

Autism, Art and the World Behind the World: Adventures in Neurodiverse Communication.

Brent White and Sonia Boué

"Your head is a living forest full of song birds." e.e. cummings

"The language of the in-between space, the World Behind the World. Qualia. Liminality.
Chaos". Brent White



Refugee Stack with Typewriter 2014

Introduction

Brent White is the Director of the [Ala Costa's Adult Transition \[ACAT\] Program](#) and Sonia Boué is an artist, art therapist and art historian. They met early in 2014 and have become friends and creative colleagues. They share a passion for advocacy and championing neurological difference. This meeting occurred through social media and a bond was quickly established through Sonia's online art project, [Barcelona in a Bag](#). By March of that year they published an article together entitled: [Asperger's, Object Art and an Extreme Case of Empathy: Adventures in Visual Thinking](#).

The article represented an attempt to understand how Brent who is autistic, dyslexic and has PTSD, and Sonia, who has dyscalculia and a sensory processing condition, were able to forge an emotional connection with revolutionary implications. Autism and friendship are not often associated in the public mind. Yet a process of mutual discovery came about through the use of object art in an evocation of Sonia's family's flight from Spain during the closing stages of the Spanish Civil War. The comment facility on the social media platform used allowed for intimacy and distance to combine, creating a safe space to practice what the authors will refer to as "call and response". Call and response is terminology borrowed from the animal kingdom and more specifically for the authors relates to birdsong, but here will be applied to their interactions. This communication method is non-linear and so this new article will require a change in gears for those more used to a linear style.

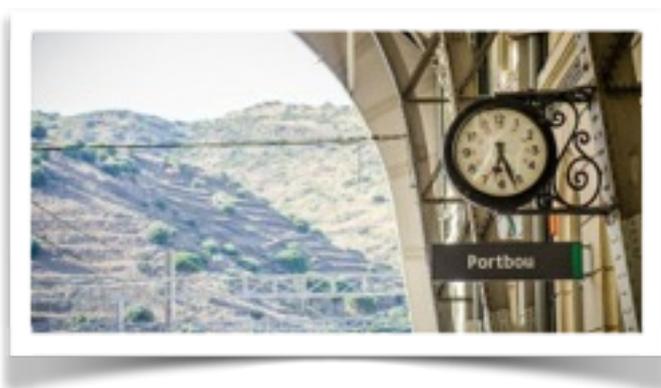
For those familiar with the diagnostic criteria for autistic spectrum conditions these encounters have flown in the face of what has unjustly passed for 'evidence' about key features of autism but which are increasingly revealed as neurological bias. Empathy and intuitive responses kept arriving in the project's inbox. The authors have been keen to share their findings and add to the growing chorus of autistic advocates and their supporters who proclaim that autism is difference. Approached with respect and appropriate understanding, connections can flourish. A willingness to truly step inside difference is required; Here the authors invite the reader to occupy such a receptive zone and hear their call. Their call is; Listen! Listen!

In this article they continue their conversation with new impetus and a new language. They contend that difference is necessary, vital and enriching. Difference is deep, extends widely and can encompass what Brent identifies as a World Behind the World. The authors draw on Barcelona in a Bag posts and their email conversations to reflect on the concept of 'world' to denote experience and interface, what this term means for them both and how they have come to share aspects of this non-linear and liminal territory. It is therefore useful to hold the notion of liminal spaces close at hand, here referring to a powerful duality of experience and the ability to transverse boundaries.

The conversation

Sonia: One day quite far into the project I posted an eye witness account of the flight from Barcelona in late January 1939, and found photographs of the station platform at Portbou where my grandmother (Abuela) cooked rice in the mortal fear and chaos of that moment. This filled in the gaps for me and brought to life the fragment of oral testimony I couldn't grasp in words. I thought about being a visual thinker and needing to see the platform. I posted the following quotation from **Benigno Bejarano's** account:

"One get's the impression that all Spain is rolling up to the Pyrenees like a mighty wave."



Sonia: Brent, you responded in a way which struck me when I read it. It was this post which altered my ideas about what I was creating. We had travelled through all those days together, our 'calls and responses' intensifying it now seems to me, but this was a moment of recognition. You said

"I'm trying to think of a time in modern history when there is not a long line of refugees fleeing their homes. It horrifies me. I think of the resolve of Abuela making rice in the middle of this fleeing. I think of Sonia creating an important and meaningful narrative from its dust and its ghosts. All these events: good and un-good; side by side; global and very personal, are complex and hard for me to pin down."

Brent: I had two strong images in my mind when I wrote that: One was an endless line of dusty beaten humans, heads bowed down, moving slowly along a dirt road, barely able to lift their feet on a road that had no end. The second image was one in which Abuela (or a person whom I assume is Abuela) opened up a rift in the first image, like someone pulling back a curtain and showed me the same road, but empty. Both images haunted me, but the second image was a glimpse at the World Behind the World. At times, my mind perceives a sort of tunnel which opens up and I can see the waking world the way that I see the dreaming world. There is a duality which we have spoken of before of waking/dreaming. But the duality is larger than that in which there is a vast universe without beginning or end in which we exist, and a vast universe inside my mind connected to the dream world with its endless fears and its endless magic which exists as long as I exists. I think they are made of the same dust.

Sonia: Let's hold this thought for a moment. I need to tune in to what you're saying. You sometimes experience a rift moment when your waking world appears as it does to you in your dreaming world?

Brent: I need to say something about language first. As we talked about in our first article, it is often difficult for me to express emotions in ordinary language. My mind sees in images with emotional fragments attached. This is what happens in dreams as well. It is difficult to describe dreams in detail, because so much is pure feeling, pure sense-tone. Ordinary language has no access to the depth and weight of the total experience of dreams. And for me as well, it cannot tell the story of how I experience the world. Being forced to use ordinary language is very frustrating and isolating for me.

I want to try to use my internal language to describe my experiences to you, the language I call Sky-Bird-Tree-Dirt. It is the language of connections. It speaks about the way all things are connected to all things in my mind.

Sonia: I'm very happy for you to speak in your language. It springs from your wiring and reflects how *you* experience the world. This article is about connecting after all, and I don't want you to face any of the usual obstacles that neurotypical language presents to you. Please continue in Sky-Bird-Tree-Dirt.

Brent: I will start in the dreaming world: It is common for me to become aware in the middle of a dream that I am dreaming. A few years ago near the end of a particular dream I became lucid; aware of the delicate fabric of the dream's architecture all around which could at any moment dissolve and I would be pulled back to wakefulness. I thought about how it was that I knew I was dreaming. I thought about the sensations, or maybe lack of sensations along the edges of my dreaming body. I realised that I knew I was dreaming because I felt no gravity.

Sonia: I'm struck by your ability to move between waking and dream worlds simultaneously. You've spoken about the ability you developed to dream lucidly, and how you rather astonishingly trained yourself to do this to deal with PTSD. Let's focus on the duality then and try to think about the personal universe you describe as an alternate reality, and the way this connects up to the physical universe we all inhabit. How do you feel the two spaces connect for you?

Brent: I feel the weight of the physical world. For example, when I walk and I allow my body to speak to the environment around me, my body traces curves. The weight of mass, the heat radiating off the side of a building or the unbelievably delicate movement of air moving off the leaves of a hedge. My hands trace curves in the air when I move through space. Gravity bends mass, particles of light, everything is bending. Gravity pulls mass, the weight of everything creates spheres. Can you sense it?

Sonia: It's as though you feel bodily mingled with the physical spaces you inhabit. It's beautiful the way you describe the motion of your body through space as speaking to the environment. This is language - this is your conversational model, just as valid as the more commonly spoken of neurotypical model of conversation. Time seems to slow down and there is a particular focus. It's a sensory, bodily flooding with input so intense and pleasurable it makes me want to join you and find equivalences in my own experience. I wonder if this is how I experience objects? I feel their presence, they speak to me and lead my creative processes. Their weight in my hand, their textures and their ability to take on characteristics are also physical. It's so powerful for me I have sometimes wondered if it is also a difference of perceptual filter, although others seem to recognise and relate to it. Synesthesia comes to mind with your experience.

Brent: Synesthesia is a fairly common neurological experience especially for spectrum folks. I assumed for a time that everyone saw numbers and letters in colors or heard the color of music. I have visual hallucinations often. They are there and they are not there. It is as if the image which would usually exist only inside of my mind floats out, and I can see it with my eyes.

Sonia: This helps me understand your response to the project! Visual hallucinations are imaginary experiences made almost tangible. This is exactly what I do as an artist. I have to embody ideas and emotions. I have to make my internal processes tangible so I move between the imaginary world and reality backwards and forwards constantly. It is a little like your ability to move between dreaming and waking in both directions. I wonder if your process of floating an image out into physical space so that it becomes visible also works both ways, so that images you see in the external world become internalised in some particular way?

Brent: I don't believe the world is ever solid. The world is made up of countless atoms all in constant motion and as we move into even smaller particles the movement increases.

Particles bounce and move in and out of existence all the time. The illusion of solidity gives us comfort, but it is illusion.

Sonia: This reminds me of some work I made before Barcelona in a Bag. I used my Hoover bag dust and sweepings as media because I wanted to focus on those tiny forgotten and unloved particles. I felt a universe of experience could be contained there and that while we spend all our time in conflict with it trying to clean it up and get rid of it, it might just contain treasure. A lot of this work was about trying to catch dust in jars, sift and grade it and show the beauty of this living breathing matter. I kept asking myself, where does the dust go?

I want to ask you more about what you call the "Language of Sky-Bird-Tree-Dirt" because it takes us deeper into the duality you experience.

Brent: The language of Sky-Bird-Tree-Dirt: Everything and everyone is connected by the dust and the atoms which exists in all of us and in the universe. Everything living is connected by everything living. It is our truth. My mind sees this all so easily and draws curving lines to graph out the connections. It is stunning. The vast architecture of the breathing world pulsates and radiates. Sky-Bird-Tree-Dirt says that it is a privilege to be a living thing even if it is only for a second. Sky-Bird-Tree-Dirt says that we are not lonely.

Sonia: I keep returning to a phrase I've adopted to help me think about different neurologies, which is 'how the world connects up' for different people. My own difference, living with chasms of perception (what it is to be without a sense of number, system, pattern or sequence) is hard to describe. Mostly I intuit and surmise. I swoop like a magpie gathering objects that glitter, take them to my nest, examine them to come to a wider comprehension of my surroundings and events. Most importantly I have to see before I can know, or my knowing is a seeing in a true sense. Sky-Bird-Tree-Dirt, the beautiful connection you feel with the natural environment, reminds me of the connectedness I feel when I am making work, and through my objects.

Brent: This connection is important to me because as hard as I have tried, I cannot connect most people to the language of Sky-Bird-Tree-Dirt. When my mind draws lines of connections to all objects in my environment, but the connections rarely lead to *people* in that environment.

Sonia: I understand why. Many people won't feel this language and the connection you do - they aren't wired to do this. Yet when you begin to explain it so well my mind jumps to comparisons. The way you feel as your body caresses and speaks to the air as you move through it may have a certain equivalence for me when I swim. I think this goes beyond the obvious immersive quality and sensory aspect of swimming, but even if I'm a



long way off understanding your emotional experience, thinking about swimming helps me to think about you moving through the air.

Brent: And I often feel as if the world of living people occurs in the daylight and that I am the nighttime.

Sonia: Day and night are connected but opposites, they form a cycle yet run in tandem. I imagine you're talking about feeling separate. You feel you inhabit a contrasting space from that of neurotypical people? Yin and Yang come to mind. I like this association as it suggests harmony, which adds to the idea that humanity needs our differences. Without your night there can be no neurotypical day.

Brent: The World Behind the World is always liminal [or at least it seems so]. The World Behind the World cannot be seen if you are not willing to leave the daylight and become the nighttime. I am not alone because I am part of the mystery; no body, no words, only breathing, being and feeling.

Sonia: That is poetry Brent! Poets and artists understand the liminal.

Brent: Sky-Bird-Tree-Dirt is a language made up of the delicate fabric of the World Behind the World. It is spoken by your hands praising the curve of the world. It is spoken by Abuela pulling back the curtain of thoughts, but giving no answers. It is spoken by the ghost of me as a boy with his arms wrapped around my current-self. It is spoken by the blue color of Sonia's father's suitcase. It is spoken in the iconography of my dreams. It is spoken by the mystery sky I saw in a dream as a child. It is always there in the periphery, listen, listen.

Sonia: You've helped me to listen and here's an example. I want to talk about another moment in the project. During February as I carried out my art vigil for my family, you were involved in organising and publicising a vigil for disabled people killed by their caregivers in the Bay Area of San Francisco. This moved me terribly as I absorbed the pain and fear disabled adults feel when these killings are minimised in the press and in the courts because the victims are disabled and thus considered a burden to their caregivers - as though those killings are somehow justifiable.

Some weeks later I produced one of my most challenging pieces, Ofrenda 1. It is inspired by a photograph by Spanish exile Enrique Tapia of the wooden suitcase he used as a cot for this three month old baby during the retreat from Catalonia.

As often happens in my work, there was an intense fusion of associations. It was a 'blinding' connection between the Spanish Civil War with the 'war' within the autistic community between adult advocates and those who promote 'cures' and 'eradication' for autism. I understood



Enrique Tapia's suitcase cot

the connection between your vigil and my project. They were: conflict, embattled voices and most shockingly of all child victims. For the first time my work began to touch on contemporary events. It was incredibly difficult to write this post and yet it was one of my most well received. I think Ofrenda 1 inhabits an in-between space too - this is something I can do - I can create a new space between existing worlds. This is what art allows us.

You never told me what happened for you around this vigil.

Brent: Before I left my office on the night before the vigil, I turned off the lights and set up the small memorial we had made on a table: A red poster board with pictures of recent victims. A white notebook with pictures of other victims. A bouquet of white flowers. How like an ofrenda I thought. It was hard for me to look at the pictures of the victims. I had a visual reaction to their stories. I kept seeing the kitchen knife plunging into Alex Spourdalakis. All I saw was red. But it wasn't like an ofrenda I thought. There are no candies to offer, no sweetbread, no glass of mezcal. There was no basin filled with clean water to wash away the blood. There was no white towel to make one's hands clean again.



Sonia: It was through your vigil that I had begun to see the month I spent marking the retreat from Spain with my daily posts as an art vigil. I was standing by and honouring my ancestor's unspoken wounds, the wounds of a generation. The experience you describe reminds me of the emotional imperative that drives my work. It also

reminds me of Macbeth - a play rife with hallucination, unwashed blood and eternally guilty souls - you conjure a poet's imagery, you live it. We probably arrived at the same idea because ritual ritual such as ofrenda are a natural felt response to trauma and loss that Western cultures have largely forgotten.

At times it has felt strange to you that we inhabit these shared spaces in which there is so much equivalence and recognition, it's a new sensation to connect in this way. It's been extraordinary I agree, translation between us is smooth and we've stumbled on a rich vein of shared experience. I think this is because we are both primarily extremely visual thinkers.

It strikes me too that the connection we've made has also flourished because we've never had to deal with the awkwardness of direct eye contact which I know is distressing for you. Our 'virtual eye contact' is mediated by the objects and through the rifts. We've been gazing on the same material and looking into the same spaces in each other's worlds, but always with a pleasing and restful distance. The pacing of this gaze is entirely other to that of eye contact in 'real time' and this removes many obstacles. But let's go back to what happened with the experience of ofrenda.

Brent: In *The World Behind the World*, I look at our memorial and think this is like an ofrenda. Behind me, over my right shoulder Abuela says that it is not an ofrenda because there are no offerings. In *The World Behind the World* there is a red curtain which Abuela pulls back to reveal the Refugee's Road. They are moving along the road, all of the victims; Alex, Katie, Daniel, Marcus, Angelica, Zain, Tiffany, Ajit, Christopher, Kenneth, Faryaal, Emily, Karandeep, Jori, Noe, Chase, Courtney, Ulysses, Ethan, all of them and many more. Abuela shows me this, but gives me no answers.

Sonia: How like Abuela this is. She would untie her apron and rush to the market to buy offerings! What happens next in *The World Behind the World*?

Brent: I think of an image of the ghost of me as a child. It is a whisper. The ghost of me as a child is sitting on the floor leaning against a wall. The baseboard is white. The ghost of me as a child is always afraid. Abuela pulls back a red curtain and I see the Refugee's Road. On the road the ghost of me as a child holds my hand. The child leads. Abuela says, "Listen, listen".

Sonia: I'm listening Brent.

Brent: Yes, I'm trying to listen as well. I never told you how stunning it was when you produced *Ofrenda 1*; the suitcase cot, the chocolate, the sweet bread, the cups for drinking. Stunning because you didn't know what happened in my office the night before the vigil. You have powerfully woven together the connection between these institutions which seek to eradicate difference in order to strengthen their own power as represented once again by the image of a suitcase. These stories are so hard to tell and yet we must tell them.

Sonia: It's the only piece I have ever posted, taken down, reworked and reposted. Humanity shies away from bitter truths and we shy from telling. Perhaps we fear to offend, we fear we will not be heard?

Brent: I remembering seeing the post appear, then disappear. In *The World Behind the World* Abuela pulls back a pale blue curtain and shows Sonia the Refugee's Road. Abuela says, "La carretera esta llena de voces durmientes, escucha, escucha: despierta."

Sonia: You've often spoken about the struggle to project your voice and that of the ghost of you as a child. I think about refugee and exile voices also embattled and silenced. In terms of different neurologies this silencing is also imposed. Neurotypical society has a troubling blind spot about the dominance of verbal communication. With disabilities that encompass social pragmatics having a fair say, indeed any say, can present mountainous challenge. It's essential to be met on one's own terms from the other side.

Brent: Sky-Bird-Tree-Dirt is the name of my internal language. It is often silenced.

Sonia: Yes, sadly that must be true. Another element that draws us together is social justice. A powerful bond. it's like the bond I feel with the International Brigades for standing by Republican Spain, it's a bond of solidarity.

Brent: You mention social justice and there are the ordinary answers which float through my mind; I grew up in the 1960s during the last great revolution in America; the lives and writings of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Emma Goldman, Bill Hayward, and others had influence on me. But it is deeper than this, personal, and very hard for me to talk about in ordinary language.

In the World Behind the World the ghost of me as a child is clinging to me. He is always present both in the dreaming world and the waking world. He walks the Refugee's Road. Abuela showed me; "Listen. Listen". He is a sweet boy this ghost of mine, but he is cowering in a corner, leaning against a wall. The base board is white. There is a dangerous dream spirit. I won't say his name. He appears sometimes as a cat. He lures children into a dark room. These are the places where Worlds Behind the Worlds are born. My shoes are covered in the dust of the Refugee's Road. The ghost of me as a child pulls on my hand leading me. I asked the ghost of me as a child if we are going home. He glances back over his shoulder and his eyes focus on a burning city behind us. There is no home.

The ghost of me as a child has no voice, so I must speak for him or I am complicit with my abusers. And even if my language is called Sky-Bird-Tree-Dirt I must speak for him. The inhumanity and cruelty of the fascists, of my family, of the caregivers that murder their disabled children are matched only by inhumanity and cruelty in the silence of those who stood by and did nothing.

Sonia: There is a bruised eloquence to this language of Sky-Bird-Tree-Dirt. My heart goes out to the ghost boy. He has also been through war, his city set ablaze. No home, no safety, no-one to protect him. We know that this should never happen, but we know that it does. The presence of this ghost compels you to speak in the same way that Abuela insists that I do. We're both haunted by these ghosts.

I pick up the importance of repetition in Sky-Bird-tree-Dirt language. You retell these vignettes with such poetry and rhythm it almost feels like chanting. We know repetition can be important for autistics but also with your permission I want to talk about repetition in the sense of a haunting; of recurring dreams and images and of trauma to which one is compelled to return.

I lived with second hand trauma as a child. My father was the victim of the rupture of a war I didn't experience and yet I felt its effects at a profound level. This I now know is called 'post memory' experience, and I hesitate to make my comparison, because for you trauma has been a scarring primary experience. A kind of darkness that breaks the soul to contemplate, especially for a child. My heart stops to think about what was in that dark room and to guess at how the trauma could have been repeated there. The boy ghost had no voice but yours must be heard and I feel that it will, that in speaking here it is emerging.

Your autistic voice seems refracted through the PTSD, would you agree? Tragically, PTSD and autism are not as rare a combination as we would like to think. It makes me wonder how many refracted voices there might be in our community when you consider that the dazzlingly varied combination of possible autistic language will also be shaped by life experience. With each person there is a very particular journey to be made towards connecting and listening.

Brent: The repetition of Sky-Bird-Tree-Dirt is the sound of following connections. They are like points of reference in a much larger web of connections. So large that the whole can never be seen. It is not an issue to describe an image in my mind, that is simple. The challenge is to articulate the schematic of emotional connections and history that make up the essence of the image. The image is a fixed point with electrical connections spreading out in all directions. To speak Sky-Bird-Tree-Dirt, I need to return constantly to a fixed point.

Sonia: This sounds so familiar to me. You hook up as you go along through each point of reference sequentially. You see it so clearly close up but zooming out to see the whole is the challenge. These multiple dots that connect in sequence sound like fragments, is that right? This to how things work for me when I try to create order. I also zoom in to fragmentary snatches of experience and memory but there's little sequence, if I can find a way of leaving a trail I can then work backwards to try and join things up but usually it's still in pieces. That's why systems and pattern are almost impossible to read. Quite often I just see and know how quite vast yet disparate things connect in a holistic way. That's the swooping I've talked about before, but I can't hold any detail in this mode. Fragmentary, and refracted, are words that I find so useful.

Brent: Refraction is such a perfect way of framing both the experience of communication and the experience of perception in general. You are stating everything so beautifully and with such empathetic understanding. I believe that autistic children are more susceptible to PTSD. Long term exposure to trauma changes the physical structure of the developing brain in children. It creates a brain which is always on guard; anxious. My nervous system resembles an insect's body covered in tiny hairs which constantly reads the air for danger. This is my insect-self.

I have no sense of life before trauma, but someone like your father must have experienced his life one particular way before witnessing the horrors of war, and then lived with the scars of that traumatising experience after. I can only imagine what it must have been like for him. Perhaps a desperate longing to return to a before time, a desire to return home? Only, there is no home.

I am saddened for you and your father, or for my brother, for my sister, for strangers, for soldiers, or ordinary people caught up in the absurd storm of history that blows them like sticks into the wrong place at the wrong time; for exiles, for children pried from safety, for the ghost of me as a child all wondering the Refugee's Road. This endless line of ghosts we make. Who tells these stories?

Sonia: I am also extremely saddened for the abuse you suffered from childhood. I see too how you use your suffering to empathise with others and I am in awe. Autistics are not supposed to empathise and connect to the emotions of others and yet you do it so beautifully it reveals this untruth. You feel for everyone you've known and heard about!

You're also right that the trauma of war was heightened by a life spent in exile. The impossibility of return to the 'captive land' to the life that could have been, was the most painful aspect, and my father's yearning for it never ceased. One of the effects of second generation exile is that I'm hyper-sensitive to emotional vulnerability and the horrors of injustice. During my project I was aware for the first time what it meant to be a refugee's daughter, and to live with the fall-out of exile. It has coloured everything.

Brent: It might be a blessing in a way not to have a "time before". When I read the accounts of soldiers returning home from the experience of war and changed by what they experienced, I sense the yearning to return to the time before they were traumatised. As I imagine it was with your father. I was born into a home that was already burning to the ground. I had no home to lose. How much sadder then it must be to have lost a home.

Sonia: One of the most extraordinary moments of connection between us occurred when I made a post about my father. You remember when I began my work on my assemblage portrait of my father entitled, *Exile 1: Eat my Words?* It's actually a piece about the silencing of his voice through exile with a counterpoint that it contains an exact model of the typewriter he wrote his plays with. I was working on a couple of versions, one of which I hoped would be definitive and would include a copy of his play *Tierra Cautiva* which was published in Veracruz in 1962. This version didn't work well as the play is a slim book and was dwarfed by the other elements, which was exactly the wrong effect, but I hit on the idea of taking a detail shot of the piece in which the play could shine. I posted it and within the hour you stunned me with an act which almost defies description in terms of its emotional impact.

It still affects me deeply to think of it now. Perhaps it would work well if you describe what happened from your perspective?

Brent: I think we need to return to our discussion of objects. My initial impulse was excitement over seeing your father's book in the photograph. Of all objects, books are my favorite. I could feel the texture of the brown cloth binding. I could feel the paper; smell it. I had a new sense of *Barcelona in a Bag* and a new sense of the role your father was playing behind the scenes. His importance in the arrangement of the other objects.

I went online to see if copies were available for sale. I found two for sale in Spain and one in the United States. I liked the idea of purchasing the book in Spain. I liked this as a tribute to you and your work. I liked it as a tribute to your father and to the struggles of your family in exile. I liked it because it felt like I was rescuing your father and keeping him safe in my house. I liked it because your father's book connects us through the physical object of the book.

Sonia: I want to remind you of my reaction, which I wrote in the following day's post of *Barcelona in a Bag*.

"I didn't know about these copies of my father's play, I didn't know his words, his voice could be found in Spain. The significance of this is vast. My father's voice did reach Spain, it did, it did!"

"I didn't know that Brent would do this for my father, but he did, he did!"

I was literally jumping up and down because you understood that this object embodied my father and you cared enough to find him. You rescued him. You took him into your home! You did this for me and my family and I find this to be a friendship gesture of the deepest kind. I know that you're keen for us to talk about how autistics are empathic, loving and



can offer friendship but to stress that this will likely be expressed differently from neurotypical people. I wonder if this is one such an example of a specifically autistic expression of friendship?

Brent: I can't speak for other autistic folks, but you ask an interesting question. I do think that friendships or relationships of neurodiverse people in general are often expressed in ways which are not recognised as legitimate by neuro-normative culture. I recently wrote a blog post about this idea called: [He is Sitting in a Chair](#). The post describes the friendship between two participants in my adult program which is expressed by proximity. The two participants don't speak much to one another, nor do they make eye contact, but one always makes sure to sit next to the other every day in program. Speaking about my own issues with forming friendships, I wrote:

"Like many autistic folks, social pragmatics are an issue for me. It isn't that I don't want to be friendly or meet new people, nor is it simply an issue with shyness or awkwardness. The issue for me is walking up to someone [stranger or not] and striking up a conversation makes no sense. I have no access to how it works. I know intellectually how conversation, particularly small talk should work, but I cannot conceptualise the process in my mind. It is blank..."

Social interactions are exhausting for me. They take place in environments I cannot control; sounds and light assault my senses; obligatory eye contact, someone invades my personal space or touches my shoulder. Through this cacophony I'm required to decode spoken language.

The friendship we have established occurs in liminal space. It is a space which is devoid of the physical and open to the imaginative. It is very safe and nonjudgemental. The language of call and response lends itself not only to our collaborations, but surprisingly leads us to moments of intense self-discovery.

In the physical world our relationship is expressed by the object of your father's book, but in the World Behind the World we are bound by Abuela who is a conduit through which the currents of time and history flow; Sharp blue sparks illuminate roads. Her words come to us in the smoky whispers of dreams, She calls us Mockingbird. She calls us Magpie and we smell the cool dark soil of her breath. In the World Behind the World we speak in the voices of birds. In the World Behind the World we are very alive.



Sonia:

This is very beautiful, Brent, and I feel this World Behind the World you describe as a place of great freedom. I see it vividly. I've mentioned poetry several times in relation to the way you write, but here what you express takes this notion further. I believe you are living in a poetic universe, and that referring to poetry with its emphasis on snatched or fragmentary experiences and a collaging of imagery makes perfect

sense. Although, the poetic here is a living breathing space, unlike mere words on a page. Friendship from you feels like this; you invited me to join you in this wonderful universe and I'm seeing it for the first time from within. It feels like an enchanted forest where I can fly like a bird and am allowed to be the magpie I identify with in terms of my neurology (primarily the way in which I gather and organise information). You identify and value the magpie in me. You notice that my magpie ways are a precious system that help me stay organised. You teach me about myself.

We've been talking about friendship in relation to autism. In this blog [Judy Endow](#) writes about the autistic capacity to give friendship, yet autistics are always seen as being in need of friendship. There is a need for a major shift in this paradigm for social justice. Judy suggests this neuro-normative definition of friendship hurts us all. I admire this blog immensely, it reinforces what is so important about our friendship; equality.

Brent: For me, our World Behind the World radiates from the single image in my mind of Abuela cooking rice at the Portbou Station platform. From that image my mind bursts with connections to so many different memories; electrical impulses, sparking synapses, dendrites dancing in dark space, green lightning. Your gift of friendship allows me to name my emotional reactions to your work, *Abuela*. It seems that the invitation into one another's cognitive space has always been mutual, equal and very respectful. In our friendship we are able to speak to one another without shame or fear of judgement. In the everyday world we find ourselves needing to explain our neurologies, our quirks, or to beg for whatever accommodations we may need.

We are vulnerable when we risk speaking in our true voices. We are like birds in the neurotypical world, quick to flee and retreat into the high branches when we feel unsafe. Our writing projects seem to me a celebration of different ways of seeing and a recognition of the artistry and poetry of autistic and neurodiverse minds. What I would ask is that the reader be willing to take a risk by coming into our space, our World Behind the World and leave the comfort of their neurotypical world behind for a while. We have lived in the neurotypical world forever and listened to their voices which have so often don't include us. Our World Behind the World is beautiful. Our World Behind the World has a name; it is called "Listen, Listen!"

Sonia: Brent, I think you just made the perfect closing statement.

Summary

It perhaps goes without saying that this has been no ordinary conversation. It took place over many days and has been edited collaboratively, which adds to its unconventional flavour and tone. The entire process was conducted, at one remove, through emails and private messaging, and the authors have never heard each other's voices, as not one spoken word has passed between them. It has been explorative, at times risky and perhaps even challenging for the reader, which suggests that this article represents new ground. In fact, for the authors, these difficulties within the writing signal success. The aim is to break old ground because social justice depends on it. The old ground is uneven and that just won't do.

The authors hope their readers have followed in their journey, but if chasms in understanding have appeared along the way they may be used to consider how such gaps could equate to autistic experience in a predominantly neurotypical universe. If we

have made square pegs of you we apologise, but argue for the furtherance of empathy for autistic people's struggle with social pragmatics. We politely suggest that an invitation to speak Sky-Bird-Tree-Dirt doesn't come up every day. Yet social pragmatics *are every day*. The strain of accommodating is currently borne by autistics.

One major finding is that with the right technology (whatever it may be in each individual case) and a true commitment to understanding built on mutual trust, there are potentially thousands of autistic universes waiting to unfold. Thousands of Worlds Behind The World lie waiting for access, for this is what our article is truly about. It is about access through technology, responsiveness to different modes of expression and a strong dose of what Abuela would call good old fashioned kindness. The world will be richer for all this dazzling diversity. Not only it is unjust to leave these voices in silence, it is our contention that the neurotypical world is missing out. Listen! Listen!

About the authors:

Sonia Boué is a visual artist and arts educator, she holds a degree in History of Art, is professionally qualified as an Art Therapist, and is MSc in Applied Social Studies (Mental Health Specialist) from Oxford University. Her passion for therapeutics, social justice, neurology and creativity has led to work in a wide variety of settings. Beginning her arts practice as a painter she has developed an object-led process which is research based encompassing both autobiography and history. Her practice also includes free writing and performative elements. She is currently a member of Magdalen Road Studios in Oxford.

Brent White is the Adult Programs Director at Ala Costa Centers, a non-profit organization in Berkeley, California. Brent designed Ala Costa's Adult Transition [ACAT] Program in 2009 as a partner program Ala Costa's Adult Community Training [ACT] Program. Brent has a Bachelor's Degree in Sociology from Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo. He is deeply committed to neurodiversity and autistic advocacy. He enjoys a quiet life in his darkened apartment with his cat, his dog and thousands of books.