It is not uncommon to run into inspirational and sensational photographs, videos or other media artifacts of disabled people doing what are, typically, ordinary things. Often, these pieces are accompanied by statements that add to the piece's inspirational value.

Recently, I came across a Tumblr post by Amythest Schaber (2015), who runs a blog called Neurowonderful, which included screen captures of a Tweet by Autism Canada. Autism Canada is an organization that provides informational resources for autistic people and their families, and leads national policy and research initiatives related to autism. The Tweet by Autism Canada contained an attached image.

The image is of a toddler who is looking through a window with their hands pressed against it. The toddler appears also to be looking at their reflection. There is a quote attributed to Deya Velasco overlaid on the image just above the toddler that reads, “Children with autism are mirrors to see how good we can be”. Below, in the bottom left corner, is Autism Canada’s logo along with the words “see the spectrum differently”. Just above the logo is the hashtag #AutismCanada.

This picture and its accompanying Tweet are an example of what is called “inspiration porn”. Stella Young (2014) and Phillipa Willitts (2012) describe inspiration porn as images of disabled people that are used to send a message, typically to non-disabled people either to help
them feel better about themselves, or to guilt them into doing things that they do not want to do. Shapiro (1994) adds that the inspirational disabled subject is thought of as touching by non-disabled people, but regarded as offensive and violent by disabled people. Normally, the intention of these images is to show non-disabled people that their lives “could be worse”, or that they have no excuse not to do what they should be doing (Young, 2014). Images such as this one often objectify disabled people, and are immersed in stereotypes about disabled people (Young, 2014). These images are objectifying because they reduce disabled individuals to their disabilities, and then use their disabilities as props (Willitts, 2012). Images of inspiration porn also imply that disabled people only deserve pity if they are able to overcome their limitations (Shapiro, 1994). Additionally, these images often end up erasing the daily struggles disabled people face, and do nothing to bring to the forefront the real issues that disabled people deal with in their daily lives such as inaccessibility and discrimination (Shapiro, 1994; Willitts, 2012). Yet, if disabled people point out the problems with how they are being represented, they are often told that they are being ungrateful or that they are overreacting (Young, 2012).

Looking back at the Autism Canada image, I find it interesting to note that Autism Canada gives a very specific view of what they think autistic people look like, and their view of what autistic people look like reifies current stereotypes pertaining to autistic people. The child in the image is white or light-skinned, male-coded and is, to state the obvious, a toddler. This evokes a particular image of autism that is repeated quite consistently within the media and by many autism organizations such as Autism Canada (Hilker, 2012). Images of autistic people in the media are very often images of white boys (Hilker, 2012; Stevenson, Harp, & Gernsbacher, 2011). This has resulted in the belief that autism is a disorder that only affects boys (Mandavilli, 2015), and in the under-diagnosis or delayed diagnosis of autism.
amongst children of colour (Mandell, Listerud, Levey, & Pinto-Martin, 2002). Furthermore, autistic adults have been made largely invisible since the vast amount of media attention is predominately focused on autistic kids (Stevenson, et al., 2011). Using a toddler instead of an adult in the picture adds to the erasure of autistic adults and feeds the incorrect belief that autism is something that can be “grown out of” (Stevenson, et al., 2011). Autism Canada’s choice of autistic representation, therefore, has implications for how people view autistic people, and implies that only certain autistic people can be considered “inspirational”.

“Children with autism are mirrors to see how good we can be”, says Deya Velasco (n.d.). This implies that autistic children are only reflective surfaces and, as reflective surfaces, they do not have their own agency or subjectivity; they can only reflect the supposed goodness of their parents or caretakers. Additionally, the quote implies that autistic children cannot provide anything of value, or of their own making to the world. Autistic children exist only to reflect the people in their lives and must mirror “good behaviour”. It also suggests that autistic people are only around for the benefit of others while at the same time it underestimates the abilities of autistic people (Shapiro, 1994). Furthermore, it also proposes that the existence of autistic people is facilitated by those around them such as their parents, caregivers and organizations, thereby eliminating autistic individuals’ autonomy and assuming lack of ability. The intention of the image and statement is to make the non-autistic parents of autistic children feel better about themselves, which is exactly what Young (2012) talks about in her article regarding inspiration porn and images of disabled children and disabled people. It implies that non-autistic caregivers of autistic children and adults are “good people” for “dealing with” autistic people. This then feeds into the “burden” stereotype about disabled people, and frames families and caregivers of disabled people as “heroes” for “putting up with” disabled children and adults while positioning the
disabled individual as a problem (Piepmeier, 2012).

The child in the image is also not named and is quite literally compared to an object – a mirror. Their humanity is removed and they are reduced to an object. Dehumanization and deindividuation is a tactic that is relied upon in order to display disabled people as objects of inspiration to non-disabled people (Willitts, 2012). The quote also works to exceptionalize autistic people, and essentially claims that autistic people are inspirational for just being autistic (Young, 2014). This claim ignores that autistic people, and disabled people in general, are just trying to live their own lives, but the objectification and exceptionalization of their lives makes it very difficult to do so because of the added expectations of being considered “inspirational” (Young, 2014). Therefore, images of inspiration porn, such as this one, are never really about disability, but are rather about how disability is used in a particular way by non-disabled people to bolster non-disability.

I think this particular picture, and the other images that Autism Canada has tweeted, is also used to foster awareness and acceptance of autistic people, as is implied by their slogan “see the spectrum differently”. Yet, I cannot help but find this venture rather ironic since Autism Canada suggests the use of harmful biomedical procedures and therapies to “treat” autism. Treatments such as chelation – a procedure typically used to treat heavy metal poisoning (Autism Canada, n.d.) – and Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) – a therapy that uses learning theory in order to modify behaviour (Baer, Wolf, & Risley, 1968) show that Autism Canada understands autism as something which needs to be remedied. Chelation as a treatment for autism originates from the belief that mercury in the Mumps-Measles-Rubella vaccine causes autism (Gould Soloway, 2011). This belief has been debunked by multiple scientific studies (Gould Soloway, 2010), yet chelation is still used even though it is a highly dangerous and deadly practice that has resulted in the death of an autistic child (Gould Soloway, 2011). Autistic self-advocates have rallied against ABA because of the ther-
apy’s coercive and abusive tactics, and that the focus of the therapy is the normalization of autistic people (Sequenzia, 2015). Therefore, the sources of these “inspirational” images come into question as it is often the case that the people and organizations behind them support the treatment or curing of disabled people, at any cost, while also portraying them as objects of pity and/or inspiration (Shapiro, 1994).

Furthermore, the picture does nothing to combat the prevailing narratives about autism or disability in general. Inspirational images rely on and re-use the framing of disability as tragic and as a problem needing to be solved in order to make non-disabled people feel better about their lives and themselves (Shapiro, 1994). These narratives are very often internalized by both disabled people and non-disabled people, which contributes to ableist attitudes and actions (Shapiro, 1994).

The opportunity for non-disabled people to think about disability differently is overshadowed by inspirational images of disabled people, and this picture also fails to provide that opportunity. Even though the “feel good” quote suggests one can be a better person by just being around autistic children, just being in the presence of a disabled person does not make a non-disabled person “better” or necessarily a good person. The quote focuses solely on the feelings of non-autistic people – most likely parents and caregivers of autistic children – and provides no insight into the lives of autistic people. Inspirational images of disabled people strip away agency from the person or people they are representing and tell stories suited for the good feelings of a non-disabled audience.

Inspirational images of disabled people do not advance disability activism and the struggle for liberation (Willitts, 2012). The Autism Canada picture merely attempts to target the feelings of a non-disabled audience through exceptionalizing autistic children, and by doing so, it hinders the advancement of liberation by allowing non-disabled people to be complacent in the systemic discrimination of disabled people. Images such as this one allow non-disabled people to distance
themselves from disability and the structural issues that allow for the oppression of disabled people, by dismissing disability as something that can be overcome, corrected, or is merely the result of a bad attitude (Shapiro, 1994; Smith, 2014; Willitts, 2012).

Autism Canada’s picture exemplifies inspiration porn, and in doing so re-produces controlling images that surround autism – that it is a disability that only affects boys, affects white children only, and lasts only in childhood (Mandavilli, 2015; Stevenson, et al., 2011). The picture’s inspirational content objectifies, dehumanizes and exception-alizes autistic people while it panders to the feelings of a non-autistic audience. Autistic people’s stories and lives are not represented in the image – as is typical of inspiration porn – but their lives are used as inspirational content for the benefit of non-autistic people who are presumably parents and caregivers of autistic children. As a result, the opportunity to think critically about disability and ableism is missed, and these images contribute to the furthering of ableist attitudes and behaviours.

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Vaccines-Do-Not-Cause-Autism


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