

Toward a Postcolonial Neurology

Autism, Tito Mukhopadhyay, and a New Geo-poetics of the Body

Ralph James Savarese

Department of English, Grinnell College, Iowa

The article proposes the need for a postcolonial neurology, countering recent concerns about the dilution of the term *postcolonial* when used as metaphor. Adapting George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's notion of "philosophy in the flesh"—the fact that cognition is embodied, which is to say radically conditioned by physiological systems—it analyzes the nonfiction work of Tito Mukhopadhyay, an Indian writer in America whom the medical community would describe as "severely" autistic. The article contends that Mukhopadhyay's alternative embodiment gives rise to both a different sense of relation and a different way with words, each in some respects preferable to the neurotypical standard. Paying attention to Mukhopadhyay's body challenges—with proprioception, sensory processing, over- and under-inclusion of details in his apprehension of the environment, word finding, a drive to associate, a persistent animism, and synesthesia—it suggests that he is a cross-cultural, cross-sensorial migrant: a neuro-cosmopolitan armed with metaphor in a world that is often quite hostile to the neurological other. Finally, it situates Mukhopadhyay's writing squarely in the burgeoning neurodiversity movement, which, though recognizing the difficulties that autism often presents, nonetheless asks that it be treated and accommodated as difference.

Postcolonial Analogies

In the preface to his best-selling book *An Anthropologist on Mars*, Oliver Sacks contends that he is no ordinary doctor/author. "I have taken off my white coat," he declares, "deserted, by and large, the hospitals where I have spent the last twenty-five years . . . feeling in part like a naturalist, examining rare forms of life; in part like an anthropologist, a neuroanthropologist, in the field—but most of all like a physician, called here and there to make house calls, house calls at the far border of human experience" (xx). The case studies that make up the book are thus intended less as explorations of neurological pathology than sympathetic portraits of human diversity. Yet the good doctor wants it every which way. His shifting metaphors and anachronistic fantasy work to humanize the scientific authority required to tell these stories, but the authority itself is never renounced, nor is its connection to a pathologizing impulse. Indeed, both

remain in the kinder, gentler figure of the physician or anthropologist. Apparently oblivious to the oppressive history of anthropological endeavor, Sacks, for example, reinscribes the center/margin binary that makes colonialism possible, exactly as he would have us believe in his folksy goodwill.

One should obviously be careful with metaphor. Yet, however dubious the avowed departure from conventional roles and settings, Sacks' metaphor-making is richly suggestive. Contained within is the possibility of a different sort of understanding: what might be called, tracing out the potential implications of the anthropological conceit, a postcolonial neurology. By that term I mean, in part, a celebration of cerebral difference—in this case, autism—as against the standard binaries (normal/abnormal, etc.) that customarily consign it to an inferior status. I mean as well an acknowledgment of the history of oppression and exclusion suffered by people with autism, particularly those labeled 'severely autistic' or 'low-functioning.' Despite Mark Sherry's sweeping critique of the appropriation of postcoloniality as metaphor,¹ it is worth conceiving of autism in postcolonial terms because it allows us to see the current struggle for self-determination being waged by autistics as a kind of neuro-nationalist uprising and because it also frames the encounter of autistics and neurotypicals (NTs) in cosmopolitan terms.

Jahan Ramazani reminds us that metaphor itself has postcolonial implications. In his essay on the Indian poet A. K. Ramanujan, Ramazani explores the "revealing overlap between theories of postcoloniality and metaphor" (72). "Metaphor and postcoloniality are both conceived of," he writes, "in terms of the movement, transference, or alienation of discourse from one place to another, a movement that involves not only a one-way shift but inevitably a bidirectional hybridization" (73). "Analogies between metaphor and postcoloniality should awaken us to our oddly geographical understanding of metaphor," he continues, "and, conversely, to the prominent role that metaphor ought to play in our understanding of the postcolonial" (74). Far from a mere "totalizing trope of identity and organicity" (74), metaphor enacts the postcolonial on a formal level and, when done well, "renews perception" (74). Calling a progressive view of autism postcolonial thus constitutes no betrayal of the latter, and it insists that we view Sherry's notion of a "completely different experience" (10) in the real-world arena of movement and contact.

As important, the particular focus of this essay—a nonspeaking man with autism who has authored three astonishing books and who moved to the United

1. Sherry writes, "Postcolonialism should not be understood as simply a metaphor for the experience of disability; nor should the terms 'colonialism' or 'disability' be rhetorically employed as a symbol of the oppression involved in a completely different experience" (10).

States from India at the behest of the organization Cure Autism Now (CAN)—demands a postcolonial approach. This man, Tito Mukhopadhyay, and his mother, Soma, broke with their sponsor over the organization's aggressive cure agenda. Moreover, attention to brain physiology reveals an “oddly geographical” understanding of this other globe. Terms such as “left hemisphere,” “right hemisphere,” and “left hemispheric dominance” suggest a geo-politics of the brain, as if the history of colonialism had been mapped onto it. That autistics positioned at the “low-functioning” end of the spectrum are increasingly believed to rely heavily on the right hemisphere (as opposed to most neurotypicals), and that new work on creativity (see Kane, for example) reveals the crucial role of the right hemisphere in the generation of fresh figurative language (something neurotypical writers accomplish through the temporary inhibition of the normally dominant left hemisphere), only adds to the postcolonial resonance. In this scenario, both metaphor and autistics labor to free themselves from colonial suppression. The sometimes wildly metaphoric language of nonspeaking autistics² makes potential allies of neurotypical poets, whose common mission is to re-present the world in a way that resists and reformulates hegemonic expression. In the hands of someone as skilled as Mukhopadhyay, English is at once familiar and unfamiliar: an autistic hybrid of Hindi, Bengali, and British and American English.

The cognitive scientist George Lakoff argues, “We are neural beings. Our brains take their input from the rest of our bodies . . . We cannot think just anything—only what our embodied brains permit” (Brockman, 1). In this way, autistic embodiment allows for another kind of thought and language use, one obviously conditioned by the encounter with neurotypical culture. Co-authored with Mark Johnson, Lakoff's aptly titled book, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, invites us to imagine an equivalent proposition: autistic memoir in the flesh. Having elsewhere extensively laid out the issue of cerebral lateralization and its relation to both autism and poetic language (“The Lobes of Autobiography”), I seek here to attend to other aspects of autistic embodiment: atypical proprioception and sensory processing, over- and under-inclusion of certain elements in the apprehension of the environment, a drive to associate, a persistent sense of animism, and radical synesthesia. By examining the work of Tito Mukhopadhyay, we can see not only evidence of a postcolonial neurology but also intimations of a very different politics. How the autistic subject understands his relationship to himself and others (both human beings and natural objects or animals) suggests a rejoinder to neurotypical assumptions and arrangements. That subject literally

2. See, for example, the documentary *My Classic Life as an Artist* (2005), whose screenplay was written by the film's subject, Larry Bissonnette.

decenters and deterritorializes. Though marked by a history of exclusion and degradation, he has begun talking back to the empire of science. The subaltern has learned to speak, and he has most certainly learned to write in the master's tongue. He is a cross-cultural, cross-sensorial migrant, a cosmopolitan armed with metaphor in a world that is often quite hostile to the neurological other.

Who is Tito Mukhopadhyay?

Tito Mukhopadhyay is a 21-year-old man with what the medical establishment would call 'severe autism.' He grew up in Mysore and Bangalore, India. In the year 2001, at the age of thirteen, Tito moved to the U.S. with his mother. By this point, Tito had become something of a sensation in the autism community, a figure who challenged conventional assumptions of mental retardation in the 'severely autistic.' At the age of twelve, he published his first book, *Beyond the Silence*, in the U.K.—what would become, in its American publication three years later, *The Mind Tree*. It is difficult to believe that any eleven-year-old could have written this sophisticated book, let alone someone with autism. Though definitely not the first nonspeaking autistic to reveal competencies previously thought impossible, Tito was marketed as such, and because his mother had taught him how to write with his own hand unaided, Tito successfully persuaded many scientists of the need to rethink the so-called low-functioning end of the autism spectrum.

With the enormous success of *Beyond the Silence*, Tito received an invitation from Portia Iverson, co-founder of CAN (which would later merge with the Autism Speaks foundation in 2006) and the wife of a prominent Hollywood producer, to come to the United States. The plan was for Tito to serve as a high-profile figure for the organization and for his mother to help other nonspeaking children with autism learn to communicate, including Iverson's son. For a time, Tito and Soma did indeed serve their sponsor, who arranged a *60 Minutes* episode about new possibilities for autistic children, which only served to increase Tito's and CAN's renown. But right from the beginning tensions emerged that could not easily be managed by resident aliens at the mercy of their sponsor. Stuart Murray has written persuasively of the use CAN made of Tito:

The autism poster child version of Tito is an empty signifier of a declared achievement, a story of struggle and overcoming in which his various books are *markers* on a path towards an undefined state of normalcy and acceptance. Within such a state, the difference of Tito's autism is largely negated, because his writing is read not as an account of living with autism, but rather as a *product*, an uninterrogated (and in fact *unread*)

achievement of someone who should not be able to write in the first place. The fact that Tito can write at all is central to the [advertising] campaigns that point to his ability to overcome; what he might have to say seems of secondary importance. (148–49)

What Tito does say, beginning with the epilogue to the “Sound of Silence” section of *The Mind Tree* and ending with the chapter of his 2008 book *How Can I Talk If My Lips Don’t Move?*, entitled “Struggling Our Way Out of a Belief System,” is unambiguously at odds with the agenda of his sponsoring organization. While CAN was all too happy to champion Tito as evidence of what is possible for ‘severely’ autistic children, its primary focus was to raise funds to develop a cure—in short, to eradicate the difference that is autism. In *The Mind Tree*, Tito proclaims, “One day I dream that we can grow in a matured society where nobody would be ‘normal or abnormal’ but just human beings, accepting any other human being—ready to grow together” (90). He was eight when he composed this passage, exposing the normal–abnormal binary that constructs autism as pathology. And in *How Can I Talk*. . . , he remarks:

I was astonished by Mother’s involvement with the belief that autism is a disease and needs a cure. Mother had always believed in my thoughts and judgment before. How could she participate in a system that classified me as sick? Did Mother really think I was less of a person? (176)

Tito goes on to say that CAN “policed our every move, prevented opportunities for interviews, and signed away rights to our story on our behalf, without even having the courtesy of consulting us” (176–77). He and his mother, he reports, “had to find a way out of the sickening web of this belief system” (176).

In contrast to this view, Tito adopts the perspective of the neurodiversity movement, which, while not disregarding the very real challenges that autism presents, nonetheless views it as a kind of difference. The metaphor of postcoloniality, or at least one aspect of it, is no doubt complicated by the Mukhopadhyays’ pursuit of opportunity in America, but a different kind of colonization, as Arthur Frank has argued, is encountered in the rationalized, medicalized West, whose central sites are the research lab and clinic.

When Tito speaks of the rights to his story being signed away at the hands of his sponsor, he is alluding to a particularly nasty battle over the publication of Portia Iverson’s own memoir of autism, *Strange Son*, which depicts Tito in a very unfavorable manner. Iverson sold these rights to a production company for a huge sum. As Tito himself points out in his Amazon.com review of the book,³ Iverson depicts him as “bestly,” as an “alien being,” and as “possessed by

3. See http://www.amazon.com/Strange-Son-Portia-Iverson/dp/1573223115/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=b00ks&qid=1260669715&sr=1-1.

a demon”—descriptors that work to emphasize the purportedly awful “behaviors” of autism and, hence, the urgent need for a cure. “The book *Strange Son* felt like a slap on my face from someone who mother and I trusted the most,” Tito writes. “Overstimulation and [the] puberty stage can be difficult for many like me. But getting recorded in a way like that hurts more than my Autism.” At the end of his review, Tito tells Iverson’s readers that his latest book will soon be published and it will “describe my sensory conditions, in detail, so that other authors may be more equipped before writing about them as observers if they watch the show.” He also notes that his review “got deleted again” from the Amazon website, wittily exclaiming, “Strange deletion!” And he warns that if anyone deletes his review again—say, Iverson or her agent or her publisher—he will “put it back.”

That the plot of Iverson’s memoir concerns a selfless woman who founds a crucial organization and commits herself to the project of finding a cure by becoming an expert on the science of autism only underscores the neo-colonial drama. Even motherly devotion is pressed into the service of the cure agenda, as the mother, in effect, becomes a scientist. Such devotion contrasts mightily with that of Iverson’s foil, Soma, who worked strenuously to teach her son how to read and write. In a recent interview, Tito pokes fun at the reigning hypotheses about autism, echoing Thomas Kuhn’s theory of paradigm shifts and evincing autistic pride in the process. Bursting into poetry, he declares:

Theories are created
 For reasons observed
 Theories are broken
 For reasons replaced
 As the old order goes by
 It inspires the new
 We watch it die
 With our obscured view
 So what if a Theory
 Says something?
 It doesn’t change for sure
 Any - Thing.
 I may be that
 And I may be this. . .
 Who cares anyway?
 I am a Proud Autistic. (Savarese, “More than a Thing to Ignore”)

There is no room for Tito’s self-affirmation in groups such as CAN and the presumptuously named Autism Speaks. If, as Frank writes, “Post-colonialism in its most generalized form is the demand to speak rather than being spoken

for . . . or, in the worst cases, rather than being effaced entirely” (13), then Tito’s autism speaks insistently here, however much it might be drowned out by louder voices.

Metaphors He Lives By, Or the Impact of an Alternative Neurology

In their first book together, *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff and Johnson convincingly demonstrate that metaphor is far from just a “device of the poetic imagination and the rhetorical flourish” (3). “Our ordinary conceptual system . . . is fundamentally metaphorical” (3), they contend. This revelation anticipates the more dramatic claims of cognitive embodiment in *Philosophy in the Flesh*. In the earlier book, the authors pay close attention to what they call “orientational metaphors”—how simple directional words such as “up-down, in-out, front-back, on-off, deep-shallow, central-peripheral” (14) arise from our physical experience of the world and then end up being imposed on abstract concepts such as happiness and sadness. Simply put, they reflect the “fact that we have bodies of the sort we have and that they function as they do in our physical environment” (14).

These orientational metaphors can be quite subtle. This is illustrated, for example, by the metaphor of the container, as implied by the preposition *in*. “I sat *in* the chair,” we say, but what if the preposition *in* makes no sense because our proprioception is so different from that of most people? What if we feel “scattered” (*Mind Tree*, 28) as Tito does quite regularly? What if we have significant body boundary challenges—if we flap (a common form of autistic perseveration) to know that we have arms? Some of the strangeness of autistic writing, but also its beauty, originates in different operational metaphors that spatially situate (or fail to situate) the person. An examination of Tito’s use of the preposition *around* provides an excellent way into what I am calling a postcolonial neurology, for the word implies relation, particularly when the communicating subject refers, for instance, to the world *around* him. How that world exists around him and what *around* might mean make all the difference for a new geography of the possible.

In his first American book, *The Mind Tree*, Tito takes great pains to reveal the gap between what he experiences and the judgments neurotypical onlookers make when observing him. While neurotypicals move very quickly to the presumption of his mental retardation, Tito wants the reader to focus on his sensory issues and proprioception. Proprioception is a sensory modality that can be defined as an awareness of one’s body in space—that is, of the position

of the various parts of the body in relation to one another and their constitution as an organized whole. Writing in the third person, as if to mock the dominant theory-of-mind paradigm, which holds that autistics have no awareness of self and others, Tito says, “He felt that his body was scattered and it was difficult to collect it together. He saw himself as a hand or as a leg and he would turn around to assemble his parts to be whole” (28). The absence of ordinary sensory input encourages him to compensate through what neurotypicals typically call, in the pejorative, “behaviors.” “A new environment became very difficult to cope with,” he reports, “as he felt that he was not able to find his body. Only if he ran fast or flapped his hands he was able to find his presence” (28). Getting his body, which he often does not feel at all, to do what he wants is an immense challenge, as is managing the fragmentation he can’t help but project onto others. “Mother followed me around with her voice” (10), he writes in *How Can I Talk. . .* “I hear a voice behind me speak” (89), he says at another point. In both examples the voice is separate from the person; in the second, it is doing the speaking. Of his own voice, he remarks in *The Mind Tree*, “The problem of autism was making him feel that his voice was a distant substance that was required to be collected and put somewhere inside his throat” (81).

So frequently does Tito mention his sensory challenges that he feels compelled to proclaim, about a third of the way through *The Mind Tree*, “My readers must be tired of the phrases ‘using the body’, and ‘feeling the body’, since I repeatedly use them. But that is unavoidable as I explain every stage of learning and coping with the confusion of relating the mind and body” (62). Immediately following this remark, he alludes to the socio-political context in which this struggle takes place: “The constant guilt of not being able to be a proper and normal human being was there too, standing in his way to ‘try’ and be like others” (62). In *How Can I Talk. . .*, he speaks of “mov[ing] forward with my body and mind toward self-improvement” (49). By this point he has mastered the fine-motor requirements of activities such as writing or buttoning his shirt—“Once I understood the task, I could map it well *around* my body” (75; my italics), he says—but he continues to deal with a profound mind/body disconnection. The “I” of the “forward” sentence progresses with these two entities, one cumbersome, the other active and alive, the two still strangely divorced. No neurotypical person would refer to himself or his future in this way.

It is impossible to overstate the impact of an alternative neurology. The problem with bodily integrity and inadequate or uncoordinated sensory input leads Tito to believe that he is connected to all sorts of things. “I thought . . . my shadow was an extension of my body” (29), he recounts in *How Can I Talk. . .* In the concluding section of *The Mind Tree*, which carries the same title, he transforms

his own predicament into a fictional conceit that plays with notions of separate entities. Clearly a metaphor for the plight of the autistic who is believed not to have a mind or imaginative capabilities and who must cope with sensory processing difficulties, the “mind tree” labors to make sense of the world. Speaking as that giant banyan tree, Tito writes, “The silence *around* tells me that it is night” (168; my italics) and, further, “When the dust blows with the wind and when the crows settle down on my branches, I can make out that it is midday” (169). The tree wants to ask a crow feeder why he is sad, but he is “just a Mind Tree.” He has been “gifted this mind.” He “can hope,” he “can imagine,” he “can love,” but he “cannot ask” (169). Almost startled by its own consciousness, the tree remarks, “My concerns and worries are trapped within me somewhere in my depths, maybe in my roots, maybe in my bark or maybe all *around* my radius” (169; my italics). By analogy, Tito’s mind is not localized in his head; his sensory dislocations seem to facilitate a kind of extraordinary diffusion of thought and feeling. All *around* my radius, he speculates.

As part of this unobservable meditation, the tree ponders its relation—indeed, its connection—to the earth, and it proposes that the earth, too, as a “breathing life form,” has a mind “like I have” (174). “But where does it keep its mind?” the banyan tree asks (174). If the head has been dethroned by autism, or if in the terms of this conceit neither a tree nor the earth has a head, and if the autistic body cannot be said to be conventionally discrete, at least in the way that it makes itself known, then mind is an entity linking all things. “The earth listens too. I am certain of it,” the tree declares. “It listens with a great satisfaction as I can feel it under my deep roots” (174). But the earth does not “show off” its understanding. “Why should it?” the tree asks. “When it is all *around* us, we take it for granted. We do all our deeds good and bad on its heart” (174; my italics). The tree “wish[es]” that its “roots could go down below, further and further, till they touched the great heart,” but it concedes that it has “limitations.” “Every beyond is within a boundary,” it says (180).

And yet, at the same time, the tree insists that these limitations can be surpassed through the faculty of imagination. *Its* mind has no limitations when it imagines. “It crosses every beyond to touch further and further beyonds faster than any limit of time” (180). “And time is limitless too,” it adds, “although it limits the events within its set-up boundaries” (180). Toward the end of “The Mind Tree,” the tree proclaims, “When things are open for you to imagine, you can go to any extreme. You are open to imagine any number of impossibilities. You can imagine the hermit talking like the thunder, his voice reverberating for a long while, traveling with the wind, cutting through the mist, and reaching the other end of the earth” (191).

This is no ordinary paean to the imagination. In another section, right at the very beginning of *The Mind Tree*, Tito informs us that he is prone to experience “illusions” (8). “There was a cloud on the chair and he found it difficult to sit on the chair,” he reports. His mind constantly presents him with things that are “unreal;” he has little control “over these images that form *around* him” (8; my italics), he says. In an interview with Douglas Biklen, Tito relates how the “other day I had to shut my eyes on the road because the whole road seemed to become so alive, although my logic told me that it could not be so” (121). In *How Can I Talk*. . . , he explains: “My boundary between imagining and experiencing something was a very delicate one. Perhaps it still is. So many times I need to cross-check with Mother, or someone who can understand my voice now, whether an incident really happened *around* my body or presence” (23; my italics). The motif of boundaries is significant because the great compensation for Tito’s many challenges is precisely his capacity to disrespect and, thus, destabilize such boundaries, including, to a large extent, the boundary between self and other. Entities lose their simple, agreed-upon status as discrete and impermeable, a fact that has significant implications for the project of empathetic identification, whether with humans, animals or the earth itself. “Maybe I do not have to try very hard to be the wind or a rain cloud,” he says in a recent interview. “There is a big sense of extreme connection I feel with a stone or perhaps with a pen on a tabletop or a tree. . . . I just have to think about it and become it” (Savarese, “More than a Thing to Ignore”).

In addition to the gift of a fervent imagination, Tito discovers, as a very young boy, that he has a nearly perfect memory, so much so that the past overtakes the present with all of its vivid particularity. “The chairs and tables were still there, but a book or a magazine or some eatables were seen in places they were kept previously” (*Mind Tree*, 8), Tito tells us. The implications are astonishing: “I can see the past,’ thought the boy. He began to recall every sight, sound and smell—the happenings that had occurred *around* him and was glad to find out that he could actually replay the acts over and over again. In fact, he could actually ‘feel’ the previous incidents *around* him” (*Mind Tree*, 8; my italics). The preposition *around* appears with stunning frequency in Tito’s work, and its usage is far from common. On the one hand, the word tries to convey a very different experience of relational embodiment; on the other, it speaks of the pressure that both his imagination and his memory put on a stable positioning of the self or “presence.” As operative categories, neither “the real” nor “time” obtain with their customary certainty. The result is a deterritorialized, postcolonial space, at once mapped and unmapped. As the next section will demonstrate, the ubiquitous preposition *around* reflects a very dif-

ferent understanding of language—of what ought to be its purpose and political effects.

A Proprioceptive Ethics and a New Geo-poetics

I have addressed Tito's "fragmented sensory experience" (*How Can I Talk*. . . , 208) and proposed a link between it and his empathetic imagination, but I want now to be a bit more audacious. If proprioception, as I noted, is an awareness of one's body in space, an awareness of the various parts in relation to one another and their constitution as an organized and dynamic whole, then we might imagine a figurative equivalent: a kind of political or ethical proprioception that not only contests typical arrangements of power and identity but reconfigures them as well. With this sort of proprioception, Tito's body challenges would be an advantage, for they would facilitate a different understanding of, and relation to, the world. The entities that exist around Tito are not to be mastered through a process of condescending classification. In a particularly moving scene in the section of *The Mind Tree* called "All through the Rainbow Path," Tito befriends a cow that does not laugh "as men do" (131) when he attempts to imitate its speech. "She was not much bothered about my imperfection," he says, "maybe because there is only one sound in the cow's voice" (131). "When they are hungry, they moo," he writes. "When they greet each other, they moo" (140). He wishes that "men too had one universal word in their speech" (131). After forgetting to leave the gate open for the cow and the cow then wandering off, Tito laments, "I felt helpless inside me somewhere near the eyes. Tears ran down because I had lost a friend" (140). Bodily disorientation—"somewhere near the eyes"—fuels empathetic identification. "I mooed in pain" (140), he reports, becoming a cow and speaking its language, however imperfectly.

Dawn Prince, another autistic writer, has written extensively about the species privilege that neurotypicals customarily practice, and she links it to the plight of autistics who are analogously underestimated. Prince turns her very life around when one day at the zoo an ape attempts to communicate with her in American Sign Language, asking, "Are you a gorilla?" Like Tito, she had been trying to relate to the animal on its terms. "All these creatures the normal world imagines silent," she exclaims at the end of her article:

The autistic child, the ape in the zoo or in the laboratory, the homeless, the dogs in cages. Thinking their silence means they lack language, lack consciousness, is convenient. We are starting to speak the language of the masses, though, and the time of silence without meaning is drawing to a close. (n.p.)

For Prince, that “language of the masses” is usually a “weapon rather than an amorphous mist of the birth waters of reality.” “It cut[s] up the world,” she says, “and its use also cut[s] groups of people one from another.” The subaltern, whether cow or gorilla or person with autism, is talking back in the language of its oppressor but with a crucial difference. This language remains faithful to the “birth waters of reality,” to a child’s sense of discovery. Put simply, it does not congeal or colonize:

When I was young I talked to animals in that language of silence. I knew what trees and streams were saying because they told me. I knew what sow bugs and snakes were saying because they molded me. I grew together with them in a world where everything needed everything else. Sometimes my grandfather would ask me in the garden, “What are the worms saying today?” “Fine fine slither dirt push good rotting green,” I would answer, smiling. (n.p.)

Tito’s relation to the world—his sense of aroundness—is similarly alive, animistic, and anti-hierarchical. He “hear[s]” the sky and earth speaking to each other in the language of blue and brown” (*How Can I Talk. . .*, 1). He can “see the night jasmines wet with morning dew, lit with fresh sunshine, trying to form a story in white with their jasmine-petal smell” (*How Can I Talk. . .*, 22). The walls in his bedroom “tell [him] their own stories in the language of a wall” (Savarese, “More than a Thing to Ignore”). Most people, Tito laments, cannot understand “how the dimensions of the night can enter one’s mind and become so alive that it can squeeze out the last drop of sleep from one’s eyes, leaving it thirsty like a desert” (*How Can I Talk. . .*, 184). In the chapter from *How Can I Talk. . .* entitled “Autism! A Fancy Word,” he explicitly links this kind of animistic perception with a refusal to allow language, in the words of Prince, to “cut up the world” or “cut groups of people one from another.” Poking fun at the way doctors diagnose autism, Tito recounts:

Now that I knew I was autistic, I began to group things under it. I made up a whole list of things that I thought had autism. The curtains that moved in the wind, the big and small leaves that moved a little more with the air because of their suspended positions, the little bits of paper, or the pages of an open book under a fan were classified as autistic. They were affected with autism because they flapped, because they would not respond to any blocks, because they did not talk, and I was sure that they would not be able to imitate the clinical psychologist. I wondered how the clinical psychologist would look if she imitated the leaves on a branch if the leaves wanted to find out about her condition. (28)

Through the course of Tito’s witty subversion, the “fancy word” of autism becomes less a signifier of pathology than a term for his sense of “extreme connection” or animistic empathy, a term that re-orders the world, dismantling the

privilege that attends to one entity or group. No small irony this complete inversion of what Biklen has termed “the myth of the person alone” (1)—here Tito reveals just how isolated and unconnected are haughtily rational neurotypicals. His words reorient the body politic, and any proprioceptive ethics would have to pay close attention to the way that language is deployed—whether it connects or divides, whether it dismisses out of hand.

In “Poetry as Right-Hemispheric Language,” Julie Kane reveals the cost of such rationality for neurotypicals. Investigating the role of the non-dominant right hemisphere in the production of poetry and noting that literacy is what consolidates the shift from right-hemispheric dominance to left-hemispheric dominance, she explicitly links poets (who manage temporarily to inhibit the left hemisphere when they write) with young children (who have not yet lateralized to the left) and pre-literate peoples. Kane argues:

If left-hemispheric dominance for language is not the ‘natural’ condition of human beings aged eight and older, but rather, a side effect of print literacy, then it stands to reason that *the qualitative changes in consciousness* between oral and print cultures—from community identity, “magical thinking,” pervasive animist spirituality, and poetry to individualism, science, and rationalism, faith-based religion or agnosticism/atheism, and prose—may be the outward signs of a fundamental shift from right- to left-hemispheric structuring of conscious thought processes and memories. (16)

That shift is inextricably tied to the history of colonialism, as narratives of both personal and national development hinge on leaving these immature or “primitive” perspectives behind. In this way, the renunciation of “animist spirituality,” whether conscious or unconscious, is a form of conquest, as is becoming an individual. Kane’s point invites us to think of postcoloniality in neurological terms: the forces of history have moved inside the brain, and their impact is so much more significant than any simple social constructionism. For the fields of Disability Studies and Creative Writing, it invites us to reconceive of purported cognitive disadvantages as anything but that, at least in certain contexts.

Elsewhere I have suggested that nonspeaking autistics who learn to read might nevertheless retain their right-hemispheric dominance or, at the very least, forge a unique power-sharing arrangement between the two hemispheres (“The Lobes of Autobiography”). Although Tito is quick to counter the label of personification for what he does in his writing—“It will be called pan-psychism by me” (Savarese, “More than a Thing to Ignore”)—his allies are nonetheless neurotypical poets who temporarily inhibit the dominant left hemisphere during the creative process and thereby reanimate the world, if perhaps in too domesticated or unthreateningly bookended a way. With Tito, however, the right hemisphere remains *perpetually* active, and yet he is capable of shifting from

one perspective to another. Writing about one of his favorite objects—a mirror in his home—he remarks:

I can clearly separate the physical laws of reflection with the planes of incidence and reflection from my enchanting extrasensory experiences, leading my mind to differentiate between my alive and interactive world and the reality about what a mirror is, a mere object with a plane surface. (*How Can I Talk*. . ., 213)

Importantly, logic does not have to come at the cost of losing a constant sense of ‘aroundness.’ Ramazani has proposed that “in Third World literatures, juxtapositions caused by colonization and migration throw into relief what habit normally conceals, defamiliarizing the cultures of colonizer and colonized” (74) and, further, that “split vision is characteristic of postcolonial literatures” (74). In this way, Tito might be thought of as a sensory cosmopolitan, shuttling back and forth from different perspectives. He is the embodiment of “split vision,” reversing the assumption of First World (or neurotypical) superiority by exposing *its* cost.

A Dispute with Nouns, a Bowl of Tulips

There is not space here to flesh out all aspects of a postcolonial neurology, but I want briefly to discuss a few: under- and over-including elements of the environment, a drive to associate, word-finding delays, and radical synesthesia. All of these aspects affect how Tito uses language, that principal instrument of a proprioceptive ethics. When he speaks of his “story growing *around* a hat” (*How Can I Talk*. . ., xv; my italics) or of it “form[ing] *around* staircases” (*How Can I Talk*. . ., 35; my italics), he is manifesting this ethics. He does not speak of writing “about” a hat or staircases, for that preposition would suggest a very different relationship, spatial and otherwise, between the storyteller and his subject. It would position both as discrete entities, with the former presumptuously claiming the latter. With Tito, language steps lightly, provisionally; it neither masters nor replaces the object it names. About under- and over-including elements of the environment and a drive to associate, Tito reports that they “may make me disassociate myself from the totality of the situation and select one aspect of it. After that I may be completely within a labyrinth with my over indulgence or over association in that single aspect of the environment which has multiple aspects, making me ignore the other parts of the situation” (Savarese, “More than a Thing to Ignore”).

Consider the following example in which a red bucket is being filled with water:

I first notice the color of the bucket. I might easily get distracted by its redness, since it would remind me of how my hands bled when I had fallen from a swing, how I was so absorbed in the red that I had forgotten about my pain, and how the red resembled a hibiscus. . . .

I would then realize that I was hearing the sound of water, wondering why that sound reminded me of a drowning man's last blood flow.

The bucket is filled up eventually, and I see water spilling from it. I understand the situation, waking from my branching thoughts, summing up the components into one conclusion, which is "water filling up a red bucket from a garden tap." (*How Can I Talk*. . . , 96)

How much more evocative is Tito's process of apprehension than that "one conclusion," which most neurotypicals jump to instantaneously. The delay facilitates fresh perception. The world will not settle into familiarity. Like his present ability to distinguish between the rational and "enchanted extrasensory experiences," Tito's understanding of language was not always so stable. His sense of 'aroundness' encouraged him to "form wrong associations between words and objects" (*How Can I Talk*. . . , 214): "When I heard the word *banana* while I was looking at a cloud, I labeled the cloud 'banana'" (214), he says. Education, though, "helped me settle my dispute with nouns" (214). As in the work of Gertrude Stein (whom he sounds like here), that "dispute" remains partially open: the signifiers behave more provisionally; they seem "map[ped] around" (*How Can I Talk*. . . , 75) what they signify, not racing to subdue it. This literally is the case when a noun cannot be recalled, and Tito has to engage in a circuitous, word-finding process: "A striped animal, which is not a zebra, is a TIGER" (*How Can I Talk*. . . , 116). Add to this a difficulty recalling faces, which must be stored as unrelated images (his teacher's face is a bowl of tulips), and you are well on your way to a kind of metaphor that works to re-present the world. These involuntary phenomena seem to fuel the voluntary phenomenon that is highly crafted writing.

The final aspect of a postcolonial neurology that needs to be addressed is Tito's radical synesthesia, which also defamiliarizes the quotidian. At one point in *How Can I Talk*. . . , Tito says of a woman's voice that it "tasted like a tamarind pickle" (110) and of a man's that it "transform[ed] into long apple green and yellow strings" (200). When scientists did an fMRI on Tito and tapped his hand, his visual cortex lit up (Savarese, "More than a Thing to Ignore"). His writings are replete with synesthesia, yet the physiological antecedent makes of it both less and more than a simple figure of speech. Noting that synesthesia is much more common in writers and artists, the neuroscientist Vilaynour Ramachandran has proposed that the origin of poetry and art can be traced back to this neurological condition (see Ramachandran and Hubbard, 979, 982). He speaks

of metaphor emerging from the body, or the senses attempting to understand themselves in relation to one another. Because synesthetes have extensive cross-wiring of anatomical regions otherwise responsible for discrete functions, he believes that they have an advantage in relating unrelated concepts.

While it is useful to think of Tito as a kind of neuro-immigrant or globetrotter—my metaphor capitalizes on the re-location of discourse that theories of both metaphor and postcolonialism enact—it is also useful to think of autism and postcolonialism as synesthetic expressions of ostensibly opposite and discrete critical senses. Contrary to what Sherry maintains, troping autism as postcolonialism does not conflate “completely different” (10) experiences; rather, it practices, at least potentially, the kind of “aroundness” that repairs division and the oppressive hierarchies it makes possible. It also pays homage to the remarkable self-advocates, those “proud autistics,” who are both fighting for their rights and contesting hegemonic neurotypicality.

Works Cited

- Biklen, Douglas. *Autism, or The Myth of the Person Alone*. New York: New York UP, 2005.
- Brockman, John. “‘Philosophy in the Flesh’: A Talk with George Lakoff.” *Edge* 51 (1999). 1 June 2010 <http://www.edge.org/3rd_culture/lakoff/lakoff_p1.html>.
- Clark, Camille. “Tito Mukhopadhyay Reviews *Strange Son*.” 3 March 2007. 1 June 2010 <<http://autismdiva.blogspot.com/2007/03/tito-mukhopadhyay-reviews-strange-son.html>>.
- Frank, Arthur. *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995.
- Johnson, Mark, and George Lakoff. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1980.
- . *Philosophy in the Flesh*. New York: Basic Books, 1999.
- Kane, Julie. “Poetry as Right-Hemispheric Language.” *PsyArt* (2007): <http://www.clas.ufl.edu/ipsa/journal/2007_kane01.shtml>.
- Mukhopadhyay, Tito. *The Mind Tree*. New York: Arcade, 2003.
- . *How Can I Talk If My Lips Don't Move?* New York: Arcade, 2008.
- Murray, Stuart. *Representing Autism: Culture, Narrative, Fascination*. Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2008.
- Prince, Dawn. “The Silence Between: An Autoethnographic Examination of the Language Prejudice and its Impact on the Assessment of Autistic and Animal Intelligence.” *Disability Studies Quarterly* 30.1 (2010).
- Ramachandran, Vilayanur S., and Edward M. Hubbard. “Psychophysical Investigations into the Neural Basis of Synaesthesia.” *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Biological Sciences* 268: 1470 (May 2001): 979–983.
- Ramazani, Jahan. *The Hybrid Muse: Postcolonial Poetry in English*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2001.
- Sacks, Oliver. *An Anthropologist on Mars*. New York: Knopf, 1995.

- Savarese, Ralph. "The Lobes of Autobiography: Poetry & Autism." *Stone Canoe* (January 2008): 61-77.
- . "More than a Thing to Ignore: An Interview with Tito Mukhopadhyay." *Disability Studies Quarterly* 30.1 (2010).
- Sherry, Mark. "(Post)colonising Disability." *Wagadu: A Journal of Transnational Women's and Gender Studies* 4 (2007): 10-22.

