Productive Bodies and Minds: Exploring Autistic Labor in *As We See It*

by

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Abstract

Allistic actors have long portrayed autistic characters on-screen – a topic of critique for autistic advocates (Jones, 2022). Cue *As We See It*: a 2022 Amazon Original series about three autistic roommates navigating their twenties. The series intentionally cast autistic actors and addresses a demographic of autistic people often overlooked in television: the youth precariat (Aspler, Harding, & Cascio, 2022). This research explores whether and how *As We See It* adds complexity to discussions around work and disability/autism. Applying Fairclough’s Critical Discourse Analysis, I examine the show’s pilot episode and reception among key audiences. Several themes emerged reinforcing an ableist/neurotypical discourse that valorizes ideal bodies and minds within a capitalist order, around which autistic people are disciplined. An alternative discourse also emerged celebrating autistic pride. This study contributes to the developing field of Critical Autism Studies and explores the affordances of a critical, materialist approach in furthering questions of autistic labor.
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And to Nicky. The boxer, the fighter, the champion. Your siblinghood has been the greatest gift of my life. You taught me resilience, and always reminded me:

It ain’t about how hard you hit.
It's about how hard you can get hit and keep moving forward.
How much you can take and keep moving forward.
That’s how winning is done.

– Rocky Balboa

I love you.
# Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................................................ ii

Acknowledgements ............................................................................................................................................................. iii

Table of Contents .............................................................................................................................................................. iv

List of Appendices .............................................................................................................................................................. vi

Introduction ................................................................................................................................................................. 1

   Positionality .............................................................................................................................................................. 4

Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework .................................................................................................................................... 6

   1.1 Feminist Disability Media Studies .......................................................................................................................... 6
   1.2 Critical Autism Studies ............................................................................................................................................. 7
       1.2.1 The Affirmation Model ...................................................................................................................................... 8
   1.3 Materialist Feminism ................................................................................................................................................ 9
       1.3.1 Materialist Critical Autism Studies ................................................................................................................ 11

Chapter 2: Literature Review .......................................................................................................................................... 15

   2.1 The Proto(neuro)typical Capitalist Worker ............................................................................................................ 15
       2.1.1 The Violent Erasure of Disabled Workers’ Labor Power .................................................................................. 16
   2.2 Helping or Hurting? Contemporary Legislation and its Impact on Labor Relations .................................................... 20
       2.2.1 The Americans with Disabilities Act and Labor Rights for Autistic People ...................................................... 20
       2.2.2 The Fair Labor Standards Act, Subminimum Wage, and Sheltered Workshops ............................................. 23
       2.2.3 Social Security in the United States .................................................................................................................. 27
   2.3 Investigating Autistic Labor On-screen .................................................................................................................... 30
       2.3.1 Television: Postwar Antiseptic Space or Potential Kinship Building Site? ..................................................... 34
       2.3.2 Background on Amazon Studios & As We See It (2022) ................................................................................ 36

Chapter 3: Methodology .................................................................................................................................................. 40

   3.1 Critical Discourse Analysis ..................................................................................................................................... 41
   3.2 Method .................................................................................................................................................................... 47
   3.3 Statement of Ethics Considerations ........................................................................................................................ 51

Chapter 4: Analysis ........................................................................................................................................................ 53

   4.1 As We See It, Episode 1, “Pilot” ............................................................................................................................ 53
   4.2 The Dramedy Genre ............................................................................................................................................... 60
   4.3 Audience Reception ............................................................................................................................................... 62

Chapter 5: Discussion ..................................................................................................................................................... 70

   5.1 Potentiality .............................................................................................................................................................. 71
   5.2 (In)dependence ...................................................................................................................................................... 76
   5.3 Functioning constructs .......................................................................................................................................... 79
   5.4 Adulting .................................................................................................................................................................. 82
   5.5 Neurodivergent-Positive Discourse ..................................................................................................................... 84

Conclusion ........................................................................................................................................................................ 89

   Introductory Remarks ................................................................................................................................................. 89
   Research Questions, Revisited ................................................................................................................................... 90
The Pilot..............................................................................................................................................................................................92
Audience Reception.........................................................................................................................................................................................93
Limitations and Future Research ..................................................................................................................................................................94
Final Thoughts ............................................................................................................................................................................................96

References ...........................................................................................................................................................................................97

Appendix: Corpus .....................................................................................................................................................................................115
List of Appendices

Appendix: Corpus.................................................................115
Introduction

Over the last several decades, allistic (non-autistic) actors have primarily portrayed autistic characters onscreen (IMDB, 2018; Shaul Bar Nissim & Mitte, 2020), which has been a topic of critique for autistic advocates (Kurchak, 2021; Luterman, 2021; Jones, 2022). Mainstream programs like Netflix’s *Atypical* (2017-2021) or ABC’s *The Good Doctor* (2017-) are frequently cited as examples, as are instances where characters are coded with autistic characteristics without explicit mention of being autistic, such as Sheldon Cooper of CBS’ *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-2019) (Gaeke-Franz, 2022). Cue *As We See It*: a recent 2022 Amazon Original dramedy series about the lives of three autistic roommates navigating their twenties. Available exclusively on Amazon streaming service, Prime Video, *As We See It* (2022) (hereinafter *As We See It*) has been applauded by some critics across the mainstream, trade, and subcultural press for intentionally casting autistic actors in the roles of autistic characters: all three lead characters are played by autistic actors (Deggans, 2022; Fienberg, 2022; Hadadi, 2022; Kemp, 2022; Poniewozik, 2022). *As We See It* also tackles a demographic of autistic people often overlooked across media depictions: the youth precariat. While young autistic people are featured in film and television, they are often children and teenagers (see *Atypical*, *Parenthood*, *The A Word*); or adults with established careers (see *The Good Doctor*, *The Big Bang Theory*). The promotional description for *As We See It* reads as follows: “The series follows Jack, Harrison, and Violet, 20-something roommates on the autism spectrum, as they strive to get a

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1 Identity-first language will be used throughout my thesis. While person-first language is adopted by many disabled people, I follow thinkers like Jim Sinclair (1999/2013) and Jake Pyne (2020) who suggest person-first language can be seen as an effort to separate autism from the person instead of viewing autism as essential to one’s selfhood. According to Pyne (2020), “A person who has something, can also not have it. This is the calling card of conversion therapy” (p. 17). Language contributes to (de)humanization, and aligned with the framework of this research, I echo that the multiplicities of humanness are valuable.
job, keep a job, make friends, fall in love, and navigate a world that eludes them.” As this description highlights, employment is a central topic. It is noted first (and twice) in the overall thematic list addressed by the series, demonstrating a particular ideological orientation toward productivity and successful integration within capitalism as essential to establishing one’s identity during the transition from “adolescence” to “adulthood.”

In the United States, where the series is set, it is difficult to determine rates of employment for young autistic adults specifically. Currently, no national dataset exists that offers information on the full population of autistic adults transitioning from “adolescence” to “adulthood” (Roux, Rast, Anderson, & Shattuck, 2017). Data is often reported on those 17 years of age or younger; or adults more broadly (Roux et al., 2017). A recent American National Autism Indicators Report on developmental disability services and outcomes in adulthood published by The A.J. Drexel Autism Institute suggested 14% of autistic adults were employed for pay in the community (Roux et al., 2017). A 2015 report by the same organization focusing specifically on young autistic adults found 58% had paid employment between high school and their early twenties, while four in 10 young autistic adults never worked for pay during that same period (Roux, Shattuck, Rast, Rava, & Anderson, 2015). Furthermore, as more time passed after high school, it took longer for autistic people to find work than their peers, upwards of six years in some cases (Roux et al., 2015). This work was most often part-time (79%) and low-waged.

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2 I have initially written these different periods in quotation marks as I am mindful developmental stages such as “adolescence” and “adulthood” reflect an ableist, heteronormative view of the life course, which many critical disability and queer theorists resist with alternate notions of crip time and queer time (Halberstam, 2005; Taylor, 2004; Sheppard, 2020; Rees, 2021). This will be reflected upon further throughout this thesis. However, capitalism largely depends upon normative understandings of the life course; As We See It shapes much of the series’ discourses around young adulthood; and statistical research relies on age brackets to delineate employment rates. As such, I will be referring to life course stages throughout this analysis both for consistency with the series and existing research, and to inform a larger materialist critique of current discourses surrounding autistic labor.
Black and Hispanic autistic youth faced employment rates roughly half of what their white peers experienced (Roux et al., 2015). Surveying disabled youth more broadly, The Office of Disability Employment Policy, a branch of the U.S. Department of Labor, published the following 2021 statistics: disabled people ages 16-19 participate in the labor force at a rate of 24.3% (compared to 36.8% among their non-disabled peers). Disabled people ages 20-24 participate at a rate of 46.7% (compared to 72.0% of non-disabled people of the same age). The 2021 unemployment rate for disabled youth (16-19) was 21.1% (compared to 11.4% for non-disabled teenagers) while the unemployment rate for disabled young adults was 16.5% (compared to 8.7% of able-bodied young adults) (The Office of Disability Employment Policy, 2021).

My thesis will explore questions of autistic labor as depicted in *As We See It* and in discourse surrounding the series and reproduced through it in order to address the following research questions:

1. In what ways does a consideration of autistic labor deepen our understanding of capitalist values surrounding productivity, potential, and worth; independence and interdependence?

2. In what ways does the pilot of *As We See It* address questions of autistic labor? Does it

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3 There is some dispute about whether autism is a disability (Kenny, Hattersley, Molins, Buckley, Povey, & Pellicano, 2016) as there is no singular experience of autism and it can be accompanied by co-occurring conditions, such as intellectual disabilities, ADD, ADHD, mental illness, sensory or mobility disorders (Brown, 2013). The American Psychiatric Association’s (2013) *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* outlines diagnostic criteria for autism spectrum disorder, which some autistic scholars and self-advocates suggest has been helpful for gaining civil rights and protections, such as the inclusion of autism as part of the ADA Amendments Act of 2008 (Garcia, 2021). Others, such as the Autistic Self Advocacy Network (2012), suggest the criteria is limiting and exclusionary. For the purpose of this thesis, I follow the work of autistic self-advocates (Brown, 2013; Yergeau, 2018; Garcia, 2021; Autistic Self Advocacy Network, 2022) who recognize autism’s links to disability culture and see the autistic self-advocacy movement and disability rights movement as sharing common values and goals.
move beyond stereotypical constructs of autistic people? Does it challenge, reproduce, or resist ableist understandings of labor in consideration of autism and disability?

3. Who are some of the key audiences for As We See It, and how is their reception of the show's storylines and narrative arcs reflected online in review articles and on social media? Do discursive practices involving/surrounding the series reproduce or challenge a normative social order?

This thesis will explore whether and how As We See It adds complexity to discussions around work and disability/autism, moving beyond stereotypical representations and ideals of generalized workers (Fritsch, 2015). It will ask how this, or other treatments of autistic labor deepen our understanding of Western capitalist values surrounding productivity, potential, and worth; independence and interdependence. My aim is to explore how a critical, materialist approach might inform ongoing discussions related to labor and autism. Applying Fairclough’s Critical Discourse Analysis, which draws on both critical and Foucauldian notions of discourse as a system of knowledge, I will examine whether the pilot episode challenges, reproduces, or resists ableist understandings of labor in consideration of autism and disability. I will also examine the show’s reception among key audiences, attuned to discourses as informed by my theoretical framework and literature review. This research will be grounded in materialist feminism, drawing from Marx, as well as Critical Autism Studies. Given its focus on popular culture and television as discursive sites, this research will also be situated within feminist disability media studies.

**Positionality**

I engage with this research as both a presently able-bodied white-settler master’s student and as a sibling to a disabled loved one. Though I am not autistic, I draw from my
experiences watching my brother, who is a young adult and has a traumatic acquired brain injury, negotiate his neurodivergent disabled bodymind. It is my hope that this relational position allows me to engage with the present subject compassionately. In writing this research from my non-autistic (allistic) position, I am mindful of reproducing research that extends a long history of allistic academics, advocates, and parents writing and communicating on behalf of autistic people (O’Dell et al., 2016; Broderick & Roscigno, 2022). To address this, I aim to exercise a citational practice that draws upon insights from autistic scholars and self-advocates. This also includes centering the voices of autistic people and their lived experiences, which involves seeking out the positions of autistic audiences as it relates to their experiences watching *As We See It*. This will be critical as many articles about the show across mainstream press are seemingly written by allistic authors. In an effort to resist reinforcing white disability studies (Minich, 2016; Schalk, 2017), I will ensure those with intersectional lived and embodied experiences are also included in the works I draw from.
Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework

This thesis explores autistic labor through the lens of a materialist feminist analytic/methodology as well as Critical Autism Studies and feminist disability media studies. I blend these traditions together to mind gaps and ensure a well-rounded approach to this thesis. For example, while traditional Marxism can be deterministic and feminist materialism may overlook autistic people, Critical Autism Studies centers autistic agency and world-making. Where Critical Autism Studies are still developing a formal materialist orientation, a feminist materialist analytic examines economic and capitalist structures in exposing systems of oppression.

1.1 Feminist Disability Media Studies

I situate my analysis within feminist disability media studies in order to critically engage with the social and economic conditions that privilege normative bodyminds and discursive formations on-screen. Feminist disability media studies lies at the intersection of Feminist Media Studies and Critical Disability Studies. These fields similarly offer an “interdisciplinary intervention into media studies and [are] invested in questions of identity, representation, and relations of power” (Cleary, 2018, p. 63). Disabled bodyminds have long been positioned in the public domain to be gawked at (Garland-Thomson, 1997; Clare, 2015/1999; Cleary, 2018): from 19th century freak shows to 21st century advertising campaigns featuring disabled athletes/actors/models/children that work to elicit sympathy, pity, or inspiration from consumers (Young, 2014; Clare, 2015/1999; McGuire, 2016; Pullen, Jackson, & Silk, 2020). As disability acquires greater visibility across the media landscape, examining disability’s positioning in cultural narratives and its symbiotic impact on public discourse and the collective body politic is of increasing importance (Ellcessor & Kirkpatrick, 2017; Cleary, 2018). Mass media images of
disabled bodyminds remain of great influence as disabled people are still largely excluded and segregated from other areas of public life (Cleary, 2018). Given the ongoing oppressive nature of disability visibility in media and entertainment, an increase in on-screen representation alone is not sufficient. While “authentic casting” (Katims, 2022) may be radical for some – as was a discernible sentiment upon the release of As We See It – feminist disability media studies go beyond questions of identity and representation, also examining relations of power and materiality (Cleary, 2018). One way these relations reveal themselves in the context of As We See It is through discourses embedded both within and surrounding the show, as will be explored in this thesis.

1.2 Critical Autism Studies

Similar to the way Critical Disability Studies as a theoretical framework expands our understanding of disability as not strictly biological or impairment, but rather social, cultural, political, and economic (Schalk, 2017), Critical Autism Studies challenges the dominant neurobiological constructions of autism, focusing instead on the ways autism is materially and discursively produced (O’Dell, Bertilsdotter Rosqvist, Ortega, Brownlow, & Orsini, 2016). It does so whilst continuing to recognize the embodied experiences of autism (O’Dell et al., 2016); the importance of diagnoses and self-diagnoses to some autistic people (Yergeau, 2018; Garcia, 2021); and the way autism can run in families (Woods, Milton, Arnold, & Graby, 2018). Critical Autism Studies was coined in 2010 by Davidson and Orsini (O’Dell et al., 2016). While the parameters of the field were still developing, three elements were identified in the critical analytical approach: attention to power relations; enabling narratives that challenge dominant constructions that influence public opinion, policy and popular culture; and a commitment to new analytical frameworks. My thesis adopts Waltz’s (2014) definition, which builds upon
Davidson and Orsini’s original definition: “The ‘criticality’ comes from investigating power dynamics that operate in discourses around autism, questioning deficit-based definitions of autism, and being willing to consider the ways in which biology and culture intersect to produce ‘disability’” (as cited in Woods et al., 2018, p. 978). This definition encapsulates several critical factors upon which the field of Critical Autism Studies depends, namely that embodiment, diagnostic criteria, power relations, and culture offer a more complete analytical scope together and do not need to exist in contradiction to one another. Critical Autism Studies allows for a reframing of autistic persons that values the complexities of personhood; and challenges normative assumptions of ability (O’Dell et al. 2016), such as – and importantly for the purposes of the present research – ableist criteria that assign value and determine employability under capitalism.

1.2.1 The Affirmation Model

In line with Critical Autism Studies’ subversion of a non-autistic worldview as our dominant reference point, I align this thesis with the Affirmation Model of Disability (Swain & French, 2010). The affirmation model is defined as “a non-tragic view of disability and impairment which encompasses positive social identities, both individual and collective, for disabled people grounded in the benefits of lifestyle and life experience of being impaired and disabled” (Swain & French, 2010, p. 569). It sees the disabled/non-disabled binary as flawed as the divide cannot be drawn based on impairment alone (many people have impairments but do not encounter ableism to the same degree; think wearing glasses to assist with vision), nor can it be drawn based solely on oppression (many people who are not oppressed by ableism are oppressed by other social factors under capitalism including poverty, race, and gender identity). Rather, Swain and French (2010) regard lived experiences and perception of disability as more
informative. The *social* model of disability is frequently cited in Critical Disability Studies scholarship as it moves away from the personal tragedy model of disability (which sees disability as something to be pitied) and instead highlights how societal barriers are disabling (Oliver, 2013). The image of steps leading up to a building without another means of entry is an often-cited example. According to Russell (2019), the social model of disability can lean too heavily on social attitudes (‘if we could only change people’s hearts and minds!’) and neutrality (the built environment is what it is) in making its case. While the social model is important – and does orient this thesis to some degree given its widespread application across the literature – Swain and French (2010) suggest the social model in its essence redefines ‘the problem’ while the affirmation model adopts a non-tragic standpoint that disability is “a positive personal and collective identity” (p. 571). When applied to a Critical Autism Studies framework, the affirmation model thus asserts the value and validity of life as an autistic person and autistic communities, collectively, resisting dominant ideals around normativity from a non-tragic standpoint.

### 1.3 Materialist Feminism

Different from idealism, which focuses on spiritual ideals, historical materialism questions the material conditions and social relations associated with one’s existence, as well as the economic, political, and cultural practices that inform these interactions and which vary over time (Hennessy, 2016). While materialism harkens back to sixth century BC (Hennessy, 2016), for the purpose of this writing, materialism will be applied as it relates to its association with Karl Marx and his critique of capitalism. Marx was among the first philosophers to suggest labor was a purposeful, universal human capability (Gindin, 2016), rather than a necessity. Considering labor’s potential to be a liberating force, however, meant navigating “the tension
between necessity and capacity” (Gindin, 2016, p. 89) as dictated by given power relations. An understanding of the prototypical capitalist worker and exploitative labor dynamics as outlined by Marx will inform my exploration of autistic participation in a capitalist market.

Early Marxist thought was by no means inclusive. A product of the period in which he wrote, and his role as a Victorian husband and father with traditional patriarchal attitudes, Marx (and his collaborator Engels) failed to acknowledge the many colonial and patriarchal underpinnings of capitalism. Marxist feminists later worked to remedy these omissions, by revealing and redefining the value of reproductive labor and immaterial labor: the largely unpaid backbone of the free market which “enhances the capacities that workers exchange for a wage” through a labor of care (Hennessy, 2016, p. 102). Marxism has been critiqued for being sexist and chauvinist, and for ignoring race relations and other intersectional power dynamics (James, 1994). Feminists previously critiqued Marxism for being overly economic-deterministic and for discriminating against women occupying positions of paid labor (Vogel, 2013/1983). However, by expanding the framework adequately, many amended versions of Marxism and materialist feminists assert it remains a critical tool for analyzing material conditions today (James, 1994; Hennessy & Ingraham, 1997; Vogel, 2013/1983; Hennessy, 2016). It is through this critical and revised feminist lens that I will engage with a Marxist-materialist analytic.

Historical materialism is commonly associated with Karl Marx. It is from here Marx’s critique of capital emerged, outlining the tenuous relationship between those who offer their labor and those who control resources and accumulate value through the surplus labor of workers. As an analytical framework, historical materialism outlines “a set of basic epistemological and ontological principles to guide the study of societies as historically contingent and structurally conditioned” (Gleeson, 1999, p. 26 as cited in Oliver & Barnes, 2012,
Capitalism is a “social totality” (Hennessy & Ingraham, 1997, p. 6), thus struggles under capitalism transcend wage labor alone. Historical materialism further accounts “for the role of culture in production and consumption of capitalist values and norms in such areas as education, the law, the media, literature and art” (Oliver & Barnes, 2012, p. 99). Hennessy and Ingraham (1997) argue knowledge making is an “integral material aspect” of what gives divisions of power legitimacy. They suggest culture, “the domain of knowledge production” (p. 5), is thus a primary site where capitalist struggle unfolds. In contrast to cultural feminists, however, materialist/Marxist feminists do not see culture as the whole of social life but rather as one arena of social production. Lastly, historical materialism both acknowledges the oppressive limits of capitalism and the potentiality of human collectivity to alter material conditions. This potentiality is “a crucial asset” (Hennessy, 2016, p. 104) for radical politics and change making.

A materialist analytic thus lends itself to the present investigation of popular culture (television) as a site through which capitalist ideals are both discursively reproduced and resisted. Materialist feminism’s orientation toward “emancipatory knowledge” (Hennessy & Ingraham, 1997) and actively creating more just social and economic conditions distinguishes historical materialism from other materialisms (Hennessy & Ingraham, 1997; Hennessy, 2016). This aligns well with the objectives of Critical Autism Studies as well as my objective to contribute to the emerging field of scholarship bridging materialism and Critical Autism Studies to avoid over-determination of structure or culture in either approach.

1.3.1 Materialist Critical Autism Studies

Much of the feminist Marxist/materialist literature I surveyed fails to mention, let alone account for, disability, disabled persons, autism, or autistic people when referring to the material realities that impact various collectives of oppressed peoples under capitalism. Critical Disability
Studies and Critical Autism Studies help fill gaps left out by materialist approaches (see Oliver & Barnes, 2012; Mann, 2019; Russell, 2019; Broderick & Roscigno, 2022). A materialist Critical Disability Studies approach allows for an investigation of how modes of production intersect with – and impact – disability and makes salient the way perception of disability is intimately tied to a given society’s modes of production. For example, disabled activist and writer, Vic Finklestein (1980), charted a three-phase historical development which marked pre-industrial feudal society (phase 1), the transition to industrial capitalism (phase 2), and finally an emergent society whereby disabled people would no longer encounter social and material barriers (thanks to new technologies) and would thus be “reintegrated” into mainstream society (phase 3) (as cited in Oliver & Barnes, 2012). During phase 1, disabled people were part of a larger lower social hierarchy (i.e., those who were not reigning lords). During phase 2, disabled people became segregated as their own categorical group, which impacted equitable access to the labor market. As for phase 3, though some suggest the Information Age and new technologies have not had the emancipatory effects they once promised (Oliver & Barnes, 2012; Russell, 2019), others note “disabled peoples’ ongoing, creative, and open-ended appropriations” (Fritsch & Hamraie, 2019, p.3) of technology, or how the Internet has been a key technological development for autistic self-advocacy (McGuire, 2016). Finklestein’s work demonstrates how accounting for historical developments and applying a class analysis through a Critical Disability Studies lens allows us to contest the idea that our existing economic structure is natural and neutral.

As an emerging field, Critical Autism Studies has yet to develop a comprehensive materialist analytic. In my research, I encountered a piece published by autistic self-advocate and Communication Researcher, Benjamin Mann (2019). Mann (2019) posits how inclusive representation alone does little to address the neoliberal capitalist structures that work to
reproduce compulsory able-body-mindedness and, in turn, material inequities. Rather, Mann (2019) echoes Marxist/materialist thought in suggesting “material relations produce unequal distributions of power for autistic people” (para. 2). He thus calls for greater bridging of Critical Autism Studies with historical materialism to establish a materialist Critical Autism Studies. This framework allows for deeper investigation into structures that perpetuate compulsory able-body-mindedness, including employment and housing; the conditioning of ideal working subjects; and the oppression of those deemed ‘deviant.’ Aligned with materialist Critical Disability Studies, Mann (2019) argues capitalism benefits from viewing autistic people as barriers to efficiency because it helps reinforce the status quo, which benefits capitalism. Mann (2019) calls for “the eradication of economic structures that produce and perpetuate inequalities for autistic people and acknowledges the ways that such structures mask these inequalities through ableist stereotypes and narratives” (para. 7). Locating how capitalist imperatives that determine the ‘ideal’ worker continue to be naturalized, discursively in media for example, can reveal ways of working that largely go unchallenged by the able-body-minded/non-autistic beneficiaries, with the objective of reimagining existing capitalist conditions, in the short-term, and renegotiating a radical restructuring, in the long-term.

More recently, Critical Autism Studies scholar Alicia A. Broderick’s (2022) *The Autism Industrial Complex* responds to the lack of research examining the political economy of disability, and autism specifically. In this work, Broderick (2022) breaks down the Autism Industrial Complex (AIC), what she describes as a nearly unavoidable byproduct of neoliberal capitalism in late 20th century America and its intersection with the rise of behaviorism. Broderick describes the AIC as not simply the ‘big business’ that permeates the autism industry – including goods and services bought and sold in the name of intervention and rehabilitation –
but rather the Autism Industrial Complex commodifies autism and establishes the normative cultural logic of intervention that supports the AIC’s economic infrastructure (Broderick & Roscingo, 2022). Working together, the production of autism as commodity and the rhetorical products that manufacture the need for, and legitimacy of interventions produces violent hegemonic cultural logics about autism that largely exploit autistic bodies and target non-autistics as its primary consumers. Broderick’s analytic importantly examines both the cultural politics and political economy of autism. Doing so allows Broderick to examine historical, ideological, and economic conditions that favored the development of the AIC, thus troubling any naturalness we may prescribe to the modern-day intervention industry. Broderick’s (2022) analysis further allows for an exploration of how the AIC is sustained, how ideology evolves as capitalism evolves, and how autism as a historically specific category, and autistic bodies, are framed, marketed, positioned, bought, sold, and manufactured over time. Broderick’s (2022) work makes significant strides in reconciling political economy within Critical Autism Studies. Specific to the present thesis, Broderick (2022) exemplifies the affordances of deploying multiple analytical frameworks: she sees the cultural and the economic as co-constitutive; analyzing ideology, rhetoric, and discourse in tandem with social policy, media, and business, which resonates deeply with this thesis’ research objectives.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 The Proto(neuro)typical Capitalist Worker

Karl Marx was among the first philosophers to suggest labor was a purposeful, universal human capability (Gindin, 2016), rather than a necessity. Considering labor’s potential to be a liberating force, however, meant navigating “the tension between necessity and capacity” (Gindin, 2016, p. 89) as dictated by given power relations. According to Marx, human beings relate to each other through working to reproduce ourselves (James, 1994). Under capitalism, an individual became linked to the pay they earned through selling their labor. In-turn, one’s primary relational asset became their capacity to sell their labor and participate in the labor market. Marx suggested capital is not only a class dynamic but an interpersonal dynamic, suggesting personal worth has been transformed into an exchange value under capitalism (James, 1994). As Hennessy (2016) writes, “the material basis of capital’s value relation is the labor time stolen during the working day and the time for regeneration stolen through the plunder of both nonhuman resources and human capacities as they are drawn into exchange markets” (p. 101). Considering labor relations under capitalism provides context on the ideal capitalist subject and the structural elements that were developed to exclude disabled and autistic labor.

Marx refers to one’s ability to work as labor power. Labor power is not the work itself but rather the ability to work: our time (James, 1994). A given worker’s labor power (ability to work) is sold to the capitalist for a wage for an agreed upon duration of time. During a portion of that time, the worker produces enough output to cover their equivalent wages. This is what Marx called necessary labor – the amount of time the laborer works to cover a value equivalent to their wage (Russell, 2019). Any additional labor-time worked by the worker over and above necessary labor is thus unpaid, the value of which is termed surplus labor value (Russell, 2019). It is here
that the capitalist extracts profit. This ratio of paid work time to unpaid work time is what Marx called *exploitation* (James, 1994). According to Marxist principles, the key to greater capital accumulation is to ensure access to unpaid labor (Russell, 2019). It is deceptive to the worker; however, as day rates, hourly pay, and annual salaries create the illusion of being paid for the entire workday. This dynamic creates conditions whereby surviving under capitalism is an inequitable struggle for means: existing labor relations are such that collectively produced resources are highly individualistic and not collectively controlled or shared (James, 1994; Hennessy & Ingraham, 1997). These discrepancies are made more apparent when considering intersectional lived experiences. Much like disability more broadly, “autism’s origins are embedded within a contemporary neoliberal historical moment that is significantly defined by a regime of global capitalism” (McGuire, 2016, p. 53). Neoliberal imperatives condition a normative version of the ideal worker, which is circulated across the totality of capitalism. It is thus critical that disability politics account for labor relations and the “exploitative economic structure of capitalist society: one which creates (and then oppresses) the so-called disabled body as one of the conditions that allow the capitalist class to accumulate wealth” (Russell, 2019, p. 9). Historical materialism allows one framework for charting and interpreting the compiling conditions fueling the exclusion of disabled persons under capitalism.

**2.1.1 The Violent Erasure of Disabled Workers’ Labor Power**

Capitalism is certainly not the first structure that made workers dependent on employers. During the feudal era, laborers were dependent on kings and landowners, much like contemporary workers are dependent on bosses, executives, and capitalists.\(^4\) However, the tools

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\(^4\) This is a stage social feminist thinkers, like Silvia Federici, would describe as pre-capitalism, setting the stage for the social-economic system (i.e. capitalism) which would ultimately succeed feudalism (Federici, 2004; Kisner, 2021). Extending Marx’s account of primitive accumulation, Federici (2004) directs our attention to the growing divisions between members of the working class, the increasing
workers used were their own and workers were responsible for organizing their own labor. Capitalism concentrated the power to buy labor, organize labor, and own equipment into the hands of capitalists (James, 1994). Further, disability did not necessarily preclude people from participating in modes of production or in daily economic life during the pre-industrial period. Agricultural tasks, for example, that were passed down generation to generation could be observed by D/deaf family members (Oliver & Barnes, 2012). Likewise, environmental terrain that was familiar allowed blind workers to engage in production with fewer hazards (Oliver & Barnes, 2012). While not all disabled people or all impairments were accepted or treated with dignity during this time period – with many facing prejudice, exile, and death due to religious suspicion (Taylor, 2004) – there was a slower, more self-determined, and cooperative nature to work whereby one produced what they could (Oliver & Barnes, 2012; Russell, 2019). The concentration of land ownership meant that many laborers living on these estates were able to work and tend to the land in ways that suited their skillset. Feudal-era households held “a great degree of liberty in designing everyday tasks that would match the corporeal capacities of each family member” (Gleeson, 1999, as cited in Taylor, 2004, para. 16). As a result, while workers did not accumulate wealth, they were able to earn their sustenance (Taylor, 2004). This shifted dramatically in a factory-based system. The rise of industrial capitalism in the 18th and 19th century meant bodyminds were valued less for their ability to contribute to the overall production process and more for their ability to operate in machine-like ways and at machine-like speeds (Taylor, 2004). This virtually erased disabled workers’ labor power.

The transition from feudalism to capitalism changed the law of value (the evaluation of separation of reproductive labor from other economic relations, and other state mechanisms for controlling women’s bodies, adding complexity to Marx’s stance, which was in essence the separation of producer and mode of production.
one’s output), which today is often based on “average socially necessary labor times” (Taylor, 2004, para. 15). These labor times are predicated on the average outputs by non-disabled and allistic employees (ASAN, 2018). Capitalism’s rise created new categorical divisions between disabled and non-disabled workers: disabled workers had to ‘compete’ with one another, their non-disabled counterparts, and with machines (Oliver & Barnes, 2012). Many were left out as a result and institutions in-turn became a method of control. In Britain, for example, new categorical distinctions emerging at this time allowed for the incarceration and institutionalization for those deemed “aged and infirm,” “defectives,” and “mad” (Oliver & Barnes, 2012, p. 61), which saw the population in institutions rise significantly over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries. Working class families too, facing new pressures under capitalist modes of production, turned to institutions when they could no longer support disabled kin and when other institutions, like compulsory schools, would neither allow nor accommodate them. Institutions thus became an apparatus for the state in order to reinforce conformation to the capitalist order. As Russell (2019) notes:

The “medicalization” of disablement and the tools of classification clearly played an important role in establishing divisions between the “disabled” and the “able-bodied.” Disability became an important “boundary” category whereby people were allocated to either a work-based or a needs-based system of distribution…The disability category was essential to the development of an exploitable workforce in early capitalism and remains indispensable as an instrument of the state in controlling the labor supply today. By focusing on curing so-called abnormalities and segregating those who could not be cured into the administrative category of “disabled,” medicine cooperated in shoving less exploitable workers out of the mainstream workforce. (p. 17)
I cite Russell (2019) in full here as this passage illustrates the compounding events that led to the segregation of disabled people during early capitalism, the residual effects of which we continue to observe today. Social Darwinism and eugenics only offered further ‘scientific’ justification for this segregation. It brought forth categorical divisions, including horrific labels such as “mongol” to further underscore certain individuals who could be a “threat” to civilization (Oliver & Barnes, 2012). Positive eugenics leveraged policies to encourage “so called good stock to breed” while negative eugenics leveraged policies to prevent “the mentally and morally unfit from breeding” (Kerr & Shakespear, 2002, as cited in Oliver & Barnes, 2012, p. 92). This impacted which groups were deemed to be of high intelligence and thus had enterprise prowess necessary for successful business: Physical, sensory, mental, or communicative differences were all threatened by social Darwinists (Oliver & Barnes, 2012; St. Pierre, 2022). This was further compounded in 1903 when the pre-Nazi theory of racial hygiene entered the cultural lexicon and led to the targeted sterilization of 500,000 “genetic ‘defectives’” (Oliver & Barnes, 2012, p. 89) in Germany (though this figure is presumed to be grossly underestimated). Hundreds of thousands more were exterminated under Nazi Germany (Oliver & Barnes, 2012). A disabled person’s participation (or not) in Germany’s economic life in tandem with any support they sought from government funds became the cruel rationale for their targeting, and subsequent labeling as “social parasites” and “useless eaters” (Oliver & Barnes, 2012, p. 89) in German propaganda. Whether one could contribute to the market determined their level of fitness, and, in-turn, the value of their life.⁵ Viewing one’s degree of contribution as an individual trait, rather than embedded within capitalism’s design, upheld the ideology of Social Darwinism and

⁵ While it is not capitalism specifically driving this understanding of disability in the Nazi context, similar perspectives on eugenics working to determine who is valuable in the pursuit of world domination and in the creation of a ‘master’ race animate this notion of productive bodies and minds as imperative or inherent to one’s value.
subsequent concentrated levels of wealth. While Nazi Germany remains one of the most extreme eugenic practices, many eugenic-informed policies existed before and persisted in its wake in Britain, the United States, and Scandinavian countries such as Sweden, Denmark and Norway into late twentieth century (Oliver & Barnes, 2012; Clare, 2015/1999). Latent across these policies were ableist and racist fears of reproducing “unfit” populations who would be dependent on the welfare state.

What this brief overview highlights is that the dominant understanding of disability in capitalist societies “is constituted by the organic ideology of individualism, the arbitrary ideologies of medicalization, normality and eugenics” (Oliver & Barnes, 2012, p. 79). This works to uphold compulsory able-bodiedness and able-mindedness as the benchmark of the “capable and compliant” (Oliver & Barnes, 2012, p. 81) worker under capitalism. These logics persist today: Contemporary debates that position one’s access to social security as a personal failure or a drain on a given country’s economic order further ascribe one’s capacity to work as their human worth. The following section will examine the efficacy of current legislation in the United States aimed at remedying these historically inequitable and ableist labor conditions.

2.2 Helping or Hurting? Contemporary Legislation and its Impact on Labor Relations

2.2.1 The Americans with Disabilities Act and Labor Rights for Autistic People

In 1990, following decades of advocacy, activism, and protests by disability rights movements across the United States and further afar, President George H. W. Bush signed into law The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The ADA was regarded as monumental to some (McGreevy, 2020) and a “codification of simple justice” (Mayerson, 1992) to others. Still, the ADA aimed to create equal opportunity for disabled people in the areas of public accommodations, employment, transportation, state and local government services, and

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telecommunications (ADA National Network, n.d.). During the ADA’s initial conception, autism was barely mentioned by Congress during deliberations and appeared nowhere in the text of law (Garcia, 2021). Less than two decades later, President George H. W. Bush’s son and 43rd President of the United States, George W. Bush, signed into law the Combating Autism Act (2006), investing nearly one billion dollars to “treat” (read ‘cure’) autism (Garcia, 2021). As Garcia (2021) notes, changes in diagnostic criteria, advocacy, and policy mirror one another. And, for much of the 20th century and early 21st century, political advocacy was parent-centered and largely conducted without input from autistic people (Garcia, 2021; Broderick & Roscigno, 2022).

The ADA was amended in 2008 and expanded the definition of disability to include autism, thereby granting autistic people rights under the ADA (Brown 2020; Garcia, 2021). Needless to say, changes in policy did not universally afford autistic people political, economic, cultural, or social safeguards; let alone protections against physical harm. For example, it was not until 2020 that the Food and Drug Administration banned the use of electrical shocks on people with developmental disabilities – only to be, horrifically, overturned in 2021 following an appeal (Morris, 2021).

Title 1 of the ADA outlines employment rights for disabled workers and the rights a given employer must respect, including not being able to assign a disabled employee a worse job or less pay (Brown, 2020; Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs, 2009). It was informed by Section 503 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which preceded the ADA. Section 503 clarified legal standards and terms including ‘disability,’ ‘qualified,’ ‘essential functions,’ and ‘reasonable accommodations,’ among others, which were subsequently incorporated into the ADA (Brown, 2020). Title 1 suggests employers must provide reasonable accommodation,
which is regarded as an ‘interactive process’ whereby one speaks to their employer about their
disability and what would allow them to perform their job adequately. This in and of itself is a
complicated right to exercise as many disabled people are reluctant to disclose their disability for
fear of discriminatory or punitive consequences (Yergeau, 2018; Garcia, 2021; Broderick &
Roscigno, 2022). In consideration of autism, this ‘disclosure’ can be further complicated as
autistic communities often consider ‘diagnoses’ across three categories: official, unofficial, and
self (Yergeau, 2018). This is because seeking a diagnosis in the United States, especially as an
adult, is challenging. Costs range from $500-$5,000.00 and – despite being a requirement to
access some state services – not all insurance companies will cover adult assessment, as
diagnostic coverage often stops at the age of 18 or 21 (Yergeau, 2018). As such, autistic adults
seeking a diagnosis may go about identifying in other ways: for example, Broderick and
Roscigno (2022) describe how certain autistic people exist in “stealth mode” (p. 98) –
strategically evading the Autism Industrial Complex – by existing “off-grid” (p.98) beyond the
parameters of paperwork and intervention. Not to be mispositioned as “passing,” these autistic
individuals thrive and build community whilst liberated from such firm constructs. Structural
barriers, such as the need to acquire a ‘medically’ proven diagnosis, thus further complicates
accessing ADA rights as an autistic adult.

Caveats within the ADA also create challenges in realizing its emancipatory effects and
enforcing its policies. For example, if a requested accommodation is determined to cause “undue
hardship” on an operation’s bottom line relative to the organization’s size, structure, and
financial resources, then an employer does not need to provide it (Office of Disability
Employment Policy, n.d.). Added labor costs associated with accommodations or support needs
are (incorrectly) presumed to impact a company’s bottom line, and, as a result, the rate at which
workers can be exploited and their surplus labor value achieved. As outlined in their recent symposium on the work of Marta Russell, Adler-Bolton and Vierkant (2022) note “Disabled people are a nexus around which the capacity for surplus labor power can be built” (para. 4). By this, the authors are referring to the commodification of every aspect of disability: regardless of the degree to which a disabled person is employed, they are nonetheless at the center of political economic structures that extract profit from their care, support needs, and accommodations. Language such as “undue hardship” indicates a disabled person’s right to accommodation is less a legislative right and more dependent on an employer’s willingness to provide one (Russell, 2019). Subsequently, one’s employability is largely determined by the precarious decision-making power of a concentrated group of executives. Furthermore, Title 1 does not apply to businesses with less than 15 workers (Office of Disability Employment Policy, n.d.). This is unfortunate as it may prohibit disabled employees from integrating into small businesses or not-for-profits in their region, which may offer creatively fulfilling or meaningful employment opportunities. Autistic self-advocates note ADA policies are difficult to enforce short of starting a lawsuit, which requires disposable income as well as time and access that not all workers have (ASAN, n.d.; Adler-Bolton & Vierkant, 2022).

2.2.2 The Fair Labor Standards Act, Subminimum Wage, and Sheltered Workshops

Beyond caveats within the ADA itself, other competing legislation can make ADA protections irrelevant or secondary. One such example is the The Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) of 1938, signed into law by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. The FLSA established a federal minimum wage, overtime pay, and Section 14(c). Section 14(c) permits employers to pay disabled people a subminimum wage below minimum wage if their “productive capacity” is impaired (Wage and Hour Division, 2008). Employers must qualify for an exemption
certification, though they do not always take the time to do so until authorities intervene (U.S. Department of Labor, 2022). There are over 1,133 Section 14(c) certificate holders (issued and pending) in the United States as of July 2022 (Wage and Hour Division, 2022), accounting for nearly 40,000 employees, though others estimate this number surpasses 140,000 (ASAN, 2018). The FLSA was established during a period when understandings of autism were beyond inadequate and were largely informed by medical discourses and psychiatric interpretations of autism as “some ‘thing’” needing to be cured or eliminated (McGuire, 2016). Section 14(c) is highly contested among autistic self-advocates, and many are pushing to repeal (Garcia, 2021). Renewed calls to repeal Section 14(c) arose in 2016 by Democrat and Republican parties alike (Garcia, 2012); The National Council on Disability put forth recommendations for the elimination of 14(c) subminimum wages in 2012 and 2018; and The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights recommended the repeal of Section 14(c) in 2020 (The National Council on Disability, 2020). For the moment, subminimum wages persist. Section 14(c) says subminimum wages are to be commensurate, however, this proportional adjustment is based on criteria such as: “Determining the standard for workers who do not have disabilities, the objective gauge against which the productivity of the worker with a disability is measured” and “Evaluating the quantity and quality of the productivity of the worker with the disability” (Wage and Hour Division, 2008). That the non-disabled employee is considered the ‘objective gauge’ of productivity is a blatant example of how ableist discourse and discriminatory language infiltrates policy discourse and subsequently adversely effects material conditions for disabled people.

Subminimum wages also contribute to the separation of disabled and non-disabled employees. These working conditions are known as segregated or congregate employment (ASAN, 2018). Sheltered workshops are one such example. Sheltered workshops often involve
assigning disabled employees repetitive tasks for very little pay (some paying less than $1.00 USD/hour), away from their non-disabled communities or colleagues (Clare, 2015/1999; ASAN, 2018; Garcia, 2021). Self-advocates make clear there are significant financial consequences, social repercussions, and little skill building development involved in these settings (ASAN, 2018). This further contributes to the infantilization and fabrication of disabled people as dependent subjects (Clare, 2015/1999). Landmark cases have challenged segregated employment settings, notably Olmstead v. L.C. in 1999 (see U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division, n.d.) and more recently Lane v. Brown/United States v. Oregon in 2022 (see The United States Department of Justice, 2022). In response to backlash over the years, The U.S. Department of Labor established “Employment First,” a national integrated employment framework based on the idea that all people should be able to find work for real pay (Office of Disability Employment Policy, n.d.). However, its framework reads more as suggestive than it does legally enforceable. Some U.S. states have established their own Employment First laws, while others have no policy at all or promote Employment First frameworks as preferred but without any enforceable legislation to mandate supported and integrated work (disabled and non-disabled employees working together for competitive wages) (Association of People Supporting Employment First, 2020). This is yet another example of promising, but not fully realized, state intervention.

Sheltered workshops persist, in-part, because they are not universally rejected. Some disabled people embrace these programs insofar as they offer employment opportunities where work may otherwise not be present; and for some, the repetitive tasks are pleasant (ASAN, 2018; Garcia, 2021). Without discounting these experiences, self-advocacy groups like the Autistic Self Advocacy Network (2018) are critical of these programs as they are based on ableist principles that value certain bodyminds over others. For example, sheltered workshops often determine pay
scales based on rates of productivity (called productivity tests), which discern how much work a
disabled employee can complete per hour. It compares this rate of completion against non-
disabled employees completing similar tasks (ASAN, 2018). This is a glaring example of the
non-disabled/allistic worker being privileged in a capitalist system. In all jobs, rates of task
completion among employees differ regardless of disability or impairment. It also perpetuates
what Broderick and Roscigno (2022) call the ‘normative cultural logic of intervention,’
fundamental to the Autism Industrial Complex: positioning a particular labor standard as what
all people should strive for creates a circular loop whereby “[t]he net amount of therapy needed
to bridge the gap to wage laborer/consumer becomes a means of consumption, thus integrating
the lumpen class of disposed and dispossessed autistic citizens into the realm of consumption as
consumers of intervention” (p. 92). As Political Correspondent and Autistic Self-Advocate Eric
Garcia (2021) notes, subminimum wages suggest that autistic labor is inferior and creates an
“illusion of fairness” that will “never substitute the real thing” (p. 73). Work programs reinforce
that a particular group is ‘different’ which can lead to greater alienation despite inclusivity
intended by the program (Oliver & Barnes, 2012). Furthermore, government sponsored programs
– including many sheltered workshops that receive significant amounts of funding from
Medicaid (ASAN, 2018) – are often the first to be cut when states encounter financial hardship
(Oliver & Barnes, 2012). As a result, these programs are not easy to depend on.

While government subsidies that incentivize employers to hire disabled workers may
help offset incurred (perceived) labor costs and thus make hiring disabled persons a more
‘approachable’ option, they also create a ‘guilt free’ safeguard to ableist employers who can shift
their responsibility to support disabled/autistic workers back onto the government, and in-turn
avoid hiring or retaining the employees, which further perpetuates a cycle of poverty (Russell,
Sheltered workshops are often framed as ‘stepping stones’ into integrated employment. Research suggests, however, that only 5% of workers in sheltered workshops successfully transition into (or are given the opportunity to participate in) integrated employment (Disability Employment TA Center, 2021). Another study examining employment outcomes of sheltered workshops found that those who never worked in segregated settings actually earned higher wages and worked more hours over the course of their employment (Cimera, 2011 as cited in ASAN, 2018). Nationally, 84% of employers who qualify for a Section 14(c) special wage certificate (as noted above) operate sheltered workshops and sheltered workshops employ 95% of all Section 14(c) recipients (Disability Employment TA Center, 2021). Moreover, sheltered workshops receive 46% of their funding from state and local governments (Disability Employment TA Center, 2021). This research concludes that “the exemption from equal pay which is authorized, the isolation and congregation which is endorsed, and the separation from the mainstream of economic activity which results in sheltered workshops are the direct and intentional effect of governmental action” (Disability Employment TA Center, 2021, p. 6). This underscores that despite various legislation established to afford disabled/autistic people equal opportunity and protection from discrimination, it is neither adequately enforced nor is it always powerful enough to combat other ableist and contradictory legislation.

2.2.3 Social Security in The United States

Much like the illusory nature of disability rights legislation, social security also creates barriers to access. Medical institutions and social security institutions have long held disability as an individual defect and attributed these personal problems as reason for economic exclusion, despite human difference existing for all of humankind (Russell, 2019). Two of America’s most significant programs, Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Social Security Disability
Insurance (SSDI), create a “dichotomy between earned and unearned disability benefits” (Garcia, 2021, p. 66), which translates to perceptions of ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving.’ There is a perception that recipients of SSDI have *earned* their income because they pay into social security (Garcia, 2021). However, as Russell (2019) highlights, many Americans, including the wealthiest social strata, rely on government support: think CEOs and major companies in the United States, that receive substantial tax breaks on offshore profits (Drucker & Tankersley, 2019/2021). Closer to home, consider homeowners in Canada who receive government incentives as first-time home buyers (CMHC, n.d.) or access to federal grants to make their homes greener (Government of Canada, n.d.).

SSI is paid for by general funds like personal income tax or corporate taxes; and is generally reserved for those with limited income or who cannot work in paid labor. SSDI is accumulated from workers’ contributions to a social security trust fund and is based on one’s earnings (Garcia 2021). As Russell (2019) makes clear, current labor market realities mean these programs are becoming increasingly relied upon. Workers are forced into different jobs over their careers, endure long periods of unemployment, or cannot maintain the profile of an ideal worker long enough for a “lifetime of continuous work (and thus enough gains) to build ‘savings’” (Russell, 2019, p. 64). The most recent Annual Statistical Report on the Social Security Disability Insurance Program at the time of this writing suggests paid disability benefits were distributed to over 9.5 million people, of whom 89% were disabled workers (Social Security Administration, 2021). According to the included diagnostic groups, autistic people receiving support for their disabilities accounted for 1.1%. of all beneficiaries and 0.4% among disabled worker beneficiaries (Social Security Administration, 2021). The most recent Annual Report of the Supplemental Security Income Program at the time of this writing reported 7.7
million individuals received Federal SSI payments as of December 2021 (Social Security Administration, 2022b). Neither fund is easily accessible – with some applicants waiting up to 2 years for final determination or needing to hire lawyers to manage an appeal process (Russell, 2019) – and can often leave applicants/ recipients in positions of extreme poverty. For example, if one does not qualify as ‘disabled enough’ they can be denied disability based social security; however, if that same person’s disability makes it difficult to find work, they are stuck in what Garcia (2021) calls “income purgatory” (p. 67). Such was the case for autistic political writer Andrew Savicki, who was denied SSI benefits because it was “physically possible” for him to work full-time; however, because he does not hold a college degree and is unable to drive, obtaining work for good pay is challenging (Garcia, 2021).

Furthermore, some disabled people get Medicaid insurance through SSI, which means they cannot make too much money or it will disqualify them (and thus terminate their current access to Medicaid) (ASAN, 2018). This is where sheltered workshops and subminimum wages come in: They create low-paying work opportunities that enable some SSI recipients to continue earning their assistance. In 1980, congress passed the Social Security Disability Amendments Act. This included Section 1619(b), which offered protections to recipients of SSI to be able to access Medicaid even if their income rose above a given year’s earnings cap (Social Security Administration, n.d.). For perspective, in 2022, the annual SSI amount for an individual is $10,092.40 (Social Security Administration, 2022a) of which monthly payments are adjusted based on countable income. While Section 1619(b) offers some welcomed protections, each U.S. state can establish earnings thresholds, and passing these thresholds means individuals are deemed to have earnings high enough to replace SSI and Medicaid benefits. In 2022, these state-established thresholds are as low as $33,353.00 (Social Security Administration, n.d.).
Considering precarious work and poverty are the material realities for many disabled and autistic Americans, and aligned with the present research’s interest in Feminist Disability Media Studies, it merits investigating whether mediated depictions of these lived experiences are being captured in popular culture.

2.3 Investigating Autistic Labor On-screen

Cultural discrimination targeting disabled people dates back to at least ancient Greece and Rome, whereby an obsession with bodily perfection meant physical and intellectual ‘fitness’ was a prerequisite for social inclusion (Oliver & Barnes, 2012). The rise of industrial capitalism saw the permeation of an ideology centered around individualism, which largely supported the creation of disability as an individual problem both medically and socially (Oliver & Barnes, 2012). This in-turn impacted how disability and disability narratives were depicted across popular culture. As noted previously, disabled and neurodivergent people who were not productive laborers within a capitalist system were also relegated outside of public spaces through institutionalization, further making them invisible from the public domain (Fritsch, 2010; Oliver & Barnes, 2012; Russell, 2019; Garcia, 2021). This period coincided with the rise of behaviorism, commodifying autism as an ontological category and crafting dominant cultural narratives positioning autism as an ‘epidemic’ in ‘urgent’ need of intervention (Broderick & Roscigno, 2022). Television was – and continues to be – a key platform to disseminate this global media campaign (Broderick & Roscigno, 2022).

In 2022, disability representation on television is still limited (GLAAD, 2022), as are informed depictions of autistic people specifically. Research in the field of disability media studies examining disability on television is comprehensive. Given the present research’s primary focus on autistic experiences, I will limit my discussion of relevant studies to those
focused on televised depictions of autistic people. I further delimit the scope of my discussion to those focused on popular/fictional television depictions of autistic people, as opposed to, say, news media. This is because the objective of my line of inquiry is to better understand how autistic experiences become fictionalized, in terms of how they are historically-informed as well as how these discourses work to naturalize – or object to – a capitalist agenda.

Existing research exploring depictions of autism on-screen tends to focus on whether the series or character(s) serve a pedagogical function (Eilers, 2020); influences attitudes about autism (Stern & Barnes, 2019); aligns with the personal tragedy or medical models of disability (Holton, 2013; Moore, 2019); offers intersectional character representations (Dean & Nordahl-Hansen, 2021; Aspler, Harding & Cascio, 2022); or frames autism positively or negatively (Nordahl-Hansen, Øien, & Fletcher-Watson, 2018; Gaeke-Franz, 2022). Unanimous across the research is that autistic representation in media is inadequate and that autistic characters fall primarily into one of two categories: the burden or the savant. The storylines that result from these character traits focus primarily on struggling with interpersonal dynamics, including dating, friendships, and family relationships. In some cases, television series that are granted a second season make efforts to remedy problematic depictions following audience feedback. This was the case for the Netflix series *Atypical*. Multiple criticisms accompanied its first season, including storylines that framed autism as a burden; its failure to address disparities faced by groups beyond those who identify as white, middle-class; and the casting of an allistic actor in the role of an autistic character, among others (Brady & Cardin, 2021). Subsequently, in the show’s second and third seasons, efforts were made to address some of the issues raised by autistic advocates (Brady & Cardin, 2021). Other multi-season series are less amenable. Gaeke-Franz (2022) examined positive and negative portrayals of autism on two popular television
sitcoms, CBS’s *The Big Bang Theory* and NBC’s *Community*. Regarding the latter, Gaeke-Franz (2022) concluded that early intentions to make the character Abed Nadir autistic meant *Community* offered a dynamic portrayal of autism on television. Meanwhile, autistic-coded character Sheldon Cooper of *The Big Bang Theory* is never confirmed as autistic. Instead, Sheldon is depicted as difficult and is often mocked. In at least one instance, he is instructed on how to mask his characteristics, which ends up having adverse impacts on his well-being (Gaeke-Franz, 2022). Despite comments from audiences expressing a desire for Cooper’s autism to be more explicit, cast and crew have repeatedly refused the link between autism and Sheldon’s character, addressing the situation instead with a recurring piece of dialogue in the series: “I’m not crazy, my mother had me tested” (Gaeke-Franz, 2022). This incorrectly suggests that someone is only autistic following a medical diagnosis (Yergeau, 2018; Broderick & Roscigno, 2022) – not to mention its use of a pejorative dodges any sort of meaningful engagement on the topic.\(^6\)

To my knowledge, limited research focuses specifically on the occupations or paid labor of autistic characters, how discourses of autistic labor on-screen reinforce or resist capitalist assumptions, and what potential consequences (whether direct or indirect) these depictions may have on employment. This may be due to limited media portrayals of autistic adults seeking

\(^6\) It serves to mention that audiences negotiate depictions uniquely; and no critique of a particular character or storyline is a monolithic representation of the perception of all audiences with lived experiences. As Muñoz (1999) makes salient, audiences may exercise “disidentification,” that is, the transforming of a work by audiences who do not identify with the hegemonic mainstream to serve their own subcultural purposes. Disidentification can lead to the reimagining of representation that generates new significance to the minority subject(s): “The phobic object…is reconfigured…and not as the pathetic and abject spectacle that it appears to be in the dominant eyes of heteronormative culture” (Muñoz, 1999, p. 2). On-screen depictions of autism are often coded by an able gaze for an able gaze; however, they are part of our cultural repertoire. For autistic audiences with a limited representative catalog to choose from, actively making and remaking meaning is a tactical effort and reading oneself within the existing cultural repertoire can be a meaningful subversion.
Fictional autistic characters on television are often children, who are not expected to work, or adults who are in established careers. These characters are overwhelmingly white, middle class, educated, and communicate smoothly (Alper, 2017; Aspler, Harding, & Cascio, 2022). Research conducted by Dean and Nordahl-Hansen (2021) examined 26 empirical studies addressing autistic characters in film or television, exploring demographic attributes associated with these characters. Across the 87 autistic characters mentioned in the 26 studies sampled, 56.1% were children and adolescents; young adults accounted for 35.2% of the sample; 8.7% of characters were deemed middle-aged; and no senior adult characters were identified (Dean & Nordahl-Hansen, 2021). Also of note, 73.3% of characters were described as having average or above average intelligence – the latter of which works to reinforce the savant stereotype; 22.1% as experiencing cognitive impairment, and 2.6% did not address cognitive level (Dean & Nordahl-Hansen, 2021). Socioeconomic status and occupation type were not tracked. A further limitation of Dean and Nordahl-Hansen’s (2021) report for my purposes is that film and television productions were lumped together, making it difficult to distinguish television specifically.

Research by Stevenson, Harp, and Gernsbache (2011) examined the role various media play in infantilizing autistic people, including websites of charitable organizations, popular media (television and film), and news media. Specific to popular media, 83 films and television series were identified with at least one autistic character, 68% of whom were children (Stevenson et al., 2011). The authors identified several consequences associated with a lack of representation of autistic adults, foremost among them were those associated with employment. Stevenson et al. (2011) note that employers, much like society at large, are “inundated with rhetoric asserting that autistic children must either be cured or suffer a lifetime as unemployable burdens” (para. 32).
As such, employers lack resources and knowledge necessary to support an autistic employee. Rarely, Stevenson et al. (2011) suggest, is a capable autistic adult with appropriate workplace supports presented in media. Discourses that infantilize autistic people fail to promote the economic well-being of autistic adults, thereby invisibilizing human variance in the workplace. Recently, Akhtar, Dinishak, and Frymiare (2022) offered an update to Stevenson et al.’s (2011) study by replicating their methods to examine whether depictions had shifted a decade on. Overall, Akhtar et al.’s (2022) research found that representations of autistic adults in US media had seen some progress. Specific to film and television, Akhtar et al. (2022) examined 124 films and television series released from 2010-2019 that featured an autistic character, of whom 58% were children. This notes a slight increase in representations of autistic adults since Stevenson et al.’s (2011) study. The authors suggest an increase in autistic self-advocacy, an increase in autistic journalists, and the hiring of autistic consultants on film and television productions may possibly explain the increase. Both Stevenson et al. (2011) and Akhtar et al. (2022) examine representations of autistic children and adults on-screen, and briefly gesture to its outcomes and consequences. While this offers insight into the state of representation, neither study delves into specific storylines among productions that do feature autistic adult characters.

2.3.1 Television: Postwar Antiseptic Space or Potential Kinship Building Site?

Representation in media is not the end goal of disability justice. However, it can be a vehicle through which to interpret complacent and oppressive structures in Hollywood. There is power in visibility just as there is violence in invisibility. As noted by Douglas Kellner, “media serves a pedagogical function insofar as it informs consumers, for better or for worse, about our social reality and how individuals fit into it” (as cited in Cleary, 2018, p. 63). Television is a central pedagogical node in our greater media landscape (Spigel, 2001). As communication
scholar Lynn Spigel (2001) notes, following World War II, the medium of television served as one marker of “a general return to family values” (Spigel, 2001, p. 186). In the wake of mass suburbanization in the United States during this period, television occupied a “discursive space through which the family could mediate the contradictory impulses for a private haven on the one hand, and community participation on the other” (p. 186). Occupying a sort of spatial ambiguity in the postwar era as both a physical fixture within the private sphere while simultaneously projecting images from public worlds, television performed a sanitizing role akin to its electrical communication predecessors, the telegraph and the telephone (Spigel, 2001). As Spigel (2001) writes, “Numerous commentators extolled the virtues of television’s antiseptic spaces, showing how the medium would allow people to travel from their homes while remaining untouched by the actual social contexts to which they imaginatively ventured” (p. 191). It allowed folks comfortable in suburban settings to gawk, stare, judge, and bear witness to social contexts beyond their home whilst themselves remaining untouched. Today, television continues to facilitate a sense of togetherness whilst keeping communities at a “fictional distance” (Spigel, 2001, p. 205), and I would argue to a greater degree as access to television is ubiquitous: multi-television set households are not uncommon; and television series can be streamed anytime and everywhere.

Though television can shield discriminatory viewers from the outside world, television can also bolster mediated kinships. Ginsburg and Rapp (2016) describe “mediated kinship” as the role media can play in establishing an affinity between able-bodied people and disabled people as well as one another. Mediated kinships are significant because circulating the narratives of disabled people across the zeitgeist inclusively alters the cultural body politic. It also increases “visibility and temporality” (p. 107) by including human difference across cultural
spaces, which bolsters acceptance in a lasting way and supports connection building. Television is one of these cultural spaces. Ellcessor (2017) optimistically highlights how “the incorporation of disability into…popular media…directs our attention to media technologies, access, and complex relations between media producers and audiences” (p. 32). Though there has been an increase in disability representation on-screen – important for the formation of identity among disabled audiences and exposing able-bodied audiences to embodied experiences beyond their own – Ellcessor (2017) suggests accessibility, “the means by which people with disabilities can use media” (p. 34), and access to leadership roles in production are what will be key to greater equity. It is one thing for showrunners and producers to search for “experts” to advise on a show, as is increasingly common (Hilton, 2020), but until meaningful opportunity among crews and creatives is established as the new status quo, inaccurate portrayals of equity-seeking groups will persist.

2.3.2 Background on Amazon Studios & As We See It (2022)

Amazon – the parent company behind Amazon Studios, production company of As We See It – promotes its efforts to augment both accessibility and access to production across its various entities. For example, Amazon integrates access into much of their public facing corporate materials: they feature disabled employees, many of whom hold leadership positions, in several advertising campaigns (Amazon, 2021a; Amazon, 2021b; Amazon Ads, 2021; Amazon Alexa India, 2021); and hold an annual internal workshop and event series aimed at accessibility education throughout the company (Amazon Staff, 2021). Further, Amazon Studios recently released an “Inclusion Playbook,” outlining commitments the production company is making toward equity and inclusion, in which disability is listed (Amazon Studios, 2021). Across these efforts, however, Amazon continues to position disability as other or as exceptional rather
than adopt a social, political, or relational understanding of disability (Swain & French, 2010; Cleary, 2018). For example, among the objectives listed in the “Inclusion Playbook,” is: “Aiming to include one character from each of the following categories in speaking roles, with minimum 50% of these to be women: LGBTQIA+, person with a disability, and three regionally underrepresented race/ethnic/cultural groups. A single character can fulfill one or more of these identities” (Amazon Studios, 2021). As it reads, this would suggest that a background character (such as a barista at a coffee shop taking a main character’s order) who is multiply marginalized could fulfill this suggested requirement. Amazon Studio’s Inclusion Policy also sets targets for hiring behind-the-scenes: “30% women/non-binary people and 30% people from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups to be credited across directors, writers, producers, and creators for a season of content. These goals apply to the writers’ room and non-writing producing staff” (Amazon Studios, n.d.a). Hiring disabled creative practitioners is not mentioned. Their Inclusion Policy also states that all auditions and sets should be accessible per federal, state and local requirements (Amazon Studios, n.d.b). However, as explored in the previous section, government policies are often fraught with contradictions or fall short of meeting the access needs of many. Positioning basic compliance to federal, state, and local requirements as ‘inclusive’ is misguided. While Amazon’s Inclusion Playbook and associated policies may initially read as progressive, their targets are ambiguous and include no enforcement measures to ensure follow-through.

The advent of streaming has changed television in some ways, such as starting to diversify the kinds of stories that get told, whilst continuing to reproduce familiar storylines and discursive elements in other ways (Brady & Cardin, 2021). Despite not being hosted on a traditional broadcast television network, As We See It follows an episodic series format, is
available for viewing on television screens via Smart TVs (as well as other devices), and was created by successful television writer and producer Jason Katims – who has made a career of creating and producing dramas for broadcast television, including *Parenthood* (2010-2015) and *Friday Night Lights* (2006-2011).

Based on the Israeli comedy-drama *On the Spectrum* (2018), which similarly follows the lives of three autistic roommates navigating their twenties, *As We See It* was adapted by Katims, who is the father to an autistic child. Katims (2022) has said he knew from the beginning he wanted to cast the series “authentically” and had prepared for “a very long” search, which might “not result in viable choices.” To his surprise, his casting director sent him multiple auditions within weeks. Katims has recounted on more than one occasion his reaction to tape of actress Sue Ann Pien reading for – and who would ultimately be cast as – Violet (one of the three lead characters), which he says made him cry within seconds (Ito, 2022; Katims, 2022). Though Katims’ emotional reactions toward his autistic cast at times reads as exceptionalizing (Young, 2014), his position is a welcome departure from other producers who discriminate against hiring autistic actors. For example, in early 2021 pop-musician-turned-filmmaker, Sia, released her feature-length directorial debut, *Music* (2021), which made headlines for inappropriately depicting the restraint of an autistic child (Luterman, 2021). Sia was also criticized for hiring an allistic actor to portray an autistic character after she allegedly worked with one autistic actor who found the work “unpleasant and stressful” (Spenser, 2021; Mintz, 2021). Conversely, in addition to casting three autistic actors as its three main characters, *As We See It* was reported to have included neurodiverse supporting actors, set assistants, and writers’ room assistants (Ito, 2022); however, details about the nature of their work are vague, and the inclusion of autistic creative practitioners in executive or leadership roles goes unmentioned. Miracle Project, a
theater and film program for autistic children, was brought onboard to “ensure that the set was a nurturing, non-triggering one” (Ito, 2022), which cast members appreciated and said was unique relative to their previous experiences in the industry (Glassman, 2022; Ito, 2022). Intentionally casting autistic actors in the roles of autistic characters as well as an inclusive set culture philosophy bode well for the series. In the following research, whether the series adds complexity to discussions of autism, and in particular discussions around work and disability/autism, will be investigated as will the discursive practices surrounding the series and whether these reproduce or challenge a normative capitalist order.
Chapter 3: Methodology

This research lies within the critical paradigm and embraces multiple ways of knowing and interpreting the world. Given the value-laden and subjective position of this epistemological orientation (Merrigan, Huston, & Johnston, 2013), I do not presume objectivity, nor do I suggest statistical significance or generalizability in my findings. Rather, the purpose of this research is to expose historically informed structures that perpetuate oppressive systems of meaning, thereby reinforcing a social order, with the hopes of instigating social change. The following research questions were explored:

1. In what ways does a consideration of autistic labor deepen our understanding of capitalist values surrounding productivity, potential, and worth; independence and interdependence?

2. In what ways does the pilot of As We See It address questions of autistic labor? Does it move beyond stereotypical constructs of autistic people? Does it challenge, reproduce, or resist ableist understandings of labor in consideration of autism and disability?

3. Who are some of the key audiences for As We See It, and how is their reception of the show's storylines and narrative arcs reflected online in review articles and on social media? Do discursive practices involving/surrounding the series reproduce or challenge a normative social order?

In order to address RQ1, RQ2, and RQ3, I employ three theoretical frameworks – materialist feminism, Critical Autism Studies, and feminist disability media studies (see Chapter 1: Literature Review) – which ground this work in their common interest in how systems of meaning are established and reinforce power relations. In line with my theoretical framework and epistemological orientation, this thesis will employ Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as its
primary method. As discussed further below, discourse analysis is associated with the critical paradigm (Merrigan et al., 2013) and is a method employed by Critical Disability Studies scholars (Mitchell & Snyder, 2000; Grue, 2014; Hall, 2019; Cardin, 2020) and Critical Autism Studies scholars (McGuire, 2016; O’Dell, 2016; Woods et. al, 2018; Broderick, 2022). In the critical autism and disability studies paradigms, discourse analysis is a methodology which works to reveal the historical origins of social, political, and economic systems and challenges ableist values. In so doing, applications of discourse analysis within these fields take language and discourses seriously as they do denaturalizing material conditions. Reconciling this method with a materialist analytic, however, has its challenges and will be addressed further below. As will be discussed, this methodology in drawing on the aforementioned theoretical areas complimented one another and each filled in to address areas in which others were lacking. This combination was best suited for the analysis of my sample, which included the pilot episode of *As We See It*; online review articles published on mainstream and subcultural publications; and reviews expressed via blog posts, Twitter comments, and other audiovisual media as outlined in section 3.2 Method.

**3.1 Critical Discourse Analysis**

Emerging in the late 1980s and establishing itself more concretely in the decade to follow, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) – commonly associated with Norman Fairclough – is attentive to linguistic and intertextual properties (Titscher, Meyer, Wodak, & Vetter, 2000). Its roots are in critical social theory that extend from Marx to the Frankfurt School (see Foucault, 1976, 1977; Titscher et al., 2000; Alrasheed, 2017). CDA differs from traditional linguistic analysis in its attunement to power relations, viewing discourse as a social phenomenon reproduced in patterns across cultural sites, rather than a discrete statement. Importantly,
Fairclough bases CDA on the understanding that discourse is “both socially constitutive and socially determined” (Titscher et al., 2000, p. 148). These are key assumptions for my purposes here. Working to blend my theoretical, epistemological, and methodological orientations requires proceeding under the logic that discourses are valuable and are co-constitutive of material structures/relations, not solely deterministic. Discourses can work to construct institutions much like institutions influence how we come to (re)articulate certain phenomena. According to Fairclough, discourse analysis alone is not sufficient for examining societal structures: Social, cultural, and critical theories must be called upon to fully examine the wider context of a given discursive practice (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Thus, discourses are both socially constituted and structurally constructed, maintained, and reproduced.

In contrast to other discourse theorists more squarely situated in poststructuralism, Fairclough’s CDA does not depart entirely from Marxism (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Fairclough defines the purpose of his work on CDA as follows: “to develop ways of analyzing language which address its involvement in the workings of contemporary capitalist societies. The focus on capitalist societies is not only because capitalism is the dominant economic system internationally…but also because the character of the economic system affects all aspects of social life” (Fairclough, 2013, p. 1 as cited in Alrasheed, 2017, p. 108). In line with Fairclough’s line of thinking, there is a role for discourse analysis in studies that center economic conditions. Acknowledging that some within the academy suggest political-economic analysis benefits more from broader socio-cultural analysis, Alrasheed (2017) notes, in drawing from Fairclough, that “all historical, political, or economic processes have to be semiotically mediated in order to be normalized. Meanings are important, but so too are style, grammar, semantics, coherence, and patterns” (p. 115).
The following brief example illustrates these logics in relation to my research topic.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed into law The Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) of 1938, which established a federal minimum wage and overtime pay as well as Section 14(c), permitting employers to pay disabled people a subminimum wage below minimum wage if their “productive capacity” is impaired (Wage and Hour Division, 2008). As noted previously, Section 14(c) is highly contested among autistic self-advocates and many push to repeal (Garcia, 2021). The FLSA was established during a period of time where understandings of autism were beyond inadequate and were largely informed by medical discourses and psychiatric interpretations of autism, as “some ‘thing’” needing to be cured or eliminated (McGuire, 2016). As Garcia (2021) notes, this was the same year Leo Kanner began his landmark study on autism, which produced violent discursive tropes that would last for decades to come. Examples include “refrigerator mothers”; autistic people as having “innate inabilities”; the (mis)understanding of autism as primarily impacting white, middle-class families; and the pathologizing of movements and behaviors (many of which are still considered ‘classic’ symptoms of autism today and are considered by many autistic advocates to be healthy expressions of excitement and joy like ‘stimming’) (McGuire, 2016). Kanner’s work was influenced by “historically specific cultural attitudes,” which were “absolutely central to the birth of child psychiatry” (McGuire, 2016, p. 34). During the period in which both Roosevelt signed the FLSA and Kanner conducted his

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7 Kanner’s research also influenced one of the most cited (so-called) ‘symptoms of autism’: lack of empathy. Theory of Mind is a (problematic) concept in cognitive psychology that claims an indicator of ‘normal’ human cognition is the ability to quickly recognize and attribute the mental states and intentions of others (McGuire, 2016). Psychologist Simon Baron-Cohen (1995) suggests autistic people demonstrate the inverse of this, what he terms “mindblindness” (as noted in McGuire, 2016) and associates this with a lack of empathy (as noted in Brady & Cardin, 2021). Milton (2012) reframes this by identifying the locus for discrepancy as that which lies between two social actors (“the double empathy problem”): empathy is a practice of reciprocity and does not rest solely on the autistic social actor in a given interaction. This can be extended to employment situations too, where autistic people must largely mask and contort themselves to fit within neurotypical molds of the ideal worker.
work, eugenics were seeing a surge in popularity and promoted discourses outlining a ‘good’
human race through logics of fit/unfit, normal/abnormal, compliant/deviant (McGuire, 2016;
Russell, 2019), which impacted and were heavily impacted by structures throughout society,
including – but not limited to – political, economic, and religious institutions. For example, it is
important to acknowledge eugenics were heavily influenced by a history of slavery (Jarman,
2012). Slavery, much like eugenic practices, and much like ableism, conflate social problems
with biological ones and is fueled by underlying economic interests. As noted by Sins Invalid co-
founder Patty Berne (2017):

The histories of white supremacy and ableism are inextricably entwined, both forged in
the crucible of colonial conquest and capitalist domination. One cannot look at the history
of US slavery, the stealing of indigenous lands, and US imperialism without seeing the
way that white supremacy leverages ableism to create a subjugated ‘other’ that is deemed
less worthy/abled/smart/capable...Each system benefits from extracting profits and status
from the subjugated ‘other.’ 500+ years of violence against black and brown
communities includes 500+ years of bodies and minds deemed ‘dangerous’ by being non-
normative" (as cited in Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018, p. 14)

While I am not suggesting causality between these various events (slavery, eugenics, the FLSA,
and Kanner’s research), nor am I purporting that this is a comprehensive overview of this span of
time, what this example highlights is the difficulty in distinguishing the impact of discourse from
social, political, economic, and historical contexts. Rather, bringing these systems into dialogue
with one another demonstrates their co-constituting effects and how they work through and with
one another to reinforce dominant positions, the outcome of which can produce violent material
consequences.
Fairclough’s attention to both language and larger systems as dialectical is informed by Marxism, locating power in economic processes. Alrasheed (2017) notes that, unlike Foucault, material and socio-economic relations are of primary importance to Fairclough. This is precisely why a CDA approach will be a fitting bridge between my theoretical and methodological orientations. It should be stated, that given this thesis’ grounding in Critical Autism Studies and materialist feminism, I echo the work of other scholars applying CDA (Alrasheed, 2017; Antoine, 2020) who reject the way Fairclough’s writing can at times veer into partially deterministic accounts of social practices. Nonetheless, his prioritization of capitalist structures aligns well with the research questions and aims of the present thesis, as does his view that semiotic/non-semiotic, linguistic/non-linguistic parts of societies inform one another albeit to varying degrees of significance depending on the circumstances. Lastly, CDA has an objective to be emancipatory in its work, which further aligns with the objectives of my theoretical framework (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002).

While my materialist feminist position aims to account for and disrupt inequitable material conditions, it also understands that language/discourse can have an important relationship with our real material conditions – though it is by no means solely deterministic when also considering political, economic, and ideological systems. Though discursivity and materiality are typically seen as distinct (Beetz & Schwab, 2017a), a growing area of scholarship is interested in establishing a materialist discourse analysis (Naples, 2012; see contributions in Schwab et al., 2017; and Beetz, Herzog, & Maesse, 2018). Likewise, there is a growing call from scholars working in the field of Critical Autism Studies to more explicitly engage with historical materialism (Mann, 2019; Broderick & Roscigno, 2022). For example, in their recent work, Broderick and Roscigno (2022) offer a disruption to autism discourse by weaving together a
critical analysis of language, rhetorical devices, ideology, and power dynamics, in tandem with social policy, medicine, education, business and economics. In doing so, the authors seek to establish how “the cultural politics of autism and the economy of autism co-constitute one another” (Broderick & Roscigno, 2022, p. 85). The common objective across this various scholarship is to examine how discourses as practices reveal material inequities; themselves have material consequences; and are produced under a set of historically specific material conditions, extending the view of discourse beyond merely symbolic or reflective. Given its theoretical model and methodological tools (as outlined above and continued below), CDA thus offers an apt approach to this investigation and discussion. Combining this analytical tool with perspectives drawn from my theoretical framework, my goal is to critically engage with and address gaps that no one approach entirely accounts for.

To further substantiate this methodology for my particular research topic, I want to reflect briefly on how impairment and disability are inextricably linked to historical conditions, power relations, discursive practices, and material structures. Under capitalism, able-bodiedness and neurotypicality are privileged, a byproduct of what Fritsch (2015) refers to as ‘the neoliberal hegemonic social imagination.’ Fritsch (2015) suggests ability over disability is compelled through a process of signs, discourses, material relations, and feelings; and is mobilized through institutional practices and discourses that work to manage the neoliberal subject. Among others, Fritsch (2015) builds off Shelley Tremain (2002), who suggested “the materiality of the impaired body cannot be dissociated from the practices that bring it into being” (p. 50). Fritsch (2015) suggests disability is an intracorporeal practice, and as such it emerges “based on particular materialities that are informed by ever-shifting framings of what it is to have a body and what that body can do” (p. 55). Fritsch (2015) offers two examples of the materialization of the
disabled body as marked by neoliberalism relevant to the present thesis: the disabled body as ‘not worth living’ and the deeming of disabled bodies as worthy through production and consumption. These instances have material consequences. Fritsch (2015) explores how “challenging the undesirability of disability is a shared responsibility” (p. 44). This goes beyond access and inclusion; and instead must account for a reimagining of disability as part of a life worth living (Fritsch, 2015). To do so requires an understanding of neoliberal and capitalist imperatives that consider certain bodyminds desirable as well as an understanding of the ways debility and capacity are ascribed through policies and practices. Similarly, McGuire (2016) asserts that “autism’s origins are embedded within a contemporary neoliberal historical moment that is significantly defined by a regime of global capitalism” (p. 53). As such, McGuire (2016) suggests it is important to address power structures involved in governing contemporary autism discourse, and that “attending to the re/production of autism as a cultural crisis allows for new ways of critically engaging with the risks and possibilities of relation to and across difference” (p. 9). McGuire (2016) proceeds with the assumption that, “discourse is and always must be material” (p. 72). And while exposing and reflecting upon such imperatives by analyzing discourses in popular culture and across sites of reception is not enough, perhaps in its efforts to address the reproduction of material inequities and amplify a multiplicity of voices that counter dominant logics, this thesis can contribute, in a small way, to opening space for “desiring disability differently” (Fritsch, 2015).

3.2 Method

Unlike Foucault who does not provide a clear blueprint for discourse analysis, Fairclough offers steps and processes. As outlined in Titscher et al. (2000), Fairclough’s CDA involves form and meaning, and follows three dimensions of analysis. It first examines patterns in vocabulary
and other concrete textual features, such as grammar, semantics, and organization (the textual level). This is followed by an intertextual and interdiscursive analysis that links how texts draw upon orders of discourse, conventions, genre, and narrative. It draws attention to the way texts are dependent on socio-historical repertoires (the discursive practice level). Lastly, questions of power are centered and an analysis that accounts for a given institutional and social context is considered. Here, socio-historical power relations and larger ideological structures are brought into analysis (the social practice level). This third level is where Fairclough’s analysis is further informed by the work of Marx (on class relations) and Gramsci (on hegemony) (Titscher et al., 2000). The CDA procedures then investigate each of these dimensions: first, describing the linguistic properties; second, interpreting the relationship between the text and discursive practice; and third, explaining connections between the discursive and dominant domains of society. Like other scholars applying CDA (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002; Alrasheed, 2017; Antoine, 2020), this blueprint is less fixed procedure and more to be adjusted based on the scope of the project; however, it will be useful in delimiting the scope of my analysis and in drawing connections between texts, their presentation (or ‘genre,’ in particular for my analysis of the pilot episode of *As We See It*), and the co-constituted link between discourses and capitalist structures.

To draw from Fairclough’s terminology (Titscher et al., 2000; Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002), I examine the following communicative events (i.e., instances of language use) to support my analysis: the pilot episode of *As We See It*; online review articles across mainstream and subcultural publications; blog posts; Twitter comments, and reviews expressed via other audiovisual media. I delimited my sample to the pilot episode (as opposed to the entire series) as it allowed for a more robust analysis given time constraints. It was important to have in-depth comprehension of the pilot episode because (1) it provides an introduction and orientation to the
remainder of the series, as many pilots do; and (2) many of the reviews focus solely on the pilot episode. I am speculating but perhaps this is in an effort to not spoil the remainder of the series for readers or perhaps certain reviewers (particularly those who work for mainstream publications) received the pilot to preview in-advance of the series’ premiere. My objective is to unpack – to the extent the scope of this study will permit – how these communicative events reproduce or restructure the order of discourse (i.e., all discourse types/practices in an institution and the relationship between them) that currently works to naturalize/privilege non-disabled, allistic productive bodyminds over human difference. I draw from various sources of found data in an effort to enrich the viewpoints reflected in the research. This approach allows for both an analysis of the text and provides a sense of underlying issues of production as well as reception. In turn, these might provide a sense of the material realities of various audiences reading the texts. In the end, this multi-pronged approach will help inform my research questions around how this show addresses autistic labor and labor more generally, which relates to the real-life conditions of autistic people.

Texts were chosen in a non-randomized, purposive manner as my objective was to include a myriad of voices including those of cultural critics and audiences with lived experience. Review articles were identified through a Google Search, sorted by date, for articles published between January 2022, when the series was first released, and September 2022, when I concluded my data collection period (search terms “As We See It” and “Amazon” and “Review”). I collected texts from the first 10 pages of search results, after which the results generated became less relevant and inaccurate. To delimit the scope of my corpus, I removed articles that filtered into my search that were not centrally focused on reviewing or commentating on the series, including listicles (e.g., “best TV shows to watch now”); duplicates
appearing on aggregation sites; and articles positing whether there will be a second season. Articles that are interview-centered were also omitted. Some review articles reach out for supplementary quotes from cast and crew and other review articles cite interviews from other publications. Both of these instances are left in the corpus. However, “Q & A” articles with cast and crew that did not offer an independent review of the series were omitted. This is because these articles often offer little supplementary commentary. Knowing that cast/crew typically have either financial motive or contractual obligations to promote projects they are affiliated with, the discourse can be skewed or impacted by studio-directed media lines and talking points. That said, the experiences of cast and crew were still important to the research, and hence why I reference select interview articles as part of my literature review (see Chapter 2.3.2).

I then actively sought out articles to supplement these (largely) mainstream publications by searching for review articles and blog posts published by autistic audience members, which offer “insider-informed” discussions (Welch, Cameron, Fitch, & Polatajko, 2020). To include viewpoints beyond those who express themselves in long-form written communication, I then looked for reviews by autistic authors published as podcast episodes on Spotify or videos on YouTube; as well as comments made on Twitter by investigating commentary about the series via the #ActuallyAutistic Twitter thread (search terms: “#actuallyautistic ‘as we see it’” and “#actuallyautistic @AsWeSeeItPV”) (see Egner, 2022). These searches generated 77 and 47 tweets respectively. Duplicate posts or posts simply linking out to a written article were omitted. In total, the corpus comprises 47 review articles (of which 15 are written by authors who openly stated their autistic positionality), two Twitter search result feeds, two YouTube reviews, and one podcast review on Spotify (see Appendix).

As I (re)watched the pilot episode of As We See It and analyzed relevant review texts, I
was attentive to discourses informed by my theoretical framework, and cross-referenced them across texts during my re-readings. My analysis is primarily exploratory and inductive, which allows discursive patterns and similarities from across the texts to inform my coding and, subsequently, my discussion (Merrigan et al., 2013). After assembling my corpus, reading and re-reading was key to reviewing the data. Through this process I noticed and compared points of interest. I remained open to coding at various textual levels (for example, audiovisual cues, single words, phrases) that appeared across the various texts chosen for analysis. Aligned with materialist feminist perspectives, efforts were made to use the language of the text itself. As an allistic researcher, this is especially critical when drawing from publications whose authors self-identify as autistic. A materialist feminist framework (informed by CDS, eg. Fritsch, 2015) informed the labor-related discourses I was attentive to while Critical Autism Studies informed normative discursive relations that are re/de-constructed throughout the various texts.

3.3 Statement of Ethics Considerations

   No human participants were recruited for this research. That being said, reviews and reception related to my thesis were pulled from social media platforms, such as Twitter, in an effort to augment the voices of autistic individuals in the research. Including social media data in research continues to be a gray area with many scholars debating the most ethical way to move forward (Townsend, & Wallace, 2017; Williams, Burnap, & Sloan, 2017; Karusala, Kumar, & Arriaga, 2019; O’Callaghan & Douglas, 2021).

   Researchers note how Twitter users are not necessarily a representative sample of the population as they are predominantly young, white, and educated (Karusala, Kumar, & Arriaga, 2019; O’Callaghan & Douglas, 2021). Others debate whether usernames should or not should be published, whether consent from users needs to be received, and the implications of using
content from a user deemed ‘vulnerable’ (Townsend, & Wallace, 2017; Williams, Burnap, & Sloan, 2017; O’Callaghan & Douglas, 2021). Disabled people are often listed as ‘vulnerable.’ While it is true that certain disabled people have higher support needs than others, this sweeping category can contribute to the infantilization of disabled and autistic people (Garcia, 2021), which makes it a difficult ethical metric for research conducted with a Critical Autism Studies framework.

On July 4, 2022, I emailed The Office of Research Ethics at Carleton University to inquire about whether my research, which would not interact with human participants directly but would be supplemented with comments made by audiences on social media, required an ethics application. They responded there was no need for ethics clearance (E. Hersey, personal communication, July 6, 2022). Despite this reply, I did take precautions when sampling social media data for publication in my research. In line with some of the recommendations made in the literature I surveyed, I changed an individual’s username when it needed to be written for citation purposes unless they were considered ‘public figures’ (verified, large following) or organization-run accounts. I also chose to omit identifying demographic data points, including geographic location. Lastly, I only sampled data published from public social media accounts. Where blog posts were concerned, I only drew from public blog pages.
Chapter 4: Analysis

In this chapter, I will explore the first two levels of Fairclough’s Critical Discourse Analysis: the textual level and the discursive practice level. I will first breakdown and analyze the pilot episode of *As We See It*, describing its linguistic and semiotic properties (level one). I will then interpret the series’ genre conventions, explaining the relationship between the series and its discursive practice of the ‘dramedy’ (level two). I will then return to level one to explore audience reception to the series, attuned to concrete textual features. In the following chapter, Chapter 5: Discussion, I will proceed to the socio-historical level of Fairclough’s Critical Discourse Analysis (level three).

4.1 *As We See It, Episode 1, “Pilot”*

As with most television pilots, the first episode of *As We See It* sets the scene. In a tight 37-minutes (the following seven episodes have a 30-minute run time), the episode introduces us to the series’ six principal characters: roommates Violet (played by Sue Ann Pien), Harrison (played by Albert Rutecki), and Jack (played by Rick Glassman); their aide Mandy (played by Sosie Bacon); Violet’s brother, Van (played by Chris Pang); and Jack’s father, Lou (played by Joe Mantegna). It also sets the tone for the seven subsequent episodes by establishing character arcs, conflicts, and interpersonal dynamics.

The opening scene of the first episode sees Mandy encouraging Harrison to go for a walk outside. He is hesitant. Within the first 30 seconds, the question of employment is raised:

Mandy: “You need to be able to leave the building” (00:17)

Harrison: “Why?” (00:20)

Mandy: “Why? To do things. To go see friends. Go to the movies. Shop. Eventually get a job. That’s the goal, right?” (00:22)
The audience is then introduced to Jack. In his first scene, Jack is in a meeting at work, where he is a computer programmer, building upon the well-established television trope of autistic characters with an affinity for – or working in – STEM fields. The sound editing is such that each background noise is isolated and enhanced (for example, the sound of a pen clicking or fingers clacking on a keyboard) to replicate how Jack is experiencing the sensory components of the meeting. Jack is pacing, irritable, and eventually insults his boss. He is later fired.

We then meet Violet, also at work. Before the audience sees Violet, the camera focuses on cue cards lying next to a cash register with greetings and pleasantries written out. Violet works as a cashier at Arby’s. In this introductory scene, we see Violet interacting with a customer who she finds appealing:

Violet: “You have nice eyes… We should have a date. The first date can be fun and silly, like an arcade – that’s what Cosmo online says.” (5:21/5:32)

Man: “Oh actually –” (5:41)

Violet: “And the second date should be at a restaurant so we can get to know each other. We can’t have sex on date one or date two but on date three, we can screw, ok?” (5:42)

Man’s wife: “What?” (5:51)

Violet’s manager: “I’m sorry, is everything alright here?” (5:59)

Man’s wife: “No it’s not alright… (Speaking to Violet) Are you retarded?!” (6:00)

Violet’s manager: “Violet why don’t you go to the office, and I’ll be there in a sec, ok? (Speaking to the man’s wife) We don’t use the R-word here. It’s actually unacceptable.” (6:06)

This scene is unique in that unlike typical narrative devices that may justify a character’s misstep by “blaming” autism (which does happen later in the episode – stay tuned), Violet’s manager,
who is not autistic, condemns the customer for using an ableist slur. On the other hand, Violet is not given the narrative space to stick up for herself or handle the conflict independently. Violet is later relocated to working in a non-public facing position at Arby’s. Within the first six minutes of the series, all three characters’ employment status is introduced and their competencies at work are articulated through scene and story. None of the initial interactions with these characters indicates competency or happiness in a work environment.

We are then taken to the characters’ apartment, where they are participating in ‘group’ – scheduled time to reflect on their ‘weekly goals’ with Mandy. The audience learns that the three characters share this apartment because it is being rented by all three of their families (in particular Harrison’s family):

Jack to Harrison: “You’re not even qualified to live here with us.” (6:58)

Mandy: “Of course he is. Your families rented this apartment for all three of you and you know that.” (6:59)

Jack: “So we could become independent. Harrison will never be independent or have a job. His parents are filthy rich, and they pay for most of the rent otherwise you wouldn’t even make the cut.” (7:03)

Once again, neoliberal discourse is front and center in this scene when Jack suggests the apartment unit is being rented so that they can all become independent, including financially. Further it reproduces, depictions of privatized solutions to systemic inadequacies, which are not uncommon in stories that center disabled or autistic lived experiences. As We See It

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8 To give another recent example, in the 2020 Oscar-winning film, Sound of Metal, lead character Ruben, who struggles financially, moves to a living community for Deaf adults with relative ease and little discussion of how his stay is being costed. Those who are familiar with housing, long-term care, and assisted living know these facilities/communities/homes are costly and waitlists can be backlogged multiple years.
conveniently evades a class conversation by making one of the main characters the product of a wealthy white family whose funds allow for a full-time aide and housing. Further, it evades the reality that identity-based factors, including racialized groups and those of lower socioeconomic status, are often even more deprived of resources (Brady & Cardin, 2021).

During this group scene, Jack and Harrison argue, Violet discusses how she would like to date someone who is not autistic, and Mandy polices the roommates when they use swear words. She also notes to Violet that the dating-app, Tinder, is off limits. Keep in mind, Jack, Harrison, and Violet are adults in their mid-twenties. Further, Mandy curses throughout the episode and pursues romantic relationships, as does Violet’s brother, Van. In creating this dichotomy (those who can use mature language, who can pursue intimate relationships, and those who cannot), the series discursively reproduces the typification of autistic adults as infantilized. That said, while this thesis adopts a non-tragic standpoint and works to position autistic people as agentic subjects, I also want to recognize the disproportionate sexual predation and violence enacted upon autistic people, and autistic people who are women-identifying in particular (Ashkenazy & Yergeau, 2013; Cazalis, Reyes, Leduc, Gourion, 2022).

Van’s relationship to Violet is particularly difficult to watch. Van uses punishment and reward throughout the series to ‘manage’ Violet’s behavior. When she expresses desire of any kind, he shuts it down and punishments are threatened:

Violet: “Will you take me shopping? I need to get more lacy bras.” (11:35)
Van: “Look brothers and sisters don’t really talk about this kind of stuff, ok?” (11:46)
Violet: “I’m 25. I want a boyfriend. It’s normal to have a boyfriend. I want to be normal.” (12:05)
Van: “Alright, how about this? If you do well this week – just get through the week – I
Violet: “This weekend is too late; I might have a date before that. I’m on Bumble now.” (12:21)

Van: “If you don’t delete the app, I’m gonna have to take your phone.” (12:45)

Violet’s finances are also controlled by Van, as depicted in the pilot when Violet goes on a date without telling Van and calls him to transfer money into her account so she can pay her bill. Van is angered by this and shows up at the restaurant, physically dragging Violet out to the car. The series holds Violet to an overall different standard. While the male characters are encouraged to date and seek out romantic interests, Violet’s sexuality is policed and punished. Further, all three characters are heterosexual; however, the actor who plays Violet, Sue Ann Pien, is queer in real life. The decision to make all three characters straight is odd given the well-documented identifications and resonances between autistic and queer communities (Yergeau, 2018; Garcia, 2021), not to mention Pien’s intersectional lived experience.

The audience is then brought into Mandy’s home, which she shares with her partner. Upon learning she did not pass the Medical College Admission Test, against the backdrop of melancholic music, Mandy says to her partner: “You’re going to be a governor or a senator and I’m still gonna be trying to get Harrison to walk to the coffee shop without freaking out” (8:41).

Mandy is positioned as a compassionate character throughout the series (and in most of the coverage about the series): a pillar of stability, wisdom, and friendship for the three roommates. However, she is also scripted lines latent with judgment that call this into question.

When we first meet Lou, Jack’s father, Lou and Jack are playing cards with a group of older adults. Jack is condescending and insults the group, and Lou makes efforts to justify Jack’s comments: “I’m sorry. It’s the Asperger’s. He doesn’t mean it.” (17:25). Contrary to the script’s
earlier suggestion that it would not use autism as a justification tool (when Violet’s boss condemns the patron for using an ableist slur), Lou reduces Jack’s choice words to Jack’s autistic self. After their card game, Lou and Jack have dinner when Jack reveals he was fired. Lou assertively replies:

“Jack, you need to fight to get that job back. I’m serious. Now, you were doing great. You had three good months. Three beautiful months. I mean, [getting fired] was a definite setback but nothing you can’t bounce back from…Do you remember how long it took you to get this job? And this place, they’re willing to look past some things. To see how smart you are. To look past the other stuff. Not everyone is willing to do that” (24:47/35:45).

Interestingly, there is a near critical avoidance of the words “autism” or “autistic” in the pilot episode. Words like “retarded,” “Asperger’s,” and “the other stuff” are included in the script. An explicit utterance of “autism” or “autistic” occurs only once over the span of the 37-minute pilot in reference to Mandy’s aspirations to become a neurologist and make “new breakthroughs in understanding autism” (8:56). Though I do not expect all characters in this fictional series to articulate themselves as an autistic self-advocate or Critical Autism Studies scholar might, the absence of such language contributes to the invisibilization of autistic culture. Lou goes on: “You’re 25. Do you want your dad to be supporting you forever?” (26:10) to which Jack responds, “Yes” (26:15). The series discursively positions independence-as-objective time and time again. In this particular scene, Lou is trying to use the tactic of humiliation (in reference to being supported long-term by a parent) to motivate Jack into getting his job back. It is difficult to deduce based on the tone of the series whether it is making a comment on financial independence in autistic young adulthood, specifically, or young adulthood more broadly as many families face
similar dynamics as parents work to navigate supporting their children during periods of precarious work or worry about what will happen to their children when they are gone. There is also no acknowledgement of the affective labor Jack contributes to his family dynamic: When Lou announces he was diagnosed with cancer, Jack becomes his father’s medical advocate and helps him navigate treatment plans.9

In the last few minutes of the pilot episode, Mandy encourages Harrison to try walking to the cafe once more, which he does to the backdrop of inspiring instrumental music. They return to the apartment where Violet and Van burst through the door arguing:

Violet: “How am I supposed to meet guys? I’m a sandwich technician!” (30:58)

Van: “Meet them at the drama club Violet!” (31:01)

Violet: “Normal guys!” (31:02)

Van: “You’re not fucking normal!” (31:06)

Desiring – or striving for – normativity is a recurring plot point. The pilot offers little insight into the characters’ participation in autistic communities, be it online (such as #ActuallyAutistic, see Egner, 2022) or in real life (aside from mentions of a drama club for autistic people that seems to have been coordinated on their behalf by parents or Mandy), further perpetuating the stereotype that autistic people are non-relational. In this scene, Violet is understandably upset by Van’s comments. Harrison and Jack ultimately comfort Violet, one of the few moments over the course of the entire series where the three roommates interact with one another, let alone in a supportive or interdependent capacity. Harrison is particularly comforting to Violet and acts as an

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9 Existing research suggests the opposite of what is depicted in the series is more common. For many autistic people (and in particular women, gender-fluid, non-binary, and trans people), communicating and advocating for themselves within a medical system not designed for them can be difficult (Moseley, Druce, & Turner-Cobb, 2020). Jack is perhaps better able to negotiate this given his stereotypical role in the series as a white, male-coded, ‘rational,’ ‘scientific’ character type.
intermediary between her and Jack, who becomes increasingly frustrated by Violet’s emotions. Interestingly, Harrison walking to the cafe was positioned as this moment of triumph in the episode, while his compassion and friendship are not commented on, further establishing a tone throughout the series that values independence and self-sufficiency over interdependence and mutual aid.

The pilot’s final scene sees Mandy helping Jack prepare to apologize to his former employer, when she instructs Jack to make eye contact and “don’t be your true self” (34:45). He walks into his former office, inspiring music plays once again, and the credits roll. The pilot concludes as it began: with a focus on the importance of paid employment.

4.2 The Dramedy Genre

Form is a component of Fairclough’s Critical Discourse Analysis. Following an examination at the textual level, an intertextual and interdiscursive analysis is recommended that links how texts draw upon orders of conventions, genre, and narrative – what Fairclough refers to as the discursive practice level (Titscher et al., 2000). Genre in relation to the series itself, and in particular the pilot episode, warrants a brief discussion. However, a robust exploration of conventions across each medium sampled for the following audience reception analysis (mainstream press vs. trade press vs. subcultural press vs. blogs vs. Twitter commentary vs. YouTube as a communication platform vs. the medium of podcasts) is beyond the scope of this thesis. Further, a variety of mediated communication platforms were sought out for this research precisely to resist traditional conventions found in mainstream media. My objective in gathering a variety of texts (communicative events) is to resist privileging certain dominant forms of critical commentary (i.e., written, long form, reviewed by editors) over others. And thus, I am less interested in genre in relation to audience reception as I am in the discourses various
audiences reproduce or resist.

The “dramedy” genre – a portmanteau of “drama” and “comedy” – is ripe for a trope Stella Young (2014) describes as inspiration porn storytelling. As Young (2014) notes, inspiration porn is a common othering tactic used to pathologize and tragedize disabled people (though not all autistic people identify as disabled). While *As We See It* can be critiqued for conforming to certain inspiration porn tactics (for example, inspirational music crescendo-ing as Harrison walks to the coffee shop), it is difficult to suggest this is unique to a show about autistic characters as the conventions of the dramedy are well-established. Havas and Sulimma (2020) note television dramedies often evade “capital P” politics typically reserved for “high brow” dramas and instead focus on “everyday politics” and identity (p. 79). While the dramedy’s dramatic tone gains these series’ cultural currency among critics, they are equally as tied to the genre of television comedy. In particular, the dramedy embraces its comedic roots by staying loyal to a 30-minute format (common across Western television sitcoms) and by deploying “cringe aesthetics,” what Havas and Sulimma (2020) suggest are affective moments exposing a central character or environment’s faults or shortcomings; and the depiction of violating socio-cultural taboos.

All these dramedy conventions are observable in *As We See It*. Show creator Jason Katims is no stranger to the Drama genre, having previously produced television dramas *Friday Night Lights* and *Parenthood* (which also included an autistic character, though largely viewed from the parents’ struggle in raising him), and whose writing and producer credits are almost entirely for dramatic projects (IMDB, n.d.). However, *As We See It* also embraces comedy: there are jokes included throughout the script, plot devices frequently deploy moments of “cringe,” and it leans on the 30-minute sitcom format. Of note, a 30-minute format limits the number of
characters an audience is introduced to given time constraints. This may explain why the lead characters often succumb to stereotypical archetypes. It may also explain why the community surrounding the characters in *As We See It* is predominantly neurotypical as neurotypical characters are ubiquitous across sitcom programming and thus require less exposition when introduced.

In addition, Katims-productions are themselves a subgenre: over a dozen texts reviewed for this thesis mention Katims’ specific production style, including “full-of-heart”/“heart-wrenching”/“heart-warming” storytelling and handheld camera work (Abrahams, 2022; Baldwin, 2022; Fienberg, 2022; Framke, 2022; Hadadi, 2022; Hoeffner, 2022; Ito, 2022; Laman, 2022; Mathews, 2022; Nicholson, 2022; Piazza, 2022; Poniewozik, 2022; Roush, 2022). These characteristics transcend Katims’ portfolio and are not necessarily a reflection of the themes, characters, and discourses *As We See It* engages. As Friedlander (2022) remarks, “Katims is gonna Katims” (para. 6). For these reasons, genre conventions were secondary to my analysis of autistic labor in the series than were the semiotic components of the pilot episode, including script and story lines, that compose the discursive contours of the show. There is a formulaic property to both the dramedy genre and Katims’ work that is less specific to this series about young autistic adults than it is to 30-minute programs more broadly that blend serious undertones with comedic properties.

### 4.3 Audience Reception

As part of my research, I actively sought out texts to supplement the slate of mainstream publications reviewing the series by searching for reviews published by autistic audiences. In line with the Affirmation Model of Disability that sees the binary between able/disabled as flawed, I did not want to position articles written by allistic authors in opposition to those written
by autistic authors. In particular, I did not want to presume that all autistic authors shared a
monolithic point of view; nor that all authors who did not explicitly self-identify as autistic were
able-bodied or allistic. However, aligned with Critical Autism Studies and Critical Disability
Studies, I recognize shared community is a productive component to fighting for access and
advocating for disability justice (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018, 2021; Fritsch & McGuire, 2021;
Egner, 2022). Interdependency, which is antithetical to the individualization central to
capitalism, is important for creating more just conditions and social structures for all. Thus,
while the texts are all discussed in conjunction with one another regardless of author identity,
certain commonalities were observed among writers with lived experience, and these will be
noted.

As previously mentioned, the audience meets each character in *As We See It* at work, or,
in Harrison’s case, in preparation for work. Throughout the pilot episode of *As We See It*,
employment is positioned as a central imperative in each character’s arc. Financial stability, and
thus independence, are positioned as the ultimate objectives of each character’s personal journey
into adulthood. Despite its centrality in the pilot, the coverage and conversation about the show
focus very little on this aspect of the series. In most instances, the employment type of each
character is listed at the top of a review as general background on the series; however,
discussions of autistic labor are largely absent. Most of the texts did not explicitly engage with
concepts such as employment, work, and labor, though neoliberal discourses were present in
their reviews (as will be taken up in Chapter 5: Discussion). A mix of person-first and identity-
first language was applied evenly throughout the discourse as was the language of
neurodiversity. Application of particular language-use was not specific to autistic or allistic
writers.
Regarding real-world labor conditions surrounding the show, every single text highlighted the series’ ‘authentic’ casting – confirming its significance within the industry, and, unfortunately, its exceptionality. However, the discursive contours of this discussion were narrow and mostly framed its significance within the context of representational politics. Six texts engaged slightly deeper with the importance of hiring practices. A long form review article published in *The New York Times*, which included quotes from cast and crew, discussed set culture, cast experiences, and casting procedures (Ito, 2022). Other texts made note of: neurodiverse assistants hired behind-the-scenes (Autistic Science Person, 2022; Ito, 2022; Magro, 2022; Mathews, 2022); quoted Katims’ inspiration for the series among which was the rates of unemployment for autistic young adults (Kennedy, 2022); and/or expressed hope that the show’s authentic casting would open more doors for autistic creative practitioners (Autistic Science Person, 2022; Kennedy, 2022; Magro, 2022; Sethi, 2022). These nods are brief but stand out amidst a corpus that largely ignores the precarity encountered by young (autistic) adults and autistic creative practitioners (Brady, 2022).

The reviews further focused on romantic relationships that developed throughout the series (Chiriguayo, 2022; Wood, 2022; Poniewozik, 2022; Friedlander, 2022; Nicholson, 2022; Mathews, 2022; Mehrotra, 2022; Osman, 2022; Sethi, 2022; Lopez, 2022; Moffitt, 2022; Belle, 2022; Laman, 2022; Autistic Science Person, 2022; Schwartz, 2022; Bethany, 2022; Creepypuppets Presents, 2022). That sex and relationships dominate reception surrounding *As We See It* is not surprising – and while it is not the central focus of my thesis, its prominence in the series and in the surrounding discourse warrants a brief analysis. Mediated depictions of autistic and disabled characters are often not portrayed as sexual. As was explored in Chapter 2: Literature Review, eugenic efforts to ‘purify’ the human race meant the reproduction of certain
races, bodies, and minds (white, cis-heterosexual, non-disabled) were suitable, while Black, queer, disabled, and other oppressed groups were isolated in institutions or endured forced sterilization. These eugenic practices established several violent assumptions, notably the de-sexualization of disabled and autistic people. Presumed asexuality meant any expression of sexuality appeared excessive (Kim, 2011), contributing to the conflation of sexual ‘perversion’ and disability (Jarman, 2012) – the latter of which gave rise to discourses of harm reduction. Disabled and autistic people expressing sexuality were in-turn deviant and needed to be ‘controlled’ to prevent ‘risk’ (Kim, 2011; Jarman, 2012). As Siebers (2012) notes, establishing a sexual culture inclusive of disabled people requires access to “safe spaces where they may develop new erotic theories and modes of being” (p. 43). Given its ubiquity in modernity, I argue media play a role in creating this affinity space and in the production of a sexual culture that embraces sexual diversity and variability. When a film or television series begins to resist antiquated discursive formations, however imperfect or incomplete, it sparks audience engagement. In recent years, to name but only a few examples, Abigail Heringer became the first Deaf contestant cast as part of reality dating franchise, The Bachelor (Guglielmi, 2021); Love on the Spectrum U.S., a docuseries about autistic people navigating romantic relationships, won multiple Emmy awards (White, 2022); and disability activist and influencer Lolo Spencer was cast as a sex-positive freshman in Mindy Kaling’s The Sex Lives of College Girls (Sherer, 2022). As We See It is among the latest Hollywood productions addressing the sexuality of disabled and autistic people and this was taken up across the corpus by audiences who both applauded and criticized its depictions.

Of the 47 texts reviewed across mainstream and subcultural publications, blogs, YouTube, and Spotify (less Tweets), only seven were entirely critical of the series (aside from
appreciative nods for the show’s intentional casting) (Autistic Nottingham, 2022; Autistic Science Person, 2022; Creepypuppets Presents, 2022; Laman, 2022; Lopez, 2022; Schwartz, 2022; Tacia, 2022). Nine texts were mixed in their evaluation of the series (Bethany, 2022; Blevins, 2022; Budowski, 2022; Hoeffner, 2022; Moffitt, 2022; Piazza, 2022; Smith, 2022; Treece, 2022; Wood, 2022). The remaining 31 texts praised the series. The seven critical pieces all came from autistic audiences. The general sentiment across the two Twitter threads reviewed was mixed. Many took to the platform to express their gratitude for a series that casted three autistic leads while others expressed their disappointment:

“If you’re #ActuallyAutistic and haven’t watched @AsWeSeeItPV yet, I highly recommend! I’ve never related to a character like I’ve related to Violet. @SueAnnPien. More #AutisticGirl rep please and thank you!” (Twitter User 1, 2022)

“I just finished the first season of @AsWeSeeItPV and I was crying tears of happiness. For the first time in my life, I felt represented in media. Thank you @RickGlassman for making me feel seen through your character. #ActuallyAutistic” (Shepherd, 2022)

“I watched one episode and thought it was just awful, my allistic husband also thought it was a dreadful, negative, stereotypical presentation of autistic people as total pains in the ass. I almost cried when the therapist woman said ‘don’t be your true self’ #ActuallyAutistic” (Twitter User 2, 2022)

“If you haven't yet watch As We See It. No savants but infantalization & NT savior tropes...but there are 3 MCs played by #ActuallyAutistic actors & while it will clearly be another generation before we get a highly sophisticated autistic show, AWSI does a lot of good things” (Twitter User 3, 2022)

Twitter was also a space where autistic audiences could check in with one another prior-to
viewing the series. Audiences were looking for trigger warnings or advisories before deciding whether to watch the show:

“Has anyone seen As We See It on amazon? Is it in any way a decent show about autistic people, or is it as problematic as most other stuff? It'd be nice to see them get it right for once! #ActuallyAutistic” (Twitter User 4, 2022)

“Has anyone seen the show As We See It on Amazon prime? Is it worth the watch or is it another poor portrayal [sic] of autistic individuals? #ActuallyAutistic” (Twitter User 5, 2022)

“Is ‘As we see it’ any good or is it ableist garbage? #ActuallyAutistic #AutismAcceptanceMonth” (Twitter User 6, 2022)

Across discourse surrounding the series, praise was expressed for: featuring an Asian-American, woman presenting autistic actor (thus moving away from the white, male actors often portraying autistic characters on television); allowing different autistic experiences to be viewed on-screen (given there were three different lead characters with different characteristics); and for creating a broadly appealing dramedy. Criticisms included: the double standards for the allistic characters – for example, Mandy and Van being able to pursue intimate relationships (Autistic Science Person, 2022; Wood, 2022); framing autistic people as a burden for allistic family members or support networks (Autistic Science Person, 2022; Autistic Nottingham, 2022; Laman, 2022; Lopez, 2022; Wood, 2022); producing “caretaker entertainment” (Lopez, 2022), “neurowashing” (Autistic Nottingham, 2022), and “neurotypicalsplaining” (Schwartz, 2022) by centering non-autistic characters in an effort to appeal to non-autistic viewers (Laman, 2022; Moffitt, 2022; Treece, 2022); and a lack of scenes celebrating autistic friendship (Autistic Nottingham, 2022; Creepypuppets Presents, 2022; Laman, 2022; Moffitt, 2022). The series was
also criticized for reinforcing stereotypes – for example, Jack’s character is a rude computer programmer who lacks compassion for others (Autistic Nottingham, 2022; Moffitt, 2022; Treece, 2022). As Treece (2022) notes, “If the audience does not have the lived experience of being autistic, they will not recognize the exaggerations or stereotypes because they cannot compare the portrayals of the characters to their own inner worlds” (para 4). Several reviewers condemned the depiction of Violet’s sexuality being controlled without explanation or discussion of sex education (Autistic Nottingham, 2022; Autistic Science Person, 2022; Creepypuppets Presents, 2022; Laman, 2022; Lopez, 2022; Schwartz, 2022). Lastly, the series received criticism for not fully developing its main characters beyond the obstacles they encounter (Moffitt, 2022; Lopez, 2022). Referring to the latter, autistic YouTuber, Creepypuppets Presents (2022), suggested: “You know when Atypical is getting autism representation right compared to your show that's bad” (7:10). In a similar vein, autistic podcaster, Melissa Tacia (2022), felt Sam, the autistic protagonist in Atypical, was a more well-rounded character than the leads in As We See It.

Texts implicitly engaged with various models of disability, the most dominant of which being the Social Model. There was a distinct effort made in a number of texts to highlight social barriers and the built environment. Select texts engaged with affirmative discourse, explicitly celebrating difference and autistic pride (Autistic Science Person, 2022; Autistic Nottingham, 2022; Belle, 2022; Creepypuppets Presents, 2022; Girish Modi, 2022; Laman, 2022; Moffitt, 2022; Piazza, 2022; Tacia, 2022; Smith, 2022 Moffitt, 2022). Other texts more explicitly engaged with the medical model:

“[The three characters’] families have chipped in to help pay for…behavioral aide Mandy (Sosie Bacon), who helps coach them through the various obstacles created by their
ASD” (Sepinwall, 2022, para. 3).

“In many ways the soul of the story is the challenging relationship between Violet and her brother Van…After the death of their parents, the burden of caregiving fell on him. Forced to grow up overnight, the strain of constant concern and caring for Violet limits his ability to live his own life” (Mehrotra, 2022, para. 8)

“According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, autism affects an estimated 1 in 44 children in the United States today” (Kennedy, 2022, para. 10)

Or, perpetuated the charity model by othering and tragedizing characters and their plot points:

“But more than anything…it’s the acting that makes it so easy to fall into the show, and feel such sharp pangs of sympathy for its vulnerable characters” (Framke, 2022, para. 2)

“There’s drama enough in [Mandy] caring for these fragile souls. She knows they’re always just one crisis away from a setback, and you will almost always see the inevitable meltdowns coming” (Roush, 2022, para. 4).

However, the majority of texts took the inverse approach by emphasizing the relatability of the characters, which I suggest has both positive and negative connotations and will be explored further in the following chapter.
Chapter 5: Discussion

The third and final level of Fairclough’s analysis centers questions of power: institutional and social contexts are considered. Here, socio-historical power relations and larger ideological structures are brought into analysis (the social practice level). This third level is where Fairclough’s analysis is further informed by the work of Marx (on class relations) and Gramsci (on hegemony) (Titscher et al., 2000). In the following discussion, I engage with a materialist feminist analytic, explaining connections between the discursive contours of the present corpus and dominant domains of society. Though discussions of autistic contours are largely absent from audience reception surrounding the series, several key themes did emerge during my analysis that implicitly reinforce ableist understandings of autistic labor. These themes constitute and reproduce a larger discursive formation of productive bodies as those which fit the mold of an ideal neoliberal worker and which can keep pace with capitalist modes of production. These productive (allistic) subjects in-turn possess ultimate labor power. On the other hand, a counter-discourse – what I will refer to as “neurodivergent positive” – also surfaced, resisting ableism in the series and which worked to counter the aforementioned oppressive discursive formation. These findings will be explored further throughout this chapter.

As will be noted in Chapter 6: Limitations and Future Research, the materialist feminist framework that informed the labor-related themes I was attentive to in order to address my research questions was but one approach to studying this series. As a result, the order of discourse in which I considered for this analysis was restricted to focus particularly on themes which reinforce/resist a capitalist order. Following my analysis at the textual level as outlined in Chapter 4, four broad themes were identified that work to characterize the discursive formation of ideal productive bodies under capitalism [(1) potentiality; (2) (in)dependence; (3) functioning;
and (4) adulting]. These four themes will be defined, and examples will be pulled from the corpus to demonstrate them in action (i.e., how they work to uphold the overall discursive formation of productive bodies). In many instances, several themes intersect; however, to avoid repetition, unique passages were pulled to illustrate each discursive contour. The counter-discourse (labelled ‘neurodivergent-positive’), which resists the normative discursive formation of productive bodies (and in turn labor power), will also be defined and examples will be presented.

5.1 Potentiality

The theme of potentiality demarks the possibility for normative life outcomes. They suggest an individual only fully recognizes their human rights and freedoms “if s/he moves in time with neoliberal values and its market rationalities” (McGuire, 2016, p. 123). As outlined by McGuire (2016), free market orientations establish understandings of what and who is considered a good investment. The (non-autistic) child-turned-adult is positioned as having more potential along a normative life course continuum to work and to earn economic success. On the contrary, the autistic body is marked as being in a perpetual state of becoming, of not quite adulthood, and thus not quite contributing market participants (McGuire, 2016; Yergeau, 2018). Since neurodiverse people threaten to disrupt the promise of a ‘good’ productive future, learning how to adapt to an allistic world improves one’s potentiality (read ability to become a producer-consumer). Passages identified as perpetuating the concept of potentiality are also infantilizing as they maintain the position that autistic people are in a perpetual state of not quite ‘healthy’ child and not quite capable of adulthood.

There are resonances of Applied Behavioral Analysis discourse in the concept of potentiality. Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA) is an “evidenced-based” intervention approved
for autistic individuals. It uses an antecedent-behavior-consequence model to instigate, chart, map, and correct behaviors of autistic people, often during childhood (Yergeau, 2018). The autistic child is surveilled by parents, therapists, teachers and anyone else deemed relevant to the intervention process. Negative reinforcement is often a vital part of treatment. Although there are a number of mainstream parenting strategies that deploy similar strategies (think positive reinforcement during toilet training, for example), many neuroqueer movements do not approve of ABA. As Yergeau (2018) asserts, “ABA is rhetorically and thereby materially violent” (p. 94). It is rooted in the problematic medical/cure model of disability and leverages these discourses in maintaining its efficacy.

The behavior of all three principal characters is in a constant state of modification throughout the pilot episode in an effort to bolster the potentiality of their life outcomes. Jack is encouraged to be friendlier and make eye contact; Violet’s desires are often reigned in or controlled all together; and Harrison is pushed to increase his level of activity. The three roommates have weekly goals, which Mandy oversees, and are rewarded or punished based on degree of accomplishment. Across all three characters, we see implementation of a program similar to ABA. And while it is not named as such, it bears similar resemblance to the program, including recording “problematic behaviours,” analyzing “reinforcers,” breaking down desired behavior into “component parts,” and “camouflaging autistic traits” (Pyne, 2020, p. 4-7). Stable employment and economic independence are the primary objectives for all three of these

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10 ABA is a critical technology deployed to maintain the efficacy and supremacy of behaviorism-as-ideology under neoliberal capitalism. Its medical and economic stronghold is significant: In 2019, all 50 U.S. states constituted ABA as “the ‘only’ ‘evidence-based’ and therefore only health-insurance-fundable, intervention for autism” (Broderick & Roscigno, 2022, p. 78). For over 75 years, ABA has worked to generate and extract profit from autism by fueling a logic of ‘necessary’ behavioral intervention, and media play a large role in disseminating messaging (and in turn reinforcing cultural logics) that amplify this objective (Broderick & Roscigno, 2022). Thus, while disappointing, it is not surprising that ABA themes surfaced throughout the pilot episode of As We See It.
characters and we see the significance of this goal through its prominence in the pilot episode: The episode begins and concludes with discussions of employment; each character is met at their place of work or in-relation to obtaining potential employment; and employment as a goal comes up in several instances throughout the first episode. Each character’s personality, behavior, and extracurricular hobbies are in-turn oriented to maximize their labor potential.

Across the corpus, the concept of potentiality was applied to the possible or lost futures of the characters as well as of autistic people generally. Often, it is exercised not with direct reference to autistic people’s employability; however, in exercising notions suggestive of one’s potential to adapt, mask, adjust, bend, and work hard nonetheless, this theme contributes to the medicalized view of autism as separate from and detrimental to an individual and their otherwise presumed successful life. We see potentiality arise particularly when traits evaluated as detrimental to a character’s potentiality are attributed to autism; and when a character’s aspirations are rearticulated. At times, the objectives of the characters are minimized or positioned in-opposition to the objectives of allistic young adults.

“Some TV characters have lofty goals. They want to find a soul mate, a fulfilling career or their place in the world. Then there’s Harrison. When we first meet him, he just hopes to walk to the coffee shop alone” (Kennedy, 2022, para. 1)

“And yet, as we get to know these characters — blunt, brilliant, and insecure Jack (Rick Glassman giving off a Sheldon Cooper vibe), impulsive and needy Violet (Sue Ann Pien), lonely and well-off agoraphobe Harrison (Albert Rutecki) — it’s impossible not to delight in their small victories and root for them, as well as for those who love them” (Roush, 2022, para. 5)

“Their families have chipped in to help pay for an apartment in Los Angeles that they
share, and for the work of behavioral aide Mandy (Sosie Bacon), who helps coach them through the various obstacles created by their ASD” (Sepinwall, 2022, para. 3)

“Their other roommate, Jack (Rick Glassman), hopes to pass as ‘normal,’ but his indelicate bluntness — like informing his boss (Robby Clater) that he has ‘inferior intelligence’ — makes it clear that Jack's brain works a little differently than others. (Baldwin, 2022, para. 1)

“How do you create characters who struggle with social interactions but whom viewers still want to engage with and be around for a full season?” (Ito, 2022, para. 10)

The theme of potentiality is further underscored through the application of infantilizing discourses. For example, the application of childlike descriptors or childhood metaphors (eg. ‘It takes a village.’ taking ‘first uneasy steps’). This works to reinforce the cultural understanding of young autistic adults as not quite adults, and thus not quite capable of adult responsibilities, undermining the capacities, capabilities, and agency of autistic people.

“Violet is a sweet and eccentric Arby’s ‘sandwich technician’ who hopes to seek out a boyfriend to lead a ‘normal life’” (Smith, 2022, para. 2)

“Albert is so loveable as Harrison. His journey touches on his childlike behavior and his friendship with a young child who seems to be on his mental level” (Carey, 2022, para. 7)

“As befits this sort of show, you’ll laugh and probably cry, but also cringe as these young adults take their first uneasy steps towards independence under the guidance of their loving and resilient aide, Mandy” (Roush, 2022, para. 2)

“It takes a village, and as I see it, this one is very much worth visiting” (Roush, 2022, para. 6)

“They are looked after by their life coach Mandy (Sosie Bacon), who sets an agenda of
daily goals that she expects them to fulfill as part of transitioning to fullfledged [sic]
independent living” (Skudra, 2022, para. 3, italics mine)

Others were critical of infantilizing discourses and themes of potentiality deployed by the series:

“We’re still perpetuating stereotypes here. I know there is no way to represent the
totality of the Autistic Community no matter how many Autistic characters they write,
but it would still be nice to see characters other than the nerdy, socially awkward, often
infantilized version Hollywood loves so much” (Belvins, 2022, para. 7)

“Van and Mandy both read like the actual main characters of As We See It, because it
largely presents their problems as beyond their control. Meanwhile, they constantly tell
their autistic wards that they need to do what they’re told in order to be happy”
(Schwartz, 2022, para. 8)

“It felt like this was written for non-autistic parents who are watching their autistic
teenager or young adult grow up and are scared for them” (Autistic Science Person, 2022,
para 29)

“It’s interesting to note that the actor Robby Clater, who plays Jack’s neurotypical boss,
is autistic…One question I had while watching this was, why couldn’t Jack’s boss be
autistic? There are in fact autistic managers and bosses in the real world” (Autistic
Science Person, 2022, para. 30)

“The show had both autistic actors and consultants. But somehow it was still incredibly
infantilizing. Maybe it's because I'm late diagnosed and the majority of autistic people I
know are also late diagnosed, but I don't know anyone who is 25 and has their phone
taken away” (Forest, 2022)

“As We See It. I’ve watched it all. Having ND actors is good. [check mark emoji]
Unfortunately, much thrust of the story seems to be how the long-suffering NTs Mandy, Van and Lou undergo positive growth thanks to the quirky-burdensome guys ‘with autism’. [red X emoji] #ActuallyAutistic” (Twitter User 7, 2022)

“These characters are completely reduced to their autism. Their character arcs are literally their therapeutic goals…So for example, Jack, this guy, his therapeutic goal is to make friends and get along better at work so he can live independently...sort of like the writer googled ‘issues faced by autistic young adults’ and decided to make each one a character in this show. They are less people than abstractions of issues” (Creepypuppets Presents, 2022, 2:41)

“The thing that I find cringey is that the moments that are spun in a way to where it would seem more like it was a positive is more like an inspiration porn type of moment. Where it’s like ‘aww look at this autistic person they did something.’ Like, it’s like condescending almost” (Tacia, 2022, 9:17)

5.2 (In)dependence

Building off the theme of potentiality, under a neoliberal regime, one achieves maximum potential only if reached independently. Independence is positioned as the goal for most people over the life course; however, disabled people in particular face significant scrutiny given historical and sociocultural biases – recall violent labeling under Nazi Germany, as informed by eugenics ideology, such as “social parasites” and “useless eaters” (Oliver & Barnes, 2012, p. 89). To depend on someone else is often positioned as burdensome, whether that be an economic burden on societal structures (Oliver & Barnes, 2012; McGuire, 2016) or an emotional toll on support networks, such as families – the latter of which presents itself via the theme of (in)dependence surrounding As We See It:
“Mantegna strikes the right chord as Jack’s father, who worries if his son will be independent enough to survive without his guidance — a parental concern not limited to those who have kids with disabilities” (Sethi, 2022, para. 9).

“...[As We See It is] particularly effective at illustrating the emotional toll their struggles take on the people who love them” (Baldwin, 2022, para. 4)

“For people on the autism spectrum, everyday activities can be incredibly challenging — exchanging pleasantries with a coworker, walking down the block to a corner coffee shop, and even trying to date. Life can take an exhausting emotional toll on their friends, family, and caregivers to” (Chiriguayo, 2022, para. 1)

“Meanwhile, caring for the three roommates takes a toll on Mandy’s personal life” (Skudra, 2022, para. 14)

“@AsWeSeeItPV is like watching an lgbt centric show that’s centered around a straight person who uses the gays as crutches. Why can’t we have #ActuallyAutistic representation without using a neurotypical savior?” (Twitter User 8, 2022)

“Developed by TV veteran Jason Katims (Friday Night Lights, Parenthood, Roswell), the gentle, sensitive dramedy delicately balances light laughs without ever shying away from the burden of what Harrison, Violet and Jack, and their loved ones go through” (Mehrotra, 2022, para. 5)

“It makes you aware of what a day in the life of an autistic person looks like, and it shows the challenges of being a parent of an adult on the spectrum” (Butwell, 2022, para.14)

“Why are we spotlighting so much time with the 3 lead's guardians/caregivers (as well as some of their romantic entanglements)? Why is so much attention focused on how burdensome the 3 autistic adults can be from these guardians/caretakers?” (Twitter User
The compliant neoliberal subject is one that can independently interface with capitalism. The disabled subject is marked as antithetical to that. However, we all require support whether we identify with disability culture or not and whether we encounter ableism or not. Dependence is not universally implicit in disability. It is capitalism that creates dependent subjects, which often leads to economic strain (Russell, 2019). Despite this, independence-as-goal is the dominant and recurring discursive trend over the course of the pilot episode of As We See It as well as reviews and commentary by audiences. The theme of (in)dependence suggests autistic people can integrate within an allistic world through some (neoliberal) combination of putting in hard work and/or desiring normative life course outcomes. Though not always discussed in reference to labor conditions, the theme of (in)dependence is frequently deployed across the corpus to underscore its importance as a prerequisite for adulthood, and in turn, stability. This implies the characters are legitimate subjects because they are trying to assimilate into the paid labor market.

“‘As We See It’ follows three roommates on the autism spectrum who are learning to be independent and accepted as they grow up” (Chiriguayo, 2022, image caption)

“The leads are as different and unique as anyone on the spectrum, yet they share the same desire for independence in a world that often refuses to accept them at face value. (Green, 2022, para. 3)

“They receive additional support from a therapeutic aide named Mandy (Sosie Bacon), who helps them set and maintain goals, including maintaining a job, making friends, and becoming more independent” (Keener, 2022, para. 4)

“This Amazon Prime Video series premiered this last Friday, January 21, and features people who identify on the autism spectrum and takes us on their journey toward
independence and acceptance” (Guevara, 2022, para. 3)

“All three are living with Mandy in order to work towards greater independence, and all have goals they are supposed to achieve each week” (Nicholson, 2022, para. 2)

“Hanging over each of these small struggles is the question of whether the characters can find the independence and self-sufficiency that others take for granted. Or as Violet (Sue Ann Pien), one of the roommates the series follows through its first season, puts it: ‘How am I supposed to have a normal life?’” (Poniewozik, 2022, para. 3)

(In)dependence is further deployed as a demarcation point between the three lead characters, noting their perceived independence and, in-turn, their readiness for adulthood:

“Rutecki heartwrenchingly [sic] communicates Harrison’s disappointment when he realizes his lack of independence — exactly what he and [his 10-year old neighbor] have in common” (Hadadi, 2022, para. 6)

“The least independent of the trio, but with the richest parents, Harrison has daily objectives that include battling external stimuli to navigate around the block, though he’d rather watch game shows on TV” (Fienberg, 2022, para. 4)

“Jack played by Rick Glassman is the computer technician, seems to be the most self-sufficient of the three” (Sethi, 2022, para. 5).

“First up, there’s the gentle Harrison (an endlessly lovable Albert Rutecki). Arguably the least independent of the three, Harrison leads a mostly sedentary, largely homebound life” (Mehrotra, 2022, para. 2)

5.3 Functioning constructs

Functioning constructs (i.e., “high functioning” or “low functioning”) deem autistic bodies as inherently non-functioning and thus, in need of interventions that will allow them to
become independent persons capable of producing and consuming. As Yergeau (2018) notes, the capitalist logics underpinning functioning constructs are such that “functioning’s gradations (from high to low) entrap autists in continua that correlate their rhetorical unworthiness with their economic unworthiness” (p. 50). The push for productive, high functioning workers creates a self-fulfilling prophecy of bodies that are never healthy enough and always debilitated when compared against the fictionalized imagined version of their potential self. Functioning constructs are futile and create tiers of worthiness among autistic workers all whilst failing to describe what autistic people can do (Garcia, 2021). Access to support resources also inform functioning constructs (‘If only one had blank, they could accomplish blank’). Undeniably, access to support resources is critical; however, Garcia (2021) highlights how we should move away from the suggestion that autistic people can work if only they had the right support, as it denies the realities of a subset of the autistic population. Under a capitalist system, functioning constructs can be particularly harmful to those with communication disabilities (Alper, 2017; St. Pierre, 2022) or those who move differently.

Functioning constructs are less common in the pilot episode itself, but are recurrent in communicative events about the series, often placing the characters along a hierarchy or continuum. Two autistic audience members, Bethany (2022 – cited below) and Tacia (2022), alternatively framed this theme in terms of support needs, which aligns with language deployed by autistic scholars and self-advocacy groups (Garcia 2021; ASAN, 2022).

“Mandy’s goal is to help [the three main characters] become functional adults, and she does an amazing job at supporting and encouraging each one in different ways” (Butwell, 2022, para. 12)

“They have a caretaker in Sosie Bacon’s Mandy, who herself is not on the spectrum but
is sometimes a barely functioning adult” (Friedlander, 2022, para. 7)

“Jack, who has a job as a computer programmer for a publishing company, is the highest-functioning…The childlike, sensitive Harrison, meanwhile, can’t even leave the apartment…Violet, who works at Arby’s…falls somewhere in between” (Sepinwall, 2022, para. 3).

“The autism spectrum is so wide and broad that each case presents itself with snowflake-like uniqueness. You can find two people who are at roughly the same level of functioning with their autism spectrum disorder, or ASD, yet their personalities and ways of functioning will present so differently as to feel like they have wildly different diagnoses” (Sepinwall, 2022, para. 1)

“Two of the three protagonists are fired from their jobs and the third is unemployed. All have had problems with romantic relationships. The behavioral issues are far more realistic than the usual tropes ascribed to functional autistics…Another, a computer programmer and possibly the highest-functioning of the three…Harrison, possibly the lowest functioning of the three, can’t leave his home due to noise and fear of dogs but is finally able to manage this problem. (Mitchell, 2022, para. 10)

“The series does this all while empathizing that even autistic people who seem “high functioning” and work professional jobs still need supports and services” (Hecker, 2022, para. 3)

“In recent years, television has actually started taking into account the reality experienced by people with functional diversity and, more specifically, the particular difficulties that people with autism spectrum disorder face on a daily basis” (Guevara, 2022, para. 1)

“These autistic people definitely kind of lie in limbo if that makes sense. So like not your
super high functioning, low level, low support needs individuals, but also not non
speakers who need someone with them 24/7. So I would say possibly that they would
land around level two in support needs because they do live in community housing
technically, even though it's arranged, I guess, by their parents…And that they do have an
aide who works with them quite often. They rely on other people a lot to help them with
their work and with other things” (Bethany, 2022, 3:50)

5.4 Adulting

What quickly became apparent as an objective of the pilot episode – and what was later
taken up through audience discourse – were efforts to establish discursive contours that position
autistic young adults as “just like” their non-autistic counterparts. This theme primarily presents
itself as exercising compassion for the desires, mistakes, and setbacks experienced by the
characters. The implications of such discussions – what I am categorizing as adulting – is that
the non-autistic young person is the de facto young person, perpetuating normative discursive
formations of disability as other and as exceptional to non-disabled personhood. The theme of
adulting also operates from a specific hegemonic vantage point: As poignantly noted by Garcia
(2021), “while yes, the right to grow up also includes the right to screw up, only able-bodied
people have this luxury. For autistic and other disabled people, every bad decision becomes a
referendum on your right to live independently” (p. 107-108). With a long and violent history of
‘deviant’ behaviors being subject to institutionalization (Kim, 2011; Jarman, 2012; Oliver &
Barnes, 2012; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018; Russell, 2019), the privilege to make mistakes
becomes all the more precarious among young autistic adults. The theme of adulting also
presumes – and panders to – an allistic audience: despite efforts to be inclusive-of autistic
people, in their pitch for relatability, this theme works to justify why As We See It is ‘worth’
watching *despite* autistic characters being at the center of the show.

“Piloting through the perils of career, friendship, and romance, the situations presented are often as wholesome as they are awkward, speaking to anxieties that we all have, whether they stem from inside or from dealing with others” (Smith, 2022, para. 3).

“The problems and traumas [the three main characters] face are those that would set back any 20-something. And that refreshing assumption, which runs throughout As We See It, is the key to its value and beauty” (Osman, 2022, para. 9)

“In summation, As We See It is a deeply moving and engaging miniseries that captures the challenges of young adulthood for people on the autism spectrum. It touches upon numerous themes that viewers will find relatable, such as family relationships, the desire for independence, and the question of passing vs. embracing one’s identity” (Skudra, 2022, para. 19)

“It’s about three 20-somethings on the autism spectrum living together and striving for the same things as any other 20-somethings want to achieve. A job. A date. Independence. Friendship. Love” (Butwell, 2022, para. 3)

“As We See It takes a different approach and, in doing so, fills in a gaping hole for stories of people with ASD: grown adults simply adulting” (Friedlander, 2022, para. 5)

“But, for the most part, willingly or not, these three [characters] have been thrust into the world of adulthood. And guess what? They make the same mistakes that just about all 20-somethings make” (Friedlander, 2022, para. 7)

“As We See It gently and smartly suggests that Jack, Violet, and Harrison’s lives, and their problems, are just as normal and messy as everyone else’s, even as they’re just as unique as any other human being is from one another. (Sepinwall, 2022, para. 10)
“At its core, the challenges Jack, Harrison and Violet face are rooted in experiences to which we can all relate. Trying to establish your own independence while also finding a personal sense of joy and peace is not just daunting if you are on the autism spectrum”
(Sethi, 2022, para. 1)

5.5 Neurodivergent-Positive Discourse

Contrary to the themes outlined above that reaffirm a dominant discursive formation of productive bodies (and labor power), a counter-discourse emerged – what I will refer to as neurodivergent positive – that celebrates autistic pride. Neurodivergent positive discourse was exercised in texts being particularly critical of regressive/ableist components of *As We See It*; or, in texts that were particularly affirmative of autistic personhood. This counter-discourse emphasizes self-determination, or the idea that happiness involves someone who is in charge of their life, doing what is important to them, and who is connected to community – not necessarily “working a nine to five job and living on their own and meeting all their milestones” (Julia Bascom, Executive Director of the Autistic Self Advocacy Network, as cited in Garcia, 2021, p. 110). Neurodivergent positive discourse also emphasizes crip culture in that it imagines crip and autistic futures and sees difference as meaningful (Swain & French, 2010; Yergeau, 2018). Opposing capitalist imperatives, neurodivergent positive discourse emphasized the wisdom, hacks, and skills of disabled people, and/or promotes the importance of interdependence (Hamraie & Fritsch, 2019). The latter stands in stark contrast to themes of (in)dependence, which work to uphold the neoliberal discursive formation of productive bodies (and by extension labor power), as many Critical Disability Studies scholars reject the inter/in-dependent binary noting instead how we come in and out of independence depending on spatiality, temporality, geography, and kinship (Halberstam, 2005; Kafer, 2013; Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018; Sheppard,
Neurodivergent positive discourse was primarily deployed by autistic authors, though not exclusively. For example, autistic writer and blogger, Jonathan Mitchell (2022), rejected the neurodiversity movement and hoped this series, given its depiction of the many hurdles its characters’ encounter, would reinvigorate conversations about cure and treatment. Mitchell’s (2022) position was an outlier when compared to the broader corpus. The majority of self-identifying autistic audiences deployed neurodivergent positive discourse when expressing resonance with moments in the series that celebrated difference; or in critiquing the series for not doing enough to celebrate autistic culture.

“The series truly had an opportunity to show the nuances of an autistic employee in a non-autistic environment and the long-term effects of masking, but unfortunately it did not take that route. It just doesn’t make for good TV” (Treece, 2022, para. 8)

“Real autistic people develop Masking to enable them to interact, often at great psychological cost. Jack shows no signs of this and his Scripting is ‘played for laughs’. Autistic people are often very concerned with not hurting the feelings of others and upset if they accidentally do. Instead of subverting unrealistic stereotypes about Autistic people Jack reinforces them” (Autistic Nottingham, 2022, Slide 4)

“Autism is never shown as a positive in the show. Jack’s pride in his work cause him to be fired and Harrison’s trusting nature gets him into trouble. It is only shown as a disadvantage that prevents the characters from having fulfilling lives. The only brief glimpses of something like a positive Autistic experience are when Autistic characters support each other” (Autistic Nottingham, 2022, Slide 8)

“Additionally, in depicting three adults living with a caretaker in a nonjudgmental way, As We See It makes a genuine effort to fight against the stigma of adults who don’t live
independently, even while depicting some of the stress that can come with disclosing a
living situation like that” (Moffitt, 2022, para. 3)

“When the characters are first introduced, they are almost always in conflict with each
other. In real life, autistic people often find it easier to socialize with other autistics, but
in As We See It, the leads mostly seem to be irritated by each others’ habits and
challenges” (Moffitt, 2022, para. 7)

“It is true that many autistic people mask their autistic traits due to external pressure and
often internalize narratives that they are lesser. However, the series neither critically
examines the origin of these beliefs or their consequences, nor does it do much to show
the flip side of autistic characters learning to be proud of their differences or identities”
(Moffitt, 2022, para. 9)

“This show means so much to me as an autistic adult. So often, it feels like content about
autistic people focuses on children and teens- that content is important and has its place,
but autism doesn't just go away the moment you turn 18. By showing characters who are
full-grown adults with autism getting jobs, navigating relationships, etc, As We See It
gave me characters, I could deeply relate to” (Keener, 2022, para. 11)

“The non-autistic characters say they don’t need to be normal and they’re beautiful as
they are, rather than creating an opportunity for the characters themselves to work
through their own internalized ableism or negative feelings” (Autistic Science Person,
2022, para. 19)

“Look, I think autistic community is great. I think autistic people can and should live
together and care about each other but it has to be on our terms. If this show were about
autistic people who chose to live together and chose to hire an aide to make their lives
easier, that would be one thing. But the arrangement in the show…sends the message that autistic people lack autonomy in their own homes, which if you had in-home aba like I did, can be a major source of pain for you” (Creepypuppets Presents, 2022, 9:40)

“When As We See It dials back the melodrama, as the main trio just sits on a bed together in one episode, it feels downright refreshing. I yearned for more moments like these, where autistic people get to be defined by their interactions with one another rather than being corralled or used as objects for neurotypical people” (Laman, 2022, para. 12-13)

“I know that this kind of thing [forced institutionalization] happens all the time, but it's heartbreaking to watch as an autistic person and it makes me wonder who the audience is supposed to be, because autistic people already know we don't want to live in fucking group homes” (Forest, 2022b)

“For season two, I want to see: - A high masking, late diagnosed or self-diagnosed autistic adult, preferably female or afab. - Violet, Jack, and Harrison make strides to be more independent - not because they have to mask their way through independence, but because the people in their lives (1) meet them where they're at better, (2) give them more leeway to be more independent, and (c) stop infantilizing them/judging them so much…From watching this show, I have gotten the most pleasure out of watching the 3 individual actors, not only in scenes together on the show (which are few and far between without caretakers and guardians), but in interviews and podcasts promoting it” (Twitter User 9, 2022b, series of tweets)

“I bloody love #AsWeSeeIt @AsWeSeeItPV. What wonderful acting, from your Autistic cast! They had a LOT of input, I can tell. One thing, every time someone says ‘have’
Autism it physically and mentally hurts. They are all #AwesomeAutistics #ActuallyAutistic they don't "have" it. (Twitter User 10, 2022)

“I feel like a show that is going to showcase [the challenging parts] of an autistic person’s life also needs to balance it out with the moments where your autism is not just getting in your way. There are very specific struggles but there are also really beautiful and amazing things about being autistic. And there are also a lot of ways that autistic people appreciate their brain and the way it works” (Tacia, 2022, 12:27)

All four themes (potentiality, (in)dependence, functioning, adulting) that constitute the overall identified ableist and neurotypical discourse that valorizes ideal bodies and minds around which autistic people are disciplined as well as the counter-discourse that surfaced (neurodivergent-positive) were informed by and reflect my particular theoretical framework. Each reinforces (or resists) neoliberal understandings of labor power under a capitalist order; and offers a vehicle through which to expose and interrogate discourses and structures that co-constitute ableist understandings of autistic labor in our shared culture.
Conclusion

Introductory Remarks

The 2022 series *As We See It* made efforts to address a long-overlooked gap in the mainstream media landscape. By casting autistic actors in the roles of autistic characters, *As We See It* instigated a critical conversation about the importance of casting autistic actors in the roles of autistic characters. For this, the series was widely praised. All communicative events reviewed for this research highlighted and applauded the series’ casting efforts. The vast majority of the corpus had little if any criticisms to wager against the show. However, this response to the series was far from universal. My research into audience discourse surrounding the show indicated more nuanced reception. Seven texts, which happened to also be published by autistic audiences, were entirely critical, while nine texts negotiated the affordances and constraints of the series. On Twitter, the general sentiment was also mixed: Many took to the platform to express their gratitude for a series that casted its three leads authentically while others expressed disappointment over their character arcs.

As feminist disability media studies scholars will note, representational politics alone is not sufficient to combat the ongoing oppressive nature of disability/neurodivergence visibility in media and entertainment (Cleary, 2018). Examining relations of power and materiality is critical to resist and restructure the existing Hollywood industrial complex. One way these power relations reveal themselves in the context of *As We See It* is through discourses embedded both within and surrounding the show, and it was here the present research was intent on focusing. Equally as unique to *As We See It* but much less discussed relative to the series’ casting efforts was the show’s decision to center a period of time and demographic of autistic people often overlooked across media: the youth precariat.
Research Questions, Revisited

My literature review revealed there is limited existing research exploring depictions of autistic characters on-screen that focuses specifically on their occupations or participation in paid labor. There was also little research on how discourses of autistic labor on-screen reinforce or resist capitalist assumptions, and what potential consequences (whether direct or indirect) these depictions may have on employment. A materialist analytic thus lent itself to the present investigation of popular culture (television) as a site through which capitalist ideals are both discursively reinforced and resisted. Materialist feminism’s orientation toward “emancipatory knowledge” (Hennessy & Ingraham, 1997) and actively creating more just social and economic conditions well with the objectives of Critical Autism Studies. In bridging materialism, Critical Autism Studies, and feminist disability media studies, my objective was to avoid over-determination of structure or culture in either approach. Using Fairclough’s Critical Discourse Analysis as a map, this research sought to explore the following research questions:

1. In what ways does a consideration of autistic labor deepen our understanding of capitalist values surrounding productivity, potential, and worth; independence and interdependence?

2. In what ways does the pilot of As We See It (2022) address questions of autistic labor? Does it move beyond stereotypical constructs of autistic people? Does it challenge, reproduce, or resist ableist understandings of labor in consideration of autism and disability?

3. Who are some of the key audiences for As We See It (2022), and how is their reception of the show’s storylines and narrative arcs reflected online in review articles and on social media? Do discursive practices involving/surrounding the series reproduce or challenge a
RQ1, RQ2, and RQ3 were successfully investigated over the course of this thesis. RQ1 served as an overarching guide throughout my research. Analyzing both the pilot episode and audience reception to the series through the lens of Critical Autism Studies and in specific consideration of autistic labor, allowed for a deeper understanding of capitalist values surrounding productivity, potential, and worth; independence and interdependence. It also indicated the contradictory and exclusionary structures in place for autistic laborers at both the state and corporate level, and how these systems are reproduced and constituted by cultural sites (in the case of the present research, television) and across public/popular discourse.

RQ1 notably helped to inform RQ3 as a Critical Autism Studies-informed approach (in tandem with a materialist feminist analytic) informed my analysis of audience reception and the themes I was attentive to; how these were influenced from a socio-historical perspective and characterize an overall discursive formation of productive bodies (and labor power); and whether they could be labelled as reproducing or challenging a capitalist order. Collecting a broad corpus that accounted for audiences with lived experiences, as well as audiences more broadly, and which accounted for communication styles that did not privilege one medium over another also worked to satisfy RQ3. It did so by ensuring as many key audiences as possible were accounted for in the corpus; and that an exploration of how discourse surrounding the series was presenting across various platforms was taken into account. For example, if only mainstream press articles were considered for this research, the present study would have missed much more nuanced audience discourse occurring over Twitter.

Lastly, RQ2 was addressed by conducting a thorough analysis the pilot episode of As We See It. By delimiting the scope of my research to focus solely on the pilot episode (as opposed to
the entire series), a more robust analysis was made possible and examples were relevant to much of the reviews included as part of the corpus, allowing for cross-referencing of discursive formations present in both the series and in surrounding discourse about the series (as detailed in Chapter 5: Discussion).

**The Pilot**

Within the first six minutes of the *As We See It*’s pilot episode, all three characters’ employment status is introduced and their competencies at work are articulated through scene and story. None of the initial interactions with these characters indicates competency or capability in a work environment. Preparing for employment, seeking employment, obtaining employment, adjusting to work environments, and losing employment are central arcs within the show. Rather than implore structures to change, *As We See It* compels its characters to alter themselves to fit within the confines of an ableist/allistic world. The takeaway at the end of the pilot is that failing to do so leads to punishment (such as losing cell phone ‘privileges’); isolation; rejection; and loss of livelihood – especially as it relates to economic well-being.

Resisting typical neoliberal aspirations may have offered a more radical or subversive angle to this series. Instead, the series hinges its progressiveness on its inclusive casting. For example, historian Yves Rees (2021) explores how disabled people have been denied economic independence – both historically and in the contemporary present – which has led to the creation and discovery of “alternative means of economic organisation, other temporalities, and other metrics of human value and achievement” (p. 20). Generative and creative possibilities can emerge from atypical temporalities that exist beyond a standard punch clock. Harrison, a character who does not have a job, is constantly being conditioned for paid labor – in particular employment at a physical office location. Giving value to Harrison’s life *as is* or perhaps even
considering alternate employment circumstances (such as working from home where he may be more comfortable) are not considered. The other two characters, Jack and Violet, are depicted as fumbling within their employment positions: they are both demoted and/or fired within the first episode, and are, once again, conditioned to better integrate themselves within ableist work environments not designed by/for them (e.g., “making eye contact” and “don’t be yourself”).

**Audience Reception**

Despite the centrality of work and labor conditions in the pilot, the coverage and conversation about the show focused very little on this aspect of the series. Instead, sex and relationships dominated discourse surrounding the series as did its casting – confirming its significance within the industry, and, unfortunately, its exceptionality. However, the discursive contours of this discussion were narrow and mostly framed the significance of casting within the context of representational politics. Despite nodding to the real-world work opportunities for autistic creative practitioners, most texts did not explicitly engage with concepts such as employment, work, and labor. The employment type and status of each character were often listed at the top of a review as general background on the series, however, discussions of autistic labor were largely absent.

Several key themes did emerge during my analysis, however, that characterize an overall discursive formation of productive bodies. This ableist and neurotypical discursive formation demarks specific productive bodies as those who fit the mold of an ideal neoliberal worker and who can keep pace with capitalist modes of production. These productive subjects in-turn possess ultimate labor power. The themes reflected in the corpus which work to characterize this are: (1) potentiality, which suggests hopeful life outcomes (i.e. financial stability) are attainable through masking and conforming to allistic normative behavioral and communicative contours;
(2) (in)dependence, which champions the self-made, independent, adult producer-consumer over mutual aid; (3) functioning constructs, which rank and evaluate autistic bodies and minds as inherently non-functioning; and (4) adulting, which positions autistic young adults as “just like” their non-autistic counterparts and reinforces allism as de facto. These themes constitute an overall discursive formation that valorizes ideal bodies and minds within a capitalist order; namely these are bodies and minds with maximum potential for labor power around which autistic people are disciplined. On the other hand, a counter-discourse emerged – what I refer to as neurodivergent positive – that alternatively celebrated autistic pride, resisted ableist understandings of autism in the series, and challenged the oppressive dominant neoliberal discursive formation of productive bodies.

**Limitations and Future Research**

This research bears limitations not uncommon across graduate research projects. Time constraints largely dictated the scope of this research. As such, my thesis is limited to found data. By drawing upon already existing data, I was able to begin narrowing down the scope of available data to a more manageable quantity. This allowed me to develop an appropriately sized corpus relative to the scale of this project and also meant I did not need to apply for ethics clearance. Where this is particularly limiting, however, is in its lack of collaboration with autistic people. Autistic input is integral to supporting the epistemological validity and emancipatory potential of Critical Autism Studies. Critical Autism Studies has and continues to be an avenue through which autistic persons, scholars, and self-advocates can “reclaim autism narratives” (Woods et al., 2018, p. 977). While imperfect, my work attempts to mind this gap by exploring reception to the series as reviewed online by autistic people: in blog posts, review articles, Twitter threads (connected to #ActuallyAutistic), YouTube videos, and a podcast.
A further limitation to this study is it adopts a particular analytical lens that, for the sake of length and in line with my theoretical framework, prioritizes discussions of labor over other valid readings and analyses of *As We See It*, which were beyond the scope of this thesis. Other researchers may be interested in, for example, deeper investigations into intersectional representations in the series, both on-screen and behind-the-scenes.

Lastly, this research is limited to texts in the English language and is primarily focused on autistic labor conditions in the United States of America as this is where the series takes place. This is somewhere I do not live or have embodied experience as a citizen in that country. This research is focused primarily on higher-income countries as a result of the geographic location in which the series is set. However, different autistic perspectives and cultural perspectives of autism arise within different cultural contexts (O’Dell et al., 2016). Though I exercise caution in my writing to resist replicating medical discourses, a Western perspective of autism has long been informed by the neurobiological perspective, where research on genes, the brain, childhood development, and environmental influences has been historically dominant across academic discourse about autism (O’Dell et al., 2016).

Future research on autistic labor is needed, especially research reflective of labor conditions in lower- and middle-income countries. Even fewer studies exist investigating *mediated* depictions of autistic labor. In either instance, research that involves autistic persons and participants with lived experiences would offer significant depth to the scope of knowledge generated by these studies. Specific to research about the present series, *As We See It*, focus groups would have greatly bolstered discussions of autistic labor, as specific discussion points aligned with the present study’s research questions could have been raised and engaged with. The present research touched only briefly on the representational politics of the series; however,
a greater exploration of representation within the series and how it conforms-to or challenges dominant depictions of autistic characters and storylines in film and television would be interesting. Lastly, *As We See It* is based on the Israeli Comedy-Drama *On The Spectrum* (2018). A comparative analysis of both series, their casting process, production teams, story lines, material labor conditions, and audience reception would work to further address gaps in the research.

**Final Thoughts**

Though there has been an increase in disability/autistic representation on-screen – important for the formation of identity and shared community among disabled/neurodivergent audiences and exposing able-bodied/neurotypical audiences to embodied experiences beyond their own – access to leadership roles in production, writer’s rooms, financing, and more, are key to greater structural equity. *As We See It* often conformed to well-established, harmful ableist tropes – perhaps to maximize potential monetary/audience reach – and in doing so seemed written for an *autism* audience more than an *autistic* audience. Until meaningful opportunity among crews and creatives is established as the new status quo, inaccurate portrayals of equity-seeking groups will persist as will the perpetuation of hegemonic structures and Western capitalist values that do little to reflect the possibility of alternate labor outcomes – for young adults, autistic or not, and people more broadly. In the meantime, based on audience reception reviewed for the present research, television making an effort in some capacity, such as *As We See It*, offer certain reprieve for disabled and autistic audiences seeking entertainment. And as shows like *As We See It* become entrenched in the cultural lexicon, these series offer audiences hope by setting new precedents (on-screen and behind-the-scenes) upon which future film and television will be expected to build.
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