

LEAP WORKSHOP · WED 18 NOVEMBER

Throwing Away the Master's Tools

Into the Neuroqueer

Jessica · Leeds Excellence in the Arts Programme

Key terms, defined

QUEERING

1

PEJORATIVE

A slur against gay men, from the late 1800s.



2

RECLAIMED

Reclaimed as a defiant umbrella term by activists like Queer Nation, late 1980s.



3

THEORISED → EXTENDED

Queer Theory (Judith Butler, 1990) makes it a verb: exposing gender as performed, and so changeable. Walker extends that verb to neurocognition.

PATHOLOGY PARADIGM

One “right” way for a brain to be. Diverging from it means Something Is Wrong With You.

NEURODIVERSITY PARADIGM

Diversity of minds is natural and valuable. There is no “normal” mind, any more than a “normal” ethnicity or gender.

What is “neuroqueer”?

- Coined in 2008 by Nick Walker (and arrived at independently around the same time by Athena Lynn Michaels-Dillon and others).
- First used as a verb: to “neuroqueer” is to subvert, defy, or disrupt neuronormativity and heteronormativity together, not separately.
- Then an adjective: neuroqueer theory, art, narrative, embodiment, space — anything shaped by that practice.
- And an identity: you don't have to be neurodivergent, queer, or both to neuroqueer — and you're neuroqueer if you do.

“You're neuroqueer if you neuroqueer.”

— Nick Walker, “Neuroqueer: An Introduction”

Discuss: which of these four did you already half-know without the label?

A BORROWED WARNING, PUT TO WORK

The Master's Tools

“The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.”

— Audre Lorde, 1979

Walker's move: if the pathology paradigm is the master's house, its language and assumptions are the tools — even the idea of a “normal person” is one of them.

WHAT'S A “TOOL”?

“...the dynamics, language, and conceptual frameworks that create and maintain social inequities.”

A TOOL OF OUR OWN

“...a tool that can help us to dismantle the master's house.”

— Nick Walker, “Throw Away the Master's Tools”

SO, IN PRACTICE

Today, we're neuroqueering by...

1

Undoing your own trained neuronormative habits, on purpose

2

Building spaces where non-normative ways of thinking and being are simply allowed

How? By reading two texts through two lenses at once — starting with autistic language on the page.

Autistic language, key terms and definitions

Julia Miele Rodas reframes traits long pathologised in autism diagnosis — repetition, echolalia, list-making — as literary techniques already prized across the canon.

Repetition

Words, phrases, or structures recur — read as rhythm and intensity, not error.

Echolalia

Language repeated back, sometimes exactly, sometimes reshaped in the repeating.

List-making

Cataloguing, sequencing, litany — verbal order imposed through accumulation.

Neologism

Inventing or reworking a word rather than reaching for an existing one.

Monologue

Sustained, self-directed speech not shaped around a listener's expected turn-taking.

Exclamation

Sudden, exclamatory outburst — Rodas's “ejaculation,” in the classical rhetorical sense.

*Terms and framework: Julia Miele Rodas, *Autistic Disturbances: Theorizing Autism Poetics from the DSM to Robinson Crusoe* (2018).*

Wild Nights – Wild Nights!

Wild Nights – Wild Nights!
Were I with thee
Wild Nights should be
Our luxury!

Futile – the winds –
To a Heart in port –
Done with the Compass –
Done with the Chart!

Rowing in Eden –
Ah – the Sea!
Might I but moor – tonight –
In thee!

Two lenses, one poem

1 Disrupting heteronormativity

- Who is she talking to? The addressee is never gendered or named.
- What references does she make — and queer? Look closely at “Eden.”
- Does the poem let you assume a heterosexual reading, or withhold it?

2 Reading for autistic language

- Where does the poem repeat itself — and what does the repetition do?
- Where does syntax fragment or compress, rather than run in full sentences?
- Try the terms from the last slide against specific lines.

Where the neuroqueer shows up

'thee' — never gendered, never named →

Wild Nights – Wild Nights!

Were I with thee

Wild Nights should be

Our luxury!

Futile – the winds –

To a Heart in port –

Done with the Compass –

Done with the Chart!

Eden — queered: whose garden, whose fall? →

Rowing in Eden –

Ah – the Sea!

Might I but moor – tonight –

In thee!

← *Repeats itself at once — intensity, not error (Rodas: repetition)*

← *Two clipped negations in a row — fragmented, list-like syntax*

DISCUSSION

Bringing the two readings together

Walker treats queering heteronormativity and queering neuronormativity as one entwined process, not two separate moves.

So — how does Dickinson neuroqueer?

Don Quixote, Part I, Chapter V

Context: Don Quixote has vanished for three days. When a farmer finally brings him home, his niece explains to the priest and barber what's been driving him mad.

“It was often my uncle's way to stay two days and nights together poring over these unholy books of misventures, after which he would fling the book away and snatch up his sword and fall to slashing the walls; and when he was tired out he would say he had killed four giants like four towers; and the sweat that flowed from him when he was weary he said was the blood of the wounds he had received in battle; and then he would drink a great jug of cold water and become calm and quiet, saying that this water was a most precious potion which the sage Esquife, a great magician and friend of his, had brought him.”

Two lenses, one scene

1 Reading the neuro register

- Where does hyperfocused reading tip into repetitive physical action?
- What happens to bodily sensation — sweat, exhaustion — once it's run through the story?
- Is the sword-slashing excitement, or regulation through motion — a stim?

2 Reading the queer register

- Who is the real object of his devotion — a lady, or the knights themselves?
- His most vivid relationship (Esquife) is entirely imagined, and entirely male. What does that do?
- His time runs by the books, not the village clock — how does that sit outside “normal” adult time?

Where the neuroqueer shows up

*Two days of unbroken
hyperfocus — a special
interest at its limit*



"it was often my uncle's way to stay
two days and nights together
poring over these unholy books
of misventures,

*Devotion poured into tales of men and
their exploits — not a lady*



*Reading discharged
straight into repetitive
motion — a stim*



after which he would fling the book away
and snatch up his sword and fall
to slashing the walls;

and when he was tired out he would say
he had killed four giants like four towers;

saying that this water was a most precious potion
which the sage Esquife, a great magician
and friend of his, had brought him."

*Esquife: an imagined magician,
claimed as a close male friend*



DISCUSSION

Bringing the two readings together

We did 3 & 4 with Dickinson by reading two lenses as one. Same move here — but on a scene about hyperfocus and imagined men, not a poem about desire.

So — how does Don Quixote neuroqueer?

WRAPPING UP

A text can hold neuroqueer potential — but that potential doesn't activate itself. It takes a reader to pull it out.

Notice how neuroqueer readings focus on joy and connection: excited stimming, intimacy between reader and speaker. It's a mode for expressing and interpreting possibility, changeability, and the absence of shame.

WHERE TO GO FROM HERE

Rhetorical reading

Adapted from Krista Ratcliffe's rhetorical listening: treating a reader's identification with a text as connection across difference — not diagnosis.

Reparative reading

Eve Sedgwick's alternative to “paranoid” reading: reading for sustenance and pleasure, not only suspicion and critique.

Why bother neuroqueering canonical literature? Because it shows that neurodivergent and queer expression already sits inside the most highly valued forms of cultural expression — not on the margins of them.

PROVOCATION QUESTION · FOR YOUR REFLECTIVE WORKBOOK

What in your own reading might already have neuroqueer potential, waiting to be pulled out?