

# All the weight of our dreams: on living racialised autism

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**To cite this article:** Marianthi Kourti (2018): All the weight of our dreams: on living racialised autism, *Disability & Society*, DOI: [10.1080/09687599.2018.1471811](https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2018.1471811)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2018.1471811>



Published online: 20 May 2018.



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BOOK REVIEW

**All the weight of our dreams: on living racialised autism**, edited by Lydia X. Z. Brown, E. Ashkenazy and Moréniwe Giwa Onaiwu, USA, DragonBee Press, An Imprint of the Autism Women's Network, 2017, 500 pp., £19.59 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-99-750450-7

This anthology is a collection of essays, blog posts, poetry and artwork that aims to shed some light on the experiences of autistic people of colour. The writers and editors are all autistic people of colour and they seem to be situated in different countries, although most of them seem to reside in the USA and Canada. *All the Weight of Our Dreams: On Living Racialised Autism* adopts an intersectional approach (Crenshaw 1989, 1991), attempting to cover the various aspects of the lives of autistic people of colour.

The book is divided into six parts. The first part lays the groundwork on the importance of *All the Weight of Our Dreams*. It presents how the under-researched and largely unrecognised intersection of autism and race affects people who live racialised autism. Among the key themes it identifies is later identification, lack of support and the danger of dealing with violent police forces as an autistic person of colour.

The second part focuses on the writers' autistic experiences. It discusses the ableist experiences the writers had in the past (e.g. 'As soon as I was diagnosed on the spectrum, my counsellor stopped talking to me like an equal and started talking to me like a child'; 26) and includes many essays that explore the violence experienced by vulnerable autistic individuals, as well as common ableist attitudes towards explicit accounts of violence (e.g. 'Stop pathologizing violence. Violence is not a mental illness, but psych disabled people, like all disabled people, live with the constant possibility of violence and abuse in this profoundly ableist world'; 120).

The third part explores the intersection of autism, race and different cultural backgrounds. It presents the writers' experiences of trying to 'pass' as white and neurotypical, the exclusion they have faced not only by being a racial minority in a predominantly white society but also from their own communities, and the misunderstandings they have experienced from people from all ways of life with minimal understanding of what it means to be autistic (e.g. 'It is frustrating trying to share part of your identity when doing so closes the door on being seen as a human being'; 174). Going further than that, it explores people's further identities such as sexuality (e.g. being 'disgaybled'; 134).

The fourth part, entitled 'Our personal is political', focuses on the writers' reflection on their various identities, being autistic, being a person of colour, being LGBTQ+ and the political implications of that process ('When autism has such a white cis male face in the media and in terms of who is often diagnosed, it may be difficult to entirely relate to the idea of "difference" the way many white autistic people have conceptualized it'; 357).

The fifth part consists of essays focusing on disability activism and the writers' experiences of this as autistic people of colour, for example:

Intersectionality demands complexity without easy answers or simple slogans, because the real lives of everyone in the movement are infinitely more complicated than single-issue politics can recognise. Intersectionality requires thoughtful organising and intense labour if we truly seek to build more just and equitable communities. (424)

Finally, the sixth part includes artwork from autistic people of colour which present their thoughts and experiences.

As a white autistic person, I have really enjoyed reading this book. I have found myself agreeing with many issues the writers discussed; not only the experiences of being autistic, but also those of being an immigrant/bicultural:

Being bicultural gave an alternative explanation for a lot of my problems 'fitting in'. If I didn't fit in with my Dominican family, it was supposedly cultural. If I didn't fit in with my New England white co-workers, it was also supposedly cultural. But after I discovered autism, it made much more sense why I had never fit anywhere. (183)

It has also been very interesting to read the stories from people of many diverse backgrounds. Although most of the writers of this book are located in the USA or Canada, they offer a rich tapestry of lived experiences from various backgrounds and shed light on intersections that up until now have very rarely (if ever!) been discussed.

Admittedly, *All the Weight of Our Dreams* has been an incredibly hard read at times. Containing many essays that explicitly discuss violence as it is experienced by disabled individuals of colour, this book includes some of the writers' biggest worries and fears, when they are forced by very real, explicit violence. One only needs to read Onaiwu's conversations with her children as a black autistic mother of black disabled children about violence and how to keep safe to get but a glimpse of the oppression and fear those communities are living under (145–147). Despite being a difficult read at times (for the right reasons), I really appreciated the fact that the writers presented the raw, emotional reality of their everyday lives and presented them to us so we can get a more insightful view of their experiences. It is that vulnerability that makes statements such as 'We talk about intersectionality in our identities, in our organising, and in our writing so often. It is time to move from talk to accountability' so poignant, as they underline the very real need for this effort.

The editors of *All the Weight of Our Dreams* should be commended on their inclusivity efforts as well. I have really appreciated the editor's note at the beginning on the steps they took to keep this book as inclusive as possible and to support their disabled contributors. Some of them are obvious throughout the text (such as using written descriptions of the images included, to make them accessible to visually impaired individuals), and others are more implicitly apparent, if one takes into consideration the variety of perspectives included as well as the number of contributors. In short, I would say that this book is a must-read for those wanting to understand the experiences of autistic people from an intersectional perspective and I hope that it sparks many discussions and more interest on the lives of the numerous autistic people of colour across the world.

## References

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2018.1471811>

