During the last few years, while I pursued my ethnographic research on the formation of autistic subjectivities, I came close to autistic people, a minority group, with which I wasn’t biographically connected. Nevertheless, the roots of my search were deep in my psychic structures. As a woman, I had experienced feelings of exclusion, but my own experience was just not enough to deconstruct this subject position of not belonging. In a sense, no matter how critical my perspective was regarding the injustice of gender system, I could not avoid constructing my own identity, even excluded, abjected non identity. Still, what was at stake was the double edged knife of my ego and the power relationships that such narcissism, even traumatized, creates and reproduces.
My relationship with the autistic people I met during the last five years helped me realize some of the meanings that these feelings have for me and for others, but specifically raised two issues which now seem to me interrelated and which I need to discuss. The first concerns the notion of empathy, what anthropologist Veena Das refers to as “to feel the pain of others in one’s own body” (Das, 2011), which was crucial due to the fact that most of my informants don’t have speech. This intersects with Judith Butler’s concept of performativity, that is the psychic and embodied reproduction of the dominant discourse. As I will try to explain many autistics do not reproduce these structures. Since I had constructed certain cultural identities and, consequently, carried their political implications, I had to deconstruct these discourses and the power relationships, which I had internalized, in order to feel how autistics feel and how they are related to their environment. Thus, my communication with them regarded certain presuppositions that raised two questions: Why do we embody and perform the dominant discourses? Which language does not speak the structures of power?

I was formed in a political environment where gender, sexuality, disability, body are not natural facts, but political results of power relationships. With this perspective I read the genealogy of autism and realized the prejudices, projections and fantasies of many non autistic people that this history incorporates. (Nadesan, 2005) One of the most dominant approaches today, the Theory of Mind, suggests that autistics do not understand the minds of other people (Baron-Cohen et al., 1985). I believe that this way of rational communication is far from autistic experience indeed. The definition of autism which I prefer, has come out of readings of autistics’ people narratives, such as William Stillman and describes the neurological disconnection between language and the body, during which the body blocks brain waves (Stillman, 2009). No matter how different their sensory experiences are, what is
coherent in autistic life is the perception of information which cannot be generalized in conceptual schemas. Even for autistics who have speech, language is idiosyncratic and subjective, mainly affected by their senses, memory and experience, rather than discourse and representation. Temple Grandin argues that some autistics are thinking with pictures (Grandin, 1996), others smell in order to orient themselves, like my friend Barbara, who used to smell my hands every time we went on a different place than the one we used to hang around and I felt that this gave her a sense of familiarity and helped her calm down. Noises are sometimes painful, the senses of pain and temperature on the skin are extremely subjective, a touch can be felt as a slap. Some people need to see and touch their bodies in order to feel sure of their existence. Time is chaotic. John asked me once: “Have you lived in the 19th century?” “No, I said, I haven’t.” “Why not?” John continued, “What are the limits of time?”

I feel that autistics’ subject position derives from these incoherent sensory experiences, given that they are mainly sensory and affective, based on personal memories. This is of course common to neurotypical experience as well, but, still, as literature on gender hierarchies and performativity has shown, language and identities block the reconciliation with these inner feelings. Language is mostly a tool for us to become accepted members of society and thus manipulates our judgment and attention. As autistic writer Dawn Prince stresses “I learned very early that for most people, language was a kind of weapon rather than an amorphous mist of the birth waters of reality. It seemed that for most speaking humans, language could be considered a violent activity, in that it cut up the world, and its use also cut groups of people one from another. A knife was just a knife and bore no relationship to the cutting of language. A chair was just a chair where nothing sat. A breath was just a breath, a singular thing, apart from the heart, apart from the atmosphere, a thing separate from saying”(Dawn, 2010). Most
of the autistics I met do not internalize and thus do not reproduce the structures of dominant discourse that affect our worldviews. The disconnection from their body image, their communicative complications during social interactions, their idiosyncratic relation with language, symbolism and representations redefine the question of identity formation which is common place that is subjected to discursive practices, cultural and social constructions. I intend to focus on this difference and examine what comes out of this conflict, between the discursive bodies that we neurotypicals perform and the sensory dis-embodied autistic lives.

LANGUAGE AND THE FORMATION OF IDENTITY

In his book *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty refers in the way “we find in language the notion of sensation, which seems immediate and obvious: I have the sensation of redness, of blueness, of hot or cold”. Merleau-Ponty finds that traditional analyses missed the phenomenon of perception because they accepted this sensation readily. The positivist account of accepting experiences as pure sensations corresponds nothing to our experience. Experiences have a bearing on relationships and not on absolute terms. Merleau-Ponty says: “Each point can be perceived only as a figure on a background. The perceptual something is always in the middle of something else, it always forms part of a field. The pure impression is, therefore, not only indiscernible, but also imperceptible and so inconceivable as an instant of perception. If it is introduced it is because instead of attending to the experience of perception, we overlook it in favour of the object perceived” (Merleau-Ponty, 2010) In that sense, for non autistics, the real is not objective, since perception is always mediated by language, discourse and conceptual schemas. At the same time, this role of schemas is not visible. As non autistics we are not present in the emotional, cognitive, psychic and body processes that create our
ways of attention. This background is always present, although we
don’t realize it. On the contrary, many autistics perceive stimuli as
differentiate in time and space, as pure sensations actually. Their
difficulty with tolerating sounds, for instance, arises from the fact
that sounds are coming incoherently, while non autistics judge un-
consciously and choose the sounds they will pay notice too.

The procedure of acquisition of language protects us (non au-
tistics) from attending this experience of perception, as described
before, but it creates a conflict between our personal feelings,
our senses, our memories and society’s expected representa-
tions. Discourse hegemonizes the possibilities and perspectives
of self-reflection. Unconsciously, we internalize the structures of
power relationships as psychic necessities, as the work of Judith
Butler shows. Her work enriches the foucauldian critic on dis-
course’s disciplinary effects and the normalization of subjectivi-
ties, through the clarification of the internalization processes or
the appropriation of the discursive practices as psychic neces-
sities. At this point the contribution of psychoanalysis is cru-
cial, as it approaches the subject not as knowing and singural,
but subject to unconsciously internalized modalities of power.
The concept of internalization refers to certain processes, which
precede the formation of identity, therefore they postpone and
dismantle its complete fixation. The Freudian concept of identifi-
cation refers to the continuous efforts to incorporate completely
the imaginary norm given by the parental figures in a conflictual
environment. Since the construction is always in process, what
is left outside continues to define the subject, as the constitutive
outside of its formation. Thus, the ‘natural’ body becomes “the
naturalized product of discursive practices and power relations”
(Athanasiou, 2008). The body materializes and is being material-
ized performatively as a procedure in the social time. It validates
or not the hegemonic discourse which defines and restricts what
counts as human.
Another crucial contribution of this critical thinking of identity formation and its connection with the acquisition of language is Austin’s Speech act theory. His work “How to do things with words” has been decisive for my perception of autistic language. I locate its difference from the neurotypical language at this point of the distinction Austin made between constative and performative utterances. The first are truth-value sentences, while the performative sentences do not just say something but perform what they name, they perform a certain kind of action. For instance expressions like “I swear” cannot be true or false, but felicitous or infelicitous.

The collapse of this distinction under the pressure of intermediary cases finally lead Austin to articulate the theory of speech acts. In this way, a three-fold distinction is proposed, between the locutionary act, the illocutionary force, and the perlocutionary effect, that is between the act of speech itself, the force that the speech act has to be interpreted in certain ways, and the material outcome that surfaced as a result of what was said; its practical consequences. One of the conclusions that Austin’s study reached was that even statements constitute acts, therefore the distinction on which the hypothesis of the performative acts, distinct from the statements or constative utterances, was based on, collapses.

Austin’s theory has been productively refracted from the influential critical readings by Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler. Derrida criticises the fact that Austin held the contextual framework within which signs acquire their meaning to be binding. He defends the “iterability” and the “citationality” of the sign, which has the capability of being the same and different to itself, and consequently to differentially repeat in other contexts, different than the one which provided it with its initial meaning, in a prospect of re-appropriation and new capabilities of articulation, which surface inside, but also in opposition with its history.

At this point, reading the philosopher Stanley Cavell, who
comments on Derrida’s essay “Signature, event, context” (Derri-
da, 1988) wherein all the above are analysed, is useful. According to Cavell (Cavell, 1995), the two philosophers (Austin and Der-
rida) have more in common than what Derrida admitted, primarily the fact that both are philosophers of the limit, who stand critically towards the tradition of western logocentrism, which Austin actually calls a “descriptive fraud”. Derrida includes Austin’s philoso-
phy in the “metaphysics of presence”, while Cavell contends that Austin, like Wittgenstein, understands scepticism and metaphys-
ics as forms of intellectual tragedy, but is not willing to turn the tragedy into a farce. With this, he means that one may abrogate their promises, the sign is indeed interchangeable and functions differently within different contexts, but despite this one becomes at any rate committed by the promises they give; if not by the environment of the language, then by its emotional sources. Aus-
tin refers to the tragedy of Hippolytus and their characteristically tragic phrase which includes: “My tongue swore to, but my heart did not”. We have the capability of being dishonest, says Austin, we do not have the capability of, in spite of this, not signing our words and actions, of not signing the promises we abrogate. “I am committed either way, even if my language vowed without my heart”, Cavell maintains.

Cavell rejects Derrida’s critique of Austin as regards the fail-
ures of language, as if they were external and not a structural condition of language. He contends that the French philosopher ignores Austin’s theory of excuses, which anticipate the vulner-
ability of human action, as subject to bodily wear, which is here approached as a “parchment of its displacement”. And while he says that excuses are for Austin what parapraxeses are for Freud, in the introduction of Shoshana Felman’s essay (Felman, 2003), who is inspired by Don Juan’s figure, which no word/promise can commit to anything, differentiates himself regarding this parallel-
ism. Again departing from the theory of excuses, Cavell notes that
while for Freud man is a field of meaning, whose actions express wider meanings than the ones he cares to seek, for Austin the human being is a field of vulnerability, whose actions imply wider consequences and effects than what this human being is responsible. Cavell mentions two directions, which are different and yet converge. Both these directions are situated far from the self, and converge to the same source which they come from, to the trauma as that which eludes signification, the limit of language. If we have the responsibility of recognising our Freudian subconscious, in other words if we have the responsibility to strip naked of the representations that divide us in the neurotypical language and place us far from the relationship itself and its necessary pain, it is because the body, as a psychic imprinting of these displacements, will remind us how painful what prevents us from relating is anyway. Reconciling with this vulnerability is the precondition for experiencing the openness of meaning. In other words, the sign is not placed without a price in other environments of meaning, even if this is possible, and sometimes politically important.

VULNERABLE LANGUAGE

When we speak and involve ourselves in social relations, in the temporal and spatial dimension of public life and its conflicts, it is language again which conceals its corporeal and sensory sources. Moreover, the power that language has to fetishize and mysticize the antagonisms that reproduce the existing power relationships is invested with libidinal and emotional pleasure. During the procedure of language acquisition, we repress to the unconscious our primary vulnerability which preexists the formation of our somatic ego, the primary trauma of a passivity which preexists the distinction of passive-active and actually constitutes the distinction itself (Butler, 2005). This anxiety that causes the fear for the emergence of this excluded infancy coexists with language. The
anxiety for the loss of our discursively created selves is transferred to the reproduction of the hegemonic discourse, to the structures of hierarchical relationships. We perform these social categories to avoid this fear, but unless we come in touch with this fear, we cannot do otherwise but adopt and reproduce the hierarchies. In order to come in touch with the trauma of the existential gap with the other, in order to come in touch with the other and not with the reflection of our representations and fantasies, we need to go against the discursive limits of our body image which separated us in the first place. Although we can conceive it theoretically, this reconciliation is not an intellectual effort. We can only experience it through this gesture of mourning for our discursively constructed ego. We have to speak our trauma, or else our trauma speaks for us.

Since we learn how to speak in an environment of emotions and sensations, then these emotions revive through experiences, through our move in the world. In that sense, even if language gives us the opportunity to avoid our embodied selves, by creating a body image in its place, it is delimited from the body’s life. The body not subjected to power relations that brought it to discourse in the first place, but the body as the active subject of its own unique experience, subjected to the consequences of social mutuality. Most autistics’ language differs from the neurotypicals’ illusional privilege to take distance from themselves. On the contrary, it is usually contextual and sensory-based. As Dawn Prince writes “For me, language was blended inextricably to context and memory. This melding represented the most important thing in the world, and everything, from bathrooms to snails, to dogs, had language. If a thing existed, it existed as a living part of language and had a deep understanding of its place in the vibrations of speech, in the vibrations of existence.” (Prince, 2010) This language is characterized by this closeness with the self and, consequently, the anxiety and the suffering that causes the psychic
touch with the other. For autistics, painful is language itself since they always live on the limits of it, without belonging in its categories. My autistic friends ask me how do we buckle a button, why do women wear earings, what is “you are”, what is time? And I think I understand now that I need to travel the distance to communicate. More specifically, from the privilege and the certainties of common language and belonging to face to face relationships, personal contact, mutuality.

I believe that autistics sense this vulnerability which non autistics avoid to come in touch with and which is controlled by the fact that biopolitics locate us in certain power positions (gender, sexuality, health, race) where we transfer our feelings. In opposition to this reproduction of the social contract, empathy presupposes the death of our ego, of the world as we imagined it, of the imaginary spectacle of ourselves, which derives from our personal biographies. I argue that empathy and performing our social roles are mutually exclusive. In order to feel the pain of others on one’s own body, therefore in order to communicate with autistics is conflicting and incompatible with performing the dominant discourses which mediate our emotions, senses and relationships. Empathy presupposes the feeling and experience of abjection and exclusion from human society, it presupposes this loss of intimacy and the reconciliation with the pain of our inner existential loneliness, which we experience whenever we contact others. It presupposes the autistic feeling of not being able to avoid the affect, the body and its existential vulnerability. Language motivates the pain that stems out of these limits and it’s on power’s side when it covers up this vulnerability.

REFERENCES


