include inaccurate and incomplete fictional portrayals of autistic people.⁸⁰ A 2019 report from the Geena Davis Institute on Gender and Media found that 1–8 percent of leading characters in popular shows and movies for children had a disability, and that such characters were more likely than nondisabled characters to be depicted as violent or helpless or to ultimately die.⁸¹ Driven by the momentum of the disability rights movement over the past decade and the passage of landmark legislation like the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990, literature has at least been one main source for children and adolescents to find accurate stories about disability and neurodivergence.⁸² Speaking and nonspeaking autistic authors have written picture books and young adult novels addressing pertinent topics such as sensory processing challenges and bullying.⁸³ Informational handbooks like *The Spectrum Girl's Survival Guide: How to Grow Up Awesome and Autistic* speak directly to youth autistic audiences from the vantage point of a peer.⁸⁴

Digital media, social media, and video games can also provide important networked spaces for autistic young people to find autism acceptance, challenge mischaracterizations of disabled people, and further develop their autistic identities.⁸⁵ For example, children on the spectrum may cultivate an enriched sense of self through traditional digital identity markers such as avatars.⁸⁶ Autistic youth also use an array of media artifacts including YouTube videos and blogs to spread cultural acceptance of autistic people.⁸⁷ Social media provides a space for communicating their unique experiences.⁸⁸ Instagram and TikTok creators like Paige Layle have used the platforms to document themselves stimming (e.g., flapping hands, twirling fingers) alongside the catchy, rhythmic music that is popular as a soundtrack to user-generated videos on the apps.⁸⁹ As it pertains to justice broadly, autistic teens like Greta Thunberg and Dara McAnulty have used

Twitter to great effect to lead and organize other activists, young and old, around a global movement for environmentalism,⁹⁰ though doing so also opens them up to ableist harassment online.⁹¹

Media and sociality are each central to autistic children's self-descriptions. They may internalize messages about autism being the "geek syndrome" and related to nerdiness or having deep knowledge of popular culture.⁹² Shared interests around media can become part of how they identify with others and learn to conceptualize autism itself.⁹³ Recent work surveying autistic children ages 7–14 about their self-identified strengths, interests, and positive attributes found that when asked "What do you enjoy most?," a majority responded with "technology and gaming" (a little over 50 percent) followed by "social interaction" (almost 35 percent).⁹⁴ The everyday dynamics, however, between self-identification, media, and sociality are underexplored in the literature on autism and child development. The next section provides deeper insight into how mass, digital, and social media afford identity formation and expression for diverse autistic youth.

MEDIA AND AUTISTIC CHILDREN'S IDENTITY FORMATION

Among the children that I spent time with for this book, there was great variation in terms of autism diagnosis disclosure by their parents. Factors shaping these conversations include the child's age, their level of cognition, and their parents' comfort level. But even children who did not have these talks with their parents were able to articulate feeling different or identifying with disability in some manner. Media plays a key role in how they make sense of this part of themselves, though the effectiveness and utility of media are limited by a family's access to essential resources like appropriate mental health support. To this end, I identified three main themes: (1) autistic children as audience members for mass-produced media featuring disabled, autistic, and autistic coded characters; (2) kids on the spectrum producing, making, and sharing media as a means of working through their identification with autism; and (3) girls exploring gender and its intersections with autistic identity through their engagement with media.

AUTISTIC YOUTH AS DISABILITY MEDIA AUDIENCES

Several autistic children consumed mass media such as movies, television shows, and books that allowed them to recognize and name certain characteristics about themselves. Some of this media was explicitly about autism,

while others pertained to disability more broadly. Children also tried to understand their autism through autistic-coded media characters. In all of these cases, their media reception was shaped by social and cultural factors including school curriculum, peers, and family members.

MEDIA ABOUT DISABILITY One media text that multiple autistic children ages 8 to 13 discussed as a favorite was *Wonder*, a 2012 *New York Times* best-selling children's novel by R. J. Palacio (with subsequent spinoff books) that was made into a 2017 movie starring Julia Roberts. *Wonder* is about a young boy named Auggie who has a significant congenital facial abnormality and his turbulent transition from homeschooling to a new school in fifth grade. Through Auggie's story, *Wonder* tackles difficult issues such as bullying and prejudice, as well as friendship and self-acceptance. While Auggie is not autistic, a number of children on the spectrum found his encounters with ableism and discrimination to be compelling and relatable.

Eleven-year-old son Jackson (White, boy) did not really know what autism meant, according to his mom, Linda, but he was developing a relationship to disability through his consumption of all things *Wonder*. When I sat down for my interview with Linda at the family's home in a working-class neighborhood in Boston, I noticed a library copy of *Auggie & Me: Three Wonder Stories*, one of the *Wonder* spin-off books, on the dining room table. "They're reading that in school," Linda said. Jackson's class had also read the original *Wonder* book and watched the movie in class. "Whatever he's into at school, he looks for when we go to the library because he likes to read them here with me," Linda said. She speculated that the reason Jackson was attracted to *Wonder* specifically was "because it talks so much about how different the kids are, and he talks about that. Like how different Auggie was to other people and how the kids didn't want to interact with him." The experience was close to Jackson, as he had been bullied repeatedly in school too. Linda said, "I feel like sometimes he feels like that himself because the kids don't interact with him, or he feels like he's different."

Though Jackson mumbled and had difficulty expressing himself through oral speech, he was clearer and more resolute when talking about Auggie than during the rest of our interview. When I asked him what his favorite movie was, he chose *Wonder*. Not only had he seen it, he said, but he was also reading the *Wonder* books. "I read the number one *Wonder*," Jackson said, "It has a lot of narrators: Auggie; Via, Justin's sister; Justin; Jack Will." I asked him what he liked about *Wonder*, to which he replied, "It shows Auggie. When

he had that thing on the back of his head and also he got bullied by Julian and he got a friend, Jack Will. And he had a sister, Via. That was all." "What do you like about Auggie?" I inquired further. Discussing a final scene in the book, he replied, "It shows that he's a wonder. At the end part. Whispering to his mom. And she said, 'He's actually a wonder.'" Jackson seemed excited to talk about Auggie, so I asked, "And what does that mean, to be 'a wonder'?" "Because, uh . . . so people know that they're wonders as well," he said. "Hm, I like that," I replied, "Did it make you feel like you're a wonder, too?" "Oh, yeah," he responded. Jackson explained the appeal of *Wonder* by listing its many narrators and orienting me to its central relationships. In Auggie, Jackson recognized someone else who had been treated like an outcast because of his disability, and wishfully identified with how Auggie maintained a strong sense of self despite great adversity.

Like Jackson, 8-year-old Karim (Middle Eastern/Algerian, boy) also did not yet have a full grasp on the meaning of autism, but he had latched on to something personally resonant about Auggie. Karim's mom, Nour, along with Karim's therapists, had decided until middle school to avoid talking about autism by name with him, instead focusing on language about difference. "We approached that with his CBT [cognitive behavioral therapist] and with his [therapy] providers in a way where, 'Everybody has his strengths and weaknesses. Everybody is different,'" she said. Interestingly, Nour said that language from *Wonder* was one of Karim's preferred "scripts." A common part of autistic people's vocal repertoires, scripting is the act of repeating lines, phrases, and sounds from the speech of others, particularly from movies, television shows, and other media. Nour said that Karim would specifically script about "what Auggie went through." Scripts can provide a scaffold, or form of support, for autistic children to master semantics as well as a shorthand for articulating their feelings and state of mind.⁹⁵ While he was not yet able to name or speak about autism, Karim was employing mass media content to share something about his disabled experience.

MEDIA ABOUT AUTISM When explicitly autistic characters were featured in movies, TV shows, and books, children on the spectrum had various reactions, including being curious about and critical of their portrayal. Books about autism were bound up with 9-year-old Cody's (White, boy) initial understandings of his diagnosis. As Cody told it, "We went to the beach and then we were going to the library after. So, Mom tells me that I have autism,

so we just checked out a bunch of books about it.” The books “helped me learn about people with autism,” Cody said. His mom, Meg, explained that they picked ones “that were geared toward his age and a little bit older because he can read and understand at a much higher level. To read those was really helpful to him.” There was one fictional book written from the point of view of an autistic adolescent that included descriptions of what precipitated the character’s meltdowns, or a temporary loss of behavioral control in response to overwhelming emotional situations or sensory stimuli. “That was a good tool,” said Meg, “because Cody would come to us with certain sections and say, ‘I understand what he’s feeling’ and we could read it and kind of understand what was in his brain.” Another book, *The Survival Guide for Kids with Autism Spectrum Disorders (And Their Parents)* by Elizabeth Verdick and Elizabeth Reeve, offered an age-appropriate overview of autism. Meg said of the book, “It was written to a kid’s level. You know, ‘You might be scared. You might be excited.’ A little bit of everything. I think it was well-written that way.”

Cody and Meg talked about how books not only helped Cody understand autism but aided his peers’ and younger brother’s understanding as well. Cody lived in a wealthy Boston suburb and was in a mainstream, public school classroom in which autism was openly talked about. He got to lead a conversation in his class about their reading of the book *Rules* by Cynthia Lord, which is about a nondisabled preteen girl struggling to accept her autistic brother. While the book has generated criticism in disability circles for centering on a nonautistic protagonist,⁹⁶ Cody nonetheless was thrilled to have a chance to educate his classmates. Cody said, “Well, everyone in my class knows [I have autism]. Like, we’re reading a book called *Rules* and a character in it has autism.” Meg chimed in, “Yeah, you were pretty excited about that. And you got a chance to talk about it.” Meg said that another book for slightly younger kids, *All My Stripes: A Story for Children with Autism* by Danielle Royer and Shaina Rudolph, was additionally helpful for Cody’s little brother, Mason, to understand the diagnosis.

The outcomes of these conversations and information were very positive for Cody. Prior to using the autism label, Meg and her husband had talked with Cody “about how his brain worked differently.” After they told Cody about his diagnosis and he got to read about autism, “he was excited to put a name to it and understand it. It was a relief to him to know that there’s nothing wrong with him.” Providing him with books about autism set him on

a path toward self-acceptance and open communication. “He’s expressed [that] having that diagnosis has freed him up to express to us some of his social frustrations and that he wishes he could talk more easily,” said Meg, “Like when he gets excited in his brain, to be able to express that to a friend or talk with a friend about a topic.” Based on their positive experience, Meg encouraged other parents to use media “to help their child, as much as they can, [to] understand [about autism].” Cody viewed his relationship to autism and receiving an autism diagnosis in a healthy light, thanks in part to his family and classmates’ support and enthusiasm, as well as to kid-friendly books about autism that gave him a sense of clarity about himself and autonomy over his own story.

In contrast to Cody, fictional depictions of autistic people generated dissonance for Raul. For a number of reasons, Raul’s mom, Nina, had not shown him episodes of popular TV shows like ABC’s *The Good Doctor* and Netflix’s *Atypical* with autistic lead characters (though played by nonautistic actors). For one, she was not a frequent viewer herself and thought that the topics covered in the shows were a bit mature for an 11-year-old like Raul. But the main reason Nina did not share them was because of the shows’ one-dimensional portrayals of autism and lack of nonspeaking autistic characters. Raul “isn’t *The Good Doctor*, he isn’t Sheldon [Cooper from the TV sitcom *The Big Bang Theory*], he isn’t the guy from *Atypical*,” she said. Unlike those White and autistic or autistic-coded characters, Raul is Latino, nonspeaking, and uses augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) technology to express himself.

Raul’s identity was not only tied to his diagnosis of autism but also how he communicated, which I will detail later in this chapter. He regularly sported T-shirts with slogans like “AAC is My Jam,” in reference to his use of assistive communication technology. Because of this, a different TV show—the ABC sitcom *Speechless*—was more compelling to Raul because it starred a nonspeaking lead character, even though the character’s speech disability was due to cerebral palsy and not autism.⁹⁷ “We did tell Raul about [*Speechless*],” said Nina, “We would watch it and he would kind of come in and out of the living room [to watch]. So for me, I found that to be fulfilling and empowering.” Raul’s lack of singular focus on the stationary screen was less a sign of disinterest in the TV show and more indicative of his sensory need for vestibular movement. Echoing the earlier discussion of disabled media characters, it was

more compelling for Nina, if not her son too, to watch someone on TV who communicated like Raul than who shared the exact same clinical diagnosis.

MEDIA ABOUT AUTISTIC-CODED CHARACTERS Even though Raul did not identify with the autistic-coded character of Sheldon Cooper, the tremendous global popularity of *The Big Bang Theory* provided some autistic children with a well-known character with which to identify. Jamie said that her 10-year-old son Levi (Latino and White, boy) had noticed similarities between himself and Sheldon, who appears in both *The Big Bang Theory* and a spinoff, *Young Sheldon*. Jamie noted that while “it hasn’t even come out on the show that [Sheldon is] on the spectrum . . . , [Levi] just finds him very funny and seems to relate to him.” Besides Sheldon’s brand of humor, Jamie suspected that Levi found something kindred in their shared interests. He picked up on the fact that Sheldon also “wears a lot of the superhero shirts” and that he and his friends “play [the board game *Settlers of*] *Catan*” too.

Unlike Meg, Jamie struggled with how to disclose her son’s autism diagnosis to him. “Would it help him to understand who he is and how he functions, or would he fixate on that and make it worse?” she wondered. The decision was complicated by Jamie’s lack of a local support network and an itinerant lifestyle due to her husband’s job as a traveling church youth pastor. “Maybe [we’ll have] that conversation with one of the specialists who gets to know him, about how we can go about doing that and what would be the benefits,” she said. Jamie was also unsure just how much Levi understood about his diagnosis. “I don’t think he knows it yet,” she said, but “what he will say is he has ‘anger issues’ or has ‘trouble controlling his temper.’”

For that aspect of his inner life, Jamie turned to a Disney movie. “We watched *Beauty and the Beast* somewhat recently and we were like, ‘You have trouble controlling your temper like the Beast,’” she said. Though the character was a familiar touchstone, Jamie also worried that using media in this way also ran the risk of oversimplifying Levi’s experience. “I wonder if [telling him about his diagnosis] would make him feel better,” she shared, as if to say, “It’s not just you. You’re not a bad boy.” In the absence of a more robust support system, characters that were not definitively labeled as disabled or autistic helped Levi understand his social and emotional states. At the same time, relying on fictional characters to explain significant psychological challenges, especially a monstrous and villainous (although ultimately lovable)

character like the Beast, was no replacement for high-quality clinical and therapeutic care.

PRODUCING, MAKING, AND SHARING AUTISTIC IDENTITY

Children on the spectrum were not limited to consuming media that helped them to reconcile aspects of their identity as an autistic person. They also used online platforms to create and distribute media as a means of expressing their identity, one linked both explicitly and implicitly to being autistic as well as to different ways of being autistic.

ONLINE COMMUNITIES When I asked 13-year-old Adrian (White, boy) if there was a mass media character with whom he most closely identified, he explained that he did not have one—but he had “a thing called an OC, which is . . . I made a character that I cleverly named after myself because I’m super creative and it’s not like anyone else did that.” Without missing a beat, he added, “I’m being sarcastic. Literally everyone does that.” By “OC,” Adrian was referring to a term used within anime and fan fiction culture to describe an “original character” that does not already exist or is only mentioned in passing within a media property.⁹⁸ Designed and invented by fans, sometimes in their own likenesses, OCs inspire creative practices, including fan art and cosplay, offline and on social media platforms like Tumblr and Amino.⁹⁹

The website Scratch was Adrian’s primary site for identity play and creative practice through his OC (also named Adrian), though he also drew upon and incorporated multiple social and cultural references into his creations. As an online community and digital programming platform, Scratch is a rich site for fan culture and interest-driven creative pursuits among adolescents.¹⁰⁰ Scratch community members regularly use the platform to generate animation, interactive stories, and games about their OCs. The website is also a space for difficult conversations and negotiations around identity and marginality. Young people, for example, have used the platform and their OCs to engage in discussions around race, media representation, and the lack of racial diversity within the Scratch community itself.¹⁰¹

As a means of self-expression, Adrian modeled his OC after himself in several ways. With shoulder-length brown hair, pale skin, and a hoodie sweatshirt, “Adrian” physically looked like him. Adrian’s OC was additionally accessorized with a long stick with blue duct tape wrapped around the middle. Adrian showed me the actual stick as he walked me through the sunroom

of his house. The room was packed with Rubbermaid bins and Ziplock bags full of costumes and props that his whole family used for taking part in live-action role playing games, including a giant foam sword nearly as tall as me. "I've got so many cool things and my favorite is this stick with duct tape on it," Adrian chuckled. When he gave me a tour of his bedroom (with his mom within earshot), he asked, "Does this look familiar?" picking up a small LEGO set and figurine, "There's a sweatshirt and a staff?" "Oh, it's your character!" I responded, immediately recognizing that he had built a replica of his OC out of LEGO bricks.

Besides bearing a physical resemblance to Adrian, his OC was also a way for him to work through his own personal narrative and emotional journey. In the hands of Adrian's OC, the duct-taped stick transformed into a magic staff that held symbolic meaning for him. "So honestly," Adrian said, "I think I've told like several people that this is what I consider a 'comfort item.' I think, yeah I pretty much have fallen in love with this thing," he said of the stick. From talking with his mother, Brianna, I knew that Adrian could use a consistent and reliable source of comfort, as the bullying and victimization he dealt with at school, discussed in chapter 1, had been intensely traumatizing. Because of the subject's sensitivity, I did not pry further when Adrian shared, "I'd say I made this character because, I think—I actually, I'm not going to go into my story because that's kind of a personal thing for me." Adrian drew a boundary at this moment, marked out a space for privacy, and felt comfortable enough to assert his autonomy.

Personality-wise, Adrian's OC was not only a reflection of himself, but also of media characters with whom he identified. The one he connected to the most was Leo in the *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* fantasy adventure book series by Rick Riordan. Leo's witty commentary on relationships struck a chord with Adrian. "I personally love his sense of humor," he said, "and that's what I try to build into my OC." Adrian did not explicitly say that Leo was on the spectrum, but he gestured toward it in his description of the character. Adrian's favorite line of Leo's in the book had to do with the fact that the character was the son of the Greek god Hephaestus. News of Leo's paternity was relayed to him by a Roman, whose civilization referred to the same god by the name of Vulcan. Adrian said, "My favorite line [of Leo's] was, 'Vulcan, why son of Vulcan? I don't even watch *Star Trek*.' And after, there was this other paragraph where he was referred to as Mr. Spock. I think honestly that's when I'm like, 'Okay, this character is

great.” Adrian’s favorite lines from Leo were ones that referenced the cultural phenomenon of *Star Trek’s* Spock, a media character commonly read as autistic-coded both outside and within the autism community.¹⁰²

In Scratch, Adrian built a fictional world to experiment with storytelling and code. He crafted animated interactive storylines featuring his OC in a Scratch Studio that he called “Geekdom.” The studio was a central webpage collection of all of the Scratch projects that he had made with the multiple Geekdom characters that he had invented.¹⁰³ His projects included one inspired by the fantasy role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons*. In another, Adrian embedded his OC within his own interactive version of the multiplayer first person shooter video game *Overwatch*. Adrian had made an animated introduction to all of the Geekdom characters in a sort of programmed slide show, or what is known as a “character sheet” in role-playing games.¹⁰⁴ The one for Adrian’s OC’s read, “a mix of things. depends on whats going on. logical thinker.”¹⁰⁵ For Adrian, applying logic to a situation was central to his conception of and relationship to autism. When I asked Adrian what autism meant to him, he summed it up by saying, “Overall, it’s basically my ability to think logically and just work with my mind better. It’s not really got an actual definition to me.” Using the multimedia capabilities of Scratch, Adrian was able to combine and remix media properties in order to build a character in his likeness and a virtual world that accommodated the workings of his mind.

NETWORKED PUBLISHING On account of his dyslexia, writing was not Adrian’s self-identified strength. He was able to express himself, however, using the block-based code of Scratch and its simplified tools for making interactive stories. For Raul, words, writing, and literature were central to his self-concept, not only as an autistic person, but a nonspeaking person on the spectrum who communicates using a combination of an AAC app, a letterboard (i.e., a physical board with letters to manually point to), and a keyboard. When I asked Raul, through a written interview, if there was something that he was really interested in or loved to talk about, he said, “I am very interested in writing” and he shared that technology “opens a world of learning without assistance.” Back in 2013, when I first met Raul at age 5 and interviewed his mom, Nina, a college professor, she was supporting his authorship and helping him to develop a sense of autistic pride. At

their dining room table, she showed me “a photo book” that she and Raul had put together to share with his classmates to “help normalize this idea of him communicating with an iPad.”

Raul’s intertwined identity as a writer and autistic person continued to develop over his childhood. By the time I interviewed Nina in 2019, she said of her son, “I think that his autistic identity is pretty strong. When he was 6 years old, he referred to himself as ‘Autistic Raul.’” At age 11, he enjoyed watching cartoons on YouTube and said that he liked to “go on my bed, listen to music, and document stories.” When asked if there was something that he did not like about media and technology, he shared that “I don’t like apps that influence people to perceive themselves a certain way,” highlighting how he valued authenticity online. Raul said that his favorite movies were either from the *Lord of the Rings* or the *Harry Potter* series because “they both have mythical characters that have mythical abilities like myself.” Raul’s abilities, much like those of other nonspeaking people, were often shortchanged. Individuals with communication disabilities face rampant discrimination, including being denied self-determination and equal opportunities to meaningfully participate in all aspects of life. The perspectives of AAC users are also marginalized within the autism community and underrepresented in autism research.¹⁰⁶

Raul channeled his frustrations with being misunderstood into his writing. In third grade, his teacher had tasked each student with writing a short nonfiction book, and he chose to write about being autistic and nonspeaking. Raul’s teacher encouraged him and his parents to self-publish the book online. In it, Raul writes about the challenges and struggles he faces, particularly difficulties in coordinating his brain, sensory system, and motor control to communicate in a way that is easily interpreted by others. “The book basically is his experience with autism,” said Nina, “So it’s all about his identity.” Raul writes about “the things that make him unique and cool as an autistic child,” she said. That message about identity had resonated with other kids on the spectrum, who read the book and left messages for Raul through email and social media. Nina said, “We’ve gotten nothing but positive feedback from those kids and just saying thank you. Kind of like ‘I don’t feel alone when I read your work.’” Being able to write about his point of view, as well as share his story widely with others, allowed Raul to come into his own as an autistic writer, with both autism and authorship as key components of his identity.

MEDIATED EXPLORATIONS OF GENDER, GIRLHOOD, AND AUTISM

Raul's vantage point as a nonspeaking Latino person speaks to the multiplicity of autistic identities and the intersections of autism with various aspects of identity. Seeing as autism was originally clinically defined largely through its presentation in White cisgender males,¹⁰⁷ autistic girls and gender-nonconforming children, particularly those of color, also contend with a relative invisibility that extends to media and popular culture. Some autistic girls and their parents noted this absence and remarked upon its impact on identity development. Identity exploration and experiences of autistic girlhood were informed not only by media but also by other gender norms and gendered institutions as well, such as the family.

REPRESENTATIONS OF AUTISTIC GIRLS IN MEDIA Over the course of my fieldwork, an autistic girl character was introduced on the US version of one of the most popular TV shows in the world, *Sesame Street*. Sesame Workshop, the nonprofit behind the program, sought input from autism organizations and researchers, feedback that led to the Workshop's deliberate choice to make the character a girl in order to "make it clear that girls can be on the spectrum, too."¹⁰⁸ The result was Julia, a 4-year-old girl Muppet first introduced in 2015 as part of the Workshop's "*Sesame Street* and Autism: See Amazing in All Children" initiative aimed at reducing autism stigma.¹⁰⁹ Julia's unveiling garnered significant publicity, including a television debut on the news program *60 Minutes* in the weeks leading up to her arrival on *Sesame Street* in 2017.¹¹⁰ Because the Workshop launched Julia gradually during my years in the field, I was able to notice emerging awareness of her among parents, and to some extent, autistic children. Parent reactions were largely positive in terms of the similarities they saw between their children and Julia, but some also expressed ambivalence around the choice to make the first autistic Muppet a girl.

Several caregivers of preschool-age autistic girls had an emotional reaction to seeing Julia on screen. I talked to 3-year-old Emma's (White, girl) mom, Nikki, the day after the airing of the *60 Minutes* segment that served as Julia's public debut, which both Nikki and Emma's maternal grandma, Sue Ellen, had watched. Nikki mentioned how Julia reflected Emma in a way that she had never see on TV. "They talk about how she flaps, [the way] Emma sometimes does," Nikki said. "I'm thrilled that they're gonna have a character like that." Sue Ellen also chimed in to say that she had already browsed Amazon to see if there were any Julia books to buy. Angelica,

mother of 4-year-old Bella (Cape Verdean, girl), was similarly touched by Julia. She said, "When I was watching it by myself, because getting to know the character, I cried because I'm like, 'This girl is my daughter.'" Angelica had hoped that Bella would connect with Julia too and was disappointed that was not the case. "I wanted my daughter so much to like [Julia], want to watch it and be engaged, but she had no desire," Angelica said.

Though Bella may not have been enthralled, 8-year-old Amaya (Black, Latina, and White; girl) had innately recognized something of herself in Julia. At the end of my home observation of her media use, her mom, Kimberly, shared with me that she had told Amaya beforehand that I "worked at *Sesame Street* and she got excited." I suddenly remembered that before our first interview, I had shared with Kimberly that I had interned during college with *Sesame Street* when explaining some of my professional background. Feeling slightly put on the spot, I realized that I had some photos on my phone taken at a recent Sesame Workshop alumni event with a few of the Muppet puppets, including Julia. "So that one's Julia," I said, showing Amaya the photo. "A big Julia?" Amaya inquired, remarking on the relative size of the puppet. Yes, I replied, and showed her another photo that I had taken of some Julia toys, including a plush figurine. "Julia doll? You like Julia?" Amaya asked, to which I replied affirmatively.

Amaya, as it turned out, was a big fan of Julia. She was more animated and conversational talking about the character with me than about any other topic, though this may have been related to the visual prompting from my photos. Kimberly said that when Amaya watched Julia on *Sesame Street* and observed her "doing stims just like her" such as hand flapping, she saw "someone like her on TV." This was important, considering that while Kimberly had told other people that her daughter was autistic, she had not relayed that information to Amaya because she said that she did not want Amaya to think that "anything is wrong with her." As with Karim earlier, despite her mother's reluctance to talk about her diagnosis, Amaya had identified with a disabled character long before she was given the language to describe her own disability and identity as an autistic person.

Other parent reactions, though, were less positive and raised questions over to what extent Julia was, or even should be held up as, representative of all autistic children. Bailey, mother of 6-year-old Olivia (White, girl), said that it was "really weird that they chose [the character to be] a girl. . . . [They] should have done a boy because it's so much more common in boys." Bailey

presumably saw the gender skew in autism diagnoses as an immutable biological fact and not a social construction, one that might even shift if Julia's inclusion on *Sesame Street* were to bring attention to gaps in autism diagnoses among girls. Bailey's opinion was likely shaped by the fact that the only autistic girl she personally knew was Olivia. On the basis of gender, Bailey also questioned the extent to which children on the autism spectrum would identify with Julia. She said, "I feel like you're going to find less kids that can relate to it because there's less girls on the spectrum." Bailey's reasoning that autistic boys would ostensibly not relate to Julia belied deeper myths about gender and identification in media, namely that boys will not identify with girl characters, but girls will identify with boy characters.¹¹¹

Bailey's assessment of the majority of autistic children's possible identification with Julia was notably absent any commentary on racial differences. She made no mention of Julia's implicit racial coding as White through her yellow Muppet felt, red hair, and green eyes. This omission may have been because White children are more likely to receive an autism diagnosis, thus following Bailey's logic of "majority rules," or on account of Bailey being White herself. That being said, the fact that Julia is coded White was not a barrier to Amaya's identification with the character. As an Afro-Latina, Amaya found similarities in her and Julia both being girls who liked to stim, even if she did not see her brown skin represented in the Muppet. Ultimately, Amy, mom of 5-year-old Isabella (White, girl), said it best when she noted that "Julia is not gonna represent any one child because they're all so different and a mix of strengths and weaknesses."

MEDIA AND AUTISTIC GIRLHOOD Girls on the spectrum also used media to explore their multifaceted identities. Understanding how Casey's ideas about girlhood were influenced by media like *Free to Be . . . You and Me* requires seeing her identity development as both transgender and autistic as strongly connected and guided by multiple social factors. Casey lived in a household that did not resemble a heteronormative nuclear family. Her mom, Jennifer, was polyamorous, and she and Casey currently resided with Jennifer's boyfriend, his other partner, two other housemates and their two kids, ages 6 and 2. Jennifer said that "most of the folks that live in this house are family, but blood family is just me and her because I've cut the other folks out of my life." Jennifer was not in contact with Casey's biological father, who was abusive, and did not talk to her own parents because they

would not refer to Casey by her preferred pronouns and Jennifer wanted to protect her daughter's mental health.

Casey was not just a transgender autistic child living in a household accepting of autism and LGBTQ individuals, but with people who embraced their own autistic and queer identities. Casey "knows she's autistic," Jennifer said. She had explained autism to Casey from an in-group perspective, saying that "we think a little bit differently than some people because we're autistic. It's a pride thing. We talk about it, and we try to remove stigma from it entirely." The fluid composition of Casey's household also brought her into contact with other autistic and queer people. Jennifer said that "a couple years ago, there was another kid who lived here . . . part time, also on the spectrum." Casey and that child "would talk [about the TV show] *Thomas the Tank Engine*, play *Thomas the Tank Engine*. I know, very stereotypical," Jennifer said, alluding to the fact that trains are appealing to many autistic individuals.¹¹²

Casey's story is unique for a transgender autistic girl in that, from an early age, she received affirmation of her identity and support for her gender- and autism-related needs at home. Adolescents who are both autistic and gender minority (i.e., transgender, nonbinary, gender nonconforming) report social difficulties including "specific challenges with gender discernment and gender affirmation resulting from autism-related self-awareness and/or executive function differences" as well as communicating their needs around gender (e.g., correcting pronouns that other people use to identify them).¹¹³ On a more positive note, some also describe the psychosocial benefits of connecting with other gender-diverse autistic youth and "being able to have a journey and . . . to talk and share that with people."¹¹⁴ Casey could connect with a number of people in her life who were autistic, gender minority, or both.

Besides *Free to Be*, Jennifer provided Casey with several opportunities through media for her identity exploration to be validated and to see herself and the immediate world around her reflected. "Representation matters," Jennifer said, "We try to do that in all the ways." Casey was very into comic books and graphic novels, which Jennifer indulged by bringing her to PAX, a series of gaming culture festivals. Jennifer said that "at PAX, [I] specifically asked [vendors] for some queer stuff. . . . You know, one princess saving another and falling in love." Jennifer tried to present queer stories as the norm for Casey. "It's not like [Casey] specifically knew that I was looking for queer material," said Jennifer, "just, you know, this is how they come."

Seeing as autistic gender-diverse adolescents report challenges verbalizing and self-advocating for their gender, as well as benefitting from concrete and straightforward explanations about gender,¹¹⁵ Jennifer was providing Casey with the building blocks of identity exploration through media.

REFLECTIONS ON IDENTITY

The autistic identity of children on the spectrum is but one aspect of their self-concept, which grows more complex over childhood and adolescence. The process by which their identities develop is informed by several layers of social influence. In this chapter, I focused on the role of media—online communities, websites, social media, books, movies, and television programs—as one key factor shaping autistic identity development. This includes the larger media culture and the individuals in a child’s immediate environment who directly impact their engagement with media (i.e., family members, peers, teachers). These young people’s stories highlight tensions among theories of the self, including the extent to which identity is cohesive. Taken as a whole, a number of discussion topics emerge.

AUTISTIC IDENTITY AND MEDIA

With respect to autistic identity development, I found a great deal of variation in terms of whether or not children knew or could comprehend that they were autistic, disabled, or different in some manner. This is to be expected, considering the relatively wide age range of children and their levels of cognition. As prior work suggests, parents’ comfort with disclosing an autism diagnosis to their autistic child also varied. With or without language from their parents to describe autism, children still were attracted to media that made them feel seen, putting a different spin on theories of self and identity. This included depictions and descriptions of similar behaviors (e.g., flapping), communication needs (e.g., using AAC, difficulties communicating sensory needs), and experiences (e.g., bullying). Not every autistic child like Casey and Cody has the same cognitive ability to understand autism as an identity category. But even kids who have not been told about being on the spectrum, like Amaya and Karim, be it because of their age or level of development, might still be using print, screen, and interactive media to figure things out for themselves.

MEDIA REPRESENTATION

Among explicit media representations of autism, with which autistic children might identify or explore what it means to be on the spectrum, very little exists that is accurate and authentic. This may be due to a lack of accessible opportunities for autistic artists, producers, and creators within the creative industries.¹¹⁶ Books did seem to provide more support than other media among school-age kids on the spectrum to develop a positive autistic identity centered around self-acceptance and the acceptance of others. There is a need for more fictional books to be narrated by child autistic characters and for memoirs written from an autistic adolescent's point of view, like Raul's self-published online book. Autistic kids deserve opportunities to take ownership of their own narratives. Cody's story highlights how, in school settings, books can facilitate conversations about autism that are led by autistic adolescents and scaffolded by trained educators.

These young people's perspectives also highlight how identity development and identification with media characters are not just individual processes, but relational and discursive as well.¹¹⁷ Interestingly, media did not necessarily have to be about autism explicitly (such as the book *Wonder* and TV show *Speechless*) or even about disability (like *Free to Be*) to make a positive impact on autistic children's identity development. *Sesame Street's* Julia seemed to appeal most to family members of people on the spectrum. Meanwhile, characters like the protagonist of *Rules*, a sibling, were useful for children like Cody in navigating their social worlds. This complicates assumptions about the linearity of autism representation in media and its benefits. Centering *Rules* on a sibling did not detract from the story or its usefulness to Cody because his identity is not completely self-determined. Autistic characters developed in consultation and/or led by autistic individuals are obviously important, but the children in this chapter made it clear that family members, even fictional ones, matter in shaping their identity development, as do experiences other than those labeled as autistic.

SOCIAL FACTORS

This is not to say that media is the only or even the most important social factor influencing children's autistic identity development. Positive representations of autism in the media cannot and should not supplant essential forms of support. Media representation is no replacement for high-quality

mental health services provided by schools, health-care providers, and non-profit community groups, as with the example of Levi. The conversations that autistic children have with their social partners around media also matter. Prior work has illustrated that parents affect their children's autistic identity formation, but this chapter highlights the role that media can play within those exchanges. Parents in general may support their child's positive uses of media by encouraging their child's media creation, scaffolding critical thinking, and using media to cultivate a strong sense of self. Parents of autistic kids can play a significant role by introducing media about autism to their child or giving their child space to play with media and explore their autistic identity. Autistic and otherwise neurodivergent parents like Jennifer have especially important insights to contribute in this respect within online and offline spaces.¹¹⁸ Jennifer, in fact, also shared how she and some other autistic people had led a discussion with neurotypical parents of autistic children at Casey's school about how to better promote their child's mental well-being based on their own neurodivergent points of view.

There is also much more to explore in how media informs young people's identity development at the intersections of race and autistic identity. White autistic individuals are far more likely to find gainful employment as adults, avoid dangerous encounters with police, and evade other forms of systemic racial bias. Social media platforms are vital spaces where different narratives about race, autism, and childhood are being shared, such as the #BlackAutisticJoy hashtag created by Kayla Smith and multimedia produced by neurodivergent Afro-Latina artist/scholar Jen White-Johnson and her autistic son, Knox.¹¹⁹ Television, film, and other mass media have not as yet caught up with the intersectionality of multiple marginalized identities and the depth of autistic youth experience outside of one that is primarily White and cisgender male.¹²⁰

IMPLICATIONS FOR SERVICES AND PROGRAMS

Lastly, these findings offer unique insights for educational and therapeutic programs.¹²¹ Clinical formulations of autism may not satisfy how kids on the spectrum understand their own conditions. Identifying with an endearing Beast, for example, might be beneficial in ways that identifying with poor social cognition or a neurological impairment might not be. Media and technology can also help connect autistic youth to one another, provide them with autistic role models, and allow them to develop a sense of

pride that is inclusive of being autistic. With regard to families, evaluation research published thus far has focused on the impact of *Sesame Street's* Julia and Sesame Workshop's corresponding outreach materials on the parents of autistic and nonautistic children, but not on autistic children.¹²² Julia has had some success in making a difference, but it is unclear if the primary benefactors of her inclusion on the show are autistic youth themselves.

Though outside factors affect autistic youth awareness of and attitudes toward autism, these young people also actively make meaning of their diagnosis as both a label and a cultural identity through their consumption and creation of media. Identity is an important aspect of the sociotechnical shaping of sociality because what it means to have an identity is influenced by both media and society and because social and technical forces impact the materials available to children to develop a sense of self. As with autistic adults, there are psychological benefits to providing young people on the spectrum with a positive sense of autistic belonging through media. The ethnographic work presented in this chapter can help us to figure out what aspects of mediated identity are helpful to whom and under what circumstances, with complexity and nuance. The next chapter explores the effects of media and technology on another context for autistic children's sense of cultural belonging: that of learning and informal educational settings.

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