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Can we be too alive together? A conversation with Chris Martin on poetry, autism, and our neurodivergent future

HEIDI ANDREA RESTREPO RHODES · SEPTEMBER 26, 2022



As a poet and scholar exploring disability poetics in my own work and life, I am enlivened by unconventional writing and teaching that weave concerns of disability justice with expansively imaginative approaches to language and its liberatory potential. I first learned of Chris Martin's work through conversation with poets Hannah Emerson and Aviv

Nisinzweig, who are both involved in [Unrestricted Interest](#), a community writing project that centers neurodiversity. Martin and I soon connected, and our conversations revealed



to language. He curates *Multiverse*, a series of neurodivergent writing from Milkweed Editions. Martin, who says he teaches and learns in mutual measure, has recently released *May Tomorrow Be Awake: On Poetry, Autism, and Our Neurodiverse Future* (HarperOne, 2022), a book that celebrates his ethos through featuring poetry by his students and the lessons they learn in writing together along the way.

Martin's approach to teaching poetry to autistic students refuses long-standing educational and medical models that view autism as a condition of minimal or limited internal and social life culminating in anti-relationality, lack of intelligence, and imaginative capacity. What he and his students show in *May Tomorrow Be Awake* are vital lessons offered by neurodiverse orientations to the world as they explore possibilities that poetry engenders for the vibrancy of language, life, and connection.

Martin and I spoke about the concept of consensual togetherness, deep listening as mutual pedagogy, the politics of refusing neurotypical expectations for the classroom and knowledge, human and more-than-human relationships, and what he and his students dream for neurodiverse futures.

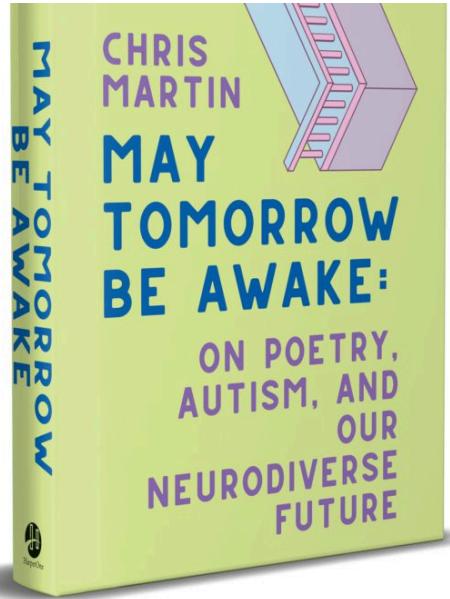
The Rumpus: I'd like to begin with one of your own interview strategies you write about in *May Tomorrow Be Awake*: What's the first question you wish someone would ask?

Chris Martin: I love that you open with a reference to Lonnie Shaw, who is such an important part of the book. One of Lonnie's incomparable poems is titled "All the Things Chris Doesn't Know." Lonnie writes: "He doesn't know how to live / in a group home his whole life. // He doesn't know you'll be better off / if you just stay in your room / and don't say nothing / not even good morning." I *didn't* know these things, and still don't, except through the force of Lonnie's expression, so I am endlessly grateful for the way Lonnie and others continue to open me up to the always more of what I don't know.



and achievements can all, when wielded lightly, present a kind of support for the writers I work with, but as we've moved toward mutual exchange, the traditional hierarchies just don't seem accurate anymore. We don't merely meet alongside, but, as my friend Imane Boukaila writes, [we also meet at the periphery](#). At this point, what feels most apt is just to say that we are friends and fellow wanderers.

Rumpus: That sentiment is also woven through how you elaborate on your work as a practice of *listening*—as a pedagogical, methodological, and editorial imperative—which is counter to ableist and capitalist formations of education, writing, and publishing. Can you say more about what it means to you to listen (which we distinguish from an exclusionary *hearing*) and how deep and attentive listening as a sensorial and relating mode of living attunes you to a disability justice ethic and ethos beyond the individuated, authoritative mode of teacher-expert?



Martin: Thank you for such a generous question. Where the teacher-expert-authority is taught to approach the classroom from the front and the top, ready to talk and talk and talk about knowledge that has already been calcified, I have found learning occurs most vibrantly and authentically when we find ourselves alongside, ready to listen, eager to wander, and trusting that unexpected knowledge will come to us. For those who have been shaped by the American school system, this other way of being together requires a transition from tuition to intuition. We must arrive in the room ready for "the rally," as Adam Wolfond calls it. It's political because we are choosing to refuse neurotypical modes of knowledge. But it's also playful, like tennis, because the rally involves a fully corporeal mode of listening to each other as unexpected knowledge caroms back and forth between us, sometimes gaining momentum, sometimes slowing down as meaning is sliced and curved. All this time, we make space for the expressivity of tics and stims, of grounding sounds and long annotative discharging hums.

It's free. Not just because we are allowing all of who we are to surface, but also because what's being "produced" has not been predetermined. The writing that arises will also not be corrected, critiqued, professionalized, or commodified, though we will have nuanced



literacies.”

The problems of the predetermined stem from what Fernand Deligny called “the thought-out project.” Whenever a teacher enters a classroom having predetermined the course of events, the potential for real learning has already been subsumed into the thought-out project. And crucially, as Sylvia Wynter teaches us, Man is itself a thought-out project. Schools are designed to recapitulate the thought-out project of Man so as to sustain white supremacy, racial capitalism, and nationalist individualism. In order to evade the capture of Man, we must learn other ways of learning. Luckily, we don’t need experts to do this. We just need each other. We need to show up, make space, slow down, tune in, and listen. We need to, as Adam writes, “game the space.” We need to, as Hannah writes, ask ourselves, “Is my ear deep or deeper?”

Rumpus: In your words I sense a kinship between “the writing and what *it* wants,” the atmospheres as participatory in creative life, and the freedom in your classroom for neurodivergent bodies to be themselves and move as they want. In a western, ableist, hyper-rationalist Cartesian world organized through racial capitalism—where nature, disabled bodies, and poems are not viewed as agentive or as forms of life that could even know what they want—this kinship of animate literacies brings neurodivergent desire into intimate relationship with language and the more-than-human world, and the desires of language and more-than-human life into intimate relationship with neurodivergent artists and thinkers. It strikes me that all three of these things evade the “thought-out” insofar as normative culture’s enclosure and containment of their possibilities means the vast and rich life in them remains, to an extent, opaque and therefore out of reach.

I’m thinking too, about Hannah Emerson’s insistence that she is not human (and how much that resonates with my own orientation to being!) I’m curious to know how in your thinking and teaching both, you hold the tension between there being a need to further humanize disabled people in order to shift the social and political terrain of how we are understood and treated, how policies are enacted toward or away from our well-being, for instance—and this refusal of the liberal conception of the human, of what Sylvia Wynter



this push to humanize disabled lives while also reveling in the way disabled writers themselves push so far past our currently impoverished concept of the human, often hoping to unfold all the animal and plant rememberings from which we've been cloistered. Sid writes of "gilled life," while Hannah writes of "the language of leaves." Adam writes of "owls easy on the ways of language," while Imane writes, "I think like a trout, reshaping my way." And alongside animal and plant life, Mark and Max Eati write about "a volcano named Eati," while Adam writes about "partly laking," and Hannah writes, "I am the drowning helpful freedom of the storm." These various modes or sways or rhythms of becoming do indeed pulse in constellation, as you so beautifully put it, because they are inherently ecological; an ongoing study of relation that exceeds neuronormative, supremacist, and capitalist frameworks.

To give a more specific example, Hannah writes in front of a large window overlooking a verdant field with woods beyond. We meet over Zoom every Monday morning and there will often be more-than-human visitors who join us from the other side of the pane. They have entered Hannah's poems more times than I can count, but this particular poem from her collection, *The Kissing of Kissing*, perhaps says it best:

Into the Towards

I go helped
by the keepers
of the beautiful

helpful beautiful helpful
thoughts of wonder.

The bird lands

on the top
of the tree
and realizes it



its birdness. Then we
decide to become

one. Together we
become the dream
of this life

now. We melt
into the void
because that is

keeping reality real.

Rumpus: I also love this use of rally you are exploring, and it makes me think, too, of the poetics of *riot*, which I return to often, in its registers as rebellion or uprising, unrestrained revelry, and an array of bright colors, such as a riot of flowers. The rally as a political gathering, as a mobilization of energies toward something, as the exchange of *play*—the tennis match, the dance and dialectic, and as you mention, “the way we together allow otherwise curricula to surface carries its own political valence.” This notion of the otherwise of the political is increasingly alive across different social movements, and has been vital in Disability Justice work given the challenges many of us face in participating in the kinds of organizing that are seen as legitimately political: marching in the streets, for instance. The classroom, the poetry workshop, a room full of neurodivergent poetry-making, poesis, as its own rally, makes a claim to the political tenor of the gathering together and work of languaging itself.

How do you see this poetics and politics of rally expressing itself on the day-to-day, and in what ways is it expanding accessibility for your students without reducing access to accommodation?



architectures without and within the body. The question becomes, “Can we be too alive together?”

Most of the work I do is one-on-one (though in truth it is never one-on-one, since there are always others providing typing/regulation/emotional support), but lately we’ve been experimenting with other ways of working and learning together, of seeking what we’ve come to call “a weightless learning.” It involves gathering on Zoom, turning our mics off, starting with a simple prompt to give us some collective direction, and then simply writing in the chat. One of Sid’s poems gave us our initial rhythm: “I am rivers / of thought. Teach me / your current current.” We allow the writing to surface one line at a time, stacked and tressed in the chat like a braiding of currents, helping us attune to certain lessons, certain learnings, that we could never have anticipated or developed individually. Whereas speaking in the classroom can feel so intense and leaden with expectation, we’ve found this way of learning together feels like ceremony, like medicine. And the writing that surfaces is simply exhilarating.

At its core, the neurodiversity paradigm declares: We are more than we are. There are things we can accomplish individually, but they often pale before the wonders we find together. And then there is the component of pleasure. What brings us more joy—scribbling alone or wayfinding with friends? The joy we feel is a blooming of abundance, or what Robin Wall Kimmerer calls [in her essay collection, *Braiding Sweetgrass*] “mutual flourishing.” It is our remarkable ability to come together, think together, and sing together in complementary ways that create overtones of meaning. When we are constantly asked to compete, that abundance is shattered. We learn to individually seek out unsustainable gains by destructive means. But if we can remember the ways our bodyminds want to be, in relation with each other and in relation with the animate land, our creative potential—for learning, for joy, for healing—can finally re-reveal itself.

Rumpus: The ability to access that creative potential relies so much on relation, both in and outside the classroom setting! In your seventh chapter, “Becoming Rainbow Man,” you talk about your lessons with your student, Lonnie Shaw, the space Lonnie had to unburden his



each of your students, so that the work of unburdening the heart, opening to imaginative work, and building meaningful relation, can happen?

Martin: I was just thinking yesterday about the complicated interplay of opacity and transparency. Autistic life is often portrayed as inherently opaque, as judged by neurotypical standards. But opacity is also a strategy, helping us avoid the surveillance and capture of distorted representation the state demands. In the first poem Lonnie wrote with me, he identified with cephalopods, who “ink a blackish purple everywhere.” Opacity is resistance and poetry is an art form that allows opacity to thrive.

But the trust I build with other neurodivergent writers begins with our transparency. We meet each other where we are and as we are. Who can articulate all the ways in which that openness is communicated? But there is something about beginning at the periphery. I love the feeling of first meeting another neurodivergent writer, where one of us hazards something askew: an observation, a sound, a movement. When the other picks it up with delight, like what Adam Wolfond calls the ball of thought, and throws it back, a momentum accrues. It’s like, oh, we can just go there? The periphery? Together? And within that momentum, I perceive a process of what my student, Amelia Bell, calls *unshunning*. In unshunning the other, we unshun ourselves. We unshun together. With gentle exuberance. With otherwise joy.

Rumpus: That interplay between strategic opacity and transparent opening toward the joy of together, feels so much a part of various decolonial and anti-normative projects, projects of world-building in the otherwise and the along of the periphery. At the end of your book, you write, “Echoing author and activist Toni Cade Bambara, my dream is to make the neurodiverse future, and the liberation that is its promise, *irresistible*.”

For me, the stories you tell, and the insight and ingenuity of your autistic student-poets, make neurodiversity so much more than pathology, and invite us as readers into the irresistible liberatory project that it can be. What, for you, has been the most enduring



within which we arrive together, conditions that sometimes appear in the guise of perfunctory accessibility checklists or under the rubric of accommodations, can really *be* the work if we are listening with deeper ears. The way we arrange the conditions of our togetherness can allow all the writing to happen that beckons to happen.

To borrow a blurred rhyme from Hannah, the conditions of consensual togetherness are the *beacon* that *beckons* our neurodiverse future, which often heralds itself by way of writing. And it brings me such joyful relief to understand how that future is here, is heralded in the here, is already happening in the way we hear each other and listen to each other and language back.

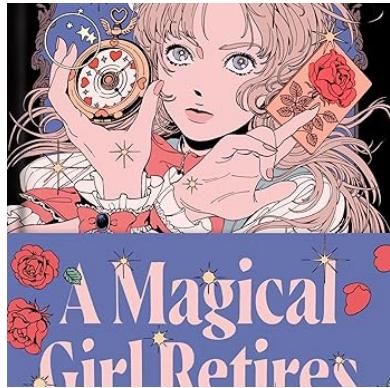
This morning I met with my student, Mark, as I do every Thursday morning. It is from Mark's poem that the title of my book (*our* book) arises. When I shared this final question of yours with Mark, he smiled and his chest lifted and he wrote, letter by letter: "I'm so relieved to start feeling *May Tomorrow Be Awake*. I've been in exuberant joy and have to stop to make sure I am still breathing."

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heidi andrea restrepo rhodes

heidi andrea restrepo rhodes (she/her) is a queer, brown, disabled poet, scholar, educator, and cultural worker. Her poetry collection, *The Inheritance of Haunting* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2019) won the 2018 Letras Latinas Andrés Montoya Poetry Prize. She currently lives and



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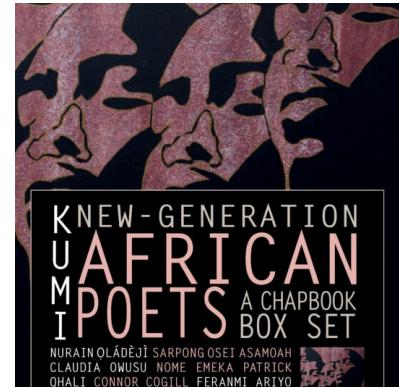


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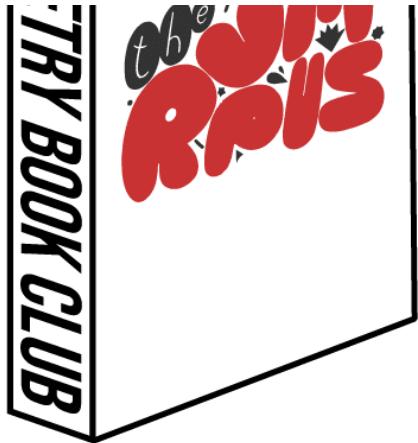
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