

Composing Perseveration / Perseverative Composing

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M&Ms on the table, organized by color. A line of toys, arranged according to size. A thought that needs to burst—that needs to expel, to wrench itself free, to crunch against your esophagus and careen its way into the sonic world. An obsession with the Electric Light Orchestra, one that dominates all interpersonal contact and structures daily life. (Have you seen them on tour yet? They have a light show!) A deep-seated need to flap your fingers, an embodied priority that ranks higher in the body queue than sneezing and urination. A life-shattering fear that you improperly disposed of a battery in 2017, and perhaps the battery exploded and started a fire . . . or injured a jogger . . . or killed a sanitation worker . . . or irreparably poisoned an entire ecosystem.

Desire, distress, requirement, repetition, release, repetition.

In many ways, this chapter offers more of a provocation about neurodivergent composition than it does a tidy argument. For what these repeated acts tic us toward is perseveration, or what I might otherwise describe as a body-mind's compulsion to ruminate and rehearse. Perseveration is sticky. Its Latin origin, *perseverat*, translates as “strictly abided by” (Lexico, n.d.; *Oxford English Dictionary* 2022). Autistic author Judy Endow (2016) describes perseveration as “repeat[ing] things over and over.” Perseveration is typified by capital-*R* Redundance, by excess, by insistence, by sameness, by stuckness. According to psychologist Timothy Pynchyl (2009), perseveration is an action that persists “beyond a desired point.”

Redundance, excess, insistence—beyond a desired point.

Arguably, being alive and disabled is already persistence beyond a desired point. Typically, perseveration is represented as a negative, as a symptom that many disabled people involuntarily experience. Even outside the domain of disability, perseveration harbors negativistic flair. Initially emerging in relation to the words *perseverance* and *persistence* (which arguably may hold more positive or value-neutral connotations), *perseveration*'s contemporary definitions rely on behaviorist strands of psychology (*Oxford English Dictionary* 2022). Indeed, its emergence as a psychiatric term in the early twentieth century is tightly interwoven with clinical work on sensoria, cognition, and bodily movements.

In the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, perseveration is described in the language of “repetitive and ritualized behaviors and interests.” In

the parlance of mental disability more broadly, perseverance is also often bound up in descriptions of obsessions, compulsions, tics, self-stimulatory behaviors, and stereotypes. Stereotypy in particular has historically not only referenced the stereotyped movements of neurodivergent people (e.g., embodied motions such as body rocking, finger flicking, head banging, or verbal scripting) but also the stereotyped movements of gender-nonconforming people (e.g., the movement of hands on hips, flexed elbows, limp wrists). Where perseverance is concerned, the impulse to pathologize is strong, signifying embodied configurations that traverse disability, gender, and perception.

In this essay, I contend that perseverance is not (merely) the pathology that psychiatry suggests. In saying that perseverance is not merely pathology, I am not saying that it is never experienced as bad or terrible (because it often does feel just plain bad and terrible, especially when you can't stop mentally tallying how many times you've checked your stove and fear you might have burned down your entire neighborhood). Rather, I propose that perseverance may at times provide us a performative framework—an unruly, indecorous framework—for writing and multimodally composing, for creating scenes and disrupting, for crippling and defying and spiraling. Importantly, I approach this framework from a disability rhetoric perspective. In summoning rhetoric, I mean to suggest that relationships and power dynamics are central to thinking about how bodyminds write and express (Dolmage 2014). Disability rhetoric, as a field, pays particular attention to how any composition is embedded in normative, often violent understandings of how we communicate, interact, and dwell. So too does disability rhetoric provide us methods for rethinking pathologized forms (such as compulsions, tics, and obsessions) as means of communicating, expressing, or signifying. As Christina Cedillo (2018) notes, disability rhetoric's attention to power and communicative acts troubles binaristic notions of writer and reader, of designer and user, of doctor and doctored. Drawing on critical race studies and critical disability studies, Cedillo highlights the ways in which racialized and neurodivergent rhetors' "distinctive embodied identities . . . are rhetorical arrangements of and in the flesh, for they literally, corporeally, and spatially disrupt normative order." In other words, any socially just approach to communicating demands an understanding of writing that compasses us toward nonnormative embodiment. Cedillo further encourages readers to "make room for bodily diversity in composition by highlighting race and disability as critical means of embodied invention that gainfully unsettle habituated expectations." Building on Cedillo's work on race, disability, and writing, I am hoping we might think about perseverance as an awkward arrangement of the flesh—a compulsive mode of persisting within and against normative space.

I keep returning, then, to persistence "beyond a desired point." I am thinking about the ways in which the lives of neurodivergent people are bound up in endless acts of repetition, repetition that is stigmatized, denigrated, and sometimes born

of trauma—and exponentially so for those whose perseverations are entwined in experiences of racism, classism, and antiqueer bias. *Persistence beyond a desired point*. Whose point is desired here? Far from viewing perseveration as an act of composing, clinical literature represents those who persevere as trapped between thought and action, as dysphoric ticcors and the sadly obsessed (Grossi et al. 2013). (To be fair, many of us *are* sadly obsessed, but that doesn't mean our sad obsessions aren't modes of creation. Routinely checking behind one's car for dead bodies might be distressing, but it's also enaction, a series of motions that modulate spatial conditions.) In many ways, disability rhetoric is uniquely primed to unsettle how we think about perseverating, given what we know about nonlinearity, writing, processing, knowing, and repetition. If rhetoric isn't about repetition, then what the hell is it about?

My provocation, as it were, is to suggest that perseveration exceeds symptomatology: What would it mean to consider perseveration as a way of writing oneself hypervigilantly, to think about perseveration as a mode of rhetorical invention or access creation? Indebted to Jay Dolmage's work on retrofitting, I suggest that perseveration might be more capaciously understood as actions disabled people engage in to maintain relations within, toward, around, or in defiance of a given space. These actions might be experienced as pleasurable, painful, embarrassing, entertaining, transgressive, involuntary, purposeful, or a number of any other affective modes—because persistence and space and relating are complicated things. In other words, I want to ask, absent broad systemic change, how do neurodivergent people, often of necessity, create access in inaccessible terrain? How do neurodivergent people body-as-verb? Where and when are we getting (un)stuck in communicative exchange?

For our purposes, I'm hoping we can think through—and trouble—perseveration in a couple of different ways. First, my hope is that it might show us where our own assumptions, as well as our methods and our institutions, tend to value the neurologically normative in their very design. Second, as we together persevere on perseveration, my hope is that we might consider moments in which there might be value in reclaiming retrofitting as a practice. What would it mean to think about crip composing practices, such as trigger warnings, interaction badges, or collective hand-flapping, under the banner of the retrofit? Does perseveration lend *retrofit* more potential, more possibilities beyond afterthoughts, failtastic revision, and exclusion?

The work of Dolmage, as well as crip technoscience scholars such as Aimi Hamraie, has done a great deal to show us how retrofits are the result of inaccessible design practices. Rather than think about neurodivergence from the inception of design, neurodivergence remains an afterthought. Retrofitting, per Dolmage (2017), is an additive rather than reimaginative ideology (78). Retrofits, per Hamraie (2017), are the postdesign deviations from otherwise “normate templates,” templates that are often based on the bodyminds of cis white nondisabled

men (20). In other words, retrofits are about additive deviations. We typically think about retrofits in the context of a nondisabled entity (a business, a school, a community) begrudgingly adding a ramp for those poor disabled folks; it is less common for us to think about retrofitting as disabled folks crip-composing normative space, or as a “necessary strategy” in an inaccessible world (Hamraie, 150). *Additive deviations.* There is something compelling in thinking about obsessions and compulsions as wily deviants that latch onto normative space, cripqueer style.

I’m not sure that all perseverance at all times is always a neuroqueer retrofit. But I wonder what it might mean to sometimes think about perseverance in this way, in a broader morass of composing practices, as one means of perverting the retrofit (perhaps as a kind of neuroqueer misfitting, à la Hamraie). We might call to mind stimming, or self-stimulatory behavior, as one such perseverative example. Essentially, stimming is bodily movement that holds sensorial significance. We might think about stimming as a kind (or relative) of perseverance because stimming is often known for its bodily persistence, for its bursts of awkward repetition. Jason Nolan and Melanie McBride (2015, 1075) refer to stimming as “sensory utterances,” highlighting how stimming can sometimes function as a mode of communicating or composing. Showcasing its environmental dimensions, Lydia X. Z. Brown (n.d.) notes that “stimming is a natural response to cope with overwhelming emotions. It is also a coping mechanism for sensory overload.” All bodies stim—we fidget, twirl our hair, chew our pens, crack our knuckles, and so on. Stimming accrues its pathological power, and becomes marked as neurodivergent, when its repetition, disruption, or other nonnormative features reach a clinical threshold of excess. In other words, a neurotypical person’s finger-tapping isn’t generally categorized as pathological stimming, yet the finger-tapping of a person with ADHD generally *is*.

I’m calling attention to stimming as a perseverance, as a potential neuroqueer retrofit, because stimming is at times compensatory. That is, while stimming holds many sensory meanings, it is frequently a means of seeking sensory balance in an overwhelming, stressful, or painful situation. A neurodivergent person might rock their body hard against a wall in order to remain in a room; the rocking, in this instance, is a way to create access in an inaccessible situation, a way to relate within or around normative space. It is for these reasons that attempts to make people stop stimming are particularly violent in their attempts to norm. Trying to prevent a person from stimming too often assumes an errant body rather than an inaccessible environment.

As with any theory of disability and space, perseverance echoes elements of those theories that precede it, and at some junctures overlaps with more widely embraced ideas about environmental design. Like theories of participatory design, perseverance centers those most affected by a given environment as that very environment is being (re)composed or (re)constituted. But perseverative compositions, I suggest, begin to diverge from more well-known concepts that

attend disability, such as universal design, in that its composers—who-are-also-composed bear direct lived experience in, with, and through disability. Importantly, perseveration remains attuned to one particular event. It is uniquely kairotic and often immediate. That is, perseveration's exigence derives from specific, often urgent, bodily need. It is a response toward that which has yet to receive adequate response. Disability justice scholars and activists such as Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018), for example, have long drawn our attention to such needs under the frameworks of interdependence and self-care, in which disabled people work together to reinvent, retrofit, or hack a space or situation in order to make it more dwellable, more traversable, more breathable, less painful, and more attuned to the coalitional work of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) and queer disability design. Self-care and other access maneuvers could be understood as perseverative when they require redundancy, compulsion, and an urgent need for release. In this vein, Naomi Ortiz (2018) underscores the urgency and necessity of self-care in spaces designed by those in positions of power—whom Ortiz terms “Rule-bearers,” or those for whom everyday situations are comfortable, welcoming, and hospitable (e.g., spaces designed for white nondisabled cis men) (19). In this, Ortiz reminds us that “safe spaces for non-Rule-bearers are a myth. We are constantly in negotiation to bring who we are into the world” (31). This negotiation is perhaps one such way of thinking about perseveration and/as retrofit. Following Ortiz, we might ask how, where, and when multiply marginalized neurodivergent people bring their very being into a world that is fundamentally unsafe.

In this way, perseverations are often, though not always, access maneuvers, incredibly *rhetorical* access maneuvers at that, and they complicate previously held ideas about retrofitting and environments that theories of universal design typically draw our attention toward. The 504 sit-ins in the mid-1970s, for example, show us perseveration at work. As Corbett O'Toole (2015, 56) reminds us, nearly 150 disabled people and allies took over the San Francisco Federal Building, occupying the space for twenty-six days. The occupation was compulsive interdependence at work, requiring a host of repetitive, embodied moves in the face of deeply hostile and inaccessible terrain: Deaf people signed to each other through the windows to get messages to outsiders and circumvent the FBI; bipedal disabled people attended to the care of wheelchair users; protesters pooled their medications and created access and care schedules; the Black Panthers delivered food (61). These were rhetorical strategies born out of bodily exigence and urgent need for redundancy (lest someone die or face dire injury).

Perseveration also departs from theories of universal design in other key ways. First, universal design deploys the social model of disability in ways that deny disability's value and insights. The social model dictates that disability is the product of an environment rather than an entity that can be localized within an errant bodymind. In other words, (bad) design creates disability. Stairs impede

access; curbs impede access; fluorescent lights impede access. Disability comes into being via these designs because some bodyminds are given entry while others are denied. To locate disability as an individual pathology rather than as a political condition constituted by an inaccessible terrain is to adopt a medical model of disability. Here, universal design endeavors to imagine a universe of users whose needs and modes of entry require equitable prioritization—from the inception of design. In other words, universal design (in theory) *eradicates* disability by eradicating inaccess.

There have been notable critiques from disability studies scholars about how theories of universal design represent the social model, as well as its embrace of an unquestioned universality. Here I wish to echo Hamraie's argument that universal design is a shifting signifier. Universal design's very appeal to universality has the effect of decentering disability; if universal design is good for the entire universe, then what matter is disability? As Hamraie (2017, 11) points out, "Post-ADA narratives insist that Universal Design is disability-neutral: the focus is not on disability but rather on everyone. This claim is confusing, however, because it does not clarify what 'everyone' means in a world that devalues particular bodies." In other words, universal design de-emphasizes disability, whereas perseverance thrives on (and from) it.

As we meditate on how perseverance composes our bodyminds and the spaces we encounter, I'm going to suggest we shift directions slightly and think about perseverance in a more specific context: the workplace. While the COVID-19 pandemic initially brought with it a remote-work landscape that was new to many people, the fraught dynamics of workplace encounters—virtual and non—have long been experienced by disabled people. Whether we are on Zoom, in a cubicle, on a sidewalk, or on a retail floor, inaccessibility and sensorial hellscapes abound at work. Lealani Acosta, Ira Goodman, and Kenneth Heilman (2013, 181) describe perseverance as "failure to terminate an action." Were we to consider perseverance's failtastic possibilities in office settings more specifically, we might call to mind any number of unending mundane potentials. Offices are inhospitable spaces: thermostats run on normate (typically male) standards; inadequate ventilation, chemical contaminants, and interpersonal stressors can make employees physically ill; cubicles, windowless rooms, and sterile furniture arrangements contribute to the artificiality of office spaces. As with the embodied effects wrought by office spaces, the neoliberal demands of office work—efficiency, productivity, loyalty—bristle against disabled ways of moving in the world (and, arguably, run counter to conditions of life and living). In response to the somatic hostilities that offices rouse, designers typically appeal to universal design practices as a method for achieving twin goals: increasing workers' overall sense of well-being as a means of increasing workers' output. In this sense, failure to terminate an action—for example, laboring and producing and assembling until punch-out time—becomes reconfigured as a normative desire.

As Hamraie (2017, 41) reminds us, universal design's appeals to flexibility and inclusion are typically deployed as normalization in workplace contexts. This dynamic is particularly present in discourse on autism and employment. In the past decade, a number of employment firms and major corporations (such as Microsoft, Walgreens, and Freddie Mac) have spearheaded autism-at-work initiatives, actively seeking to recruit autistic employees. These programs, it should be noted, typically promulgate clichéd portraits of autistic people in their attempts to represent autistics as ideal employees; and, relatedly, these programs typically invoke the rhetoric of universal design to suggest that, with a few tweaks, any standard office can accommodate an autistic worker. The stereotype of autistic people (white cis men, it's almost always white autistic cis men) as technology- or mathematics-obsessed savants persists unabated in universal design discourse on autism employment, as does the notion that math and technology are the sole provinces of the future. Universities that partner with corporations on autistic job placement are overwhelmingly STEM oriented in nature, and autistic placement firms such as Aspiritech became well known by hiring autistic people as software testers. As Shannon Walters (2010) makes clear, the rhetoric of autism employment circulates well-worn figurations of autistic people as computeristic "conveyer[s] of information, with efficiency, accuracy, and clarity being [their] only attributes." Indeed, even a cursory glance at Aspiritech's website bears this out. At once appealing to autism stereotypes and the neoliberal valorization of productivity, Aspiritech's (n.d.) praise of autistic work habits sounds very much like praise of perseverance: "Lack of boredom with highly-repetitive tasks" and "High levels of intellect and an intense desire to do work that is commensurate with their skills" are among the items listed under the heading "unique talents."

Of course, the perseverative practices I wish to foreground aren't necessarily the savory ones. For what of Ortiz's non-Rule-bearers? While a love of boredom might indeed be the heartthrob of the workplace, I am more interested, following Ortiz, in how weirder perseverative potentials might transform normative space (rather than normative space transforming weird perseverative potentials). My weirdnesses, for instance, run plenty. Echolalia, the repetition of words and phrases, orders many of my conversations; the only way I can stop myself from verbally ticcing what others say is to mouth or mutter words, to mask the compulsion with silentish lip movements. But when I do echolalize, I weird up social spaces; interpersonal awkwardness inheres in my ticced rigidity; the contours of the space I'm in change; echolalia transforms how my conversation partner and I engage across, move within, and use a given space. To be clear, this weirding is not always (or often) experienced as a positive: rather, my weirdness is a condition by which I emerge and exist in dialogic space. In fact, through my verbal perseverations, I sometimes even predict the future: my body, in its urge to get the echoes out quickly, at times predicts and emits the echoes before the other person has even finished speaking. When spaces are not retrofitted for me, my

body works (however [un]successfully) to retrofit space for itself. Rather than focus on perseverance's import to social conformity and the workplace, then, I want to draw our attention to perseverance's possible impacts on interpersonal exchanges and spatial configurations: its crip potentials, its repetitive retrofits.

To offer a more extended example of perseverance as neurodivergent retrofit, we might turn to autistic-led blogging and social media discourse. Bev Harp, an autistic author and curator of the blog *Square 8*, writes frequently about her own perseverance: Squawkers McCaw, an animatronic parrot. Describing Squawkers as an "ambassador of Autism Acceptance," Harp (2015) notes that Squawkers has accompanied her to work and community functions since 2007. *Square 8* boasts a dedicated tag for Squawkers, who appears in a variety of video posts, computer-generated images (memes, faux newsletters, and comics), and written reflections on autism and perseverance. In her 2007 introductory post about Squawkers, Harp highlights his programmability: he is capable of repeating words and phrases and doesn't require training to respond to questions. Squawkers's ability to persevere and produce echolalic speech leads Harp to quip, "Scripts, anyone?"

Recall that perseverance is characterized by endurance and saturation: it is repetition that finds its expression across a multitude of embodied, obsessive, and relational means. Squawkers, in many respects, functions for Harp as a rhetorical commonplace: his very company is perseverance, but so too is his recurrence as a character in Harp's blog a perseverative act. Indeed, the very design of Harp's blog relies on Squawkers as a metonym (that is, a substitution or stand-in) for autism. For instance, in a mock holiday card that satirizes rhetorics of regressive autism, Harp (2009) represents Squawkers as a "Sibling of Neurotypicality," implicitly suggesting that Squawkers is, in toto, autism. In another post, Harp (2008) details a trip to Chicago in which fellow travelers react negatively to Squawkers's presence and echolalic scripts. Harp subtly juxtaposes the repeated refrain made by others—is the parrot real?—against similar claims about autism itself (are you really autistic?). So threatening was Squawkers's autistic presence that, at one juncture, a passerby "in front of the art gallery had jumped as if he might bite her."

What I find noteworthy in Harp's work is her openness about perseverance's embodied effects: social spaces are not designed for neurodivergent bodies, much less for the creatures, objects, and scripts that perseveratively accompany us. The cripplingly uncommon is perceived as deviant; museums, restaurants, grocery stores, and schools are not prepared for the parrotic awesomeness of a script-loving Squawkers McCaw. But Harp's work also gestures toward something more. Even though perseverance is socially beheld as intrusive, and even though it is not conceived as a condition of daily life (much less a condition of public space), it is nevertheless a form of access creation. In other words, perseverance can mean the difference between being in a space and being forcibly

absented from a space. Perseveration is as much about coping as it is about distress.

What do we do when the tools we use to create accessible spaces are, in and of themselves, in some way inaccessible? What do we do when existing theories of design *still* foreground ability (minus the *dis*) in their appeals to universality—designs that force disabled people to persevere in order to gain access, as opposed to designers perseverating on being and doing better in their jobs as designers? When are our bodyminds the safest (or even the most dangerous) vehicles for, of, or around access? Is there something more to be said about retrofits, or perseveration, or the Electric Light Orchestra? How are we persisting beyond a desired point?

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