It could almost be a joke, like the one I told my mother when I was ten: “What do a Buddhist and a man at a hot-dog stand have in common?”
“I don’t know.”
“What do a Buddhist and a man at a hot-dog stand have in common? Think!”
“I don’t know.”
“They both say, ‘Make me one with everything!’” Loud groan from my mother, very loud. I was ten and had discovered puns—what Alfred Hitchcock called “the highest form of literature.” I couldn’t get over how such disparate things could be brought together, could be made to intermix, and then, with their boundaries softened, to lose themselves in one another.

Years later, after scribbling in my notebook, “What do autism and ballet have in common?” I remembered it. The answer to this question, which is anything but humorous, can be found in their exclusionary histories. Each, as the dance scholar Jennifer Fisher has described ballet, constituted a “kingdom of the pale,” barring the barre, as it were, or diagnosis to nonwhite populations. “The ballet’s aristocratic origins, intense scrutiny of the body,
and emphasis on aesthetic uniformity have left the African American in the wings,” writes Jenna Sullivan. Even the Russian choreographer George Balanchine, who pioneered the inclusion of many aspects of African American music in classical ballet, balked at dissolving traditional distinctions and categories: “I don’t want to see two Japanese girls in my Swan Lake. It’s just not right. It’s not done for them,” he said. “It’s like making an American blonde into a geisha. It’s a question of certain arts being things unto themselves.”

Similarly, experts used to believe that autism was an upper-middle-class disorder, one affecting the progeny of highly educated, Caucasian people. Hans Asperger called his patients “little professors” for their ability to discourse precociously on their intellectual interests. Stereotypes, along with brute economic facts, which prevented minorities from seeking treatment for their children, wildly overdetermined the portrait of autism that emerged—and that continues to this day. As one commentator argues, “The autism world prides itself on honoring neurodiversity, but it has been less successful at recognizing racial and ethnic diversity.” In 2014, a white child was 30 percent more likely to receive an autism diagnosis than a black child and 50 percent more likely than a Latino one, and when the latter groups did receive a diagnosis it came much later than it did for the former group.

*Things unto themselves*: hot dogs and baseball, white people and ballet. Not black people or Asian people or deaf people or autistic people and ballet—that would be too much like a *relishing Buddha* or *loving ketchup*, a two-ply (two-plie!) concept functioning as an invigorated, if not entirely unified, third term.

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**The subject of this chapter**—she has asked to be called Eugenie—is a multiracial, Jewish, Deaf woman with Asperger syndrome who was trained as a classical ballerina and who now works as a choreographer for competitive figure skaters. Married to a Jewish man named Jacob, she is also the mother of an autistic child. If Dora has elected to mark herself as conspicuously autistic, then Eugenie has elected, in some settings, to pass, but it’s no ordinary passing, bearing as she does the signs of multiple forms of Otherness. In her chosen profession, disclosure has met with discrimination, and so she cannot afford the associations that autism calls forth—in particular, the idea that autistics are at once emotionless and physically clumsy. The old ballet joke—“What do ballerinas run on? Batterie power”—evokes the specter of roboticism. (A “batterie,” the dictionary explains, is “the action of beating or crossing the feet or calves together during a leap.”)
For Eugenie, feeling is paramount: she thinks in feelings, moves with them when dancing, like a ribbon in the wind or like the words in a line of beautifully modulated pentameter, the emotion all the more powerful for the pressure the line is under to follow certain dictates. But perhaps my analogy misleads. Her difficulties as someone on the spectrum lie in the translation of feelings into language—into immediately deployable social scripts—though to speak of her difficulties is to miss just how naturally she functions as a social actor. Her difficulties as a ballerina lie in the “transfer of visual and verbal information into motor action.” Eugenie has termed such difficulties “motion dyslexia”: confusing left and right, transposing steps in complex combinations.

“Dancers,” notes Bettina Bläsing, “modify movements with respect to direction in space, speed, rhythm, and amplitude, and express them precisely as observed from the choreographer’s demonstration or in a modified form, depending on the choreographer’s wishes.” Call it the here-and-now urgency of action perception. At the highest levels of ballet, there’s little room for struggles with spatial reasoning or the multimodal integration of sensory input. Determined to be a ballerina, Eugenie, who has nearly perfect recall for visual detail (like Grandin, she can be considered an “object visualizer”), overcame her challenges through sheer will—at least until she had to compete for parts with other professionals and semiprofessionals. Of course, ballet is so demanding as to humble everyone; there is nothing easy about it. She simply had to work harder to power through, and around, her impairment.

But lest you think the end result would be mechanical, a feat of memorization or mime, I must report that it wasn’t. She was like a singer who can’t read music and yet whose voice and phrasing are sublime. By the time you hear her sing on stage, even her accompanist has forgotten the process of trial and error that got her there. Eugenie could “read” complicated choreography, but she couldn’t put it all together expeditiously. And just as she spent extra hours rehearsing steps and sequences, so she spent extra hours rehearsing social ones. Not in a Temple Grandin sort of way, where, in the absence of feeling, she must use stored experiences to reason out what motivates people. Just the opposite: Eugenie needed help rendering emotion cognitive, giving it a usable meaning and doing so in real time.

“I’m not deciphering other people’s feelings,” she said. “I’m feeling them. I feel everything someone else feels.” She, too, used stored experiences but only to make the music stop, as it were, to take off her slippers—to find her frontal lobes. (Picture someone fishing their medial prefrontal cortex from...
the bottom of a drain—or, in this case, her toes.) “The ballet needs to tell its own story in such a way it can be received without having to be translated into language,” Twyla Tharp said famously. Balanchine echoed this point: “A complicated story is impossible to tell. . . . We can’t dance synonyms.” Narrative complexity has been displaced onto the body; it becomes a matter of how the dancers dynamically inhabit the air. In everyday life, Eugenie required a more traditional, more self-consciously verbal, frame.

And yet she took from ballet the need to be graceful—the need to be graceful and a commitment to perfection. She would carry herself convincingly; she would look the part. She was like a Nexus-6 with superior feelings! A pirouetting Luba Luft! “I study and see everything,” Eugenie said. “Everything, I’ve studied social life so much that my database is huge. The only thing that will throw me off is a disingenuous person.” While visiting her in Chicago, I remarked, “If Grandin is an anthropologist of neurotypical behavior, then you’re something else entirely. You’ve gone native!” Later, reflecting on my remark, I recognized its thoughtless irony. What could “native” possibly mean for someone so multiracial, -ethnic, and -disabled?

I met Eugenie through a friend. I knew that I wanted to explore what scholars in the humanities and social sciences call “intersectionality”: the idea that different identities overlap or intersect in a given person. No one is just a woman or a Jew or a Democrat or Hispanic or autistic or gay or black or middle-class. They are many things simultaneously, and whatever the particular combination, these things are mutually and fluidly constitutive. Of course, some identities are more salient than others; indeed, some overwhelm, to the point of eclipsing, others.

When I say that Eugenie “looks predominantly black and Asian,” I appear to be offering a neutral observation, but I am in fact revealing how a monoracial writer has been taught to view a multiracial subject—both reductively and gradably. When I say that being multiracial and disabled is a bit like wearing orange during hunting season, my wit belies the privilege of being inconspicuous when I long to be—unavailable to stigmatizing eyes.

I wanted to understand how these identity categories, which many people think of as distinct, intersected with autism, and I wanted to see what difference such intersectionality made in reading a novel. I was especially interested in the relationship of autism to deafness, both of which have been conceived, at least by some, as a difference to be celebrated, not bemoaned. I chose The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter by Carson McCullers because the novel
features a Deaf protagonist, John Singer, who was taught to speak but who prefers to use sign language. “It was painful for him to try to talk with his mouth,” the narrator tells us, “but his hands were always ready to shape the words he wished to say” (11).

Eugenie is herself fluent in sign, and she speaks—in fact, she speaks perfectly well. Born with bilateral sensorineural hearing loss, which went undetected as a child, she contracted the chicken pox in high school and experienced additional hearing loss. Over time, that loss progressed, and like her maternal grandmother who had been born hard of hearing, she went deaf. She was “severely to profoundly deaf” for six years before getting a single cochlear implant (CI) at the age of twenty-two—back then, doctors wouldn’t give you two implants at once. The implant, however, didn’t work, at least initially. Everything sounded the same to her. “Music was actually the first identifiable thing,” she reported. Years of listening to books on tape while reading them in her lap allowed her to relearn the alphabet. By the time she turned twenty-seven—she is now forty—her CI outcome was rated “highly successful.”

Almost from the beginning of her hearing loss, Eugenie immersed herself in the Deaf community, and she became quite interested in the disability rights movement. Her second son, Meir, was born during the period of adapting to her implant; his subsequent diagnosis of autism (and later her own) would be perceived through a progressive lens. Beneath Eugenie’s Skype moniker—we would both use the sidebar to type our comments when discussing the novel—appears the well-known disability rights adage “Nothing about us without us.” To her, deafness, like autism, was a political and cultural identity as much as it was a medical impairment.

For this reason, she would find some of the language and depictions in the novel offensive. At first glance, such criticism would seem merely an enlargement or broadening of a customary point—what conservatives like to dismiss as political correctness. Because she was both deaf and multiracial, she could lay claim to additional prejudice—additional forms of roughly the same phenomenon. But, as we will see, she was just as dismayed by identity enclaves, which to her were no less oppressive and inhospitable.

Published in 1940, the novel constitutes an early attempt at thinking intersectionally. It does so primarily at a collective, not an individual, level. The characters, which include a drunken labor activist, Jake Blount; a proud African American doctor, Benedict Mady Copeland; a gender-bending café owner, Biff Brannon; and a musically talented, lower-class tomboy, Mick Kelly, all struggle to free themselves from the cage of narrow, socially im-
posed identities. All turn to Singer as an antidote to despair, believing that he understands their innermost desires. By not using speech, he takes on almost mystical powers.

On the one hand, the novel presents the clearly delineated groupings of race, gender, class, and disability; on the other, it relates them in a surprising, even tantalizing, manner: through a spatial trope that positions disability, long relegated to the margin of social life, at the center. “Each person addressed his words mainly to the mute” (211), the narrator says. “Their thoughts seemed to converge in him as the spokes of a wheel lead to the . . . hub” (211). Deafness becomes the fantastical solution to existential misunderstanding. The tragic plot of the novel—Singer commits suicide when his deaf friend and love interest, Anton, dies—concerns precisely the foreclosure of a less categorical sense of identity and a more hopeful commitment to communication and boundary crossing.

By the end of The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter, Blount has been run out of town—labor is less organized; Copeland has lost his house, is in failing health, and has all but abandoned the dream of racial uplift; Mick has given up music, taken a low-wage job, and become a conventional woman; and Biff, despite greater freedom to play with gender roles after the death of his wife—at one point he rubs her perfume on his armpits—clings to a traditional performance of masculinity in public. (Early in the novel, impotent, unwilling to wash his genital region because he doesn’t want to touch himself, he notices “the new, tender nipples beginning to come out on [Mick’s] breast” [29]; later, he says that “by nature all people are of both sexes. So that marriage and the bed is not all by any means” [132].) The heart is a lonely hunter because it wants that most elusive of hides—understanding—and because it only shoots blanks, which is to say words.

The novel’s attack on language, a staple of modernist literature, seemed especially fitting for a reader whose chosen art form is profoundly nonlinguistic. It seemed fitting as well for someone who struggles not with the mechanics of speech but with finding the right words—as if the right words could ever be found. “There is something wrong with the ‘wiring’ in my brain,” Eugenie claimed. “Something happens when I am listening and then thinking and then speaking. Something gets broken down and I am not smooth.” She could manage generally, but she could “rarely show brilliance or refinement,” and she resented that. “Most people wouldn’t notice it unless I’m stressed or overstimulated,” she said. “Oh, and I have the same ‘wiring’ issues when I sign. I struggle just like when I am speaking.”
In the course of our conversations, she would admit that she is “extremely fluent in what [she] wants to say” when typing. This has to do with being able to control the pace and stress of communication. She would also admit that “motion dyslexia” can affect her signing—as can anxiety. Once, in her early twenties, when she worked at a school for the deaf, her hands had a meltdown while communicating with the mother of a student. “She was very nice, but she was loud and had a big personality,” Eugenie explained. “It had been a looooon day at the school with lots of family events going on. I was sooooo overstimulated.”

The mom came up and asked me something and I started to respond, but it looked like my signs were having a seizure and they made no sense at all. I was just moving and darting my hands, arms, and fingers while having a mini-panic attack. She looked at me like I had turned into a giant alien with 8 heads and then turned around and walked away. She neither talked to me nor took me seriously again.

The encounter shows just how hard it is to be Deaf and autistic—let alone Deaf and autistic and black and white and Mongolian and Japanese and Indonesian and Cherokee and Jewish, as Eugenie is.

Even her mother, Shanna, from whom she’d learned much about multi-raciality, couldn’t embrace autism. “While she values my uniqueness, that’s about all of the difference she can accept in me,” Eugenie said. For complicated reasons, her mother couldn’t add neurological difference to the mix. Her husband, from whom she was estranged, was likely on the spectrum—both he and Eugenie thought so. To Shanna, autism was the straw that broke the camel’s identity. (Not one to worry about excess, Jerry Garcia, that champion of street party music and psychedelic neurodiversity, once proclaimed, “Too much of a good thing is just about right.”)

Discussing the novel with Eugenie, I would discover that she had had many experiences like the one at the school for the deaf. Whatever the enclave, it couldn’t make room for multiple forms of difference. In response, she had decided to be herself—her multiple, slippery self, as I termed it. “Yes, I am quite slippery,” she would say.

I have always been irked by people boxing me into what they want me to be. I want to be who I truly am, not who someone thinks I should be. And if this offends someone white who really needs me to be black, then too bad. And if this offends someone black who really
needs me to be black, then too bad. . . . I have to move out of old patterns of thinking about race.

One can hear in this remark considerable struggle and pain—but also a kind of triumph. Emily Dickinson wrote, “I pull a flower from the woods,— / A monster with a glass / Computes the stamens in a breath, / And has her in a class.” Taking up the same theme, William James mused, “Probably a crab would be filled with a sense of personal outrage if it could hear us class it without ado or apology as a crustacean, and thus dispose of it. ‘I am no such thing;’ it would say; ‘I am myself, myself alone.’”

As Eugenie well understood, the “categorization ‘rules’ used by perceivers” of multiraciality rarely match those used by multiracial individuals. Social science research has documented the harm that reductive, monoracial perceptions and frameworks can do. As one researcher puts it, “Instances of identity constraint are associated with tension, decreased motivation, and damaged self-esteem.” But multiraciality can also lead to more “flexible . . . strategies in dealing with . . . [one’s] social environments.”

A dip into this research revealed an uncanny parallel: just as autistics, with their detail-oriented vision, put pressure on the generally labeled thing, so multiracial people, with their complex genetic and cultural inheritances, put pressure on the generally labeled person. While the terms we deploy can’t possibly accommodate the fullness of the individual example, the minds we have—we neurotypicals, that is—aren’t inclined to see it anyway. “Due to the widely recognized limits and biases in our perceptual systems,” writes one diversity scientist, “going beyond simple categorization may be relatively rare because it can be quite effortful.”

Speed of processing is valued above all else, and yet here again it becomes a problem. Multiraciality is said to produce in monoracial perceivers “dysfluency in categorization,” which causes them to assign multiracial people to “devalued social categories, with subsequently biased evaluations and behavior.” As we have seen, my autistic collaborators make a virtue of dysfluency. They not only disregard established distinctions but also disrespect established hierarchies. Think of Tito on the masthead of speech, failing to make phonemes and identifying with a whale; or Jamie, who follows Silko into the Laguna-Pueblo landscape, a space of spirit-time and itself a kind of character; or Dora, who values the “more than human” of so-called artificial intelligence. The very notion of social “ingroups” and “outgroups” ends up reconfigured. We might borrow Tito’s phrase and speak of a “world as fluid as the sea.”
In this way, the precategorical proclivities of autism line up with the anti-
categorical proclivities of multiraciality. As Eugenie and I got going with our
discussions, she would seem to be the ideal reader for—indeed, the perfect
antidote to—The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter. Because she was a ballerina, I
couldn’t help but map onto the characters’ intersectional troubles a kind of
failed choreography and an inability to dance in a manner that might save
them. Whatever her own difficulties as a dancer, whatever the checkered
history of ballet—it, too, was a category that needed to be broken down—
Eugenie moved at just the right speed and with just the right fluency. The feel-
ing world of her feet, as opposed to the thinking world of her head, became
an advantage, leading me to ask: “In exactly whom does a social disability lie?”

WE DECIDED TO MEET virtually on Wednesday afternoons for about an
hour and a half. Eugenie’s older boys, ages sixteen and eleven, would be at
school, and her toddler, almost three, would be taking a nap. The toddler,
she would later tell me, was supposed to be a girl, her ballerina, someone
with whom she could share her passion for dancing. On more than one oc-
casion, she’d refer to ballet as—wink, wink—her “restricted interest,” yet the
demands of motherhood, marriage, and coaching made that sort of narrow
focus impossible.

The plan was to discuss three chapters a week. Like all of my other col-
laborators, Eugenie would send me notes in advance. About her educational
background or experience with literature, I knew little. Although she had
a bachelor of arts in speech and hearing science and had worked for a time
as a licensed speech-language pathology assistant, she was “an avid lover of
books.” “I’ve been a lifelong reader,” she would tell me. “I love how I can
connect with the characters on my terms (and how the characters
will always be my friends no matter what). I know the characters personally. I can
see into their lives. And there they are, steady as ever, page after page.”

Once again, a collaborator would point to how literature can serve as
an accommodation: a way of managing the messiness, unpredictability, and
meanness of social life. Novels allowed her to confront this maelstrom, to be
intimate and introspective, on “her terms”—as slowly, that is, and as calmly
as she wanted.

After greeting Eugenie online, I typed a bit about the author, including the
fact that McCullers had written The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter at twenty-three;
that she was Bohemian and polyamorous (she once had a crush on a ballerina); and that she had experienced considerable disability in her life: she suffered a stroke at thirty-one, which paralyzed the left side of her body, and died at fifty of a brain hemorrhage. I then mapped out the emerging structure of the book. McCullers, who had studied at Juilliard and who had dreamed of becoming a concert pianist, described it as “contrapuntal” and akin to “a fugue.” In a fugue, “a short melody or phrase (the subject) is introduced by one [voice] part and successively taken up by others” and then developed “in a continuous interweaving of the voice parts.” Think of “the subject,” I proposed, as the problem of identity and the “voice parts” as the different characters.

The opening chapter introduces the first two such parts: Singer and his deaf friend Antonapoulos, who live together. The latter’s “face was round and oily, with half-closed eyelids and lips that curved in a gentle, stupid smile. The other mute was tall. His eyes had a quick, intelligent expression. He was always immaculate and very soberly dressed” (3). After reacting negatively to the word “mute,” Eugenie remarked,

I understand the term “stupid smile” or “stupid grin,” but I am curious why a deaf character’s smile is stupid. Is this character going to be fleshed out in just the same way as a hearing character would be—and he just happens to have a stupid grin, the same stupid grin he might have if he were hearing? Or will the character be involved in a lot of folly? Lastly, is he unintelligent, and so therefore wears a stupid grin? In a nutshell, is this character going to be a stereotype?

Conceding that the two men are “opposites, which should make for good storytelling,” Eugenie nevertheless worried about the negative meaning that had attached itself to disability.

I agreed but sought to complicate this notion. McCullers traffics in the grotesque, which can operate as an extreme version of stereotype, yet which can also carry within it flickers of critique. The word “grotesque” means “strange . . . fantastic . . . incongruous, unpleasant, or disgusting and [it] is . . . often used to describe weird shapes and distorted forms such as Halloween masks.” Like pickled punks preserved in jars of formaldehyde, it purports to be containable. A threat disguised as pleasure, it stirs the womb of embodied possibilities. It’s sudden quicksand for the normal.

“In art . . ., grotesque may also refer to something that simultaneously invokes in an audience a feeling of uncomfortable bizarreness as well as
sympathetic pity.” The grotesque moves the viewer in multiple ways at once, and even in literature, that other visual medium, it presupposes a kind of effortless gawking. It takes advantage of the subject’s propensity to stare and, much more subtly, of the object’s commitment, in the words of Kenny Fries, to “stare back,” to put pressure on the given or agreed upon. Figuring the novelist’s pen as an aquarist’s hose, Edward Abbey points to the curious pageant of representation in Marcel Proust. In the giant tank of the Frenchman’s work, “fish drift[] with languid fins through a subaqueous medium of pale violet polluted ink.”

Both Singer and Antonapoulos function as grotesques—Antonapoulos more obviously. The “big Greek” “loved food” (5), we are told, and after a meal, while Singer did the dishes, he “would lie back on his sofa and slowly lick over each one of his teeth with his tongue” (5). The man’s corpulence suggests a balloon about to burst; his gluttony, an ungovernable force. We never see him actively signing to Singer, and after he has been taken to an insane asylum for belligerent behavior, we learn that he cannot read. He is a figure at once scary and pathetic. Yet Singer, who is pathetic in his own way, pathetic and sublime, writes to him letter after letter. “The way I need you is a loneliness I can’t bear” (217), he says in one.

When he later visits Anton at the asylum, he beholds what many would call a spectacle but what he takes in through the refracting prism of love:

He wore a scarlet dressing-gown and green silk pajamas and a turquoise ring. . . . He was knitting. His fat fingers worked with the long ivory needles. . . . The splendor of his friend’s raiment startled him. On various occasions he had sent him each article of the outfit, but he had not imagined how they would look when all combined. Antonapoulos was more enormous than he had remembered. The great pulpy folds of his abdomen showed beneath his silk pajamas. (219–20)

Encountering this passage, Eugenie would comment, “I’m envisioning Anton in bed looking like Liberace.” There would be nothing derogatory about the comparison; she’d simply be responding in a way that McCullers intended.

Yet even in our first few meetings, before Anton’s character was fully developed, Eugenie revealed her impatience. “I could hold with Singer quite a conversation I could,” she said. Her sense of the man’s loneliness was profound. She could relate to it intensely—relate to it, moreover, in his native hand. (At one point in the novel, she’d favorably tag a description of Singer’s
signing: “His hands worked nervously as though they were pulling things unseen from the air and binding them together” [210–11].) At the same time, her comment resembled an affectionate scolding—something like, “You can do better, John. Anton doesn’t treat you very well.” Indeed, Anton seems to be using Singer, indulging, yet also thwarting, the man’s homosexual desire in order to benefit materially. Not halfway into the novel, she’d complain, “Out of Singer’s entire life experience, and in comparison to what he is and does for others, how can he be desperate for the attention of such an unlikeable person?”

Eugenie’s great ability as a reader was to hop inside the tank and to move fishlike, with her own languid fins, through McCullers’s “violet polluted ink.” “It’s like I can become these characters and people,” she would tell me. “I know how all of this feels. When I read things, I relate via emotions. Everything is about connecting with emotions for me.” She’d then add, having just commented on my stubbornly intellectual approach—I stood on the outside of the tank looking in—“So this is a great exercise: putting big words to characters and their actions and what drives them.”

I was doing what I do in class: advancing analytical propositions, ignoring the reader’s experience. Repeatedly, she’d exclaim, “My brain is about to break—you’re questions are getting much harder as we go along, lol” and “I adore how you are stretching my brain. Let me think on your words more as they settle in.” Toward the end of our time with the novel, after reading a critical article about it, she’d type, “The dreaminess floats away. This is where I struggled with you at times with Heart. I just wanted to feel it, but you wanted more dissection and opinion.”

Chapter 2 gives us the third and fourth “voice parts”: namely, Biff Brannon, proprietor of the New York Café; and Jake Blount, communist labor organizer. For twelve days, Blount, who is penniless, has been eating and drinking on credit. Biff justifies serving him by saying, “I like freaks” (14). To which, his wife barks, “I reckon you do . . . being as you’re one yourself” (14).

Alice, Biff contends, has no “real kindness” (15). When he tells her, “Not but one woman I’ve ever known had this real kindness I’m talking about,” she replies, “I’ve known you to do things no man in the world would be proud of. I’ve known you to—” (15). Biff cuts her off: “Or maybe it’s curiosity I mean. You don’t ever see or notice anything important that goes on. You never watch and think and try to figure anything out” (15). McCullers thus establishes Biff as a sympathetic observer of human affairs, someone
whose own perplexing, though largely concealed, difference connects him to others. Said differently, like Singer (and really all of the characters), Biff is “pulling things unseen from the air and trying to bind them together.” Or, like Anton, he’s fashioning a new identity ensemble, a kind of all-things-and-colors-at-once “raiment.”

At first, Eugenie was “soooooooo confused by what was shared about Biff”—the unwillingness to wash his genital region; his interest in the androgynous Mick. “But I was also intrigued,” she said, “and happy that he was so in touch with his sexuality.” Here, the refusal to observe a gender norm is analogous, McCullers implies, to having a distinctive body—to being exceedingly corpulent or deaf.

We then move backward in time and hear about Blount’s first night in the New York Café. The man who was short with “heavy shoulders like beams” (16) was “talking some queer kind of politics” (17). The other patrons were laughing at him because he directed his drunken harangue at Singer without knowing he was deaf. “The mute’s eyes were cold and gentle as a cat’s and all his body seemed to listen” (23), the narrator states ironically. “You’re the only one in town who catches what I mean” (23), Blount says.

The labor organizer thus inaugurates the peculiar habit of attributing to Singer a kind of supernatural comprehension. Of Singer, the narrator observes, “His eyes made a person think he heard things nobody else had ever heard, that he knew things no one had ever guessed before. He did not seem quite human” (25). That last line worried Eugenie a great deal. “It would be offensive,” she said, “if something fantastic isn’t done with Singer’s character. The book began with two Deaf men. I am curious to see where things go.”

In subsequent weeks she would understandably harp on this point. “I am in hopes that Singer is not a prop,” she would say, and still later, “I pray that things develop with Singer. I’m beginning to tire of him being a silent sounding board for others. I imagine the author is taking us somewhere special.” As noted previously, each of the characters forges an imaginary bond with Singer. By the end, Eugenie would call him a “doll that can be bent and turned any which way to a person’s liking. He doesn’t talk back and he always listens.” When I picked up on her conceit and spoke of the novel’s “ragdoll fantasy,” she typed, “Yes, yes, yes. Singer the ragdoll, lol! Tell it!”

How to make sense of this contradiction—the desire, on the one hand, to exclude people with disabilities from meaningful pursuits and, on the other, to imbue disability and its communicative accommodations with transcendent meaning? “The disabled body,” writes Emily Russell, “is . . .
so thoroughly subject to repression that in its very exclusion from modern life it produces insight and knowledge.” Singer’s “nonverbal communication preserves [the] belief in interpersonal connection beyond the limits of conventional social discourse.”

I call this phenomenon the “ET effect.” In the blockbuster film by Steven Spielberg, ten-year-old Elliot develops a connection with an alien, one far superior to any he might have with his fellow humans. For such a connection to take hold, the creature, in this fantasy, must not be from here—an institution or group home is about as far from the public square as another galaxy—and it must not look like a member of your own species. The fascination with sign language or a text-to-voice synthesizer reflects despair about ordinary communication, but it’s a selfish delusion, as Eugenie pointed out: “Why don’t any of the characters bother to learn ASL [American Sign Language] or at least scribble notes to Singer?” she asked. Why, for that matter, must ET learn English?

The grotesque, of course, has limits as critique. It’s never entirely clear if McCullers is making fun of her characters. How can she not be mocking Blount, whom Eugenie thought detestable? “Looks like Singer has found himself another Anton,” she commented, “a motormouth one anyway.” Upon finishing the novel, she would type, “I could do without ever running into large doses of the boorish Blount again.”

And yet, his politics, the narrator tells us, are “queer”: a word that has come to suggest, in contemporary critical circles, a more explicit and unambiguous opposition to the norm. The novel deploys the word “queer” at least twenty-five times—and in a number of different contexts. Scholars, as Eugenie and I discussed, have made much of this fact, connecting it to another word, “freak,” previously encountered. According to Rachel Adams, “As McCullers uses these terms, their function depends not upon their correspondence to any fixed identity but upon their opposition to normative behaviors and social distinctions.” In this way, Blount’s politics can be considered “queer,” and he can be a “freak” without being gay, trans, fat, or deaf.

On that first night in the New York Café, he was accompanied by “a tall Negro man” (22). When another patron chastises Blount, “Don’t you know you can’t bring no nigger in a place where white men drink”? (22) he yells, “‘I’m part nigger myself. . . . I’m part nigger and wop and bohunk and chink. All of those.’ . . . ‘And I’m Dutch and Turkish and Japanese and American’” (22). Parroting the communist party’s universalist understanding

To be queer is to be anticategorical, to wander the country of identity like a hobo on a train—to plow right through the periods that mark off, and ostensibly distinguish, the identities above. (As seen through the slats of a boxcar, the landscape of “I” is one long blur.) Yet, again, in the novel, queerness never loses its grotesque aura. It’s like a valley cloaked in mist, a valley where the sun never fully rises.

For Biff, disability is so central to the concept of queerness that he can’t help looking for it in the labor organizer. As he “regarded Blount steadily with half-closed eyes,” the narrator says, “Blount was not a freak, although when you first saw him he gave you that impression. It was like something was deformed about him—but when you looked at him closely each part of him was normal and as it ought to be” (21). Because he can’t be contained by the gender binary, Biff conceives of a more capacious grouping of alternative identities, a kind of loose confederacy perhaps best symbolized by disability though not restricted to it.

If, as Isadora Duncan suggests, “the dancer’s body is simply the luminous manifestation of the soul,” then disability is simply the luminous manifestation of queerness: a strangely positive, scarlet “Q.” Scholars have taken up this prescient idea with great enthusiasm. Think, for example, of the work of Robert McRuer, whose book Crip Theory makes it impossible to investigate LGBTQ issues without investigating disability ones. Together, he argues, the fields of disability studies and queer theory can fully dismantle “compulsory” understandings of embodiment.

How queer, how disabled, can dance be? Quite, as the activist/scholar/dancer Petra Kuppers has demonstrated. But ballet may be another cup of tea altogether. While acknowledging its discriminatory past, Eugenie resisted overtly queering her beloved art form, even as she embraced a malleable sense of racial, ethnic, and disabled identity. She wanted to defend both its merciless standards and its willingness to include her. “My hair looked the same in a bun as everyone else’s,” she explained. And she wanted, as we will see, to move beyond the very notion of conspicuous identity markers:
“I am standing in a queue at a train that is heading for the future,” she stated emphatically.

Biff, however, isn’t headed anywhere. He can’t imagine coming out of the closet—can’t imagine claiming his role as a freak. At the novel’s conclusion, we are told that he stood at the counter in his café and “felt a warning, a shaft of terror” (359). The narrator says, “Between two worlds he was suspended” (359). When I asked Eugenie about that “shaft of terror,” she joked, “You mean the one he never washes?” “Biff is forever stuck,” she typed. “He’s incapable of full expression. It’s the realization that there’s no way out of a cave or a labyrinth and that there’s also no food or water. The coming to terms with how long one can survive—that’s very scary.”

Full expression—within or across (or against) available categories. In Mick, McCullers adds a sixth voice part (and the character whom Eugenie most appreciated) to her loose confederacy of freaks. A boisterous tomboy who climbs onto the roof of an unfinished, upper-class house and then scribbles a “very bad word—pussy” (37) on a wall in the front room, Mick seeks refuge from poverty in the plastic nature of art and the equally plastic nature of her own sensory impressions. Her very body, in its adolescence, and her very mind, in its synesthetic predilections, suggest a reprimand to the deterministic force and unyielding expectations of class and gender.

“I want to jump through the book and offer to pay for music lessons,” Eugenie exclaimed upon first encountering Mick’s interest in music. She was quite sensitive to the issue of cultivating talent in young people. Her notes for that week included this sentence: “I read a teensy bit of the next chapter. Yay, Mick finally has access to a piano at school!”

For Mick, as for Eugenie, all the time—“no matter what she was doing” (35)—there was music. She especially liked Mozart, whom she referred to as a “fellow... who had lived in some country in Europe a good while ago” (37). “Sometimes... [his music] was like little colored pieces of crystal candy, and other times it was the softest, saddest thing she had ever imagined about” (35). She described a few of his compositions as “quick and tinkling” (38); one was akin to “that smell in the springtime after a rain” (38). When Mick’s “hands hunted out... beautiful new sounds, it was,” we are told, “the best feeling she had ever known” (161). “She could see the shapes of the sounds very clear and she would not forget them” (119).

McCullers deploys the conceit of synesthesia, along with Mick’s characterization as both male and female—“she was at an age when she looked as
much like an overgrown boy as a girl” (132)—to underscore the ineluctably blended nature of life. To see or to smell while hearing is akin, McCullers intimates, to not just feeling masculine while being feminine (or feeling feminine while being masculine) but actually being so. Just as, according to one theory of synesthesia, synesthetes intuit the low-level integration of sensory input that makes multisensory experience possible and that otherwise lurks beneath our conscious understanding of discrete modalities—sight, touch, hearing, taste, and smell—so trans people, McCullers proposes, intuit the hidden, integrated life of hormones that exists beneath our narrow understanding of gender. Speaking reductively of sight or touch, as if they were distinct, is like speaking reductively of “men” and “women.” Categories, in short, betray.

When focalized through Mick, the narration thus becomes pointedly analogical. It disrespects what the dictionary teaches us. It moves like a swollen river beyond the banks of denotation—soaking everything, dislodging everything, allowing the fixed to float. Beginning with words (literature), notes (music), or positions (ballet), art, to use another metaphor, behaves like a fondue fountain (an edible pirouette!). We’re mesmerized by the tension between what is solid and stationary and what is fragile and flowing. In this way, art itself is inherently queer.

After Mick is forced by her family to take a menial job and to comport herself like a meek young woman, both the music and synesthesia fittingly stop. By the end, even her body, no longer in an obviously transitional state, appears to cooperate with the triumph of categories, but as the narrator, focalized through Biff, insists, there is nothing stable about gender: “Often old men’s voices grow high and reedy and they take on a mincing walk. And old women sometimes grow fat and their voices get rough and deep and they grow dark little moustaches” (132).

Over the last decade, a number of autistics—I’m thinking, for example, of Nick Walker, Ibby Grace, Athena Lynn Michaels-Dillon, Melanie Yergeau, and Lydia Brown, among others—have laid claim to the luminous scarlet “Q,” though not simply as an accepted signifier for deconstructive thinking (the kind that autism seems especially to make possible). Many autistics, as they point out, are actually gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans, questioning, intersex, asexual (or aromantic), among other things! Or, rather, many refuse such labels and allow them, as Amy Grant said of the passing years, “to fold like an accordion over each other.” These activists have coined terms
such as “neuroqueer” and “gendervague” to articulate an explicitly intersectional understanding of autism, gender, and sexuality, an understanding whose implications, at the same time, go beyond these spheres.

Listen to Lydia Brown, who, in a blogpost titled “Gendervague: At the Intersection of Autistic and Trans Experiences,” writes,

Growing up, everyone around me assumed I was a girl based on the genitals I was born with, but I always felt deeply uncomfortable with being labeled a “girl” or “woman.” I don’t feel like a woman, but I know I’m not a man either. I now identify as genderqueer or non-binary. It wasn’t until partway through college, though, before I began to question what gender might mean to me, my explorations largely kindled by developing important relationships with many openly trans autistic people through my activism.

According to Brown, “gendervague” “refer[s] to a specifically neurodivergent experience of trans/gender identity.” “For many of us,” she says, echoing Dora, “gender mostly impacts our lives when projected onto us through other people’s assumptions, but holds little intrinsic meaning.”

This is not the case with Eugenie. “I am very feminine,” she told me. “I love things like make-up and fashion. And I enjoy that part of myself. There is something about female energy and female gender norms that I love to fulfill. I truly love it. And it was never forced upon me.” As if reaching through the Skype chatbox and telepathically observing the quizzical look on my face (we didn’t use the video function), she typed, “I take pleasure in doing things associated with that same old tired female identity. Except it’s not ‘tired’ to me at all. I could easily have been Cleopatra in another life—the good parts only.”

Obviously ballet had something to do with her attitude toward gender—ballet and modeling (both print and runway), which Eugenie had done from her early teens until her early twenties. Just as she believed that autism had prevented a career in ballet, so she believed that it had prevented a career in modeling, though clearly not before she had absorbed what these stereotypical endeavors had to teach her about being a woman. And yet the effort required to pull off such performances, the effort and self-consciousness, which again reminded me of the androids in Dick’s novel, distinguished her relationship to this identity category. “Even though I had the ‘complete package,’” Eugenie explained,
I couldn’t master the nuances of how models should act—down to the
degree of how much an eye should be open or shut, or exactly how a
mouth should be held to show different emotions. It was too early for
me to understand these things. So I was nice and pretty and had a good
body, but my print work never looked quite right. I am too robotic in
my expressions, and a camera can see that immediately. It could see that
I was an imitator and not a natural. On the runway, I had a hard time
being sexy. Ballerinas are not supposed to be overtly sexy.

She had a hard time appearing sexy as a model, she stressed, not being
that way as a woman or wife. “It seems that sexuality is a language I can speak,”
she reported. “It’s not elusive to me. Sexuality is about feelings. And I know
feelings very well. I speak feelings very well.”

In ballet, she also had the “complete package”—“all of the physical quali-
ties desired in a ballerina (qualities you must have in order to dance for a
professional company),” including the “exact look needed”—but the “inside
of [her] head, which couldn’t be seen, wasn’t suited,” she said, to the art
form. By implication, that internal ballerina, the body’s brainy counterpart,
was at once ill-shaped and uncoordinated. Eugenie’s skin color hadn’t been
a problem, despite what I assumed. “Yes, I am brown,” she typed, “but a
light brown. An ‘acceptable’ brown, if you will.” (The scare quotes reflected
considerable contempt for colorism.) She did admit to feeling, as an adult, a
“teensy self-conscious” about her “derriere and thighs,” which she said were
“a smidge too big for elite levels.”

When I pressed her on the apparent contradiction between embracing
conventional notions of gender but rejecting conventional notions of race
and disability, she replied, “I suppose that I’ve never been hurt or offended
by being pegged as a female or woman. It’s a compliment to me. I hope I
look like a female as hard as I try to be one. (Kidding! I’m being sassy.)” I
came to think of Eugenie’s approach to identity as akin to solving an elabo-
rate mathematical equation. If she could assign a fixed value to at least one
of the variables, in this case gender, then maybe a solution could be found.
Even for the multiracial person herself, there was a limit, it seemed, to how
underdetermined—how queer—identity math could be.

The gender part of Eugenie was readable, immediately so, while the other
parts of her were not. The other parts, especially her racial and ethnic heri-
tage, confounded people. It made them work to label her; it revealed the
inadequacy of prevailing categories and, in so doing, prompted anger.
Imagine serving as a frequent, unwitting provocation. Her multiraciality was like a juggler juggling hieroglyphs—too many of them. Each was a knife or flaming torch that landed in the crowd. Or it was like boxing. (“Everyone has a plan,” Joe Louis once joked, “until they get hit.”) Or, better yet, like mixed martial arts, if you’ll pardon the pun. “So there I was,” Eugenie recounted, “a person who had to walk with a sign over my head that read: ‘Yep, I am part black and part white and part other things. I am here to make you uncomfortable. I am here to question how you feel about race. Now, throw out whatever ugly thoughts you have—right at me, right into my face. Go ahead.’”

She spoke of being rejected by white people but also by black people. “Matter of fact, I’ve been rejected by all kinds, including family members.” She had cousins, she said, who “considered themselves 100% black who were not 100% black.” They had been raised in predominantly African American communities and insisted that she identify as African American. When she “tried to credit” all aspects of her personhood, “they made fun of [her] for being part-white.” They wouldn’t fully accept her.

Compounding the sense of alienation, Deaf acquaintances sometimes dwelled on her racial makeup; others, on the fact that she wasn’t Christian. One Deaf person who was “born again” actually asked if she had horns. When she participated in a statewide Ms. Deaf competition and advanced to the final round, she was instructed, in a particularly humiliating way, to change her outfit because she “showed.” She had informed the organizers of her pregnancy. (It was her first child; she was twenty-two and hadn’t yet married Jacob.) Needless to say, Miss Eugenie did not win.

Listening to such anecdotes, I marveled at her resolve. How to feel comfortable in a narrow, identity-based group? A group that can’t abide complication, that doesn’t conceive of the ostensible glitch—praise the pregnant beauty queen!—as a sort of Socratic overture? You must think more deeply. You must question your assumptions. Eugenie had been primed to resist reductive thinking and perhaps, when alienated, to feel more aggrieved. Multiraciality, like bisexuality, wasn’t a dodge or a form of cowardice. In the words of the poet and feminist June Jordan, it simply “invalidates . . . either/or analysis.”

With the persistence of a district attorney, Eugenie noted the novel’s repellent representations of African Americans—because they offended her. Exhibit A: “Of course Portia’s house would have a colored smell. And of course the kids would be eating nigger toes (pecans or whatever) on X-mas.”
Exhibit B: “Glad to know Willie’s hands are dark.” Exhibit C: “I wonder why the mulatto has to be ‘loose-limbed’?” Exhibit D: “O, those malodorous negroes—give us something new!” Exhibit E: “And now the negroes are shivering in their overalls, loitering, too. Well, I suppose I did ask for something new.” When McCullers kept returning to the olfactory motif, Eugenie threw up her hands, unselfconsciously using a Yiddish expression: “Every time with the ‘negro smell,’ oy vey!”

Her parents had taught her to think of herself as “mixed”—and this most certainly showed. “I was not raised to identify with just one race,” she said. “My home was like a museum with lots of different art pieces that reflected the rich background of our identities.” Her mother, who had grown up in the South and who despite being mixed herself was forced to identify as black, came to loathe the way that people were defined by race and ethnicity. “When she moved to the Midwest, she did not carry herself as a black woman from Texas who was waiting for the next racial incident. She didn’t play that game. She dealt with people on a person-to-person basis. A name-to-name basis.”

Eugenie deeply admired her mother’s insistence on individuality, her refusal to be subsumed by any category or generalization, whether negative or positive. She could be all sorts of things, including black, but not if these things hardened like cement, ceased being relational, provisional, fluidly intersectional. In a word (though it was not her word), queer. “My mother is like an entity with no form,” Eugenie said. “She’s a ball of energy that can somehow be seen. She does not dwell in the world of needing to classify others or herself. She is just Shanna.”

Although her mother couldn’t make room for autism—an irony, to be sure, since, at the most basic sensory level, autism insists on irreducible particularity—Eugenie had absorbed something of the formless, ball-of-energy approach to who she was. Or at least the wish to elude being pegged by a “monster with a glass.” If behaving like the comic book superhero E-Man wasn’t possible, she could always aim for the complicated passing of Reep Daggle, that shapeshifter from the planet Durla.

In the aforementioned essay for an autistic organization, Eugenie commented on the paradoxical upside of being mixed: as people sought to reduce her to one race or ethnicity, she could be things she wasn’t. (“When one has no form,” declared Bruce Lee, “one can be all forms.”) “In my travels around the world, I have often been pleasantly mistaken as a native . . .,” she writes. “In Israel, I was Israeli. In Palestine, I was Palestinian. In Italy, I was Italian. And in Mexico, I was Mexican.”
Eugenie continues,

A dear friend of mine is Vietnamese. When we’re together, I tend to be pleasantly labeled as also being Vietnamese. The same thing happens when I’m with a friend who is Filipina. I am transported to all these great worlds and experiences simply because I effortlessly blend in with other people of color. This is the most beautiful part of being mixed, as sometimes there are ... no barriers to break.

It’s as if, I want to say, she were a Smith’s dwarf chameleon, which can adjust its colors “in accordance with the vision of the specific predator species (bird or snake) by which [it is] being threatened.” Yet, here, in the first quotation, she’s talking about the pleasure of being casually assigned to the majority and not, as she often is in the United States, to a denigrated outgroup. And in the second, she’s talking about subverting the process of “identity constraint” in order to affirm an already existing bond—a bond in which she operates as an individual.

All of this was “queer.” Even Eugenie’s hearing impairment—or, rather, her response to it—was a mixed (or queer) bag. When I asked if she planned to get another implant, she replied, “I do not want another CI because I enjoy pairing what I hear with my CI with the natural hearing that I have in my other ear.” While she greatly appreciated her CI, with respect to music it was like “eating Chinese food at the mall”—not even close to the genuine delicacy. Her “natural” hearing was amplified, as I’ve said, by a hearing aid.

Like the disabled cyborgs in Dora’s fiction, Eugenie used multiple forms of assistive technology at the same time—which produced, you might say, auricular intersectionality, an auditory version of Anton’s “raiment.” Sometimes, she used none: “I love being deaf. I love having a CI and a hearing aid because I can choose what I want to hear. There is so much beauty in silence. There is so much beauty in sound.”

It’s difficult to fathom such fluidity. When I commented on it, Eugenie remarked, “I’m glad to know that my sense of identity is perceived as fluid by at least one person.” Largely for this reason, the novel’s final voice part, Dr. Benedict Mady Copeland, aggravated her to no end, though in a way that was different from Blount.

Blount she could dismiss out of hand; with Copeland she seemed eager to avoid being misunderstood—eager to distinguish her frustration with him as a character who represents certain ideas of race from something truly
damning: evidence that she just might be uncomfortable with blackness. Just might be someone who, protestations to the contrary, doesn’t like African Americans or is embarrassed by them. While Eugenie trusted me, she knew how fraught the subject of race was. Both whiteness and monoraciality could distort the judgment of even the most sensitive of ethnographers. She’d seen me make mistakes, misinterpret things, and, sadly, no matter how hard I tried, be less than sensitive.

About Dr. Copeland, Eugenie said, “He is a lonely man. An ashamed man. A nearly outdone man. A very sad and angry man. Hope you like big nutshells.” While she acknowledged the horrors of the Jim Crow South—in McCullers’s depiction, it was indeed a land in which African Americans could at best try to cope—she found the doctor to be unbearably grotesque. If he were a dancer, he could not twirl, he could not leap, he could not kick, he could not lift. He was simply dressed in a leotard.

An unwitting parody of the “talented tenth,” the idea, promulgated by W. E. B. Du Bois, that with a classical education “exceptional [black] men” could rise and lead their race, Copeland studies the work of Benedict Spinoza but cannot understand it. Philosophy, that dance of ideas, takes place on a faraway stage. It is a show for which he will never have a ticket. Eugenie refused the picture of defective longing—the belief that not only social obstacles, but also racial inadequacy, prevent African Americans from succeeding at a refined pursuit like philosophy or ballet.

While pointing out the impediments to genuine opportunity, McCullers sews into Copeland’s character a number of fatal weaknesses, which render him pitiable. In addition to his intellectual limitations, he is almost entirely alienated from his family: his wife has left and he has no relationship with his sons, whom he repeatedly prodded to better themselves. Principle means more to him than people; in fact, he seems to feel contempt for the very masses he would save. As Eugenie, who prizes family and good parenting, put it, “Copeland is surrounded by hostility and racism. And he is also surrounded by his own folly.”

One of the doctor’s sons, Willie, the cook at the New York Café, is arrested while fighting over a woman and is sentenced to nine months in prison. Sadistic guards lock him in an ice-cold shed where for three days he is hung by his feet, which swell beyond recognition. When gangrene sets in, they have to be amputated. The novel revels in the shocking spectacle of Willie’s lost feet. Yet another character has become a freak, though one who mourns his disfigurement and who is baffled by its haunting aftermath. Wil-
lie says, “I feel like my feet is still hurting. I got this terrible misery down in my toes. . . . It a hard thing to understand. My feet hurt me so bad all the time and I don’t know where they is. They never given them back to me. They somewhere more than a hundred m-miles from here” (289). Like broken shards of pottery, picked up and dispersed by a social tornado, the characters are all “more than a hundred miles” from each other and themselves. In the absence of collective integrity, there is only the phantom reminder, the phantom pain, of what could be.

And yet something invidious intrudes on the portrait of tragedy, a kind of merciless condescension, and Eugenie sensed it. She was appalled by the violence done to Willie but couldn’t abide its depiction. She needed to get beyond the trauma of race, which casts people of color as perpetual victims. This wasn’t the “beyond” of Chief Justice Roberts, who, in a case about voluntary school desegregation, said famously, “The way to stop discrimination on the basis of race is to stop making discriminations on the basis of race.” Her “beyond” recognized the need for social, economic, and political remedies, but it also understood the violence of categories, and it wanted to turn that violence away from people and toward the kind of thinking that made it possible.

When Copeland judges an essay competition for African American youth and selects as the winner a boy whose eleven-year-old sister was raped by a white man and who initially, after reading about the Scottsboro boys, tried in fear to emasculate himself but who now aspires to be a lawyer “who will only take cases of coloured people against white people” (183), Eugenie all but cried, “Enough!” The boy, who ends up being killed during a race riot, responds to the prompt—“My Ambition: How I Can Better the Position of the Negro Race in Society”—by writing, “I hate the whole white race and will work always so that the coloured race can achieve revenge for all their sufferings” (183). “There isn’t a single well-adjusted Black person in the entire novel,” she remarked.

In the end, Eugenie’s predicament as a reader was less a matter of finding particular characters unlikeable or offensive than of bringing a keen sensitivity—one might even say, a ferocious reactivity—to the book’s intersectional struggle, its failure to meaningfully relate the various identity positions. In contemporary parlance, Dr. Copeland “triggered” feelings of profound frustration with “old patterns of thinking about race.” Like bumper cars at a carnival, the categories collide but remain unchanged, as isolated as they were before. Eugenie brought home to me just how distinctive was her response.
to the book. A monoracial reader, to say nothing of a nondisabled one, wouldn’t have been as invested in the drama of integration.

With glaring irony, Copeland tells Blount, “The most fatal thing a man can do is try to stand alone” (302). Yet standing alone as a narrowly defined group presents its own problems. If being multiracial, -ethnic, and -disabled was like having to play the part of Humpty Dumpty, then Eugenie refused to fall, no matter how much people might try to push her. Or if she had fallen, she had put herself back together. Moved not like the doctor by inflexible ideas but by the feeling of gliding across invisible boundaries, she had found her own feet by dancing.

... 

After Eugenie and I finished *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* and then read a book about ballet, I made plans to fly to Chicago. As with the other subjects of this ethnography, I wanted to see her in her home environment. I wanted to meet her partner and kids, I wanted to watch her coach her skaters, and I wanted to attend a ballet. Because it was just a few weeks before Christmas, the ballet would have to be *The Nutcracker*, which Eugenie had danced in many times herself and which she genuinely loved, despite its status as a money-making cliché.

*The Nutcracker* had been her first ballet; her mother and grandmother had taken her to see it when she was three. “I was bitten. Possessed. Whatever you want to call it. And when I stepped on stage to perform my first *Nutcracker*, I knew that a huge part of my soul was at home.” While fearing that her response was “teenagerish,” she refused to apologize for its intensity, recalling with great fondness the ritualistic pleasure of those Christmas performances:

Every second was magic. Even waiting backstage. I LOOOOOOVED IT. I couldn’t get enough. I wanted to sleep there. I never wanted to leave. Other girls complained, and there I was unable to get enough. I loved everything from where we parked, to where we walked to enter the building, to where my costume and changing area was, to the theatre seats, to the stage, to the fuzz on the stage, to the things sold out in front to the audience.

I could relate: my own high-level tennis, when I was a boy and then a young man, had come wrapped, like grip tape around the racket handle, in such agreeable details.
In preparation for the trip, I began to read up on the emerging field of diversity science, especially as it pertained to multiraciality. I was intrigued by the seemingly built-in problem of racism as a function of our category-making minds: the way that thinking abstractly about a group of people saves us from having to think sensuously about them as individuals—saves us, that is, considerable effort and time but at the expense of a just society. However consciously or unconsciously, we read people as belonging to “ingroups” or “outgroups” and behave accordingly. Multiracial individuals, as I have suggested, act as a wrench in the system, slowing it down and causing frustration. Studies have confirmed that monoracial perceivers “make fewer multiracial categorizations of multiracials and that these categorizations . . . take longer than monoracial categorizations.” Shoved into one or the other denigrated outgroup, multiracial people experience two forms of oppression.

So central is the notion of categories to the field that experts interested in ameliorating bias speak of “shaping social categorization outcomes.” Even when the aim is ultimately to disrupt categorization, they invariably begin with categories and try either to complicate them by adding other categories (or subcategories) or to “recast [them] as overlapping or continuous in recognition of the many individuals whose identities lie within the intersections of . . . conventional[] binary distinctions (e.g., multiracial and transgender persons).” Autistics, I kept thinking to myself, generally end with categories or something like them, and they refuse to sacrifice or subordinate distinguishing details. What difference might this make with respect to multiraciality?

I found a number of fascinating studies. In a study of the facial recognition abilities of Asian, white, and biracial Asian/white subjects in which Asian, white, and biracial Asian/white faces were labeled as either “Asian” or “white,” monoracial subjects “relied on the provided labels and had better memory for ingroup faces.” In contrast, multiracial subjects “disregarded the labels and demonstrated better memory overall, regardless of face type” (my italics). If the multiracial subject did not hold essentialist views of race, the “effect was particularly pronounced.” As Michael Stipe, the lead singer of REM, once proclaimed, “I think labels are for food. Canned food.” To the best of my knowledge, autistics have never been tested on ingroup/outgroup perception, but I’d bet the farm on different results for monoracial autistics.

Another study showed that with monoracial perceivers you could change the definition of “ingroup” and thereby affect categorization outcomes. As the researchers put it, “Who constitutes the ingroup was entirely flexible.”
“Testing memory for faces categorized according to race or university affiliation,” they once again found better memory for racial ingroup faces but only when race was emphasized. As soon as university affiliation was emphasized, they found better memory for university ingroup faces, regardless of race. A study involving people with disabilities asked the following question: “How many shared ingroup identities would an able-bodied perceiver need . . . to override the initial perception of the target as a devalued outgroup member?” The answer? Without explicit instruction or emphasis, it generally “takes two shared ingroups to overcome the influence of one dimension of differentiation.” Someone like Eugenie might, by this logic, need at least a dozen points of similarity.

Researchers stress that “multiple categorization is associated with decategorization, a move toward more individuated processing of a target.” With individuation comes “increased liking, a reduction in evaluative bias, and more accurate perceptions in general.” Yet, there are other, less deliberative pathways to individuation. In a recent study of racial prejudice, “participants were asked to detect near-threshold tactile stimuli delivered to their own face while viewing either an ingroup or an outgroup face receiving a similar stimulation.” Researchers found that “individuals’ tactile accuracy when viewing an outgroup face . . . was negatively correlated to their implicit racial bias.” In other words, the more prejudiced a subject, the less likely he was to correctly identify an inappreciable sensation on his own face.

The study relied on the principle of sensorimotor resonance, the process by which “we come to understand other people’s physical and mental states by mapping their bodily states on to our sensorimotor system.” Automatic and unconscious, this process acts as a kind of lower-level foundation for higher-order social cognition, such as empathetic perspective taking, but it is quite susceptible to prejudice. So much so that when we observe an outgroup member in pain, “sensorimotor resonance vanishes.” It is also susceptible, it turns out, to manipulation. When researchers increased perceived physical similarity through “interpersonal multisensory stimulation” (sight plus more conspicuous touch, IMS), tactile accuracy for outgroup faces improved significantly in high-prejudiced subjects. Whereas vision had previously divided them from racial or ethnic others, touch—the feeling of similarity—now united them. By itself, the former’s data had readily supported a noxious idea.

As important, the difference in the “visual remapping of touch effect” between observing your own face and that of someone else disappeared, suggesting a conflation or confusion of self and other—even when, to
repeat, the self was white and the other was from a different racial or ethnic group. Scientists call this phenomenon the “enfacement illusion.” High-prejudiced subjects, we might say, discovered themselves in people whom they implicitly disdained. The study’s authors speculate that the “gradual incorporation of the other’s facial features into the mental representation of one’s own face, occurring during the synchronous IMS, might induce the outgroup face to be processed at an individual-, rather than at a categorical-level.” We all think of ourselves as singular and, after such an intervention, high-prejudiced subjects may have accorded this status to racial and ethnic others. Here, engaging with an outgroup member in a sensuous, bottom-up (as opposed to an abstract, top-down) manner made all the difference, a fact that has significant implications for diversity training.

This sort of approach to prejudice intervenes, I must emphasize, at a precategorical or perceptual level. Autistics, according to Laurent Mottron’s theory of enhanced perceptual functioning, have privileged access to such input. It’s not only more readily available to consciousness, but it’s also more “autonom[ous] . . . with respect to top-down processes.” In other words, the frontal lobes don’t immediately subordinate sensory information to preferred higher-order constructs, such as racial or ethnic categories. The result is perhaps too much individuation. Neurotypicals, or at least many of them, suffer from generating too little. Because they possess unisensory representations of the Other, they need something like a multisensory booster shot to overcome their own natural processing proclivity.

Reflecting on this account of autism, whereby autistics show “increased activation of cortical areas associated with visual perception” and “reduced frontal cortex activity” (my italics)—or, said another way, local overconnectivity and global (or long-range) underconnectivity—I discovered an irony. The neurotypical brain, which scientists think of as properly connected, produces a social sphere that, at least with respect to embodied differences, is anything but. Divided, tense, embittered, and sometimes violent, this sphere boasts relatively little long-range, and too much short-range, communication. Even its historical remedy—identity politics—looks, in this conceit, like the stereotype of autism. And autism, with its distrust of generalizations, looks like some optimal norm.

Yes, I’m playing with language—that’s what writers do—but when experts speak of social deficits in autism they can neither imagine accompanying benefits nor critically examine their own neurologies. How about a new slogan? *Feel globally. Perceive locally.*
Eugenie understood many of her challenges—with movement, with communication, and with certain aspects of sociality—in terms of faulty connectivity. “My brain is not holding hands with my emotions. Nothing in my body is holding hands with each other except for my heart and my ears that hear music. Those two are in love,” she said memorably.

Autism, however, was never just bad or good—it was “mixed,” you might say, even “queer.” Her feeling-based approach to ballet allowed her to “easily connect with characters she might be dancing or portraying.” It also allowed her to live inside of the music—that “fluid architecture,” as Joni Mitchell once described it. “I can feel . . . what the music wants me to do,” Eugenie said. “Now if only my body would keep up.” Yet even as she lamented the body piece—the speed and ease with which she translated verbal commands or visual demonstrations into precise action—she acknowledged the focus that autism brought: “Perhaps I might not have been as dedicated to the training and the life of the trainee without autism.”

The body piece had to be learned, as I’ve already suggested, through will and repetition—much the same way that the cognitive and linguistic aspects of the social piece had to be learned through will and repetition. To this day, she painstakingly writes out what she wants to say to her older boys when they have to have a serious talk. If the mind were an orchard and words were apples, then she’d need a ladder to pick them. But if the orchard had music and the ladder could move . . . . I was struck, watching Eugenie work with her skaters, watching her help them to implement dance elements into their routines, at how effortlessly she performed her role as coach. If you watched my son, DJ, walk, you’d notice how uncoordinated he seems, but if you watched him jump on a trampoline, you’d think he was an acrobat. Additional proprioceptive input and the rhythmic entrainment of music-enhanced bouncing completely transform him. Maybe something like this was at play with Eugenie.

With pupils ranging in age from seven to eighteen—a fifty-year-old woman popped into the studio above the ice rink for ballet instruction about halfway through the Saturday I observed her—Eugenie easily adjusted her pedagogy and demeanor. She was tough with the lazy students and overtly supportive with the fragile ones. “Ballet fingers. Pull in your core. Be ready. Be ready. Arms up,” Eugenie shouted to a girl I later learned came from a badly dysfunctional family and who looked like she was skating on a pond in mid-April! Her face was that clenched. Another student appeared per-

In the studio, Eugenie had no trouble with words—hers were frequently metaphorical—and if anyone seemed autistic, stereotypically so, it was her pupils, who often couldn’t connect with the music, who seemed, in fact, distant and awkward. They were like people who had gone camping but who didn’t know how to set up their tent, how to really live among the trees. With what flare and grace, what captivating immediacy, did Eugenie model a relationship between movement, sound, and space! An evolving relationship, at once precise and flowing. “All that is important is this one moment in movement. Make the moment important, vital, and worth living. Do not let it slip away unnoticed and unused,” urged Martha Graham.

Eugenie took great pride in coaching, just as she took great pride in parenting. She would give her children what they needed: instruction, of course, but also warm, full-hearted affirmation. “I put a lot of pressure on myself to be the best mother that I can be to all of my children because that is one of my most important jobs here on earth and I take it very seriously,” she told me. She was, she said, a better parent to her middle son, who received an autism diagnosis at the age of two and who didn’t start speaking until he was three, for being on the spectrum. “It has been one of the greatest gifts because I can spot things and sense things and explain them to my son and others before anything even has a chance to become a problem.”

She related an anecdote about dropping Meir off at the bus stop and watching him stand “way too close to another cool looking kid,” then fumble with the zipper on his backpack while bumping the cool kid with it. “Needless to say, I had a private heart attack,” Eugenie said.

I had to think quick. That kind of thing can end a kid in middle school. I pulled over and called my son back to the car telling him I had something else for him. When he came I said something along the lines of, “Meir, you’re standing way too close to that other kid. Give him some room. Remember personal space? If someone’s not a family member or a friend, we don’t stand that close. I’m not saying this to be mean, I just want to make sure you have all of the info necessary before you make a decision. If you want to stand close to him, knock yourself out, little man. But you must know that he might not like it, and he might also think you’re immature or weird. Got it?”
No one had offered her such coaching when she was young—people would later attribute her own behavioral oddities to deafness—and she was determined to help Meir. “I spent so much of my life confused, not knowing what to do. And I hated it,” she said.

And yet mother and son didn’t perseverate on autism. They talked about it, they accommodated it, but they preferred, for the most part, to let difference be: “He just has a zest for life and wants to live and do. It’s not his thing to sit back and constantly think about autism (like I did). And why should I make him?” I could detect a tension between accepting the label and being proud of it and moving past labels, indeed reductive social identities, altogether. Of course, once it has been reclaimed, the autistic (or neurodivergent) label helps to make possible a certain kind of politics, and Eugenie had eagerly made use of it—it and a host of others that pertained to race, ethnicity, and deafness—but they also made her uncomfortable, as I have noted repeatedly.

Upon returning from the ice rink, I learned about Eugenie’s own diagnosis, and about how she had met her husband, Jacob. She said that she never suspected she was autistic because her only reference had been *Rain Man*, but she sensed she was different from other people by age three. “I knew that my hearing loss was not what was weird about me because Deaf people thought I was weird too,” she explained. “It’s funny and pathetic all in one. . . . And I knew that being multiracial was not what made me weird. I knew that I was weird because I acted differently and responded differently to things in comparison to both my peers and people in general.” For Eugenie, receiving a diagnosis came as a great relief: “I let out a breath I had been holding since I was three. . . . I finally had a reason. It was like never being adopted and then finally being adopted.”

Her husband, she reported, was “extremely accepting” of the diagnosis. They had met when she was sixteen, as she was beginning to lose her hearing. He was five years older. Although they shared a common religion, many obstacles to a relationship lay before them: age, race, ethnicity, and disability. Or at least to outsiders it seemed so; to Jacob and Eugenie, however, they had each found a soul mate. Unlike the characters in *Heart*, Jacob devoted himself to learning ASL—“At the beginning, I just wanted to talk to her,” he said. He became so proficient at ASL that he later went on to teach at the American Sign Language and Secondary School in lower Manhattan. He now works as
a middle-school science teacher in a gifted program; the weekend I visited, he and Meir were preparing for a statewide engineering competition.

As a result of the traffic in Chicago, I ended up wearing Jacob’s shirt and blazer to the ballet. I had planned to drive back to my hotel in order to change, but after a full day of coaching and more conversation, that seemed unwise—from their street we could see the cars backed up on the highway. I felt more than a bit foolish having to borrow fancy attire, especially since I recalled what Eugenie had written in one of our Skype sessions: “There’s something very exciting about dressing up to attend a ballet at a theatre. You just know you’re in for a treat.” As a person (and an ethnographer), I can sometimes be clueless: the day before, I had brought a poinsettia to the house as a gift. “They’re Jewish!” I later chastised myself.

Whatever the spell that ballet had cast on Eugenie, it didn’t stop her from critiquing the expressivity—and even the technique—of some of the dancers we saw that night. We both admired the two leads, Clara and the Sugar Plum Fairy, who, interestingly enough, were from China. So much for “certain arts being things unto themselves”! Yes, we were watching The Nutcracker in a major American city, but attitudes have clearly changed since the time of Balanchine. Through globalization and other forces, the world has become a large salad bowl (not a melting pot!). The United States continues to experience a significant demographic shift toward multiraciality. The first decade of the twenty-first century witnessed, for example, a 50 percent increase in multiracial children—from 2.8 million to 4.2 million in 2010. In 2013, 10 percent of all children born in the United States were multiracial. With more multiracial people, the cognitive habits of monoracial people will have to adapt accordingly.

On the drive home, Eugenie and I talked about the concept of intersectionality. Though she wasn’t an academic and, thus, didn’t regularly chew on jargon, she possessed a keen sense of how the concept was typically applied. While an improvement upon single-identity frameworks, it was still too rigid, we agreed, still too primitively triangular (or trilateral), to capture the myriad, morphing permutations of complex personhood—permutations in which certain aspects of identity, ever evolving in relation to one another, become more apparent at particular moments and in particular places. It’s as if, with intersectionality, we’re trying to use a GPS to locate who we are. (“Turn left on Callahan Rd. The multiracial, Deaf, autistic woman sits at the
intersection of Callahan and Pointer St.”) Or maybe the concept of intersectionality is like a fondue machine on low or barely moving. The magic act collapses when our account of it fails to be equivalently dynamic.

Comparing the sort of abstract theorizing found in scholarly work to the more bodily theorizing found in dance, I recalled another ballet joke: “Position, heal thyself.” Positions, of course, are the beginning and ending points for elaborate sequences in ballet, and they refer to the placement of one’s feet on the floor. Alluding to a proverb mentioned in the Gospel of Luke, the malapropism makes hilarious fun of the art form’s foundational difficulty. (Just as Jesus expects to be confronted by people who demand to see more miracles, so the prima ballerina expects to be confronted by an audience that demands to see more perfection.)

While these positions can be “healed” through the refinement of technique, the joke suggests in this context the need for a more robust intersectionality—and a larger project of repair. As with Jamie’s own movement journey, the social world itself must be healed: of its many histories of discrimination but also of the Left’s own fixed and confining responses to these histories. We would all do well, Eugenie reminds us, to remember the queer instability of categories.