

**Teetering on the edge of surplus:
Neurodivergent work, social reproduction, and bodyminds in the Ontario labour market**

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ABSTRACT

Disabled workers have received scarce attention from labour geography, revealing a productivist tendency within the field. In this study, I employ neurodiversity as a position of epistemic authority. Using twenty-two semi-structured interviews, I explore how neurodivergent workers navigate a neoliberal labour market characterized by polarization, precarity, and emotional labour. While many neurodivergent adults are pushed into the classic lumpenproletarian, my study reveals that a segment become the ‘liminal lumpenproletariat,’ workers who consciously occupy positions of persistent precarity to agentively manage their disability. I argue that these workers act at multiple geographic scales to manage their neurodivergence with high temporal, financial, social, and mental costs. My conclusions draw from Cripistemological co-creation to imagine alternative neurodivergent visions of work. Altogether, this thesis asserts that the costs of managing disablement under capitalism offer novel insights into labour geography scholarship, (dis)abling its current narrative of precarious work.

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I've always said that I think best out loud. Even better, I think best in conversation where ideas become alive. The following thesis was only possible because of my neurodivergent community; it is merely a container for numerous interconnected ideas we discussed over the last three years. Thank you, Kristin, Leigh, Sophia, Patricia, and many more, for all the thinking we did together in the most bizarre times and places.

I have also always said I am the descendent of two neurodivergent houses (not alike in dignity); my Autistic matriline and ADHD patriline. To those I have (or had) the pleasure to know – Baba, Grandpa, Mom, Dad, Auntie Leena, Brigitte, Westley, and Charlie – and those I never met who but passed along the traits for better or worse – Mary Kathleen, Joanne, Annie, and Joseph – I am so grateful to be here just as I am.

To the most neurotypical person I know: thanks for loving me, Olivia.

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This research was conducted on stolen land, the gathering place known as Tkaronto, the place where trees stand in the water, and in an institution on the territory of the Wendat, Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee and Mississaugas of the Credit River. As a settler whose ancestors were complicit in land theft, I am deeply grateful to work and live here.

For everyone reading this, my pronouns are they/them. Get it right.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

ND: Neurodivergent

LG: Labour geography

CSD: Canadian Survey on Disability

LM: Labour market

ASD: Autism Spectrum Disorder

ADHD: Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

AuDHD: Comorbid ASD & ADHD

OCD: Obsessive Compulsive Disorder

MDD: Major Depressive Disorder

DJ: Disability Justice

DRM: Disability Rights Movement

CDS: Critical Disability Studies

CNS: Critical Neurodiversity Studies

NDM: Neurodivergent Marxism

RAL: Reserve army of labour

LL: Liminal lumpenproletariat

SRT: Social Reproductive Theory

LP: Labour power

CHAPTER 1: A Problem of Divergent Work

1.1 Neurodivergence in Canada: Generational Shifts

My grandfather, Peter Fry, was an odd man. I noticed it from a young age, by the way he would talk to the air over your head to avoid direct eye contact. The eldest of 11 children, Grandpa Pete entered the workforce as a teenager. He was already hard drinking at that point. After his family business went under, Pete struggled to find work. In an eventual new job, his alcoholism became dysfunctional enough that he was offered either rehab or dismissal; eventually, he retired early on disability. To keep their family of six afloat through Pete's employment struggles, my grandma, Betty-Lou, returned to the workforce and started small businesses. My mother recalls these as the years of powdered milk.

My mother Elizabeth was an odd woman. I noticed it in the way strangers sometimes looked at her. Her appearance – garish colours and hair she often cut herself – stood out next to the professionally coiffed lululemon moms we rubbed shoulders with during my upwardly mobile childhood. At 10 years old, I did not care. She was my hero – smart as a whip and protective of her three 'sensitive' children. In her career, Elizabeth was a high achiever and highly paid consultant. She almost did her PhD. Yet, by her late 40s, she was floundering under the weight of motherhood and class performance. Through her 50s, she reinvented career paths; once, she bought professional photography equipment. Another year, she went to clown school. Like her father Pete, Elizabeth was also an alcoholic. When the booze ceased to sooth the anxiety and depression, she ran away from us. At 18, I swore I would never be like her.

I was also odd, but I tried not to notice. Instead, I memorized pages of poetry and facts about history. I chattered excessively and interrupted everyone, including teachers mid-lesson. During middle school, I kept my nose so firmly in a book that I failed to notice I was being viciously bullied. My parents called me an old soul. When I was 18, I decided that if I wanted to survive in this world and have any sort of stable work, old soul would not cut it – I needed to become 'normal.' I tried my best. My first job was at a restaurant, where I memorized social scripts and followed the formal uniform of black dress and heels just as closely as I followed the informal one – hair, makeup, and casual conversation among the 20-something hosts. Carving off my square edges got disrupted, however, when I turned 21 and I discovered a word for myself – and from it, a revelation. Rather than *odd*, *quirky*, or *annoying*, suddenly I was diagnosed as neurodivergent.

The term neurodivergence demarcates “perceived variations seen in cognitive, affectual, and sensory functioning differing from the majority of the general population or ‘predominant neurotype,’ more usually known as the ‘neurotypical’ population” (Rosqvist et al. 2020, 1). This includes diagnoses such as Autism, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, dyspraxia, Tourette's, and

sometimes mental health related neurological differences such as obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) and Major Depressive Disorder (MDD). Its originators Blume (1997) & Singer (1999) drew from the concept of biodiversity to replace older medicalized and pathologized descriptions with a concept that viewed neurological difference as being “as important for the survival of the human species as biological diversity of distinct species has been seen as essential to life in general” (in Rosqvist et al. 2020, 5-6).

Grandpa Pete died when I was 17. He would never hear the word neurodivergent, much less apply it to himself. Pete had only ever been ‘odd’ – any more medicalized words in his time were much more condemning. While teachers in Canada tried to beat the strangeness out of my grandfather, doctors in Austria began classifying children like him as ‘Autistic psychopaths’ (Czech 2018). In line with National Socialist ‘race hygiene,’ Hans Asperger (1939) determined which ‘high functioning’ Autistic children might be re-educated to “not be a burden and danger to the national community, but its productive members” and which were to be euthanized (in Czech 2018, 16).

My mother, after being sober for 5 years, learned the word neurodivergent from me. A world opened for her. When she was a child, only boys or ‘nonverbal’ children had Autism and ADHD. She was weird but a teacher’s pet, so she masked her neurodivergent traits and achieved a normal life – until she crumbled under the exhaustion and psychological distress. Price (2023, 3) notes that “for decades, Autistic boys have outnumbered girls at a ratio of 4 to 1” (figure 1).

Today, psychologists make the distinction between high or low functioning Autistics rather than the previous labels of Asperger’s and Autism. Notable Autistic scholar Devon Price (2022, 67) articulates the online neurodivergent community’s critique of such psychiatric and psychological terminology, asserting that these labels prioritize the appearance of normalcy and “fail to recognize the immense, hidden labor that goes into appearing normal.” Price (2022, 9) articulates the experiences of masked Autism, or “any presentation of the disability that deviates from the standard image we see in most diagnostic tools and nearly all media portrayals of Autism [usually observed amongst] any Autistic person whose suffering wasn’t taken seriously for reasons of class, race, gender, age, lack of access to health care, or the presence of other conditions.” Masked Autism is usually characterized by mimicry and camouflaging to appear neurotypical, often at great expense. Price (2022, 29) contrasts this with typical Autism, a manifestation of the neurotype that “is visible from an early age and usually results in a diagnosis by the time a child is in early elementary school.”

My grandpa, my mother, and I all would have been classified as high functioning, had we not been missed along the way. Never mind the rampant alcoholism, the depression, the unstable careers, and firings. Never mind our neglected homes and neglected health. We were not so obviously disabled. We

were ‘verbal,’ ‘intellectual,’ and ‘productive.’ Yet, we three existed on the edge of a diagnosis that has slowly been reshaped over the last decade by the grassroots activism of the growing neurodivergent community. When comparing the experiences of neurodivergent people in Canada across my own family’s generations, much has changed dramatically and rapidly. These patterns also emerge at the level of the Canadian population.

This study examines the experience of those neurodivergent workers, like my family, who perch at the boundary of ‘abled’ and ‘disabled.’ Moving from anecdotal to qualitative data, I interviewed 22 neurodivergent workers from diverse backgrounds, ages, and positions in the labour market to study how they understand, experience, and cope with liminal disablement under advanced capitalism. Their reflections revealed flaws within the traditional Marxist binary conceptions of the reserve army of labour (RAL) and the underclass. In its place, I co-create two novel concepts: liminal lumpenproletariat (LL) & teetering.

Typically, Marxist scholars theorize disabled workers as the lumpenproletariat – an underclass depressed out of the labour market – yet note they are periodically pulled into the reserve army to maintain low wages (Marx & Engels 1848; Malhotra & Russell 2002). This study instead theorizes neurodivergent workers as the liminal lumpenproletariat – a segment of workers situated within this capitalist contradiction, who consciously occupy a threshold position in the labour market and agentially manage their disability to avoid falling into the underclass. I describe these geographic strategies (agentive behaviours taken across multiple sites including the body, labour market, and work-home environment) as teetering. Teetering enables the LL to adapt to the advanced capitalist labour market of Ontario yet takes a significant toll and results in the normalization of precarity for ND workers. This MA thesis thus uses labour geography, an approach that takes worker agency seriously, and locates neurodivergence as a position of epistemic authority – as a perspective from which intimate knowledge of the capitalist system emerges.

1.2 Neurodivergence: Definition and Presence

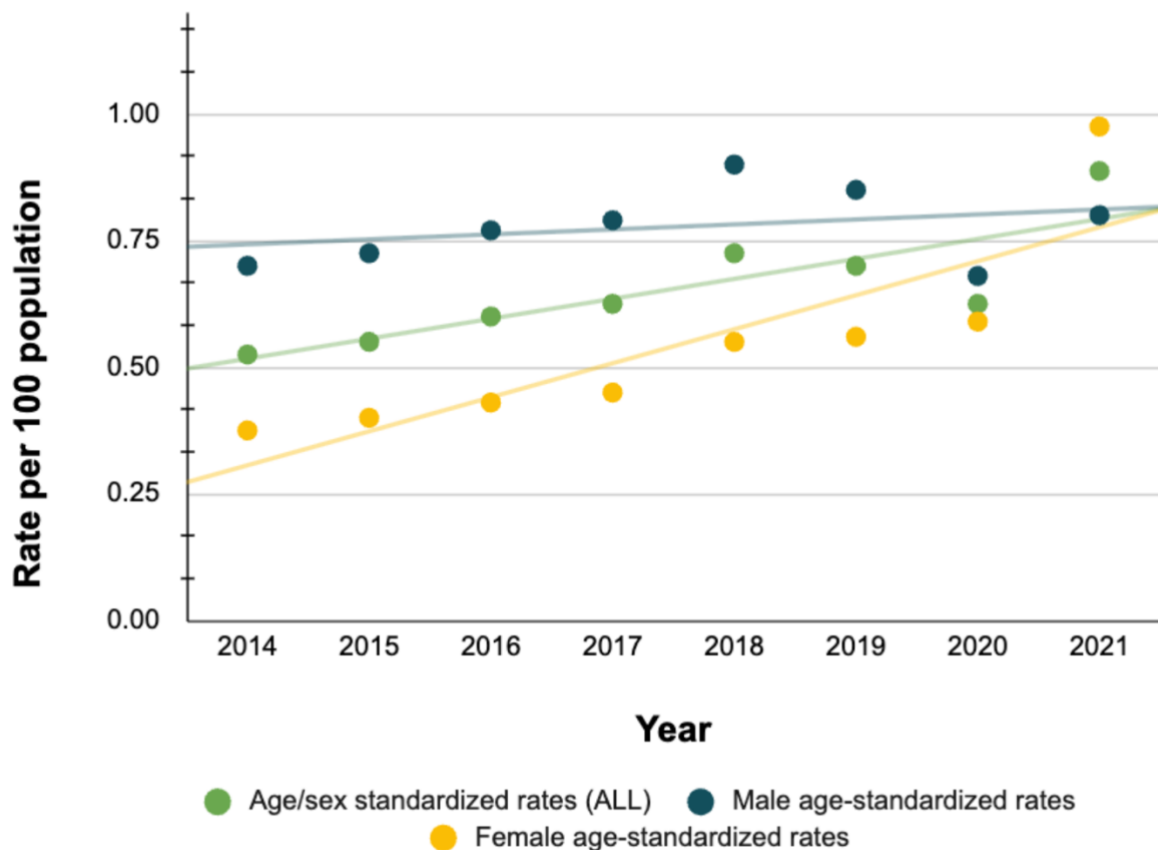
Over the past ten years, neurodivergence has gradually been adopted by increasing numbers of people. Particularly there have been shifts in how neurodiversity is understood to show up in adults – ADHD, for example, has moved from something understood as a childhood ‘disorder,’ to a lifelong neurotype (Conrad & Potter 2000). Many who were misdiagnosed or missed as children are receiving “late diagnoses” – an experience common to gender marginalized and/or racialized people, whose neurodivergence often goes underdiagnosed due to biased research and standards of evaluation (Hinshaw et al. 2022; Pellicano et al. 2020). For myself and many others, receiving a diagnosis transforms life,

bringing with it community and understanding that I would have thought impossible at 10, alone with my book on the playground.

Estimating the exact numbers of neurodivergent (ND) adults in the Canadian population is a task challenged by the fact that the census does not yet recognize or query respondents about neurodiversity. Currently, neurotypes under the ND umbrella are dispersed across other disability categories. For instance, “dyslexia, hyperactivity, attention problems, etc.” were categorized by the 2022 Canadian Survey on Disability (CSD) as learning disabilities (StatCan 2023c). That year, a total of 1,650,060 Canadians aged 15 or older (3.97% of the population) were categorized “as persons whose daily activities are limited because of a self-identified learning difficulty or a learning disability diagnosed by a health care professional” (StatCan 2024b). This represents an increase from the 2012 Canadian Survey on Disability, in which 622,300 of Canadians aged 15 and older (or 2.3%) had a learning disability (StatCan 2015). In fact, learning disabilities were found to be the second most prevalent type of disability among youth aged 15 to 24 in 2022 at 46%, after mental-health related disabilities at 68% (StatCan 2024b).

Figure 1

Annual sex standardized rates of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) in Ontarian youth and children aged 1–24 years (Butt et al., 2024)



Autism diagnoses are found in their own section on the 2020 Canadian Survey on Disability, which determined that “60,000 or 1% of Canadians aged 15+ are living with a disability and ASD being among the two medical conditions causing them the most difficulty” (StatCan 2023c). Within the census, there is no distinction made between typical and masked Autism. Indeed, the results, which are skewed male (representing ~60% of the respondents) and young (with ages 15-25 representing ~50%), reveal the usual pitfalls of such limiting schema (StatCan 2022b). It is possible that the current census questions fail to capture adults who are recognizing their neurotype later in life due to masked Autism. As Grosvenor et al. (2024, 1) concludes, “ASD diagnosis rates increased substantially between 2011 and 2022, particularly among young adults, female children and adults.”

Demographic data points and rising cultural awareness evidence that neurodiversity is increasingly salient in Canada in the mid 2020s. Further, an aging population of diagnosed youth (Butt et al. 2024) and rise in adult diagnosis means that ND people today consciously take up a much larger percentage of the labour market that they have historically. Yet, their participation in the workforce is complicated by the well documented ableism of capitalist work regimes.

As a worker, being aware of my neurodivergence is as painful as it is enlightening. I am confronted at every turn by a structurally inaccessible labour market and ableist workplaces. Certainly, there are implications both for workers and employers as neurodivergent people conceptualize themselves as such at work. Moreover, the affective labour, bureaucratic, and productivity demands of neoliberal work in global north countries such as Canada, with a high degree of service and knowledge sectors (Kalleberg & Valles 2018), present specific challenges, and opportunities for neurodivergent bodyminds. Here, I use bodymind, a disability justice phrase, to follow disability communities’ refusal of the cartesian dualism of the mind and body.

In fact, the 2012 Canadian Survey on Disability found that 63.5% of Canadians aged 15 and older with a learning disability were not part of the labour market, and 7.7% were unemployed (StatCan 2012). Those who were employed “worked significantly fewer hours per week on average than those without any disability (28 hours vs. 37 hours)” and earned on average \$19 000 less than the average able-bodied adult (StatCan 2012). Further, the CSD found only 33% of Autistic Canadians (as classified by the survey) were employed in 2020 and a 2019 study found 29% lower educational achievement among “youth diagnosed with a neurodevelopmental condition (NDC),” which likely contributes to poor employment outcomes (StatCan 2019).

While this data reveals that many neurodivergent workers are pushed into the ‘unproductive’ lumpenproletariat, conceptualized theatrically by Marx & Engels as “the dangerous class, the social scum,

that passively rotting mass thrown off by the lowest layers of old society,” the definitional limits of the census mean that many neurodivergent workers may be missing from the data (in Barrow 2020). For example, those who do not identify their neurodivergence as a disability, the high masking, the undiagnosed, and the recently diagnosed problematize these statistics. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate the experiences of ND workers in employment to map out these nuances.

Unfortunately, few of the emergent questions about neurodivergent workers have been satisfactorily addressed through either the grassroots ND movement, corporatized HR approaches, nascent Critical Neurodiversity Studies, traditional fields of psychology and medicine, nor worker focused fields such as labour geography.

1.3 Ableism and Productivism in Labour Geography

The mainstream ND community is broadly focused on sharing tips and tricks for navigating their neurodiversity, feeling less alone, and encouraging self-acceptance and love. This is a broader concern of Autistic Marxist Robert Chapman (2023, 7, 9), who critiques the ND movement’s “liberal, rights-based framework, which focuses on incremental reforms within the current system [and fails to shift] the apparatus of social forces that disempowers and discriminates against neurodivergent people.”

Anecdotal evidence from online platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram show “self-help” solutions for neurodivergent workers are marked by a productivist tendency. Like many NDers, my algorithm is flooded with videos such as: *How I focus with ADHD! 4 tips to be more productive* (Pierson 2021); *World's Best ADHD Office #adhd tips #adhd problems #adhd brain* (Honeyman 2023); *Why Can't You Find a Job as an Autistic Person? (I'm Autistic, now what? 2023)*; *Hate Every Job You Try? The Perfect Career for Your ADHD Brain* (Magill 2023); and *A Workplace Strategy for Autistic Adults* (Mom on the spectrum 2023).

Many of these videos coach neurodivergent bodyminds on how to work hard, long, and with focus. Others advise NDers on how to best mitigate or recover from the toll taken by keeping up with productivity, including tips for burn out, exhaustion, and depression. Self-help within the online ND community encourages ND workers towards a “neoliberal entrepreneurialism,” in which they are encouraged to confront the ableism of the capitalism through “radical responsabilization” to the detriment of collective action and systemic critique (Mirchandani 2019, 549). As Mirchandani (2019) shows, such entrepreneurialism discourages worker action and undermines morale.

Beyond the online ND community, NDers at work have been extensively studied from a medical model of disability, which locates the problem in the individual ‘(in)curable’ body rather in disabling social norms and built structures (see Davies et al. 2022, Komblau et al. 2019). Critical disability scholars have

long critiqued this model for its failure to look at systemic barriers and injustices (Radulski 2022). Critical neurodiversity studies (CNS) research thus investigates ableism, normativity, the “pathology paradigm,” white supremacy, and capitalism in the marginalization of neurodivergent workers – demonstrating a commitment to post-structuralism. For example, the recent *Neurodiversity Studies: A New Critical Paradigm* primer asserts that mainstream HR “interventions aim at fitting ‘neurodivergent people’ into established hierarchies and ways of doing things” (Rosqvist et al. 2020, 1534). In fact, authors Rosqvist et al. (2020) argue that this trend contributes to the ‘othering’ of ND people and sustains neurotypical business as usual. Though CNS calls for systemic challenge to our conception of normality, Chapman’s (2023) Marxist critique remains – it is missing clear materialist intervention.

The extensive scholarship on workers and worksites in labour geography might offer a helpful corrective – if the field offered substantial engagement with disabled workers. Yet the labouring lives of those who work less or differently have been neglected, revealing the productivist tendency in labour geography. Still, labour geographers offer compelling frameworks for understanding structural forces alongside worker agency. The extensive scholarship on post-Fordist economies, marked by the move towards lean production, growth of precarious work and knowledge and service sectors, offers helpful context for my study (Leslie 2023a; Kalleberg & Valles 2018; Boyle & de Keere 2019; Coffey et al. 2018).

Marxist feminist and disability studies help address labour geography’s productivist tilt. Feminist social reproductive theorists, for instance, argue value is not just produced during wage labour, but also through household production. They collapse the containerized geographies of the workplace and home environment to expand analyses of ‘work’ to those who work differently, without pay, and/or invisibly (Bakker & Silvey 2008; Mitchell et al. 2004; Strauss 2013; Conroy 2014). Similarly, disability scholars question the valorization of the productive citizen (Aho 2017). Disability geographers also illuminate ableism in Ontario neoliberal policies, mapping how the Harris rollback in the early 2000’s transitioned the province from a welfare to a ‘workfare’ state and pushed many disabled people below the poverty line (Chouinard 2001, 177). However, disability geography has also shown limited engagement with a structuralist assessment of work (Chouinard 2010, 2021), with Wilton et al. (2012) noting a lack of economic analysis during its second wave. Additionally, Moss & Dyck (in McLafferty et al. 2001, 234) conceptualize the workplace as a site of conceptual, rather than material struggle, where “women with chronic illness are forced to contest definitions of “sick,” sick leave, and illness in terms of an “ill” body as well as what constitutes disability or a “disabled” body.” A theoretical articulation with labour geography helps ground disability geography in a materialist critique.

1.4 Neurodivergence in the Workplace: Research Questions and Argument

This study seeks to uncover the divergent experiences of ND workers in the labour market. I collected qualitative data on how ND workers navigate emotional & intellectual labour, sensory demands, and whether they adopt individual and/or collective strategies to restructure their workplaces socially and materially. I also gathered qualitative interview and primary legal data regarding the structural ableism of the capitalist labour market. I asked workers what forms of accommodations they do or do not receive at work; what social reproduction they engaged in in their work-home environments; and what would enable them to participate fully or sustainably in the labour market. Thus, I pose the following primary research questions:

1. How do labour markets construct embodied ableist demands on neurodivergent workers?
2. Do neurodivergent workers engage in geographic strategies to resist or mitigate these demands individually and/or collectively?
3. What are the implications of Ontario labour policy and recent neoliberal labour regimes for neurodivergent workers?

The first question is instrumental in delineating the economic and legal structures under which neurodivergent workers labour, bringing my study into conversation with the burgeoning sub-field of Marxist Neurodiversity. The latter two questions are imperative in understanding the labour geographies of neurodivergent workers. They utilize a Cripistemological approach, which considers neurodiversity as a position invested with epistemic authority, to discern neurodivergent workers' intimate embodied knowledges of capitalism. In so doing, these questions allow me to challenge traditional Marxist binary conceptions of the reserve army of labour. This thesis argues that *neurodivergent workers act at multiple geographic scales to manage their neurodivergence amidst persistent precarity, facing high temporal, financial, social, and mental costs revealing that a segment of neurodivergent adults is situated as the 'liminal-lumpen,' workers who consciously occupy positions of persistent precarity and agentively manage their disability to avoid falling into the underclass.* Moreover, understanding the costs of managing disablement under capitalism offer novel insights into labour geography scholarship, (dis)abling its current narrative of precarious work.

1.5 Chapter Outline

In the following chapter, I outline the characteristics of the post-Fordist Canadian labour market in detail, discuss the contested theoretical and political frameworks of CNS and CDS, draw in the feminist geography of embodiment and the home environment, and critique the productivism of labour geography.

Next, in chapter 3, I clarify my Cripistemology and feminist method. I outline the process of recruitment, interviews, coding, and analysis, as well as limitations of the research design.

Chapter 4 maps the embodied experiences of neurodivergent workers at the provincial scale to interrogate their position within the Ontario labour market. Articulating these experiences alongside Marxist scholarship on disability, I critique traditional Marxist binary conceptions of the reserve army of labour (RAL) and utilize two concepts to extrapolate my findings: teetering & the liminal lumpenproletariat (LL). I discuss how ND workers experience labour market entry and adapt through sectoral preference, hyper mobility, temporal, formal & informal accommodations. In chapter 5, I argue that ND workers adopt a variety of emotional and physical geographic strategies to navigate their labour market precarity within the work-home environment. These involve 1) formal accommodation, 2) informal accommodation and 3) relational care. I argue that these strategies enable workers to manage their disability but also intensify it through ND burnout. The geographies of burnout for the ND worker within the home environment are then examined. Drawing from feminist geography, I suggest that ND workers' situated precarities and privileges heighten the effectiveness of these strategies at maintaining their teetering position. Finally, in chapter 6, I review the bodymind as material and draw from Goeman & Barker's (2020) conception of "meeting place" as a way to understand the body as its own intimate and permeable scale where multiple geographies are enacted and contested (Goeman & Barker 2020, 102). I map the intimacies of teetering and liminal lumpenproletarianization through Chapman's (2023) update on Marx's (1844) theory of alienation. Ultimately, my research shows how the pain and exhaustion written onto the neurodivergent bodymind is the invisible mark of capitalism. My conclusion turns to the radical imaginations of neurodivergent workers. In mapping alternative imaginaries, I offer a co-created theorization of neurodivergent liberation.

CHAPTER 2: (Dis)Abling Labour Geography

2.1 Encountering Productivism

In 2023, while working a retail job that I hated, I enrolled in a labour geography course. Rather than the expected studies on 1950s factory work, the professor analyzed 21st century service sector, caring jobs, and part-time work. I was transfixed. After five years of sweating, coaxing, and fake smiling as a restaurant host, camp counsellor, nanny, usher, and tour guide, I was fascinated to be exposed to critical field of study that captured my experiences – bar one aspect.

Soon, I was raising my hand: “What does labour geography have to say about people like me – disabled and neurodivergent?” Working retail had been gruelling. I was suffering because of my social differences and the oppressive ‘mask’ I wore to perform to my manager’s exacting standards. Given the compelling labour geography research on other marginalized workers, I assumed that the subfield had equally fascinating discussions of disabled workers. I was to be disappointed. According to my professor, disabled workers were under-researched. Later that term, I addressed this productivist omission in essay format by asking what a neurodivergent labour geography might look like. I expand on that question in this chapter.

Labour geography must address its productivist tendency. When scholars miss those who work less and differently, they ignore the embodied insights disabled perspectives offer about structures of advanced capitalism. To build a labour geography (LG) analysis of neurodiversity, I follow critical disability studies (CDS) & neurodiversity studies’ (CNS) corrective assertions of Cripistemic authority and feminist scholars’ advancement of embodied knowledge. Adopting these perspectives, I argue, uncovers the geographic knowledge of the neurologically subaltern. However, I also critique the preoccupation of CNS & CDS with discursive and rights-based paradigms. Rather, I argue that an embodied ND understanding of structures of capitalism must be buttressed by Marxist disability & neurodiversity scholarship, which facilitates a materialist critique of work under advanced capitalism.

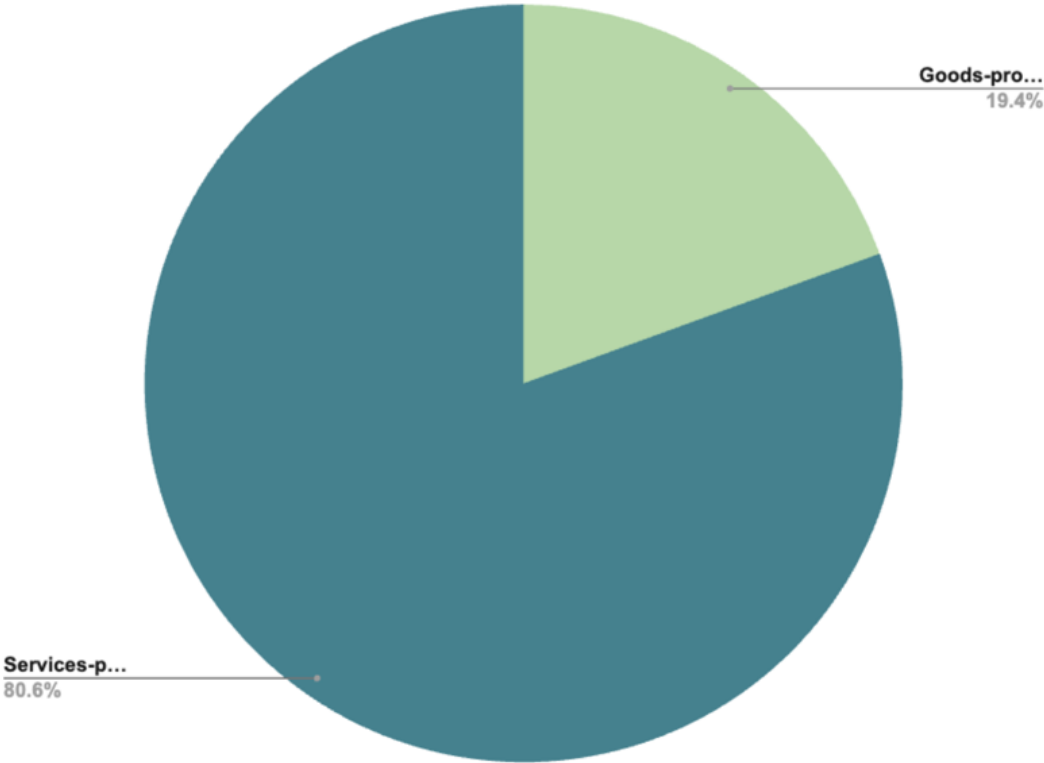
2.2 Neoliberal Capitalism in Canada

Labour geographers have analyzed the neoliberal transition over the last half century in detail (Rutherford & Gertler 2002; Bergene et al. 2016; Kalleberg & Valles 2018; Vosko 2006). Even as they miss the experiences of neurodivergent workers specifically, they describe the experience of workers under capitalism broadly (Berlant 2011; Boyle & De Keere 2019). Their insights into Ontario’s labour market are therefore essential context for my study and summarized here.

In the last half century, neoliberal reforms transitioned Canada into a post-Fordist economy characterized by deindustrialization, financialization, digital platforms, firm flexibility, non-standard work, offshoring & outsourcing, and a larger service sector (Bergene et al. 2016; Rutherford & Gertler 2002; Leslie 2023a; Kalleberg & Valles 2018). Most simply, the labour market has rearranged into two extremes, with a loss

Figure 2

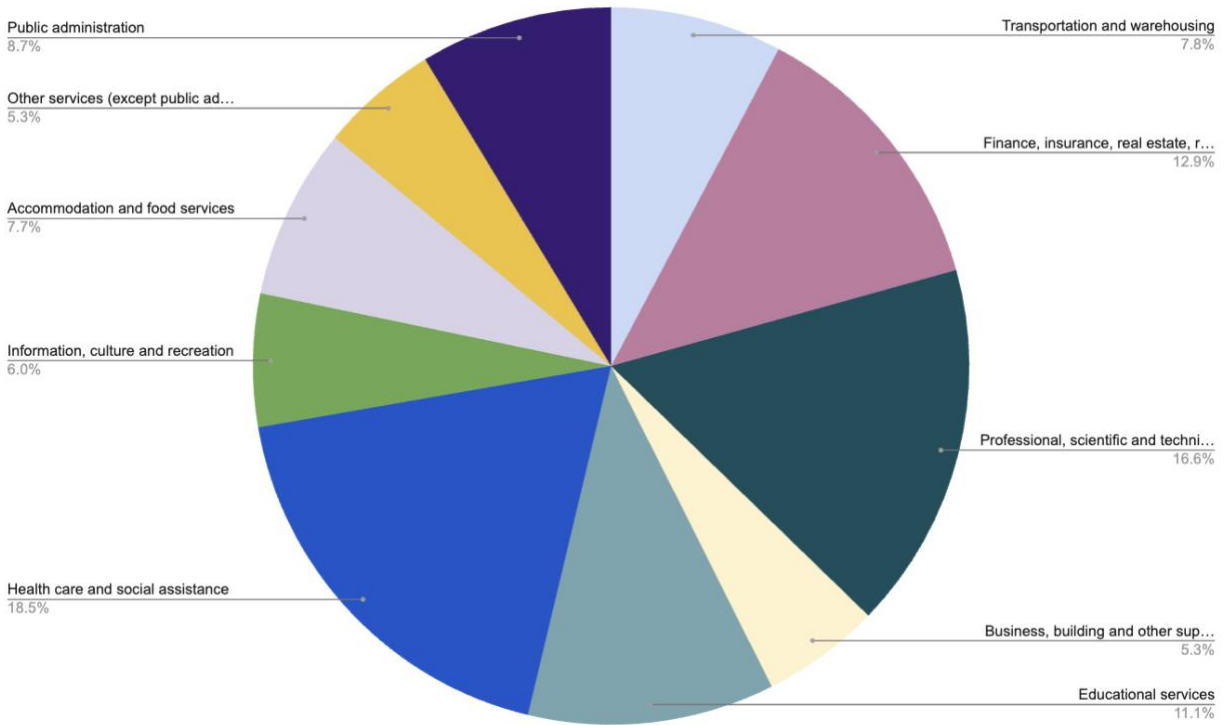
Labour force characteristics by sector (goods-producing & service-producing) in Ontario, 2024 (StatCan 2025).



of middle-income jobs and the rise of the working poor (Leslie 2023a; Stapleton 2019; Vosko 2006).

Figure 3

Labour force characteristics by industry within the services-producing sector Ontario, 2024 (StatCan 2025).



2.2.1 Precarious Work

Non-standard or precarious work refers to jobs that are “uncertain, unstable, and insecure and in which employees bear the risks of work as opposed to businesses or the government) and receive limited social benefits and statutory protections” (Kalleberg & Vallas 2018, 1). Since the 1980s, neoliberal reforms sought to increase ‘labour market flexibility’ – a combination of wage, employment, and job flexibility, which purported to increase the speed at which firms made “[wage] adjustments to changes in demand, particularly downwards; [...] change[s to] employment levels, particularly downwards, implying a reduction in employment security and protection; [...] and [changes to] job structures with minimal opposition or cost” (Standing 2011, 9-10). Firm flexibility therefore became worker precarity. Workers today spend less time with their employers and have greater difficulty finding new work if they are fired than under Fordism, the form of capitalism prevalent in the 20th century (Kalleberg & Valles 2018, 11). Fordism prioritized mass production and was characterized by “spatial centralization, workers who were less skilled, technical control, and a wage policy linked to consumption, productivity, and low labor turnover” (Pietrykowski 1995). Scholars have theorized that precarious work has led to new worker

subjectivities (Butler 2006), including greater individuality, short term thinking (Worth 2016), ‘cruel optimism’ (Berlant 2011) and “loss of ontological security” (Beck, Giddens, & Scott 1994).

Under Fordism, precarious jobs existed as a secondary segment of the labour market and were held by marginalized workers (Leslie 2023a). Precarity has thus always been the condition of labour for disabled people as the profit motive suppresses them to the bottom of the labour market (Russell & Malhotra 2002). Under post-Fordism, precarious employment has increased to one third of the Canadian labour market, breaking down the standard employment relation traditionally held by white men in North America (Leslie 2023a). Indeed, scholars discuss how “precarization has unfolded unevenly across the gender line, disrupting long-established gender hierarchies” (Kalleberg & Vallas 2018, 13; Vosko 2006). Despite this, they note, “much of the [precarious labour] literature has made surprisingly little reference to the existence of longstanding inequalities based on class, gender, or race” – or disability (Kalleberg & Vallas 2018, 6).

2.2.2 Risk, Workfare, & Austerity

Neoliberal ideology emphasizes the individual, a deregulated ‘free’ market, and a ‘small’ government (Caldbeck et al. 2015). By cutting “social benefits and statutory protections” (Kalleberg & Vallas 2018, 1) and imposing entrepreneurialism, neoliberal policy shifts risk from government and employer to worker (Mirchandani 2019, 351). During the so-called ‘Commonsense Revolution,’ Premier Harris repealed Ontario’s Employment Equity Act of 1994, one of two “most extensive” provincial equity laws “pertaining to both public and private sector employers” (Tompa et al. 2005, 97), cut eligibility for benefits, restricted home care, and transformed Ontario from a welfare to a ‘workfare’ state (Chouinard 2001, 177). For disabled Ontarians, ‘Commonsense’ rollbacks were administrative ableist violence that pushed many disabled people below the poverty line (Chouinard 2001). For those neurodivergent workers who perch at the boundary of ‘abled’ and ‘disabled,’ it is unclear what the impact of neoliberal policy has been.

2.2.3 Digital Revolution and Administrative Work

In the last several decades, countries of the global north have undergone a digital revolution (Leslie 2023; Baldoz et al. 2001). Labour scholars have discussed the implications of the rise of the platform economy and increasingly digitalized forms of work (Campo 2024; Aronson et al. 2022). Yet, digital technologies present unstudied possibilities and barriers for neurodivergent workers. While online work may create greater access for Autistic workers by minimizing sensory overstimulation, for example, it may also be inaccessible for neurodivergent people with intellectual disabilities. For example, van Holstein, et al. (2021) find that ‘self-serve’ programs are “often introduced with the objective to cut service delivery

costs as replacement for support staff, and as such could potentially limit rather than enhance access for those requiring human assistance” (van Holstein et al. 2021, 135). Post-Fordism has also resulted in the proliferation of administrative labour (Graeber 2018 & 2015). Lane (2011) observes that tech firms encourage “a ‘career management’ ideology that encourages workers to shoulder responsibility for their own careers, expecting little help from either firms or government agencies” (in Kalleberg & Vallas 2018, 7). This ideology affirms neoliberal values of individuality and appears in workspaces beyond tech. For example, Mirchandani et al. (2019, 351) find the Ontario Ministry of Labour’s employment standards complaints process imposes the burden of risk, bureaucracy, and “new knowledge or skills on individuals who are assumed to require neither time nor financial support to engage in such activities.” ND workers likely encounter disablement from these intensive bureaucratic demands.

2.2.4 Emotional/Affective Labour

Scholars argue that the enlarged presence of service sector jobs in the post-Fordist Canadian economy has made embodied performances necessary for work success, with “style, demeanour, manner of speech and emotional management” trained towards the creation of atmospheres and profit (Boyle & de Keere 2019, 708; Coffey et al. 2018). These forms of work are distinguished into emotional and affective labour.

According to Hochschild (1983), emotional labour intends to create a state of mind in others through the worker’s performance of two processes: “‘surface acting,’ which is an effort to modify one’s overt emotional expressions, and ‘deep acting,’ which is an effort to modify the emotions themselves” (in Parush & Zaidman 2023, 240). In a study on burnout in emotional labour professions, Brotheridge & Grandey (2002, 28) found that “surface acting correlated significantly with emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment.” Berlant (2011) further asserted that the requirement workers constantly exhibit positive emotions interferes with psychological subjectivities and prevents the development of negative emotions.

Coffey et al. (2018, 729) define affective labour as work that “mobilises and enrolls workers’ capacities for relationality, embodiment, and enjoyment – capacities that are central to human subjectivity – into the creation of value and profit.” Scholars have explored how these expectations are highly classed and gendered due to the body-dependent quality of labour power – i.e. with the performance of upper-class taste and aesthetics in high-end retail and “feminine receptivity towards male customers” in bar work (Boyle & de Keere 2019, 708; Coffey et al. 2018, 729). Affects are also used to shape the experiential atmosphere of a physical location; McDowell et al. (2007) show that hotels, for instance, sell a vacation atmosphere through hiring practices and staff embodiment.

Evidently, affective and emotional labour requires intuitive social skills, as it “does not rely on a discrete set of accumulated skills but rather incorporates and captures a worker’s capacities for relationality, embodiment, and pleasure into the practice of labour itself” (Coffey et al. 2018, 732). This likely presents complex challenges for Autistic people, with potential nuances for those who are high masking.

2.2.5 Micro “eographies of Work

Post-Fordist workplaces are structured into distinct micro geographies. For instance, retail work requires multitasking and multiskilled workers to operate across the store floor, cash register, and back room (Coulter 2014). The office space is contrasted between the open floor plans of tech firms and the traditional cubicle format. Often, ND workers thus labour in an environment with harsh sensory input and restrictive layouts, depending on the sector.

2.2.6 Power Repertoires

Marx (1867) theorized the struggle between the opposed class interests of the proletariat and capitalist as the impetus for societal change. While the “goal of employers is to reduce wages, displace some workers with machinery, increase productivity by speeding up work, using new technologies and maintaining control in the workplace” and lengthen the working day, the aim of the employee is “to have decent pay and working conditions, safe workplace, time off” and a shortened working day (Leslie 2023b). A labour geography approach emphasizes the agency of labour, asserting that workers shape economic geographies through distinct power repertoires (Herod 1997a 1997b; Leslie 2023b). Worker agency is understood expansively – both collectively and individually, organized, and disorganized (Kelly 2002; Bergene et al. 2016; Tufts 2016)

2.2.7 Labour Market Segmentation & Dual Interpellation

Labour market segmentation (LMS) explains how people with diverse embodied identities are channelled into different forms of work. McDowell et al. (2007, 2, 19) assert that “class, skin color, the lack of language skills, and low levels of unionization [...] reinforce the disadvantages that new entrants to the labor market typically experience.” Burroway’s (1979) concept of interpellation through the lens of labour, alternatively, explains the process by which employers use stereotypes to match worker to work. In the service industry, interpellation is dually constructed by both employer and customer assumptions – through “dual interpellation,” a process that workers may internalize and/or resist (McDowell et al. 2007, 5). Kornblau et al. (2019) document ableist discrimination in hiring and Hull et al. (2017, 2521) show that masking increases Autistic women’s employability (in Radulski 2022, 122), yet these worker experiences have not yet been analyzed through a LMS lens.

2.2.8 Labour Geography Limitations

Due to an utmost concern with workers, productivist tendencies in labour geography are unsurprising. The Marxist binary reserve army of labour furthermore supports the assumption that disabled workers do not labour and do not have labour geographies worth studying. Yet, disability is a spectrum; neurodivergence definitionally so. Disabled workers occupy a unique space of labour market liminality, irregularly pulled in and out of the labour market. Additionally, disabled workers engage in many hidden forms of unpaid care work (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018). Undoubtedly, productivism in LG has concealed information about disabled working lives; it has further obscured aspects of capitalist regimes of work and labour markets, with ranging implications.

2.3 Disability Integrations and Contestations

To understand the distinct labour geographies of neurodivergent workers in advanced capitalist labour markets, Critical Neurodiversity Studies (CNS) and its forebear field, Critical Disability Studies (CDS) must be examined. Assertions of epistemic authority, critique of capitalist ableism, and branching views on disabled work are necessary components of an LG analysis of neurodiversity.

2.3.1 CDS

CDS first emerged from a post-structuralist tradition, aimed to “challenge not just the capaciousness of the category ‘human,’ but its construction and deployment as a social and political tool” (Aho 2017, 335). Following influential French philosopher Michel Foucault, CDS investigates the normative power of disability discourses to regulate, police, and incarcerate non-conforming bodies. CDS scholars (Cartwright 2021; Radulski 2022; Rosqvist et al. 2020) challenge the medical model of disability as an individual problem to treat – thereby advancing a social model of disability – “which locates the supposed “problem” of disability within social and spatial exclusion” (Cartwright 2021, 13). CDS’s conceptualization of disability as an analytic, or “powerful prism” from which to construct knowledge, formulate identity, cultivate community, and reassert authority, is central to this thesis (Wilson 2021, 5, 11).

Early CDS efforts were largely reformist in nature, resulting in the now widely criticized Disability Rights Movement (DRM). One of the main achievements of DRM, the American Disabilities Act (1990), was lampooned by Marxist scholar Marta Russell since “our society imposes extremely significant barriers to work and economic empowerment that operate well before any employer has an opportunity to discriminate against a disabled applicant” (Malhotra & Russell 2017, ix). Furthermore, Marxist scholars and Disability Justice (DJ) organizers argue that reformist and liberal rights solutions leave behind those most impacted and do not achieve widespread liberation (Gleeson 1997; Malhotra & Russell 2002; Sins

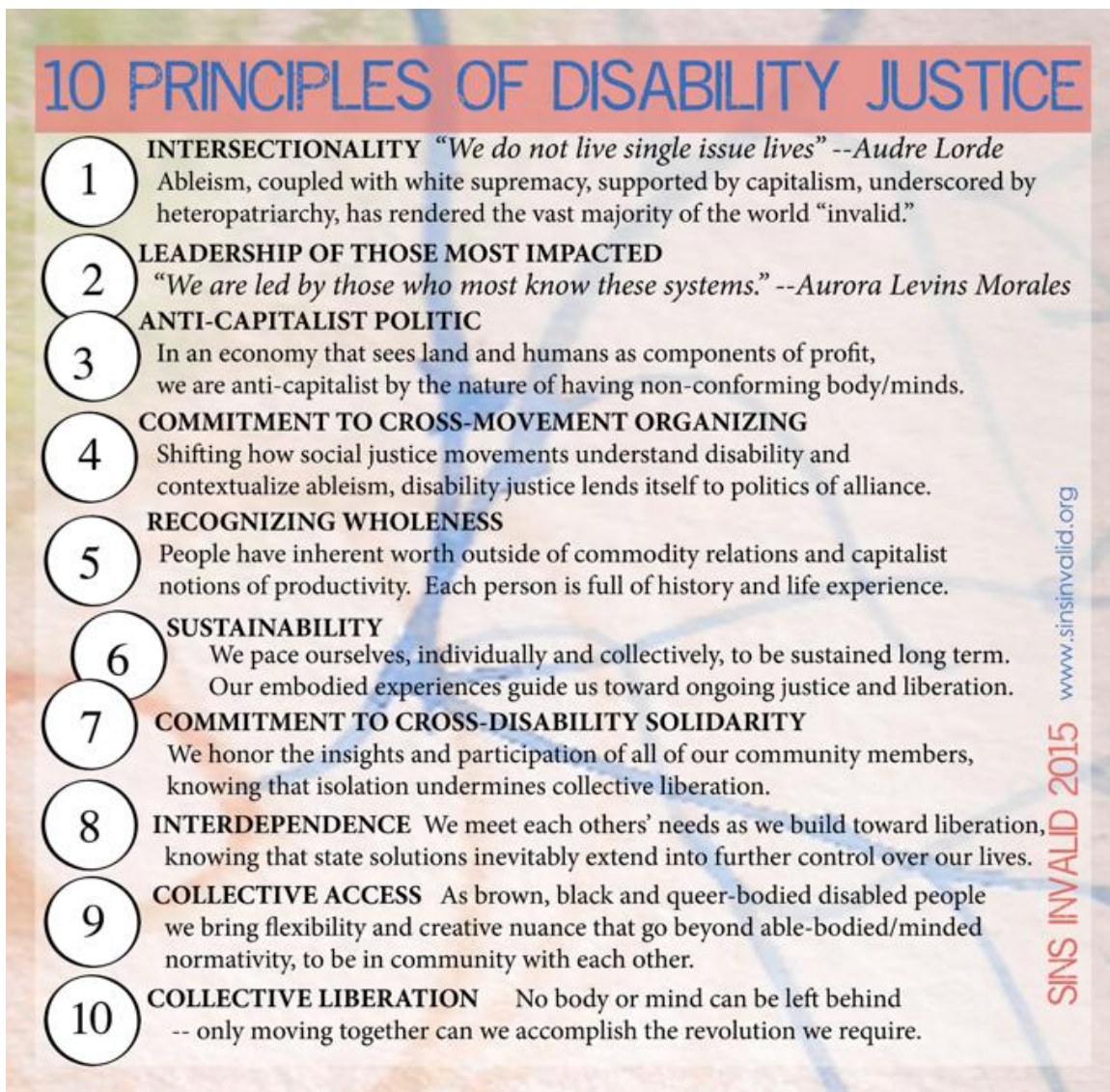
Invalid 2018). Such were the limits of a primary focus on language and normativity, rather than material and structural changes to capitalist systems of accumulation.

2.3.2 Contemporary CDS

Over time, CDS was developed by queer, feminist, post-colonial theory, and disability justice into a more radical subfield – Crip studies (see McRuer & Bérubé 2006; Kafer 2013; Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018). This section outlines concepts from Crip studies and disability justice that inform this study’s neurodivergent labour geography.

Figure 4

SinsInvalid 10 Principles of Disability Justice. Text by Patty Berne and Sins Invalid. Design by Nomy Lamm.



DJ, a framework launched in 2005 by Patty Berne, Mia Mingus, and Stacey Milbern, three disabled activists of color in the Bay area, sought to question the DRM and bring attention to the intersectionality of queer BIPOC disabled people's lives (Kafai 2021). Intersectionality, first conceptualized by Crenshaw (1991), refers to a “paradigm of intersecting oppressions” that cannot be understood by a singular analysis (Rodríguez-Rocha 2021, 4). CDS scholars such as Cartwright (2021) have adopted intersectionality to investigate able normativity and racialization in the creation of a normative white, able-bodied citizenry. This intersectional orientation and the 10 principles of DJ guide my research (figure 4).

Within the recent wave of CDS, however, capitalism and work remain conceptualized through valuation. Cartwright (2021, 11) asserts that “ableism flourishes in a capitalist system that *devalues* [author's italics] those who fail to meet manufactured expectations for productivity.” Following this argument, a politic of norms, rights, and recognition advances. ND workers thus are pointed toward adapting or contesting the devalued view of their bodymind within capitalist spaces of work, rather than reshaping their material conditions (or labour geographies). As Chapman (2023, 9) articulates, such reformism leaves “the apparatus of social forces that disempowers and discriminates against neurodivergent people [...] intact,” fails to liberate ND people, and leaves those most impacted behind. Without a stronger critique of the impersonal infrastructure and modes of production that disable people, this literature will struggle to advance its offensive against capitalist ableism. A Marxist disability perspective is required.

2.3.3 Marxist CDS

In contrast, founding Marxist disability scholars (see Finkelstein 1980; Oliver 1990; Gleeson 1999; Russell 2001) see disability as an oppressed material reality shaped by economic and technological conditions. They pinpoint industrial capitalism's origin, which introduces a new geography of work, “competitive commodity relations,” and “the prevailing rate of the exploitation of labor,” as a moment where impaired people's role in society was transformed (Russell 2001, 87; Gleeson 1997, 193). Compared to feudal modes of production, industrial capitalism “eroded the labour-power of impaired people” and pushed them into the lumpenproletariat, or unproductive underclasses (Gleeson 1997, 193). Marxist scholars' vision for a disability politics is one that radically restructures the economy and the focus on profit above all.

2.3.4 CNS

Radulski (2022) critiques NS as largely stuck within the classical disability studies canon and in need of a critical reorientation. Instead, Radulski (2022, 115) theorizes a minority group model of neurodiversity, putting forth such concepts as “Critical Neuro Theory,” “Neurominority,” and “Neurotypical hegemony” to articulate how neurodivergent people are subject to classification, discrimination, and exclusion. The

2020 primer, *Neurodiversity Studies: A New Critical Paradigm*, similarly follows trends in CDS to establish a unified CNS approach (Rosqvist et al. 2020, 3). Devon Price's popular 2022 publication, *Unmasking Autism* contributes greatly to CNS. As a part self-help book, Price (2023) argues in favour of unmasking as both a practical and political tool, since "refusing to perform neurotypicality is a revolutionary act of disability justice. It's also a radical act of self-love" (Price 2022, 13). Price (2023) acknowledges the limitation of this prescription, especially for racialized people penalized and policed for their Autistic traits. Walker's (2011, n.p.) 'Pathology Paradigm' describes how psychiatry and psychology frame neurodivergence in disorderly opposition to "one "right" style of human neurocognitive functioning." Given historical pathologization has repeatedly "len[t] an aura of scientific legitimacy to all manner of other bigotry," Walker (2011) argues that the pathologization of Autism is a "cultural value judgement" not a "'scientifically objective' description of reality."

During previous generations, neurological difference was ostracized. The activism of ND community has resulted in growing access to explanatory terminology. Still, as Chapman (2023, 9) argues, "regardless of gains in rights and recognition, the apparatus of social forces that disables and discriminates against neurodivergent people remain[s] intact." CNS has been readily co-opted by medical and HR professionals and the most marginalized ND people have been left behind to face carceral violence, school segregation, and homelessness.

2.4 Neurodivergent Marxism

Alternatively, Chapman (2023) boldly asserts a neurodivergent Marxism (NDM) to argue that "our current scientific and cultural understandings of neurological disability and normality grew in relation to specific economic conditions, power relations, and ideological landscapes" (13). In their book, Chapman understands ND marginalization as one form of oppression under the 'empire of normality' – a system of capitalist, white supremacist, and colonial domination. They thus orient NDM towards a politic of collective liberation. In this thesis, I take up Chapman's (2023, 159) call to develop "an analysis of [the empire of normality's] nature and workings" in neurodivergent workers' lived labour geographies.

2.4.1 Theory of Materialism

Marx's (1852, 5) theory of dialectical materialism posits "men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; [...] but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past." These structures include modes of production, the intensification of production under advanced capitalism, and the neoliberal rollback of social welfare. As discussed, disability Marxist scholars adopt materialism to assert that "the fundamental relationships of capitalist society are implicated in the social oppression of disabled people" (Gleeson 1997, 196).

At heart, Chapman's (2023, 6, 13, 15) *Empire of Normality* is a materialist history of the pathology paradigm, which they argue emerged "to naturalise the shifting material relations of capitalism," bringing "a much more restricted bodily, cognitive, and emotional normal range than those seen in any previous society." Traced to the 20th century, they assert that the intensification of capitalism, rising productivity standards, and demand for emotional and cognitive labour under post-Fordism narrowed the definition of neurological ability. So emerged a "mass disabling event" where "neurological domination, through either disablement or alienation, has become pervasive regardless of how close or far each of us sits to the neurotypical ideal" (Chapman 2023, 107, X, 14).

2.4.2 Reserve Army of Labour & Lumpenproletariat

Marxist scholars define the RAL as "a pool of unemployed workers who are ready to be hired to meet increased production demands [...] structurally competing with one another" to keep all wages low (Mattei 2022, n.p.). Disability scholars have effectively adopted the concept of lumpenproletariat – those who are no longer able to work or actively seek employment – for decades. Malhotra & Russell (2002, 213) assert that the early capitalist enclosure of the commons removed peasants from the means of production, introducing the 'freedom' to sell one's labour for wages, resulting in system where disabled workers were "depressed to the bottom of the market." In the lumpenproletariat, disabled individuals are stigmatized, medicalized, institutionalized, sterilized, and even euthanized. Yet, when "the available reserve army gets depleted, there is a need for more persons to join the labor pool to keep wages in check" (Malhotra & Russell 2002, 213-214). This gives rise to the core contradiction of disability – capitalists seek to expand the reserve army to the lumpenproletariat yet avoid the non-standard costs of disabled workers (Malhotra & Russell 2002, 91).

2.4.3 Capitalist Calculus

According to Marx's labour theory of value, value is a social relation broken up into use-value and exchange-value of commodities. Labour power (LP) is a person's capabilities that can be expended to produce a use-value. It is a special type of commodity which "possesses the peculiar property of being a source of value" (Marx 1867, 10). This value is not immediately conferred to the worker – instead, value is appropriated by as profit within the capitalist labour process, and a portion is returned to the worker as a wage. Further, value is measured though the total LP of human society, which is averaged out according to a 'normal' of production conditions, skill, and intensity (Marx 1867, 3). This effective 'averaging out' has detrimental consequences for disabled workers, which Russell (2001) elaborates on as 'capitalist calculus.' "Because the material basis of capitalist accumulation is the mining of surplus labor from the work force," Russell (2001, 89) argues that capitalist calculus emerges as "the owners and managers of

the businesses necessarily have to dis-criminate against those workers whose impairments add to the cost of production.”

2.4.4 Limitations of Neurodivergent Marxism

Chapman’s (2023, 17) aim to elucidate the empire of normality is “the first step towards what will need to be a much more prolonged, collective effort to combat [it].” Yet, next steps include an analysis of the micro level of worker agency, labour geographies, and embodied knowledge, and an accounting of ND social reproduction.

2.5 Marxist Feminist Interventions

Against the productivism of labour geography and Marxist theory, I draw from the expansive feminist theorization of unpaid labour, social reproduction, and home environment to analyze a neurodivergent labour geography.

2.5.1 Disabled Social Reproduction

Daily wages, a portion of the value generated through labour power, are given to allow the working class to reproduce itself through procreation, rest, recuperation, and subsistence (Marx 1867). Marxist feminists (see Federici 1975; Fortunati 1995; Giménez 2018) adopt Social Reproductive Theory (SRT) to focus on home activities “as necessary labor for the continued valorization of capital” (Rodriguez-Rocha 2021, 2). Quick (2023, 464-5) further argues that “a portion of [the working class’s] labor power must be used in the process of that household production after the end of the hours of wage labor.” Social reproduction is an essential yet understudied aspect of disablement under capitalist work arrangements.

2.5.2 The Em(mind)bodied Worker

Embodiment is central to feminist methodology, following Adrienne Rich’s descriptions of the body “as a reminder [...] of what it allows her to write and speak” (Kern 2019, 62). In geography, our bodies shape and are shaped by our surrounding geographies; feminist, Black, Indigenous, and queer geographers reveal unmapped geographies through such embodiment studies (McKittrick 2006; Moss, & Dyck 2001; Goeman & Barker 2020).

In a study of women with chronic illness, Moss & Dyck (2001, 231, 234) “map women’s embodiments of marginalization through an exploration of the precarious states of employment [looking at] the connections between bodies and environments” and workplaces as “a site of struggle.” The nature of chronic illness creates fluctuating material realities for disabled women. Although the researchers utilize a post-structuralist framework, attuned to how “women with chronic illness are forced to contest definitions

of “sick,” sick leave, and illness,” their spatial theorization of agency, precarity, and liminality within the workplace instruct my own ND labour geography (234).

2.5.3 Home Environment

Feminist geographers (Bakker & Silvey 2008; Mitchell et al. 2004; Strauss 2013; Conroy 2014) disrupt the workplace as a contained site. Instead, they advance “a relational account of scale which highlights the co-production of everyday practices and larger social, economic, and political formations,” linking workplace with sites of social reproduction (Rodriguez-Rocha 2021, 2). Moss (1997, 25) examines the analytic of the home environment as a fluid yet bounded space, constructed “within the wider social political economy, as for example, within existing infrastructure, service accessibility, and even personal financial stability, as well as within the social interaction with and assistance from family, friends, paid laborers, and community members.” I follow these scholars’ disruption of a binaristic work/home.

2.6 Existing Scholarship on Neurodiversity & Work

Through new scholarship has accompanied the rising visibility of neurodiversity, most publications perpetuate the pathology paradigm, advance capitalist calculus, and lack structural critique.

2.6.1 Low Employment

Studies on Autistic work often focus on how employers can promote inclusion and break down barriers, offering a glaring illustration of the capitalist contradiction regarding disability (Davies et al. 2022; Kornblau et al. 2019; Lauder et al. 2022; Pellicano et al. 2020). Bruyère et al. (2023, 1) advance a human resource perspective, championing “the role and responsibility of employers [...and] psychologists.” Their goal is to hire Autistic people as a solution to the ‘War on Talent.’ This corporate concept describes the labour market of the global north as a “dynamic talent landscape where it’s increasingly hard to find and keep critical skills” (Bruyère et al. 2023, 2). While proposing novel hiring initiatives, their solutions disregard structural hurdles such as ableist workplace cultures.

Workplace interventions for ADHD are less studied, with research focused on pharmacological interventions (Lauder et al. 2022). Work outcomes do, however, reveal impairment – de Graaf et al. (2008, 835) conclude that “ADHD was associated with a statistically significant 22.1 annual days of excess lost role performance.” The study is dated however – reflected in its finding that a minority of its respondents had “ever received treatment for this condition” (835). Nevertheless, the conclusions are suggestive – arguing it would be “cost-effective from the employer perspective to implement workplace screening programs [since] cost-effective therapies exist that are related to improvements in some objective aspects of role performance” (841). In more recent years, the percentage of adults with ADHD taking medication has risen (Randle et al. 2025; Chapman 2023). This correlation suggests the possibility

that ADHD medication has changed the relationship of employers to their ADHD employees and ADHD workers to their labour – a question I take up in the interviews.

Studies also reveal low disclosure rates (Madaus 2008; Shattuck et al. 2012). Santuzzi et al. (2023, 3) examine identity management techniques adopted by ND workers, including covert signalling, concealing, and strategic timing. There are also high costs of nondisclosure, including “forfeiting needed accommodations or protections against discrimination in workplaces, [furthering] poor work performance and corresponding costs to their reputation at work” through its toll on worker well-being (Santuzzi et al. 2023, 3).

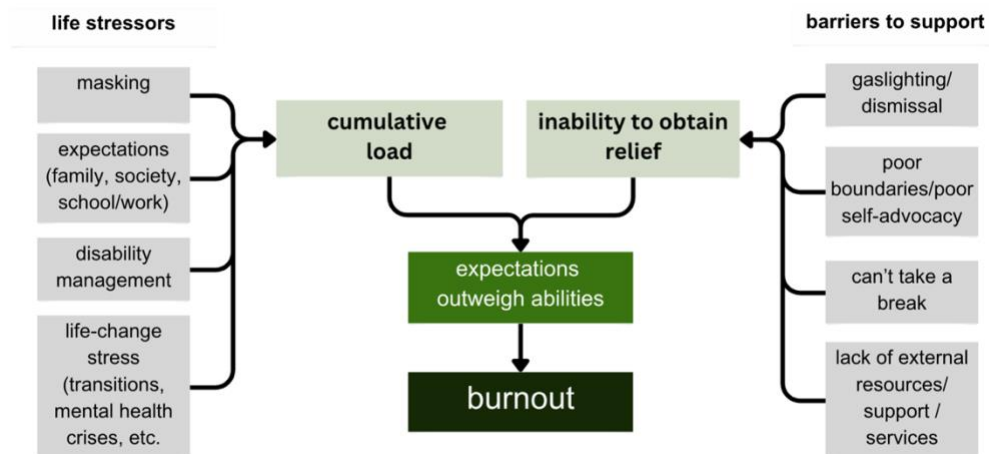
In contrast, Berman (2022) offers a more transformative perspective. Indeed, he critiques neoliberal austerity measures, workfare, structural barriers, and capitalist calculus (arguing “accommodations and supports for Autistic employees are viewed as overly needy and hurting the company’s bottom line”) to assert that the nature of work itself must be overhauled (33). Though admirable, Berman fails to connect his critique to any tangible struggle for systemic change. Pellicano et al. (2020, 1) and Berman (2022) challenge imposed neurotypical outcomes, citing “there is a limited understanding, however, of what a ‘good life’ means to Autistic people.” As a solution, these studies argue for “meaningful input from the person at all stages of the employment process” yet recommendations are limited to the workplace itself (Berman 2022, 37). Despite the “by us for us” approach, such studies remain reformist reforms.

2.6.2 Masking & Burnout

Autistic masking is another key theme (Miller et al. 2021; Radulski 2022; Hull et al. 2017; Bernardin et al. 2021). Raymaker et al. (2020, 133) define it as “a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic life stress and a mismatch of expectations and abilities without adequate supports. It is characterized by

Figure 5

Conceptual model of Autistic burnout (Raymaker et al., 2020, 134)



pervasive, long-term (typically 3+ months) exhaustion, loss of function, and reduced tolerance to stimulus.” It is distinct from occupational burnout and depression; and according to them, can lead to depression and suicidality (Raymaker et al. 2020, 132).

Radulski (2022, 121) argues that “masking and camouflaging are, for many Autistic people, a means of achieving economic and social participation.” She found that Autistic workers mask traits such as stimming (repetitive movements or noises) because of fear they may be perceived “as incapable, immature, and unprofessional – or, in other words, less ‘functional’” (121). Though Hull et al. (2017, 2521) find masking increases employability, it also brokers high emotional, energetic, and mental costs potentially manifesting as Autistic burnout. This thesis thus offers a unique labour geography analysis of ND masking, attending to the intertwining of capitalist calculus, ableist stigma, emotional & affective labour, and dual interpellation.

2.5.3 The Spectrum of Privileges & Precarities

White cisgender boys have historically been the focus of neurodiversity research, resulting in the common underdiagnosis of those with additional precarities (CAHS 2022, 2). In fact, “boys are four times more likely to be diagnosed with ASD than girls” (CASDA 2020, 15) and BIPOC Autistics are particularly unserved, with “White Autistics [being] 19 percent more likely to be diagnosed than Black Autistics are, and 65 percent more likely to be diagnosed than Latinx Autistics” (Price 2022, 53). Moreover, no study of Autistic Indigenous people in Canada exists and their rate of diagnosis remains unquantified (CASDA 2020, 15). Recent studies (Miller et al. 2021; Hinshaw et al. 2022; Brown et al. 2017; Steer et al. 2021; Kourti 2021) attempt to bridge the diversity gap yet there is more to be done.

Online, marginalized Autistics give voice to critiques of the ND community’s unmasking politic. During the 2018 twitter campaign #TakeTheMaskOff, for example, a racialized Autistic person asserted that “white-passing #actuallyAutistic people need to think a bit more carefully about telling #POC [People of Color] to #TakeTheMaskOff. For many of us, wearing that mask in a bigoted society is what has kept us alive” (Radulski 2022, 122). The deadly link between racism and ableism is an obvious danger. In 2024, police shot and killed a 15-year-old Autistic Black boy named Ryan Gainer while he was standing outside his house holding a garden tool (Gorman 2024). What was a call for help during a mental health crisis resulted in his death— demonstrating how a white supremacist system that criminalizes and murders Black men and boys enforces masking as a survival mechanism. Autistic people who cannot mask are often most at risk of violence.

Most research on neurodivergent people also prioritizes NDers in the global north. Critical disability scholars countered similar trend in CDS to move beyond the imperial core, strengthen research into the

lives of disabled people in the global south, and critique the “neo-colonial global capitalist order” as productive of disability (Chouinard et al. 2016, 591; Wilton et al. 2016; Vorstermans 2017). Yet, rising neurodivergence in the global north is itself indicative of the material conditions of advanced capitalist countries (Chapman 2023). Particularly, de Graaf et al.’s (2008, 840) 10 country study found “that adult ADHD appears to be somewhat more prevalent in developed than developing countries [and since] a deficit exists only when demands exceed the person's abilities [...] it might be that high environmental demands for attentiveness are more common in the workplaces of developed countries, leading to the higher recognition of adult ADHD in those countries.” This follows Chapman’s theorization of post-Fordism as a mass disabling event that shifted the acceptable standard of neurological ability. Though further investigation of these questions is beyond this study’s scope, they remain necessary areas for future ND research.

2.6 Toward an ND Labour Geography

Labour geography offers rich potential for theorizing the working lives of neurodivergent people. This chapter argues that its productivist gap on disability can be addressed through a multidisciplinary engagement with CDS, CNS, Marxist Disability, Neurodivergent Marxism, and Feminist theory. From such an articulation, this thesis builds new knowledges about the neurologically subaltern. Liminal lumpenproletariat and teetering, which I develop in chapter 4, are two of these novel concepts. Indeed, the expansive, divergent, and *diversity* of a neurodiversity paradigm throws into question previously binary views on disability and work. I therefore use liminality as both a place, behaviour, and a mode of the bodymind itself – as a description and consequence of the in-between neurology of neurodivergent workers. Altogether, the embodied experiences of ND workers unearth new information about structures of work under advanced capitalism and open imaginative alternatives from the status quo of the empire of normality.

CHAPTER 3: Research Design

I first learned about access within grassroots activist spaces. With time, I began to distinguish between access and accessibility. Previously, my experience was with an accessibility model in university accommodations, which offered small changes to fit my disabled bodymind – a DJ concept that refuses Cartesian dualism – more neatly into the broader institution. In contrast, the online movement school People’s Hub (2025) defines “access culture” as “a justice-oriented framework [with] practices rooted in anti-ableist values that can shift culture.” When I began this study, I committed foremost to designing it with an access-centred framework. Initially, access was a practice meant solely for the participants. However, as I operationalized the research design, “access culture” reshaped the study in profound and unforeseen ways – from recruitment to analysis, to writing itself. Soon, I made a new commitment – this time to myself and a practice of reflexive access.

As a knowledge worker with a divergent and disabled bodymind, I face structural ableism within the academy. Frequently, I mask to cope. The collaborative work of this thesis made me see my bodymind as a location of resistance. I thereafter committed to an unmasked methodology – a decision which required beautiful reimaginings. Following Kaufman et al. (2024, 386), I endeavour “to pause and detach [myself] from the pre-coded academic routines/time and just imagine [as] an extremely powerful tool to practice freedom/autonomy.” This chapter discusses unmasked neurodivergent research design as a messy process of joy, solidarity, struggle, and uncertainty.

3.1 Positionality

I arrive at the desk or interviewer’s chair with a history, politic, and bodymind. As a critical geographer, I follow the social justice-oriented researcher’s tradition of “uncomfortable reflexivity” to clarify my situated precarities & privileges and commitments “to uncover and challenge the power relations embedded in research, and [...] hegemonic assumptions about the nature of the world, the self, and research” (Brown et al. 2015, 8). In part, narrations of my own and my family’s experiences within this thesis are an expression of this methodological commitment to “uncomfortable reflexivity.”

As a white settler, I am the beneficiary of a colonial knowledge system complicit in ongoing harm of Indigenous, Black, and Brown epistemologies and communities. Since the European enlightenment, white scholars have positioned themselves as ignorant experts of the ‘other’ (Brown et al. 2015). From this gaze, they tell narratives about oppressed groups which fixate on deficits and erase other stories and knowledge. Chapman (2023) discusses how the colonial gaze constructs the disabled other as an extension of the broader white supremacist colonial capitalist system. Within my analysis, I commit to a

refusal of this gaze; further, I will interrogate “the behaviours, discourses, and perceptions of the dominant” as well as the oppressed (Brown et al. 2015, 6).

My neurodivergence, which I claim as disability, is a site of precarity. Due to professional and personal risks of disclosure within the academy, many scholars remain ‘in the closet’ suffering from “the pressure to ‘cope quietly, afraid that revealing our discrepant status as psychiatrically ‘disordered’ will discredit us” (Kaufman et al. 2024, 385). Even now, I take comfort in the vagueness of ‘neurodivergence.’ Instead of a diagnosis, I offer a description: my bodymind refuses linearity; my productive flow combines sprinting, foot-dragging, and meandering distraction; I ramble, interrupt, and engage in non-sequitur; I unknowingly trouble social conventions and fumble through authority and hierarchy; I ‘stim’ to cope with sensory stimulation, which feels painful. To navigate the world, I conceal these internal realities; yet masking, new situations, and sensory input burn me out. Sometimes, capitalist productivity standards leave my variegated neurodivergent pace behind. I am still here, however, because class privilege and family support enabled me to move slowly through undergraduate without financial or academic strain.

As Kaufman et al. (2024, 382) point out, “what’s really sad is recognizing that for each of us on the protective slow track who has made it through to a certain point in academia [...], countless others haven’t made it.” As such, I commit to critical reflexivity regarding the space I take up as a wealthy white invisibly disabled person in academia. I commit to speak thoughtfully – with, not over, my disabled community. I further commit to following the leadership of those most impacted through citational justice – beyond the academic paywall. With the space I am given, I will fight for slow as a right, not a privilege, and for a world where no one is left behind. Finally, I commit the DJ principle of sustainability regarding my own bodymind, knowing “our embodied experiences guide us toward ongoing justice and liberation” (Sins Invalid 2018).

3.2 Critical Neurodiversity and Methodology

In *Neurodiversity Studies: A New Critical Paradigm*, Rosqvist et al. (2023, 1536) do not specify strict “epistemic or methodological rules” for a neurodivergent methodology but argue for “recognising and questioning colonializing pasts and practices within research and practice, formulating other perspectives on knowledge and knowledge production and challenging dominant perspectives on research ethics.” I take this as an invitation to creatively construct my own method for working with and as a neurodivergent worker(s). Below, I describe how ND co-creation shaped this thesis as an ongoing, messy, unmasked, and first-person story-telling process. Such a ND methodology, I argue, is resistance against the dominant neurotypical method within academia.

3.2.1 Cripistemological Co-creation

Rosqvist et al. (2023, 126) argue for a Cripistemological approach which aims to produce “first-hand, and in some cases, first-person knowledge about topics that concern disabled people and communities.” To this premise, I add an emphasis on collective knowledge, refusing the enlightenment framework of the individual scholar (Graeber & Wengrow 2021). Rather, the theoretical insights of this thesis emerged from ND consciousnesses, shared embodied experience, and analysis.

3.2.2 Unmasking Within the Academy

PhD student and study participant Irina first prompted my reflection on methodological unmasking. She recounted:

“...writing what they want and contorting yourself into all these things. I was writing so many [grant applications] and masking in most aspects of my life that I like lost track of [...] who I was or what my PhD dissertation was even about. [...] both of those things, it was kind of scary.”

Her words were strikingly relatable. For me, masking and anticipating the reader’s disembodied reaction while writing is a Sisyphean task. Writing becomes punishing, inauthentic, and slow – so I procrastinate and rely upon the adrenalin rush of deadlines. As Judge (2018, 1102) remarks, “neurological-difference rarely fits comfortably within traditionally verbal academic approaches, placing neuro-diverse scholars in unfamiliar territory that can be restrictive to our different ways of engaging with and expressing ideas.” Similarly, Chapman & Carel (2022, n.p.) argue the pathology paradigm undermines the “status [of NDers] as epistemic agents” and perpetuates epistemic injustice by “diminish[ing ...] our status as knowers, interpreters, and providers of information.” Academia gives neurotypical knowledge production primacy, necessitating masking.

Upon this realization, I wondered: what does a methodology of liberatory access look like?

“Liberatory means I show up as I am [...] The intellectual imagination of neurodivergent people is so rich, and our embodied knowledge is so essential and I think that I'm kind of losing my train of thought, but I think that if we if I show up authentically that will be freeing. [...] And it's not just an intellectual project of asking what that looks like. It's actually like if I'm gonna be able to be a researcher, if I'm gonna be able to be in this world of academia, I'm not gonna be able to do it according to the neurotypical rules. Or I'll burn out. And it will be a struggle. I would rather aim for something else and try and see where it gets me and maybe it fucking crashes and burns. But like, I think it's important and I think I'm going to try.”

– Grace Pawliw-Fry 2024, “Methodology” [recording]

Therefore, I resist much of what is a neurotypical method. My method involves oversharing. It expands beyond the productive, asserting the hidden work of regenerating, recuperating, and regulating. I openly acknowledge the hours I spend on hyper fixations, the weeks my laundry piles up, and the days I hide in dark rooms after experiencing Autistic meltdowns. Beyond writing, I stretch my unmasked methodology to all aspects of research design, including interviews – where this looked like tangents or (mis)communication:

Stephanie: Say it again. Sorry.

Grace: No, that's OK. Some of my questions have like too many elements and I'm – I ramble because of my ADHD.

Stephanie: OK, good. My auditory processing is just so terrible.

Furthermore, unmasking resists ableist standards of what formality, intellect, and scholarship looks like – standards Black, Brown, and Indigenous thinkers have long shown reinforce white supremacy (Harding 2021; Smith 2021; Bell et al. 2021). Muzanenhano & Chowdhury (2023, 4, 5) outline the epistemic injustice perpetuated by “the White supremacist construction of intellectual greatness” which frame “non-White bodies as ignorant and incapable of generating useful scientific knowledge.” The authors discuss how Black scholars respond through compromise, collusion, or radicalism. The radical “refusal to compromise; therefore, paying the price of marginalization but at the same time producing some radical and pathbreaking outcomes” is a technique that an unmasking methodology must follow (12). Yet, complexities emerge from the intersectional identities of ND scholars – additional power opens unmasking to self-representing, white, male, and class privileged NDers more readily. Neurodivergent scholars must therefore address the unevenness of unmasking while committing methodologically to true alterity. Such efforts will be liberatory for our ND community and must connect us to broader struggles against ableism, colonialism, and white supremacy in academia.

3.2.3 Crip & Feminist Research Methods

Ellen Samuels (2017) describes Crip time as “listening to the broken languages of our bodies, translating them, honoring their words” (in Kaufman et al. 2023, 380).¹ Feminists similarly view the body as a site of lived knowledge and spatial analysis. Following these traditions, I used qualitative research methods to describe and analyze social-spatial structures alongside the everyday experiences of individuals. These

¹ Mel Baggs (2007) complicates the alleged brokenness of our bodies or need for translation.

methods therefore implement the intimate view of the empire of normality, offering new knowledges into Marxist disability and neurodiversity studies.

3.2.4 Stories from our bodyminds

Kobach (2010, 96) discuss how “story is practised within methodologies valuing contextualized knowledge, such as feminism, autoethnography, phenomenology, and narrative inquiry.” I utilize storytelling to follow such contextualizing instincts and as an unmasked expression of my ND instinct to overshare, create rapid connections, and prioritize high interest/stimulation.

My first experiences with storytelling as methodology came from Indigenous decolonial theory (Betasamosake Simpson 2008 & 2017; McLeod 2007). Reading the work of Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson was transformative; storytelling captured my flighty neurodivergent attention and held it; knowledge stuck in my distractible brain in a way it rarely did with drier enlightenment styled texts. Indigenous storytelling methodologies are grounded in Indigenous knowledge systems which are “inseparable from the socio-cultural, political, legal and other grounded, largely place-based relations and obligations;” these differ among Nations across Turtle Island and the globe (Latulippe & Klenk 2020). As a white settler scholar, I acknowledge the influence of these scholars while avoiding colonial extraction.

3.3 Recruitment

I found this study’s 22 participants through purposive sampling, accessed through social media and interpersonal & grassroots networks. I shared a flyer describing the project via email, text, and Instagram. The process of recruitment was enhanced and complicated by the neurodivergence of researcher and recruits.

I asked my interpersonal networks, which have always included many ND people, to share the flyer with their ND community. I found a total of 11 participants through this method. I next recruited through my networks of labour, anti-racist, and Disability Justice (DJ) organizers.² I found a total of 10 participants through this method. Speaking to politically active NDers was important for this study’s goal of co-creating neurodivergent praxis. Recruits from DJ offered special insight due to their expert knowledge and politicized disability identity. Finally, I sought out ND organizations and advocates on Instagram. I struggled with this form of recruitment; making cold contact with complete unknown bodies was anxiety inducing. I received a total of 1 response from this process, an indication of my avoidance. Though I

² To protect anonymity, I do not share the details of these activism contacts and groups.

intended to speak with only ND workers in Ontario, I included one Autism advocate living outside of Canada due to her expert status.

Figure 6

Demographics of study participants

<i>Demographic</i>		<i>Count</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<i>Gender</i>			
	Man	5	22.7%
	Woman	11	50%
	Nonbinary	6	27.27%
<i>Age</i>			
	20-30	7	31.8%
	30-40	10	45.5%
	40-50	1	4.5%
	50-60	3	13.6%
	60-70	1	4.5%
<i>ND type</i>			
	ADHD	10	45.5%
	ASD	3	13.6%
	ASD + TOURETTES	1	4.5%
	ASD + ADHD	8	36.4%
<i>Race</i>			
	Black	1	4.5%
	White	14	63.6%
	Asian	5	22.7%
	East Asian	3	13.6%
	South Asian	2	9.1%
	Mixed	2	9.1%
<i>Occupation</i>			
	White Collar Professional	5	22.7%
	White Collar Technical	7	31.8%
	Service Sector	5	22.7%

<i>Partnered status</i>	Blue Collar/Trades	1	4.5%
	Arts	3	13.6%
	Other	1	4.5%
	Married/cohabitating	10	45.5%
	Separated/Widowed/Divorced	2	9.1%
	Unpartnered/ Not Cohabiting	10	45.5%

My aim was to speak with ND working adults from diverse positionalities. However, the purposive samples were biased towards white women with class privilege, high education attainment who worked in white collar and service sectors (figure 6). Despite attempts at broadening the diversity of recruits, the final selection of participants remained a demographic already extensively studied in academia, including in studies of neurodivergent people. Future studies should intentionally recruit Black, Brown, and Indigenous participants to speak more clearly to the complex intersectional experience of racialization and neurodivergence and intentionally recruit blue collar workers in goods-producing sectors to analyze the impact of the lean transition. Moreover, the number of nonbinary participants recruited in this study is much higher than the national average of trans and nonbinary people (25% in this study versus 0.33% nationally) – offering insight on an understudied group of NDers (StatCan 2022c).

Neurodivergent memory, time, and (dis)organization also shaped recruitment. Operating flexibly with ND schedules and communication meant my own fit in. In the next section, I explore the interplay between access and unmasking.

3.4 Semi-Structured Interviews

I engaged in semi-structured interviews – an “attempt to understand the world from the subjects’ point of view, to unfold the meaning of their experience, to uncover their lived world [thus building knowledge] in the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee” (Creswell & Poth 2018, 230).

3.4.1 Access-Centred Interviews

Access was emphasized in the recruitment flyer, informed consent form, and at the beginning of each interview.³ I welcomed rambling and tangents, which often lengthened the projected one-hour time

³ Forms included the following information: *AIR/COVID: Zoom interviews are offered. If chronic illness, sickness, and/or fatigue come up and requires a cancellation, the researcher will make the necessary arrangements to reschedule the interview. SOCIAL: Interviews will proceed following a question-answer format and will remain conversational in nature. Small talk may occur at the beginning of the interview but is not required. Getting up,*

window. I invited participants with slower processing to email me additional thoughts after the interview. I wrote questions in the chat to accommodate working memory.⁴ The Zoom format was for access, with cyberspace richly theorized by DJ as 1) a bridge between isolated disabled and chronically ill communities and 2) “Crip-centric, liberated zones, [which] aim to heal and hold transformative space for all our bodyminds [following] the disability principles of collective access and collective liberation” (Kafai 2021, 44-45). Above all, ‘access culture’ is an ideal to move towards and necessitates “flexibility and creative nuance” (Sins invalid 2018). For two participants, this meant interviewing in-person (recorded and transcribed over Zoom).

Despite the chat or written options, interviews were inaccessible for at least one potential participant, an Autistic man with social anxiety. ND scholars must continue to develop access-centred research to address the absence of Autistic people with varied social, verbal, and support needs.

3.4.2 (Un)Masking the Interviewer

Creswell & Poth (2018, 232) recommend interviewers:

“Follow good interview procedures, stay within the study boundaries you have reviewed, use the protocol to guide your questions, complete the interview within the time specified, be respectful and courteous, and offer few questions and advice.”

Though I committed to access for participants, I began the interviews unconsciously committed to the inaccessible mask of a neutral researcher who must not bias the sample. Such a strategy purports to protect the data and allow the participant to share knowledge unhindered. Nonetheless, the interviewer mask conditions one towards a neurotypical communication style. In building access into the interviews, I unknowingly complicated my ability to execute the interviewer mask. This manifested in four ways:

1) Building access is a collaborative project that must be enacted, not just stated. DJ offers a strong critique of formality as ableist, classist, and racist. Many bodyminds do not fit neatly into the conscribed bounds of perfectionism and professionalism, leading to exclusion within spaces where such behaviours are expected. With disability organizers, I learned to doff my own professionalism; when I wanted to

moving around, taking breaks, stimming, lying down, tangents, or any other needs you may have, are all very welcome, and the researcher is committed to helping build a culture of access into the interview process.

⁴ I only realized that the longer questions were inaccessible for a few of my participants during interviews and amended my process to include questions in the chat function. I felt guilty for not anticipating this access need, but accept the process of building access as one of collaborative and imperfect adjustment.

build access in the interviews, I carried this learned habitus forward, necessarily undermining my interviewer mask.⁵

2) *When I invited the participants to unmask, they often beckoned me to join in.* This led to many meaningful moments of access intimacy – “a freeing, light, loving feeling [of] interdependence in action [that] builds and deepens connection [and] can transform ordinary access into a tool for liberation” (Mingus 2017). One beautiful example comes from my interview with artist and teacher Orla:

Orla: I would love to lie around with people like if that was a socially acceptable thing that you could just lie around and chill out together, right? [...] I'm tall and I've said sometimes standing up just feels like it's such a big job like the gravitational pull to maintain yourself.

Me: You're inspiring. I'm going to go sit on my couch.

Orla: Oh great. Oh, I'm so glad.

Me: I'll join you in lounging.

Orla: That's good. Oh, I see. It's so nice. The lounging. Yeah, go ahead. I love all of that.

This was not the case with every participant, however. When I interviewed one man with ADHD who had found self-described success in the corporate world, his professional demeanor meant I felt pressure to maintain my own. When the room I booked was continuously interrupted, I hid my anxious, stimming hands underneath the desk and emerged from the interview deeply exhausted.

3) *My own neurodivergent communication style proved difficult to suppress, especially around fellow neurodivergent people.* Impulsivity and forgetfulness made staying on script challenging. Directing participants with ADHD back ‘on topic’ was unappealing – I understand tangent is the point. I matched the directness of some Autistic participants in communication that neurotypicals might misconstrue as rude. Once, having forgotten to take medication, I struggled with boredom and missed the cue to prompt a participant. Creswell & Poth’s (2018) interviewing style was thus frequently inaccessible to my bodymind.

4) *Unmasking was a necessary component of the study’s co-creative Cripistemology.* In defiance of the interviewer mask, I made intentional (and optional) space at the end of interviews for dialogue and generative co-creation. There, I allowed myself to drop the mask and be authentically present – sharing

⁵ Within a series of DJ monthly care drop-ins that I participated in between 2023-2024, I observed disability organizers in positions of leadership lie down, speak freely, use the chat function, stand if needed, etc. These Crip-centric, liberated zones were profoundly loving and transformative spaces of learning.

my own interpretations in ND verbal exchange. With some participants, this meant follow up questions. With others, this resulted in hour-long discussions which I gather in chapter 7 as ND theory.

Ultimately, building access into the research process made the process more accessible for participant and researcher. Barriers remained, however, revealing ableism within academic knowledge construction. The degree to which I broke with the interview mask may be critiqued as an ethical lapse. Yet I am certain that sharing my authentic ND self was a solace to the participants who expressed shame or vulnerability by letting their own mask down. Moreover, experimentation is a necessary first step to building scholarship by, with, and for ND people.

3.5 Coding & Analysis

During interviews, audio and visual data was recorded and auto transcribed through zoom. I open coded this raw data into subcategories, performing quality check as needed, then translated organized data into coding trees. These various stages interacted with my neurodivergence in oppositional ways. My hyper focused, rapid, and interest motivated processing style, which I experience as a “beautiful, interconnected map in my mind,” allowed me to quickly and harmoniously conceptualize the raw interview data.⁶ I discerned ten initial themes and later distilled these into four working themes: work, identity, social reproduction, and politics.

A University of Montreal (2009) study finds similar results, noting “Autistic people are ‘up to 40% faster at problem solving than non-Autistics’” (in Kaufman et al. 2024, 383). However, while “some conditions even speed us up [they] do not always operate under normative time, such as within the 9–5 workday, nor can they be consistently harnessed” (Kaufman et al. 2024, 383). In coding, my untameable and uneven pace is evident. I exited the flow of interviews, and I found it impossible to task-switch into this new phase. Bored by software, I became overwhelmed by the prospect of researching, evaluating, and then learning a new technology. I procrastinated any choice and decided upon manual coding – a painful, monotonous process. Then, I painted the walls of my entire apartment. Finally, I increased my dose of Concerta and bombarded myself with stimulus, such as podcasts, to complete this stage.

⁶ A more in-depth explanation of bodymind analysis: “I have always held onto knowledge about my special interests [history and geography] as a beautiful, interconnected map in my mind. When I learn something new, I bring it into the web and the web is changed, and the new piece of data ripples through the web carrying that change with it [...] My research is one zoomed-in part of this bigger map. [...] This research has been so delightful because I can feel how every interview slots into the map. [...] When you zoom into the embodied [...] each person is a new data point, and then that data point interlaces, and after every interview my mind is buzzing. It's like a tingle. After I come out of an interview, [...] I get ‘the stares.’ The stares come from being in a certain mindset, especially after talking to neurodivergent people. So, I have these thoughts, and the mental map is shifting. It's all reconfiguring based on that data point” (Pawliw-Fry, 2024)

Coding was necessary for organizing but not disciplining the data. It allowed me to locate information and formulate the details of my argument. Yet, I abandoned the effort to clean transcripts. Instead, I dug back through the transcripts whenever I encountered confusions during writing. For me, an access-centred coding process would include free access and guidance for programs and/or different patterns of work, with coding interspersed with other tasks. However, true access requires a radical reorientation of individualized academic culture – a question I return to in the conclusion.

3.5.1 Writing

Below, I reflect on writing from the editor’s chair.

An unmasking methodology radically transformed my writing process, freeing my “pen” even during the mental challenge of the substantive chapters. Whenever I stared at a blank word document, I simply imagined telling a story to my ND community. The micro geography of writing was also transformative. In March, months alone in my apartment became untenable for all parts of my bodymind. A spontaneous choice to work in a café – historically, challenging for me – transformed the process by offering body-doubling, patterned distraction, and the energy of strangers. Suddenly, I had focus and work-life balance; I wondered if this was what being neurotypical felt like.

These techniques were soon tested. Like Hanan (2019), taking ADHD medication leaves me “feeling physically and emotionally depleted,” with an “increasing toll on [my] physical and mental health” (in Kaufman et al. 2024, 112). In summers, I take breaks to recuperate and build my tolerance back up. Now, writing disrupted my rhythms – a process captured in poem:

April 28th, 2025:

Sick sick sick. I’m sick at ease.

Micro dose of meth walking up the café street.

Push myself into a something otherwise

Hurting from fumes of concerta wreathed through my trachea

My brain heavy with rigor, heady and heated ideas.

May 2nd, 2025:

T break!

Contemplating my rhythms

The migratory pattern of academic birds

I went off my medication and, surprisingly, I kept writing. My techniques were strong enough to survive contact with the unmedicated bodymind. Months ago, I wrote that “medicating my ADHD is the only way I can write in the long form (without a looming deadline).” Due to unmasking and an accommodating labour geography, this is no longer true.

3.6 Limitations and Challenges

“I understand your worries about not fitting in in this world. It is difficult to mould ourselves into what is expected by society, and I feel that it is the most natural response to reject these pressures, to say "to hell with it". I wish it was easier for us to change these things [...] but if it were possible to change the way we measure productivity—at least within academic institutions—I think academia would be the right place for you, and maybe for me as well.”

– Kristin Chambers, 2024, Personal Correspondences

As originally stated, this study’s design centred upon access though limitations remained. My ability to implement access culture was constrained by the broader ableist structures of academia and my own unmasked voice.

Individualism and hierarchy within academia construct the master’s thesis as a test of individual mettle and endurance, with meagre disability support through the institutional accommodation model. In contrast, DJ principles provide rich material for what could be. At once, principles of *Interdependence*, or the commitment to “meet each other’s needs as we build toward liberation”; *Cross-Disability Solidarity*, where the “insights and participation of all of our community members [are valued], knowing that isolation undermines collective liberation”; and *Collective Liberation*, where “no body or mind can be left behind – only moving together can we accomplish the revolution we require” would fundamentally reshape knowledge work (Sins Invalid 2018). For example, my access needs regarding technical tasks could be met by other knowledge workers who enjoy such tasks (there are many), while I could support others’ access needs around verbal or processing related tasks. Coding would thus be transformed from a nightmare of isolation into a shared project. Such a transformation of academia would also require a disruption of the neoliberal university’s hyper productive pace. Therefore, all those left behind would be given the opportunity to produce knowledge about themselves, their own communities, and their expansive interests.

A further limitation of this thesis is the authorial voice. In the process of unmasking, I learned that my authentic writing voice involves a lot of reflexivity: I frequently locate myself within time, space, and the page as a reflection of my neurodivergent ‘oversharing.’ Yet, unmasked, I still speak in an academic tone – a reflection of my intense interests in reading and longtime writing habits. My academic tone is also a reflection of the constraints of a master’s thesis – its academic audience and theoretical terminology.

This type of verbose and complex writing requires deep processing and working memory. Therefore, academic writing is inaccessible to people who are tired, have intellectual & learning disabilities, lack access to quiet spaces, and are otherwise disabled (Dana 2025). In writing this thesis, I have attempted to balance theoretical necessities, my authentic voice, and the needs of the reader. The balance is imperfect. The academic paywall adds more barriers to access. To address this, I intend to create a short form ‘zine as a more accessible form of knowledge sharing.

In this chapter I have demonstrated how the commitment to access has radical potential to reshape research design in a messy, collaborative, reflexive, and freeing neurodivergent methodology of unmasking. In so doing, I break some academic rules and keep to others. Distinguishing between the aspects of neurotypical research design that are necessary and those that disable ND bodyminds remains unclear and will not be ubiquitous. Building unmasked neurodivergent methodology will hereafter be an ongoing, divergent, and co-creative process for each neurodivergent researcher who attempts it. This thesis presents itself as an offering to my ND community; it is an entry into the broader canon yet to be built.

CHAPTER 4: Quitting, firings, reapplying, and barely surviving

4.1 The Labour Market Through Difference

“I’ve spent my whole life just kind of being a dilettante,” Susan began, “And I’m being hard on myself, I’m good at that.”

On an energetic autumn day in 2024, I conducted my first interview: Susan (she/her), a forthright 63-year-old single white woman with ADHD. Growing up in the Ontario public school system in the 1970s was a “different world,” Susan recalled. If you were “troubled,” you went to the “dumb class.” Although not singled out individually, she felt the impact of her disability and had thereby learned shame. Work, alternatively, was “a place where you could prove yourself differently by making money, and arguably workaholism.” So, after graduation, Susan hit the ground running.

Through the “insanity” of the market in the ‘80s, Susan was fueled by the high-octane thrill of deadlines and bonuses; she worked on weekends; she was partying hard and “moving so fast, driving so fast.” At 28 years old, her bodymind became so physically tense and mentally fraught that one day she considered abandoning her car on the highway: “Why am I participating in this bullshit anyways?” So, Susan “took off” for Europe, leaving behind her life, including her apartment and boyfriend. She worked odd jobs; she deliberated becoming a cascadeuse (stuntwoman). But when Susan learned of the 1990 financial crash⁷ in a *Herald Tribune* while drinking coffee in an Italian plaza, it brought her back to earth. Though Susan flirted with an anti-capitalist politic, she found the crash “very personal [...] too personal.”

After a year abroad, she “pulled the plug” on her travels and returned to the Ontario labour market to find a new path. She fell into the burgeoning field of contract work; having never held onto a job for more than a year, it was accommodating – “that was my world. Thank God for it.” Through the 90s, Susan did consulting; worked with Health Canada; started a hemp ice cream side business; imported sisal bags from Africa, fell in with a hippy ‘intentional community.’ In the ‘aughts, she worked in the film industry but when it “tanked in Toronto,” she migrated to rural Ontario to teach at a local college. Soon, Premier Harris’ cuts made her job sporadic and part-time; fewer opportunities meant “I went back to do the masters thinking I’d get tenure at the college up here, which everyone was doing so no one got it.” Come the 2010s, Susan started multiple small businesses that “went bust.”

⁷ The 1990-91 financial crisis was a “a devastating recession” that spread globally, raised “Ontario provincial debt [from] 12.7% of GDP. [...] to 28.6% of GDP” and led to “a dramatic political and economic shift” as the Progressive Conservative Party won on the platform of a ‘Commonsense Revolution’ (Caldbick, et al. 2015)

Despite her chagrin, Susan was kind to her remembered self. Diagnosed with ADHD when she was 45, Susan had not taken the diagnosis seriously until recently. Now, she saw her colourful resume as a thrill-seeking reaction to a “shortage of dopamine, serotonin and norepinephrine.” On the day I interviewed her, Susan’s recent resume was comprised of minimum wage service work. Single and child-free, retirement is “the main question.” In our final words, she mused: “When you see what you do for your own parents. You go, ‘holy shit, no one's doing that for me’ that I've met yet in my life. Nada. No one.”

Evidently, Susan’s working life documents a rich labour geography – the history of neoliberal restructuring through the neurodivergent bodymind. Notably, a persistent sense of precarity hangs over each stage of her story, especially her last five years. Susan’s navigation of her neurodivergence – especially her need for flexibility and change – pushed her into increasingly precarious employment amidst a progressively restructured labour market. Susan’s contract work (Cooke-Reynolds & Zukewich 2004; Webb 2018) and job hopping throws her retirement into question, especially following neoliberal cutbacks to elder care and increased individual familial responsibility (Power 2017). Her story is an important demonstration of the rise of precarity as it reveals the push and pull between structural ableism and worker agency. Indeed, aspects of Susan’s work history were echoed by many study participants.

In this chapter, I map the embodied experiences of neurodivergent workers to examine their position within the Ontario labour market. Articulating these experiences alongside Marxist scholarship on disability, I critique traditional Marxist binary conceptions of the RAL and utilize two concepts to extrapolate my findings: teetering & the liminal lumpenproletariat (LL). Altogether, I show how the costs of managing disablement under capitalism offers novel insights into labour geography scholarship, (dis)abling its current narrative of precarious work.

4.2 The Liminal Lumpenproletariat

Employers engage in a capitalist calculus to ‘subtract’ (fire) “workers whose impairments add to the cost of production” (Malhotra & Russell 2002, 89). Further, when unemployment goes down and the reserve army of labour (RAL) is depleted, capitalism seeks to expand its reserve army to the lumpenproletariat to maintain low wages. This leads to a capitalist contradiction regarding disabled workers, who are both pulled in and pushed out of the labour market (Malhotra & Russell 2002).

Typically, Marxists understand disabled workers as depressed into the underclass and out of the labour market – as the lumpenproletariat (Marx & Engels 1848). In his notorious critique, Guy Standing (2011, 1) updates orthodox Marxist class divisions through his development of ‘the precariat’ – the “millions around the world without an anchor of stability.” Though Standing (2011) emphasizes the instability of this class-in-the-making, he reproduces the binary of orthodox Marxism by distinguishing his Precariat

from the lumpenproletariat that flank it, failing to contend with workers who occupy liminal positions between classes. My findings challenge these binary conceptions of the RAL.

In a moment of co-creation, Irina (33), a Marxist PhD student and participant, observed:

We're always **teetering** on this – like, are we part of the regular labor market or are we surplus? Yes, we're always moving between these spaces...I think that's really interesting. The teetering kind of population, the one that's like, not quite. I would definitely put myself there, I think. Like I need to divorce so I can get on ODSP. [...] I've been on OWA in my life. [...] I'm always right on that edge. I've never really. There's one time I had, like, a full-time job.

Irina articulated the central result of my findings: that a segment of neurodivergent workers is situated in a threshold teetering space in the labour market. I term these workers the liminal lumpenproletariat (LL). Workers in the LL consciously occupy positions of persistent precarity and agentively manage their disability to avoid falling into the underclass. In fact, they are alive in the ambiguity of the capitalist contradiction, both pulled into the reserve army and pushed into the lumpenproletariat through capitalist calculus. The 'teetering' behaviours they undertake in this labour market position are also liminal – a result of having to act differently from the way their neurodivergent bodyminds act intuitively. As Niels (32) put it: “the need for the constant sacrifice that I think neurodivergent folks have to make to meet their basic needs [...] the constant sacrificing of, you know, long term health to pay rent, to feed themselves.” Additional privileges and marginalities intensify the likelihood for the ND worker to become stably employed and/or lumpenproletarianized; yet most participants occupied the space in-between these poles, precariously employed in wage labour. I return to their agentive navigations in the next section. Below, however, I show how the concept of the LL helps me organize my findings at the provincial level.

4.2.1 Labour Market Entry

First, ND workers are made LL at the point of entry into the labour market, during interviews, job search, and education/training.

Fern, (she/they, 24), is an Autistic Pakistani nonbinary person. She discussed the barriers to entry presented by job interviews: “I don't have very good [...] stranger interpersonal skills.” They also expressed frustration with the know-who character of job acquisition in Ontario, stating that she struggles to understand all the “rules and cues and like, things that you were supposed to know.” These frustrations are echoed in other literature (Kornblau et al. 2019) which finds that the interview and hiring process are key barriers to Autistic adults' employment post-graduation.

The education system was also a significant barrier for ND workers' entry into sectors of work. Merna (she/her, 58), a white woman with ADHD, undiagnosed and unmedicated until recently, found university "nearly impossible" and lost out on her dream of becoming a psychologist. Had she known about her neurodivergence, she says, "Idiot. I could have lived up to my potential." Merna's vicious self-talk was longstanding – she told me it was the internalization of her abusive father's voice and had intensified her difficulties. Instead, Merna pursued work that suited her detail-oriented hyperfocus, which she called "the dust heap of what I could have done." She was deeply dissatisfied with the fact that none of her jobs offered "something I want to give to the world." Ultimately, Merna chose "to just be a mom and work." She avoided the lumpenproletariat as she "jettisoned" the remainder of her life, including dating, passion, and creativity.

Nathan (he/him, 28), an Autistic-ADHD Chinese man, was similarly liminal-lumpenproletarianized by the education system. Physics was the only thing Nathan had ever wanted to do. He found the busy work of other jobs painful. Yet, his undergraduate grades undermined his "entire identity" as a physicist and led him to think "I will die this year." He fell into a series of addictions and depressive episodes, only saved by getting "into a master's at the last moment." The year before our interview, however, Nathan "ran away from [his] master's" and became unhoused. He is now precariously employed by a "shady" tutoring company, stuck on the edge of lumpenproletariat. As he quipped: "I am fucking poor."

For both participants, educational barriers compounded their additional precarities, including histories of trauma, class position, and single parent status, to bar their entry into specific employment sectors. They found other work, yes, but experienced heavy psychological and emotional costs. These findings echoed a 2019 Statistics Canada study revealing "youth diagnosed with a neurodevelopmental condition" have a 29% lower educational achievement than nondisabled youth.

In all interviews, participants emphasized the centrality of their personal interest to their choice of employment. This is an expression of bodymind differences for ND people. Both ASD and ADHD are "associated with enhanced attentional hyper-focus" on topics of interest (Dwyer et al. 2024, n.p.). Furthermore, studies show that "Autistic intense interests—if appropriately directed—could be a foundation for employment (Goldfarb et al. 2019) and academic success (Wood 2021) and sources of motivation to engage in intense interests are positively associated with Autistic people's well-being (Grove et al. 2018)" (in Dwyer et al. 2024, n.p.). The opposite is thus revealed in Merna and Nathan's stories: when ND workers cannot enter interest-based fields, they suffer. Therefore, the ableism of the capitalist labour market forces ND workers to engage in liminal behaviours that do not match their bodymind preferences. The toll of this disconnect pushes them into greater precarity. Thus, is life within the liminal lumpenproletariat.

4.2.2 Succeeding at Work

Some ND workers attained job security in the rare ‘good’ jobs of the neoliberal labour market. However, while these workers avoided the persistent precarity of non-standard employment, they engaged in extensive ‘teetering’ techniques to do so.

Brad (he/him, 51), a white man, does not “feel like [ADHD] held me back from being successful.” He credits this to the social, problem-solving strengths of his ADHD and his strategy of using “time management as a survival skill” – adopting strict calendars, timetables, & task lists to perform “better than most.” Brad socially masks his frequent distraction and uses strong relationships to “build some forgiveness.” The cost of managing his ADHD slipped out in small ways, especially through its mental demand (“there's always something happening in my head.”). Yet, Brad did not describe extensive psychological suffering.

Beyond ‘teetering,’ Brad’s case exemplifies another theme – that additional identities enhance and/or undermine ND workers’ precarity as LL. Brad benefits from having a normative gender and raced bodymind. Therefore, while Brad put significant work into managing his disability, he applied himself and achieved “success” and “seniority” without the additional barriers of other participants. Another participant, Pen, observed that work success resulted when employers “exploit your mind and body for the ‘right things.’” This reflects the reality of the successful ND worker – they are those who can mask and discipline their problematic ND traits and exploit beneficial traits to serve capitalism. Due to these efforts, Brad effectively exited the LL. Successful ND workers are therefore one end of the spectrum of liminal lumpenproletariat, thus showing the insufficiency of a binary concept of the RAL.

4.2.3 Losing Work

Next, LL helps conceptualize the nearly ubiquitous struggle participants experienced with maintaining or progressing in work. ND workers are frequently subjected to firing, censure, uncertain employment, and demotion:

Irina gets fired from a deli due to her customer service (“I’m not very enthusiastic I guess”) and Pen “tends to not get a lot of promotions” because she does not recognize people’s authority. Meanwhile, Coco is told off for being too “candid” and creating “a socially awkward meeting.” Performance reviews push them to work faster, even though Dolly is working as fast as she can and if Orla works “faster, then I’m going to miss things.” Maud’s flat affect causes ableist misunderstanding with coworkers and Nathan, navigating unclear procedures in a restaurant kitchen, finds: “All the boss cares about whether or not you did it. [...] I do it, you know, worse and worse and worse. I got fired.” Moreover, Mae’s “mental health

stuff” and burnout causes her to resign, feeling “I just I couldn't keep up and I didn't even know what to ask for at that point.”

These results offer qualitative descriptions of findings of other scholarship, which record that “individuals with ASD are more likely to lose their employment for behavioral and social interaction problems rather than their inability to perform assigned work tasks” (Westbrook et al. 2012, 5) and that ADHDers have a “66% increase in risk” of being fired “than typically developing individuals,” due to greater challenges in “situations involving social interaction with colleagues and supervisors” and difficulties getting “work done efficiently” (Fuermaier et al. 2021, 1028).

Therefore, potential dismissal pushes the ND worker closer to the lumpenproletariat; to remain in the RAL, they ‘teetered.’ But what happens if the worker falls off the edge?

4.2.4 Exiting Work

Often, a dip into lumpenproletariat was caused by moments of crisis, refusal, and other precarities.

After a traumatic childhood of neurodivergent and class alienation, Pen (she/her, 30), a white Autistic-ADHD woman, felt “no one could rationalize to me in any meaningful capacity why I should be there.” University was not an option without extreme debt. So, at 15, “depressed and catatonic” and inspired by the book *Into the Wild*, Pen dropped out and looked for something different, seeking books, nature, and freedom. The following decade living off grid was not easy. Pen stated it plainly – hitchhiking and train hopping “devolves into hardship you can’t escape, devolves into heroin addiction.” She was unhoused and panhandled to get by; she was “sneaking by on cusps of system, using disability, etcetera.”

Everything changed when Pen’s grandmother died during the COVID-19 pandemic and left her \$50 000. Yet, returning to the labour market led to “crushing, crushing problems” in her late 20s, as she had spent the last decade fleeing “the social problems which were amplified by being neurodivergent.” Though she received a diagnosis and medication, Pen remains precariously positioned and works multiple jobs.

Additional disablement also pushed workers into the LL, reflecting the reality that “if you work too hard, go too fast, especially with chronic illness, then your body can step into the driver’s seat and refuse to work at all” (Kaufman et al. 2024, 390). Dylan (they/them, 45) is a disability organizer. A white, and poor/working class trans-nonbinary person, Dylan has long Covid, chronic pain, Autism, and identifies as Mad. Today they work with a disability online movement school and receive ODSF. “On average I probably work like a handful of hours a week,” they explained, “but there are months where I work a bunch, and then there's months I don't work at all.”

Yet, they spent the first decades of their career working up to 30 hours a week. In retrospect, Dylan realized they were trying desperately to succeed according to the terms set by the capitalist labour market by “masking and like pushing through” and being “really heavily medicated.” At the time, they describe feeling profoundly alienated by the pain of Autistic trauma, unaccommodated overstimulation, social demands, and of being ostracized for being “visibly trans for a number of years [...while] working with young kids.” Altogether, “that really has just led me to become, like, sick to the point where I can’t push through. [...] Now physically that's just not a possibility.” The medication made them ill, life caught up in various physiological ways, and “my body has kind of like been like OK, like I'm done.”

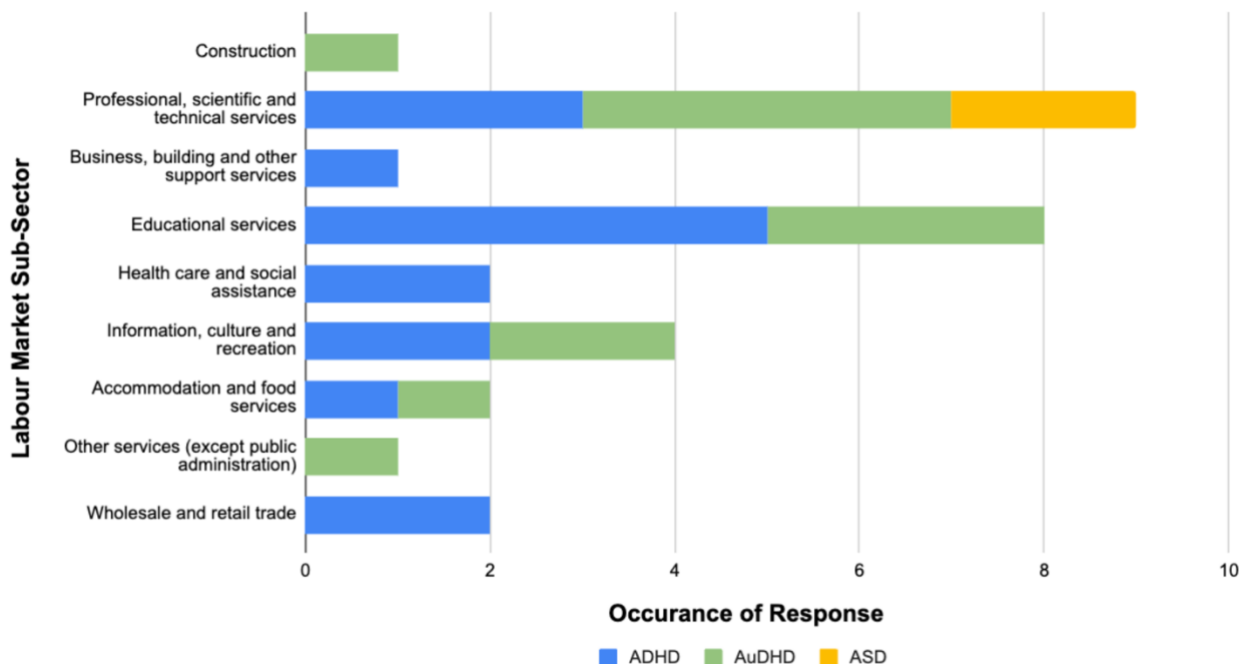
Under the capitalist calculus, ND workers’ bodyminds are alienated and rendered surplus. Yet, Dylan remained employed by the labour market for multiple decades; Pen exited and then returned. The liminality of these workers positions thus complicates orthodox Marxist conceptions of the lumpenproletariat. LL addresses this gap. Ultimately, while the capitalist mode of production disables the neurodivergent bodymind and pushes it into the underclass, labour law and worker agency attempt to disrupt this process. I turn to discuss these ‘teetering’ strategies next.

4.3 Teetering

Teetering is how the liminal lumpenproletariat adapts to the advanced capitalist labour market of Ontario; yet these behaviours result in the normalization of precarity for ND workers. The advanced capitalist

Figure 6

The Labour Market Distribution of 22 Interviewed Workers by Neurotype



labour market thus pushes ND workers to act differently at multiple geographic scales, leading to high temporal, financial, social, and mental costs. These strategies include sectoral preference, hyper mobility, temporal, and formal accommodation.

4.3.1 Sectoral Preference

Fern articulated the strategy of sectoral preference in an early interview, stating that her “decision to go into, like college and film” was self-conscious calculation. They chose a sector where they could “seem like a normal, competent person” and not lose her “mind in various ways.” Many of the other workers employed sectoral preference as an agentive strategy to navigate the ableist labour market, though this strategy was not foolproof (as discussed with Merna and Nathan previously). In brief, neurodivergent workers were drawn to sectors that combined interest, clear social norms, and variety.

Due to the study’s small sample size, this data is not generalizable across ND adults as a population in the Ontario labour market. Additionally, since all but four of the participants were from the Greater Toronto Area, the data is more relevant to the urban and suburban experience. The geographic locations of participant likely informed their employment due to local labour markets. The sectoral preferences of rural neurodivergent workers require future study. Despite these caveats, important information is still revealed by asking ND workers about their agentive choices across sectors.

Profession, scientific and other support services was the most common sub-sector the 22 neurodivergent participants worked in. Participants describe deep engagement with interests, the exercise of problem-solving skills, and high levels of autonomy as key benefits of this sector. Hiba (33), who does not “do very well with figures of authority”, explains the appeal of research where she “can direct my work the way that I want.” For Maria (38), the flexibility of start-ups accommodated her Autism. Niels (32) observed that writing code is “a logic puzzle, and that’s incredibly engaging” – especially for ND workers with “the hyper focus that can come along with ADHD.” He noticed that “from a corporate capitalist productivity standpoint, you know, I find a lot of folks sort of leverage that.”

However, Niels also described experiencing intense embodied pain because of sedentary hyperfocus. In fact, other workers with ADHD avoided the *Professional & scientific sector* entirely due to this concern, with Fern (24) sharing that “sitting down in places for hours does not appeal to me.”

The second most prevalent sector among the 22 participants was *Education*, which attracted ND workers by offering the intellectual benefits of the *Professional & scientific sector* with a kinesthetic component. Dolly (24), who works at a childcare arts program, described how she enjoyed that her “job is different every day,” that “you’re on your feet” and have “autonomy” over lesson planning.

Many of the study participants were MA or PhD students, workers who straddled the line between sectors as researchers and educators. For a few of the Autistic academics, teaching was a difficult component of the work. Autistic course director Irina saw teaching as a painful project of masking yet meaningful and “vulnerable experience” that “takes humility.” Similarly, though Hiba “love[s] teaching so much,” she comes home from tutorial “completely over stimulated” and needs to take the following day off “to do my own thing and just to be on my own, not to be around people.” This reflects the high affective demands of teaching. For Henry & Hazel, in contrast, teaching was removed from their job descriptions as an accommodation and replaced with marker-grader jobs. This was not by preference – Henry, for example, saw teaching as a goal he hoped to one day achieve by prerecording lectures and editing out his Tourette’s tics.

Another sector that ND workers straddled with education was the arts. For Greg (26), teaching theatre meant he could engage in his interests with less precarity. The theater school he worked at was accommodating “if you book a show” – his employer’s policy is to say ““go take two months, do that, and then come back.”” According to Greg, this policy is mutually beneficial since the employer “get[s] good people to work with because people know they can work there while still pursuing their careers.” Working in *Education*, therefore, was an agentive choice by ND workers to follow their bodyminds’ intense interests yet navigate precarity.

Information, culture, and recreation sector was next most prevalent, and consisted of ND workers in visual and performing arts. ND participants sought employment in the arts for similar reasons to the other sectors – their desire for flexibility, autonomy, tactile work, and interest. Orla (59) stated: “I can't bear like doing the same thing over and over again unless it's art. And then an artist is not doing the same thing 'cause I'm always creating.” Workers with ASD such as Fern and Greg describe the benefit of social norms within the arts. Fern liked that “film is very specialized and like, everyone has a role [...] things are clearly delineated.” Similarly, theatre is “a world that [Greg is] comfortable in,” since it has “its own social norms, and its own kind of community and its own way of how people talk to each other”

Taking *Food Services* and *Retail trade* together, many participants sought out these jobs for their movement, interaction, variety, and role clarity. Retail requires its workforce to multitask and be multiskilled in both hard skills, which “reflect operational, technical, and/or administrative knowledge and capabilities,” and soft skills, involving “interactive, interpersonal abilities, which require nuanced social awareness, acuity, and adaptability” (Coulter 2014, n.p.). Participants found the constant change compatible with their ADHD, presenting immediate dopamine hits. “In-your-face retail is something that is good” for Stephanie (34), “because it's go, go, go.” Additionally, the repetitive, procedural tasks of back of house retail and food preparation were appreciated, though Autistic workers struggled with

affective labour demands. In food services, Pen failed to perform subservience: “It’s not like I’m trying to be disrespectful. I just treat them like humans.”

Though only two of the participants worked in *Construction*, their reasons for staying or leaving the sector offer insights. Josh, a fabricator with ASD and ADHD, described how he “prefer[s] to work with my hands [and finds] practical, physical stuff [...] less ambiguous.” In contrast, he found “working socially or bureaucratically I get confused as to exactly what the expectations are.” Hands-on work thus offered an escape from the high emotional demands of neoliberal labour markets. Yet, another participant described the physical downside: Pen does not “work in trades as much as I can because of how much I hate the vibration in my hands of power tools and sound.” Josh noted how the “culture of machismo” in construction required he mask “any sort of weakness. [by] biting my tongue and trying not to say something too honest or something too sensitive. Or complain [...] about how cold you are or. Or how much pain you are in.” The precarity of construction work reinforced this, putting workers who called in sick too often “to the bottom of the [out of work] list.” Josh mused “I think there’s a lot of guys that are that are on that that have like some sort of neurodivergence, or just like or maybe physical disability,” revealing the ableism of the sector.

4.3.2 *Hyper Mobility*

ND participants also navigated the labour market through frequent job changes, agentively managing under-stimulation and burnout. Orla (59) has “had a lot of jobs. [...] I get bored, right? I need change, and I need challenge, and I need meaningful work;” Mae’s (32) “resume is so strange” because they spent their 20s “hopping around [to follow] mainly interests.” Niels (32) discussed vacillating between physical labour and office work, since he never “found anything that has felt sustainable” for his AuDHD bodymind between the two.

Though mobility accommodated disability in the short term, it had lasting consequences including financial cost and interpellation into contract work, low wage, and service sector jobs. Niels was “very poor from the job hopping;” Orla quit jobs even if it was to her “detriment financially.” This precarity is heightened for ND workers in old age amid neoliberal state neglect, especially feminized and child-free people such as Susan.

In contrast, Merna (53) abandoned the hyper-mobility strategy from her youth at 48-years-old when she took stock of her life and confronted her precarity: “I had no pension. No savings.” She settled into a cushioned healthcare job which she “finally was old enough to appreciate.” Yet, this forced Merna to behave outside of her bodymind preference. Though the job was “decent,” Merna asked: “is this who I would be if there wasn’t money to be made? No.” As already discussed, Merna’s purposelessness was a

heavy emotional burden. Therefore, hypermobility reinforces persistent precarity for ND workers; immobility, meanwhile, carries a psychological burden.

4.3.3 Temporal Teetering

ND workers used underemployment as another agentive ‘teetering’ strategy, working part-time to mitigate burnout. Stephanie, who joked “My ADHD tank is smaller than the average bear,” works maximum three days a week. Any more leads to “a lot more anxiety, I guess, and I become way more tired.” Orla (59), after years of periodic burnout working “so much harder” to meet the pace of her neurotypical coworkers, now teaches part time two days a week: “I have done that intentionally because I’m exhausted.”

Not all ND workers can slow to their bodymind’s pace – Niels describes spending his “entire 20s” overworking himself “just desperately trying to make rent.” Others must “slow down to keep up,” according to Kaufman, et al. (2024, 389), afraid “of being perceived as taking it easy, when really, I’m taking it quite hard on my body.” Though honouring pace enables ND workers to maintain greater sustainability, this type of ‘teetering’ structures them into further precarity.

4.3.4 Formal Accommodation

Below, I investigate formal methods of teetering in Ontario human rights law, labour law, and the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP). I demonstrate that risk is conferred onto the worker by these structures, heightening precarity for neurodivergent people.

4.3.4.1 Case Law

At the provincial scale, Ontario labour law enshrines the duty to accommodate (DTA) as a method to integrate disabled workers into the labour market and “remove discriminatory barriers to employment” (Doorey 2024, 385). Yet, the DTA is limited by capitalist calculus implicit in the concept of ‘undue hardship’ – a “legitimate defence that an employer may raise to justify why it could not provide an accommodation to an employee” such as cost “so significant that it would impact the financial viability of the enterprise” (Doorey 2024 385). Similarly, the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and Ontario Human Rights Code purport to protect persons with disabilities in “protected social areas,” including employment (CASHRA 2016, 36). These laws empower ND workers to “bring a claim before federal, territorial and provincial independent administrative tribunals, human rights commissions and tribunals or courts to enforce their rights” (CASHRA 2016, 2). Yet, ‘reading against the grain’ of case law and participant interviews counter this narrative.

Niels (33) a white cisgender AuDHD man, was unemployed when I interviewed him that October. He hit chronic burn out in the months before he was laid off and “was at the time looking into disability leave [...but] kept putting off starting that actual conversation.” Having later educated himself on Ontario labour law, Niels realized “that was a real mistake on my part. I should have said something because as soon as you say it, it really limits what your employer is able to do without it being retribution.”

Incorrect procedure, missed dates, and bureaucratic ignorance were also quite common in court cases with neurodivergent complainants. More complaints were dismissed for procedural reasons than lack of evidence, with one judge dismissing a case by stating: “the ASD documents that the complainant submitted [...] change nothing; nor do they explain the fact that the complaint was made outside the 90-day time limit set out in the Act” (Pothier c. Alliance de la Fonction publique 2021). The court system offered no accommodations for these bodymind differences. One complainant decried this situation, identifying themselves as “merely a worker” who was “unfamiliar with the law and with how quasi-judicial tribunals operate” (Burns v. Treasury Board 2024). In case law, the burden of knowledge and bureaucratic labour appears to be on the worker – ND workers, for whom missed details and difficulty with procedures is clinical, face an especially heavy burden (Mirchandani et al. 2019).

Thought Niels missed the window to ask for disability leave, he still had a strong case – he had officially disclosed his disability, asked for formal accommodations, and received a “really poor annual review” after years of “incredibly positive” ones. Furthermore, Niels was let go on thin premises – “when you restructure and eliminate a single position, that is one of the call outs in the Ontario Human Rights Commission [so] most lawyers that I talked to were quite confident that we could win on that.” Yet, Niels abandoned the viability of taking his former employer to court due to the high potential financial and emotional cost. He “waffled” for a long time but decided the reward – “breaking even financially and getting my job back” – was not worth the risk – “this being the top of mind every day for a year” and having to “fucking work for [his employer] again.” Further, Niels’ lifelong habit of job mobility, a previously discussed ‘teetering’ technique, lessened his potential payout – which only increases after 5 years with an employer.

The barriers Niels experienced were echoed by the absences in case law. Few complainants utilized the DTA clause – more drew from human rights law. Fewer still involved agentive ND adults; more often, cases comprised workplaces that served Autistic adults or children. Since the complaints-based nature of the human rights code puts “the onus is on the individual to call upon the law, when necessary,” the absence of ND workers indicates the administrative ableism of the legal system (Tompa et al. 2006, 95). This suggestion follows Chouinard (1999 & 2001), who argues disabled women’s extreme marginalization, impoverishment, and precarity in post-Fordist Canada presents obstacles to using legal

policy to fight said precarity. When ND workers face hurdles with starting and/or winning cases, employers discriminate against ND workers without legal consequence.

Additionally, Ontario law fails to contend with the disabling nature of capitalist work. First, courts demonstrate an underdeveloped understanding of invisible disabilities. Judges found discrimination only if the employer was aware of the disability in the first place (Stewart v. Ontario Government Services 2013; Binkley v. Blue Mountain Resorts 2010). One case stated “the applicant's belief that her manager must have known she has a learning processing disorder and ADHD is speculative” though it acknowledged “her manager identified performance problems closely aligned with the symptoms” of said diagnoses (Applebaum v. Allied DV Hotel Inc. 2018). Second, courts did not always identify discrimination as such and instead classified ND disablement as 'bad' work habits, insubordination, poor performance, and low work ethic. When a complainant defended disobedience, arguing “she did not remember that prohibition at the moment when she did it, due to her ADHD” her employer saw her forgetfulness as unlikely because of a recent meeting (Ontario Inc. v. Amiri 2020). The court decided that Amiri likely disobeyed the order on purpose due to her principled disagreement with the employer on environmentalist grounds. Whether memory lapse, disregard for authority, or momentary impulse, Amiri’s choice reflects a bodymind difference that is incompatible with capitalist standards of work. The case’s dismissal demonstrates the inability for Ontario law to protect workers against discrimination arising from capitalist employment relations.

Undue hardship, the failure to protect invisibly disabled or disobedient workers, and bureaucratic ableism reveal Ontario courts’ commitment to capitalist calculus. Ultimately, legal provisions heighten the liminal lumpenproletarianization of ND workers, rather than counter it. In this study’s interviews, ND workers resigned themselves to discrimination in the workplace, intuiting that it would be difficult to resist or counter – an intuition validated by the case law. As such, workers employed extensive strategies at multiple geographies, demonstrating that teetering is a condition of neoliberal labour markets, where workers must take on individual risk to manage disability.

4.3.4.2 ODSP

ODSP is another path to formal accommodation. Though its official purpose is “to enable individuals and families to live as independently as possible in the community and lead more productive, dignified lives” (Ontario 2018b, para.1),” Smith-Carrier (2020 11) show that this aim is rarely upheld, as neoliberal reform renders the program significantly burdensome. Participant experiences echo this.

Being on ODSP, “recipients of these very punitive systems, that takes up a ton of energy” and bureaucratic “work,” Dylan told me. As an Autistic person, navigating ODSP – through the strategic lying required to tell “the [government] worker what they need to hear in order to get you the thing that you need” and avoid a minefield of punitive pitfalls – made Dylan “really upset” and heightened their self-doubt. The “trauma of [...] being told over and over again that I'm not really Autistic, I'm not really sick” were reinforced by the system which “literally tell[s] you ‘You can't have this.’”

Like case law and employment standards complaints, ODSP encourages ND workers towards a ‘neoliberal entrepreneurialism,’ in which they are encouraged to confront the ableism of the capitalism through “radical responsabilization” (Mirchandani 2019, 549). This individualization of risk furthers workers’ precarity.

4.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I discussed the neurodivergent worker’s unique position within the capitalist labour market – neither lumpenproletariat nor stably employed. I have argued that orthodox Marxist concepts do not sufficiently conceptualize the teetering fluidity of the ND worker. Instead, I developed the liminal lumpenproletariat, a category of workers who consciously occupy positions of persistent precarity and agentively manage their disability to avoid falling into the underclass. I further explored the strategies workers adopt, ranging from labour market entry, sectoral preference, and formal accommodation, to demonstrate creative yet limited methods of disability management. Ultimately, I showed how ND workers’ ‘teetering’ behaviours are liminal themselves, as they are often taken up in contrast with the intuitive behaviours of neurodivergent bodyminds. Integrating a Cripistemological perspective into labour geography therefore disrupts current narratives of work and the labour market. My next chapters continue to engage with these concepts at increasingly micro scales of the ND worker, from the work-home environment to the bodymind.

CHAPTER 5: Work-Home Environment

5.1 Introduction

"We mean to make things over,
We are tired of toil for naught
With but bare enough to live upon
And ne'er an hour for thought.
We want to feel the sunshine
And we want to smell the flow'rs
[...]

Oh, hands and hearts are weary,
And homes are heavy with dole;
If our life's to be filled with drudg'ry,
What need of a human soul?
[...]

*Eight hours for work, eight hours for rest
Eight hours for what we will!"*

So went an 1878 song composed to promote the 19th century forty-hour work week labour campaign (Odell 2019). In some ways, those activists' demands have been fulfilled – according to Statistics Canada (2023) the average Canadian worker clocked in at 35.8 hours weekly in 2022. Yet this picture is only a success story when applied to certain sectors, parts of the world and able-bodied workers. How does a division of the day look when the worker in question is disabled? How does a division of the day look for the teetering ND worker – occupying the liminal lumpenproletariat position in the labour market? This chapter investigates such questions at the meso- and micro-geographic scales. I explore how the study's participants spend their days as neurodivergent workers – understanding these activities as involving both wage labour and household production, necessitating a collapse of the spatial binary between home and work.

Ultimately, this chapter argues that ND workers adopt a variety of emotional and physical geographic strategies to navigate their liminal lumpenproletariat status at the scale of the work-home environment. These involve 1) formal accommodation, 2) informal accommodation and 3) relational support. While these strategies enabled workers to maintain a position of teetering, they also heightened the possibility of collapse. I discuss the geographies of burnout for the ND worker as a condition prompted by work that manifests in the home environment. Drawing from feminist geography, I suggest that ND workers'

situated precarities and privileges heighten the effectiveness of these strategies at maintaining their teetering position.

5.2 Liminal Lumpenproletariat & Labour Power

Below, I theorize labour power (LP) and the division of the working day for the liminal lumpenproletariat. LP is a worker's capability that can be expended to produce a use-value (Marx 1867, 3). Social reproductive theorists expand LP to include household production, which they argue produces value as well. As Quick (2023, 463-464) asserts, "a portion of that labor power must be used in the process of that household production after the end of the hours of wage labor." Labour in the home environment requires the expenditure of a worker's capacities and energies yet is often rendered invisible as feminized labour.

Russell (2001, 89) argues that "the material basis of capitalist accumulation" enforces a capitalist calculus, which 'subtracts' workers who cannot be mined for as much surplus labour as their able-bodied counterparts. Last chapter showed that the traditional Marxist theorization of disability – where disabled workers are then "throw[n] out of the production process" into the underclass (Mandel 1962, 151 in Malhotra & Russell 2002, 223) – does not hold for ND workers. As liminal lumpenproletariat, ND workers occupy a teetering position, moving in and out of the reserve army of labour. Their vacillating disability, which in turns speeds them up through hyperfocus or slows them down through burnout, or may be masked, is the cause of this in-between status.

I next extend Russell's argument to suggest that the non-standard production cost of ND workers is the result of their undersized labour power (LP) relative to the total LP of the workforce, which is averaged out according to a 'normal' of production conditions, worker skill, and action intensity – essentially, an able-bodied standard. The findings of this study validate this argument. When asked how much daily energy they perceive expending in wage labour, most study participants replied with percentages between 60-100%. Therefore, since capitalist standards of productivity are dictated by 'averaged' able-bodied LP, ND workers meet this standard by selling most or all their daily labour power. What does this mean for social reproduction (SR)? In answer, follow AuDHD worker Mae (they/she, 32) after an average workday:

Expending outsized energy in wage labour, Mae arrives home exhausted and "pretty numb." Their ability to accomplish the tasks that would refresh their energy is thus undermined; in fact, these tasks drain her even more – "brushing my teeth, making food, eating, going to work, freaking dressing myself, whatever. That's about everything I have. About like 90% – No, sometimes it's even like 110% of what I have." They have nothing left for 'whatever we will' – such as hobbies or social life. Instead, she spends "everyday like six hours [...] fully dissociated fucking scrolling or YouTube or video games or whatever."

Mae returns to work the next day with even less energy to expend and then back home with barely any, making it continuously more difficult to reproduce their LP. Though Mae externalizes many of these SR tasks through paid services, this cycle of overextension may eventually lead to burnout, such as what Mae faced during their mid to late twenties: “I was exhausted all the time, and I couldn't really understand why it was so difficult for me versus for other people.”

For reader's familiar with ‘spoon theory,’ the above may ring a bell. ‘Spoon theory’ is a disability concept developed by Christine Miserandino (2003), where she explained her chronic illness to a friend through the analog of tablespoons in a diner. Each person starts the day with a different number of ‘spoons,’ which represent their available daily energy. Disabled people may start out with fewer spoons; tasks may also use up more spoons for them than an able-bodied person. In ‘spoon theory,’ burnout thus results from being pushed into the ‘red’ for your spoon budget – you have borrowed so many spoons from tomorrow to use today that your everyday spoon budget is sorely depleted. Due to the demands of capitalist work, ND workers are frequently in the ‘red.’

Why reinterpret spoon theory through a Marxist analysis? Simply, because it accounts for the underlying economics – LP shows us that spoons are not just energy, but also a source of profit. The capitalist mode of production is set up to take as many of the worker's ‘spoons’ as possible. In *Das Kapital*, for instance, Marx (1867, 163) described “capital [as] dead labour, that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks.” He emphasizes that the wage labour of the 19th century led to the early deaths of workers, who gave away so many future days’ LP until years were shaved off their lifespans. Evidently, life force (spoons or LP) of all workers is drained by this capitalist vampirism; disabled workers are especially drained. With little LP to spare for social reproduction, ND workers deal with frequent or long-term bouts of burnout and even eventual disablement. Marx also informs us that it is class conflict over the working day which enables the working class to escape “toil for naught” to “feel the sunshine and [...] smell the flow'rs” (Odell 2019). This is why a disability lens is imperative – to illuminate how campaigns such as the eight-eight-eight take for granted an able(mind)bodied worker. As we saw with Mae, her actual ratio is eight hours for work and sixteen hours for rest. Therefore, enabling time for the sunshine would mean reducing the working day even more.

Moreover, LP was not evenly dispersed within the ND participants according to their various situated bodymind differences. For example, Dylan's chronic illness means they “can't actually do something for more than like 2-3 hours [...] without about that much rest afterwards.” Additionally, Nathan's strict Autistic routines means that he experiences disruptions as extremely draining – “if I don't have creamer, I absolutely need to have it right now. I have to run to the store to buy it. And that's like an immediate net -

100 getting in the car -2000 seeing other people on the road.” These two participants fit more neatly into the traditional ‘lumpenproletariat’ category. In contrast, many participants with ADHD described having

Figure 7

ND Workers' teetering strategies in their work-home environments

<i>Strategy</i>		
<i>Formal</i>	type of work	Being structured into types of work – e.g., offered marker-grader instead of teaching
	Time	Deadlines, workload, courses, length of standard workday, fewer comps
	Tasks	Note-takers, voice recording, private exam room,
	Co-working groups	Offered through university accessibility service
	SR	Union paid for cleaning service through extended health benefit (ND specific)
	Productivity tools	Union paid for cost of productivity chair
<i>Informal</i>	Sensory	Headphones; transition glasses; heavy duty gloves; dimming lightbulbs
	Interpersonal	Reminders; picking up the phone for another
	Technologies	Pre-recorded videos; AI; robot vacuum; (dishwasher)
	Economic /automotive	Ordering in groceries, meals, products; uber/taxis; productivity devices/apps; adjustable light bulbs; professional cleaners; self-cleaning litter box; counter dishwasher
	Layout	Low stimulation rooms; high visibility & organization; atmosphere
	Temporal	Days off; part-time work; morning vs. evening
<i>Relational</i>	Neighbourhood	Externalized SR tasks (laundromat, food, etc.); commutes; walks
	Shared labour	Division of chores
	Emotional Support	Offering stress relief through solidarity and emotional support
	Co-working	Bringing laundry over to a friend’s apartment; asking for a friend to keep them company while they cleaned; taking morning walks together to enhance their ADHD medication; participating in monthly potlucks

excess (though distracted) energy. ND workers at the meso-geographic scale can thus be observed teetering between everyday hyperfunction, dysfunction, and burnout.

SRT demonstrates that ND workers' disablement in wage labour stretches into social reproduction and vice versa. Therefore, Marx's theory of LP, though helpful in understanding capitalist exploitation of the worker, must be updated to encapsulate social reproductive labour. Together with the non-binary LL, these theories help illuminate the breadth of ND workers' experience under advanced capitalist work regimes. Moving out of Marxist theory into a labour geography approach, the next section investigates how this LP cycle materializes in the everyday and asks how ND workers navigate being liminal lumpen at the scale of the work-home environment.

5.3 Teetering Within the Work-Home Environment

Since ND workers teeter across many overlapping meso-geographies, I adopt the analytic of the 'work-home environment.' This follows Moss's (1997) 'home environment' to map the social practices, materials, and relations of the home, the workplace, the work-from-home, the commute, and the neighbourhood as a linkage of relational and fluid yet bounded sites.

5.3.1 Formal Accommodations

Formal accommodations are individual adjustments to procedures or tasks that are acquired through formal organizational structures of the workplace – such as employers, unions, human resources (HR), etc. The worker's first step to receiving formal accommodation is their disclosure of disability. Precarities and privileges determine how likely to use / effective participants perceive this strategy to be. Whether a participant disclosed (with the purpose of receiving accommodation) was contingent on one of several factors including their embodied identities and class positionings.

5.3.1.2 Disclosure and White Masculinity

To Niels (32), disclosure was easy – he expressed that his whiteness and cisgender identity gave him the “privilege of being quite, you know, open and honest and not experience[ing] huge blowbacks from that.” Another white cisgender man, Brad (51), described similar willingness to disclose, though he did not explain it through his identity. Brad did, however, describe moments of discernment that indicate his perception of power. As an interviewer, for example, Brad would be open about his diagnosis, saying: “my ADD had my mind wandering. Tell me that again. I'm listening now.” With clients, however, Brad would “hesitate” before disclosing, only choosing to do so “depend[ing] on the level of relationship.” Evidently, disclosure was more straightforward for Brad when the social power dynamic was in his favour – as interviewer – compared to when he was less secure – a client relationship where he was providing the service. Speculating, one wonders: Brad would share his neurodivergence as readily if his gender and race

were not also positions of power? Looking to the answers of the racialized neurodivergent participants, it is unlikely.

Both Niels and Brad worked in offices; for Josh, a white man in construction, disclosure was an unpromising route. Due to the hyper masculine culture and “sink or swim kind of attitude,” Josh predicted that talking about his AuDHD would lead to “scepticism and scrutiny [...] I’d lose some of the autonomy [...] I don’t think I would be accommodated in any way.” Therefore, disclosure for the purpose of formal accommodation was geographically uneven for white ND men and contingent upon specific workplace norms of masculinity.

5.3.1.2 Disclosure and Racial Marginalization

Many of the racialized participants expressed doubt towards disclosure. For Orla (59), her decision to not disclose or seek formal accommodation was due to the labour it would require of her. “I am tired of educating people on things” she told me, “And not just mental health, but also being Black [...] and a woman [...] I don't wanna have all those conversations.” Similarly, Hiba (33) discussed how being visibly racialized and Muslim were the most legible aspects of her identity in the spaces she entered so “I think that if I'm experiencing stigma. It's going to be on the basis of race.” Hiba did not see her neurodivergence as a point of discrimination: “people already infantilize me. [They] already think I don't have like very insightful or [...] intelligent things to say.” In fact, Hiba avoided seeking accommodations because “it feels like I'm taking away resources from other people or it feels like I'm like mocking other people's experiences of neurodivergence and like, maybe mine is not that that extreme.” It is possible she has milder ADHD, but it is also possible that if she were white, she would experience and read the discriminatory and disabling impacts of neurodivergence more legibly and seek support.

In contrast to Orla and Hiba, Nathan (28) discussed cultural reasons for not disclosing his AuDHD in the Chinese spaces he grew up and worked in. “People that subscribe to mainland China culture [...] absolutely will not tolerate any sort of talk about Autism [...] I would never share [my ND] with Chinese people.” Therefore, the diverse additional pressures added by embodied identities – such as discrimination, expected labour, and cultural norms – discouraged racialized workers from disclosing and seeking accommodation in the workplace.

5.3.1.3 Disclosure and Gender Marginalization

White ADHD cisgender women in the study did not describe gender-based deterrents to disclosure. For example, though a white woman named Coco experienced sexism in the workplace – being called ‘aggressive’ which she linked to her ADHD impulsivity – disclosure provided her “protections” and no evident downsides. For the nonbinary people I spoke with, however, there was a general trend away from

disclosure. Dylan, for example, reflected that “there's always like a cost benefit analysis for me of asking for accommodations [...] My transness, my other disabilities, [...] there wasn't really room for, like, an intersectional understanding of needs or accommodations.” Like Orla, they knew asking for accommodation would require a lot of the work – in measuring whether that labour resulted in sufficient support, they “found often that the balance [...] didn't work out well.”

5.3.1.4 Diagnosis

Between Autism and ADHD, those with ADHD were more likely to disclose. Participants with both diagnoses reflected on this, noting they were more comfortable talking about their ADHD. Pauline, for example, stated that “the ADHD one is socially a lot more acceptable. [...] I was like ready to go tell the world [about her Autism diagnosis], but bestie was like. ‘Watch out, like, hold on one second because, like, think about the cultural references that people have for Autism.’” Pen reflected on a similar hesitance about Autism, stating that “the latter is much more misunderstood. And I think that ADHD is almost ubiquitous. So, like the problem is that people don't take it very seriously.” Henry was also unlikely to openly describe himself as Autistic, though he noted his Tourette’s was always “visible.” Therefore, the social understandings of different ND diagnoses influenced the choice to disclose in the workplace.

5.3.1.5 Characteristics of Employment

The likelihood that participants formally disclosed was also shaped by two characteristics of employment: size of organization and precarity of work. First, participants who worked in large organizations were more likely to disclose due to risk assessment and follow-through. Larger organizations had more rigid protocols, whereas smaller businesses demonstrated uneven implementation. For example, Greg notes that his small workplace employer would offer accommodations that were “always talked up very nice” but “in practice falls apart like within a week.” However, large organizations were also more inflexible. Many of the physical structures were implemented from above – with Stephanie reflecting “there are a lot of things I would do and changes I would make to accommodate myself better, to be more comfortable, but those aren't corporate, so I wear my transitions and suck it up.” Additionally, disclosing to a neutral body (such as a union, student accessibility service, and/or HR) rather than immediate boss shifted the power dynamic.

Second, precarious employment dissuaded participants from disclosing their neurodivergence. This was due to the shorter-term relationships and lack of job stability. Orla, for instance, worked in contract work for six years and lacked colleagues, so did not see the purpose in disclosure. Fern, additionally, expressed that in her “low entry position where I'm [...] expendable. [...] if I if I bring up anything, it's like, that puts me closer on the chopping block.” Moreover, informal work also discouraged disclosure. Nathan, for instance, worked for a “shady company” that let him lie about his qualifications to tutor physics.

However, while this lack of law abiding granted him the job, it also heightened his precarity. Working on the fringes of the legal labour market meant Nathan felt less entitled to fair labour practices – he assumed that, were his Autism revealed, “they would probably just get rid of me.” Precarious ND workers thus perceived disclosure for formal accommodation as a risk that could lead to capitalist calculus.

5.3.1.6 Capitalist Calculus & the False Security of Accommodation

Participants’ intuitions about the risks of accommodation are validated by Niels’ story, already discussed in chapter 4. Niels’ openness, disclosure, and search for accommodations did not improve his work outcomes. Rather, his earnest appeal to accommodations and Autistic literalism meant he “didn't catch on to what was happening right away because I got all of the right words.” As he was being pushed out of the organization, he experienced heightened internalized ableism: “I really felt like it was my fault because I couldn't figure out what would be helpful.” Already burnt out, Niels procrastinated the assigned 'task' of finding his own accommodations. Meanwhile, he experienced significant friction and time tracking from his employer. Just as he was thinking of going on disability leave, he was fired. Due to the significant ableist barriers within Ontario labour law, Niels did not seek satisfaction in court. Evidently, the intuition expressed by workers – that the meagre reward of accommodations is not worth the risk of disclosure – is supported by this evidence.

5.3.2 Informal Accommodations

ND workers’ effortfully adopt informal accommodations to navigate the work-home environment. These are the individual adjustments acquired through interpersonal and market routes and implemented by the worker alone. They are often located also the work-home environment to accommodate the workers’ disabled social reproduction. ND workers’ ability to materialize these strategies is contingent on their precarities and privileges and involve a variety of affective geographies and microgeographic physical adjustments.

5.3.2.1 Social

Neurodivergent workers adopted emotional interpersonal strategies in the work-home environment. Though some expressed this as simply asking for help, others characterized these techniques as a subversive “trick.” Hannah, for example, tells colleagues that they were “new to teaching in the classroom [or] I was like away for a long time” to gain support. Coco “very much manage[s] my managers. They work for me as far as I'm concerned.” Furthermore, Coco notes how this interpersonal strategy involved masking techniques – she presents herself as someone “really on top of it” to obscure the moments she asks for support. While subtle prompts result in a helpful correction “100% of the time,” Coco reflect that “if I just asked him straight up if I was like, hey, as an accommodation, can you send me the task that you

want me to do in writing? He would not do it.” Socially acquired accommodations were inaccessible for some workers, however, with Pen remarking that she is unable to effectively manipulate employers – “being so open and honest with people [...] leaves me in a position where somebody can exploit that. So, I’m kind of relying on the goodwill of others.”

5.3.2.2 Temporal, Economic, & Technological

ND workers took days off work for regulation; they also worked part-time to make time for SR. Josh describes using his days strategically, controlling how much stimulation he takes in in the morning to allow him to overcome executive dysfunction and complete more strenuous tasks later in the day.

ND workers used informal economic strategies to improve their productivity and/or fill in the gaps of social reproduction in the work-home environment. Ordering in food was almost ubiquitous, and many took advantage of grocery delivery services. Several participants reflected on the cost negatively, though one or two appeared to handle the expense. Merna mentioned often running late and racking up expenses with taxis or Ubers. Niels forbode himself from ordering in food ever because he is “trying to manage how quickly I can normalize the routine with how much money I have and how expensive those services are.” Orla, similarly, expressed a desire for an improved home organizational system for her art supplies, clothing, etc., but found the cost prohibitive. For some workers, the costs and time invested in productivity tools such as apps, chairs, and podcasts were worth the boost to productivity they provided. Others, however, did not engage with these tools, with Pen assuming “that any product on the market is just to make money and not actually for my benefit.”

Henry recorded videos of himself speaking and edited out his tics to present it in a professional setting. Nathan, meanwhile, would counter “instantaneous burnout” by utilizing technological solutions, such as prerecorded videos, to accomplish tasks. Many other participants relied on automating social reproductive labour, such as through a counter dishwasher or robot vacuum.

5.3.2.3 Neighbourhood & Commute

Several participants describe externalizing SR tasks such as laundry and food outside of the home environment. For Niels, this tactic “is very helpful in actually making sure that it gets down” because “there’s momentum outside.” He goes to the same Tim Hortons and gets the same thing every morning for breakfast. Niels reflected on the importance of a dense city neighbourhood where “any of your needs could be met in two blocks” in a consistent and easy fashion. In fact, other participants found externalizing SR tasks difficult due to the inaccessible urban spaces they lived in. For example, Susan avoided not doing groceries because the nearest one is an “inhuman” Costco. Orla’s distant laundromat leads to her hand washing much of her clothing.

ND workers also engaged in their neighbourhood geographies through exercise – including sports, casual walks, biking, and gym activity. Maria regulates her Autistic overwhelm primarily through sports which she has “schedules so [...] I can’t skip.” Fern uses walks to manage her hyperactivity and “get movement out of my body.” Hiba improves her ADHD focus and productivity through “one or two walks” a day that let her “refresh [for] academic labour.”

Many participants described using the commute for regulation, focus, and transition. Many of those who reported positively on commutes lived in denser settings with shorter commutes were frequent bikers and transit users. They describe the commute as “load bearing” (Greg), which provides the benefit of “zoning out” (Hiba). Car drivers describe similar benefits when they lived in more rural areas – Stephanie, for instance, saw her twenty-minute commute along a highway as the perfect time for regulating and transitioning between home and work because it required less attention: “It’s probably the actually the most relaxed time I ever have is when I am driving. There’s no people in the car yelling at me. There’s no other external stimuli, I’m just stuck alone in a box with my brain and that’s it.” Brad utilized the commute as a method to improve productivity by taking calls in the car.

Many who expressed this benefit also expressed a dislike for work-from-home for the lack of separation. Yet, commuting was also frequently a space of overstimulation – the lights, unpredictable strangers, and smells were experienced intensely. Multiple bus transfers heightened these issues – Pen opts for a longer commute if it has fewer transfers: “my time is less valuable than my levels of comfort.” Nathan completely avoids transit. Commuting was also a space of panic/stress due to the focus needed to drive on busy streets, the frequency of running late, or experience of being perceived.

5.3.2.4 Layout & Atmosphere

In their homes, ND workers noted a preference for transparent visual organization (such as clear buckets or open shelving) as a memory aid. However, they also mentioned distaste for clutter, which was a source of overstimulation. To achieve this, participants adjusted their home layouts through organizational systems, specific locations for easily lost objects, and “doom” zones to hide clutter. As small as a drawer or pile behind a sofa; as large as an entire “hoarding” room, “doom” zones also doubled as ‘masking’ strategies to hide dysfunction from others, not just the worker’s own senses. The dual need for visual clarity and minimalism was a challenge for some ADHD workers, who struggled to keep up with tidying. Others described a hyper functional response – in fact, many of the participants had comorbid OCD and spent excess time on cleaning, to the detriment of other tasks.

Overstimulation was not just the result of clutter; Maria (39) describes how motherhood increased “the overwhelm” and reduced “time to regulate.” In response, she adopted a unique layout strategy: a low-

stimulation room with a closed door. This room had white walls and no décor; “no sounds [...] no senses and just eyes.” Maria’s “kids already know that they can’t come in there” and, with the support of her spouse, she can regulate for as long as a few hours or as short as a few minutes inside “and I go out as a different person.”

ND workers created positive emotional geographies in their home environments, using décor to build calming, caring, joyful, and personal atmospheres in their spaces. As Merna stated: “I care for it and make it clean and beautiful. And then when I walk in from the outside, it cares for me.” With their energy drained by the working day, ND workers agentively built care into their very surroundings as a teetering solution.

5.3.3 Relational Support

Many participants noted the importance of their social bonds in accommodating their neurodivergence. In some cases, workers relied on traditional kinship structures – the nuclear family and partnered support. In others, workers engaged in webs of support with their disabled community and friends. While beneficial in many cases, relational work was not uncomplicated. In the following, I also discuss isolation, gendered labour demands, and “malignant independence” of the caring strategies for teetering in the capitalist labour market.

5.3.3.1 *Positive Traditional Networks of Support*

There were many examples of positive interdependence among partners and the nuclear family. Maria’s story, described in the previous section, is an example of a worker whose neurotypical spouse supported their need for regulation time. Chore sharing and burnout support were also common examples given and celebrated by partnered participants. Fern, for example, discusses the benefit of dividing SR labour with her AuDHD boyfriend: “we kind of like accommodate each other’s different kind of neurodivergence.”

The nuclear family structure also provided relational support. When queried about SR labour, Henry stated his “family was very, very helpful.” To accommodate his Autism and Tourette’s Syndrome, Henry’s parents cook extra meals (“I just don’t like Chinese food and they’re OK with that”) and provide car rides (“with my Tourette’s, I cannot drive [...]so they] drive me around”). Overall, Henry describes a positive and caring relationship with his family. In the work-home environment, some nuclear families and partners thus enabled workers to remain in teetering positions.

5.3.3.2 *Co-dependence & Abuse*

Workers also report the relational dynamics of the traditional family as a site of conflict, isolation, tension, and abuse. Pauline (33), for example, became “codependent” with an ex-partner who did

“everything for me” while she “was stuck inside” writing her MA thesis. Other workers also spoke of “ableist violence” and domestic abuse. For example, the pressure to mask and centre their abusive ex-husband undermined many of Hannah’s work-from-home strategies and led to hyper-vigilance, which they still suffer from years later. Nathan describes care work burnout from his abusive girlfriend, having to “do things that stop her from yelling at me.”

5.3.3.3 Hyper Independence & Gendered Labour

Merna states that she and her ex-husband “weren't people that comforted each other. We were people who upheld that ‘You must do all these things.’” Within SR labour, for example, Merna “had no support [...] I did all the laundry. I did all the cooking. I did all the cleaning.” She calls this “malignant independence,” a result of her abusive childhood.

The gendered dimension of ‘hyper-functional’ social reproduction is also evidenced with Stephanie (34). A wife and mother of four, Stephanie has “5 neurodivergent individuals that I accommodate.” Since she does not “really have the best quality helpers,” she does most work in the home; she is “constantly reorganizing and fixing things,” and has “set my environment up very well to accommodate myself and my kids.” With a comorbid OCPD diagnosis that “outweighs” her more “reserved ADHD,” Stephanie “made it to 34 without a diagnosis.” Yet, facing “Crippling burnout” pushed her to seek help. She noted that the outsized social reproductive work responsibility is becoming “more difficult for me” – in fact, it is especially “becoming harder for me to kind of like swoop everybody in and keep everybody from going out in all different directions” and have meltdowns. Therefore, the gendered load resulted in several participants hyper-independence, with implications for burnout in the long term.

5.3.3.4 Age Hierarchies

Alternatively, ND workers also experienced sensory strain and conflict as adult children living in their nuclear family home. First, Hiba (33) describes her house as “a sensory nightmare, because like both my parents watch TV while they are doing work. They just talk a lot, and they are very loud.” Dolly (24), additionally, stated that “there's a lot of clutter in my shared spaces and that makes it challenging to rest” – especially because even her bedroom is a shared storage space.

Living at home is an accommodation for their liminal lumpenproletariat precarity, heightened by their class backgrounds. Yet, they do not have access to relational accommodations – when asked for examples, Hiba said: “I can't think of a single thing.” This was a result of her parents’ anti-psychiatry views/ignorance – “they don't think [ADHD] is a real thing” so when she asks for quiet “they think I'm being disrespectful, so I kind of have to like, just like engineer those accommodations for myself.” For Dolly (24), “there's something that the household structure that is not allowing me to participate.” She is

constantly interrupted in her room and finds it difficult to ask for peace; her parents do most SR labour which means she cannot “gain the experience of learning how to navigate those things.” As adult children living in their parent’s homes, both participants had an undersized power to shape their own space and sensory input.

Therefore, while relational care can lessen ND workers’ precarity and burnout, shared home-environments can also lead to additional sensory overwhelm and interpersonal demands. These can further undermine ND workers’ ability to reproduce themselves, increasing their potential exhaustion and precarity. Thus, familial relational teetering strategies compound the liminal lumpenproletariat’s position in the labour market.

5.3.3.5 Community/Crip Kinship Networks

As the previous section showed, the nuclear family is a limited tool for ND accommodation due to its isolation, gendered division of labour, and age-based hierarchies. ND workers built and received community based relational support as an alternative form of disability management.

Participants describe building social networks of ND workers in their workplaces. These connections resulted in informal cultures of accommodation and emotional support. Several workers discussed doing chores with friends. Two workers, for instance, mentioned finding balance with their ND roommates – one who was slowed down by her ND benefited from the speed of her hyperactive roommate; another who was hyperactive described the benefit of a roommate who moved slower helping them find lost items and forestall meltdowns. And finally, participants described emotional benefits – as Hannah stated, “space to, like talk about it and feel understood and like be in disabled community can be a really kind of radical thing.”

Yet, many of these networks were delicate – as workers aged or were priced out of major cities, they lost access to their communities. Being in a different class position from their friends was also a challenge, with Orla noticing that she needed the mutual aid more than her friends did. Many of the workers also expressed fear of vulnerability with asking for help beyond the family unit due to internalized ableism. Others described struggling to make plans and socialize due to their burnout and a low energy threshold. Furthermore, in the workplace, some workers became irritated at fellow ND co-workers. This was sometimes the result of tensions due to productivity demands, but also a natural result of the variation of personality and bodymind within the ND community.

5.4 Collapse

Many participants described periodical burnout. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, burnout arises as the result of ND workers pushing their bodyminds to meet neurotypical productivity standards in

the long term; at the scale of the work-home environment, burnout also occurs following crisis when ND workers' teetering strategies fall apart.

Hazel's (28, they/them) experience is clarifying. A nonbinary Chinese AuDHD person, Hazel became "invested in mathematics" at a young age. They pursued math all the way into a PhD – however, they told me that "as of late, I've kind of had like different feelings about it." In the months leading up to our interview, they became politicized by their encounter with the ugly side of academia, and they discussed "the realities of like all that kind of rests upon it, you know, and how it's really valued."

When I spoke with Hazel in the fall, they were navigating extreme precarity and burnout. Due to administrative errors and techno-bureaucratic issues in their fourth year, their PhD research had come "to a grinding halt;" soon after, they became heavily engaged in a labour strike for fairer wages. Yet, pressure mounted from the university to keep up with timelines. There was no provision for their disability either through fair wages or accommodations. Over the summer, they hit a "very, very bad spiral" of burnout. They did not "have enough energy to cook [...] couldn't even get out of bed." To accommodate their social reproductive labour, they relied on food delivery and "lost a shitload of money by doing so."

These stressors were compounded by precarious housing. Hazel lives alone, describing a distant and difficult relationship with parents who "don't really understand" their Autism diagnosis. Without parental support, they developed independence out of necessity. Shortly before we spoke, Hazel had moved into an on-campus apartment to access a better kitchen and "get into a healthy space" after their intense burnout spiral. However, when Hazel arrived on the premise, there were more than 40 cockroaches on the walls and floors. Though they repeatedly called in pest control, the cockroaches kept coming back and Hazel's days, research, and sleep were repeatedly disrupted. In fact, the pest problem was connected to a recent change in policy by the university, which switched from building-wide fumigation to the less effective but inexpensive room-by-room fumigation. Hazel had to drop a course, which put them even further behind on their PhD timeline.

There is real injustice in Hazel's story: an ableist and neoliberal work regime, individualized social reproduction, and the lack of affordable pest-free housing in Toronto. Multiple avenues of teetering – the formal, informal, and relational – all failed Hazel. It is unclear where they will end up, but their intense burnout and the university's inaccessible structure means that future precarity is likely for Hazel. Ultimately, this vignette shows how a worker's additional precarities and privileges condition the effectiveness of teetering as a method to remain in the LL.

5.6 Conclusion

This chapter has shown how strategies in the work-home environment allow ND workers to maintaining a teetering LM location yet enhance their precarity. I outlined how ND workers are rendered liminal lumpenproletariat due to outsized LP expectations and disabled social reproduction. Next, I demonstrated how ND workers adapt with a myriad of costs, demonstrating that formal accommodation and disclosure are uneven and insufficient, that informal techniques often led to money loss, self-discipline, and burnout, and that relations of care offer sometimes affirming, sometimes harmful components. I also indicated how worker isolation, precarity, capitalist labour arrangements, and/or internalized ableism undermined the possibility of building or maintaining disabled communities of support. Due to the radical potentials of such spaces, their undersized presence has greater negative implications for potential political possibilities.

Altogether, teetering reveals the need for structural change. Individual solutions cannot address the broader ableism of the work-home environments – a result of capitalist calculus, the limited physical structure of the workplace, and a binaristic view of labour, which neglects disabled social reproduction. Indeed, when meso-geographic teetering is insufficient, workers displace disability management to their very bodymind. As Niels expressed: “my experience of [accommodations] has always been very self-sacrificing. And sort of trying to power through.” In the next chapter, I analyze these embodied teetering strategies and their costs at the micro scale of the bodymind.

CHAPTER 6: The Bodymind

“The materialism in this book lives in the flesh of these women’s lives: the exhaustion we feel in our bones at the end of the day, the fire we feel in our hearts when we are insulted, the knife we feel in our backs when we are betrayed, the nausea we feel in our bellies when we are betrayed, or even the hunger we feel between our hips when we long to be touched.”

– Cherrie Moraga, *A Bridge Called My Back*, 52

6.1 Introduction

“Well, if I didn't have to go to a job, I don't think I would mind it so terribly,” Merna, a 58-year-old participant, told me.

I had asked participants to describe the experience of being within their bodyminds in order to draw out and “centre neurodivergent sensory experience” (Rosqvist et al. 2020, 126). Merna’s answer offered immediate insight – that the neurodivergent sensory experience is revelatory of the bodymind as “a geography connected to other geographies” under the empire of normality (Goeman & Barker 2020, 102). As discussed in previous chapters, Merna acutely felt the pain of “not doing something that is near to [her] heart.” In a lackluster job, she was hyperaware of the way she was forced to behave unlike herself under advanced capitalism. Implicitly, she sensed her liminal lumpenproletariat position. While not all participants spoke of their bodymind experience vis a vis the type of work they performed, most expressed frustration at having to restrict behaviours and at the challenges they experienced as a result.

Based on these findings, this chapter examines the self-conscious flesh, neurons, and electrical impulses of the ND bodymind as a material record of capitalist injustice. As discussed previously, ‘bodymind’ emphasizes the inextricable oneness of mind and body; further, “the ‘neuro’ suffix [in neurodivergent] emphasises the embodied nature of the mind, and that cognition is inseparable from the body, and beyond that, the world” (Chapman 2023, 139). This chapter thus examines the connection between bodymind and world through a feminist embodiment geography. Following Indigenous feminists Goeman & Barker’s (2020) conception of the body as a “meeting place,” I map the intimacies of teetering and liminal lumpenproletarianization at two bodymind scales. First, I look at the thinking self (the mind) and discuss how the pathology paradigm shapes workers’ self-conception, and how ND workers resist internalized pathologization through the neurodiversity paradigm. Second, I regard the sensing self (the body) to show how the ND worker feels a ‘sore thumb’ under capitalism and respond through a range of mediating

actions. Though I separate these sections for sake of clarity, the experiences of mind-body are inseparable.

6.1.1 Key terms

In *Ongoing Storms and Struggles*, Goeman & Barker (2020, 102, 101) explore spatial injustice by “thinking of the body as a geography connected to other geographies under the structures of settler colonialism.” This “meeting place” framework, they argue, lets them “uproot [the body] from narrowly defined colonial scales [...] that separates humans, lands, animals, and so on” and obscures structural violence written upon the body (102, 101).

The neurodivergent bodymind is also framed narrowly – which a “meeting place” conception helps unravel. Chapman (2023, 15) defines the Empire of Normality as “an apparatus [...] that emerge from fundamental dispositions of the capitalist system, [which] bring a much more restricted bodily, cognitive, and emotional normal range than those seen in any previous society [connecting] neurodivergent oppression, colonialism, and imperialism.” The Pathology Paradigm – a dominant form of knowledge that is necessitated by the Empire of Normality – does similar work as colonial logics, structuring the ND bodymind in a distant, individual, and (in)curable scale. In this chapter, I demonstrate how structures produce power over the ND bodymind, as the self-conscious and sensing liminal lumpenproletariat, and also follow Goeman and Barker (2020, 119) in “remap[ping] body geographies to show connections,” resistance, and healing.

6.2 The Thinking Bodymind

“If a genie came along and I could get rid of this situation. Yeah, I would love to be normal.” –
Nathan

The pathology paradigm asserts power and authority over the bodymind scale of ND workers by framing itself as a “‘scientifically objective’ description of reality” and upholding “one “right” style of human neurocognitive functioning” (Walker 2011). Its medical labels and social norms disorder and containerize neurodivergence, a perspective some participants internalize. Yet, this process is interrupted by teetering efforts, which reinforce mind(body) liminality.

6.2.1 Labelling the Bodymind

Growing up, participants describe stigmatizing experiences with their schools, families, and peers that shaped their self-conceptions. Pen recalls her mother being pushed by her elementary school to get her an ADHD diagnosis and address how she was “not what they wanted me to be” – which led to her increasing withdrawal and defiance. Hazel’s parents’ limited support and understanding made their Autism diagnosis

in grade three “difficult” and led to “negative feelings about myself.” In elementary school, Henry recalled “people [we]re mean as hell” about his Tourette’s and Autism. Even without a formal label, several participants felt pathologized. In the second grade, though she “knew [she] was smart,” Merna’s slow and distracted pace labelled her otherwise and prevented her participation in a “special project,” which she remembered painfully. As adults, participants continued to face pathologization. Fern “would just never bother to go through the diagnosis process for Autism” for fear of increased stigma. Susan rejected her adult ADHD diagnosis for more than a decade, “only [accepting it now] because it’s becoming more ‘normal.’” Many participants further described prohibitive financial costs and fears of being dismissed or invalidated in the process.

When asked if they identify as disabled, participants further revealed the workings of the pathology paradigm upon their bodyminds. Lateral ableism (ableism between differently disabled people) was common. Hannah remembers “not really feeling like I was that kind of disabled;” Susan professed that “I don’t want to be on the government dole. And that’s just the way I was brought up;” and Stephanie vehemently rejected the label, stating: “I do not at all [identify as disabled] because I am fully physically and mentally capable of what every neurotypical could do so.” These participants struggled to see themselves as part of a disability community made surplus under capitalism.

Additionally, participants expressed internalized ableism (ableism directed at the self) through fears of appropriating space (“ticking the box,” to Hiba, “feels disingenuous, feels like I’m taking away resources from other people”) or being invalid in their claim (“because I knew people who were, quote, worse off,” Orla said, “I never really felt justified to say that you know I’m disabled”). These worries revealed the liminality and pain of invisible disability. Dylan discussed the “trauma” of a system that tells you “over and over again [you’re] not really Autistic, [you’re] not really sick.” Indeed, invisible disabilities can lead to “lifelong psychic and social ramifications, affecting the very capacities for individual expression and identity formation” (Kaufman et al. 2024, 382). Yet, the invisibility of disability also offered an agentive liminality. Pen states it clearly: while she “will utilize” the label “for purposes of self-protection in an unfair system,” she also avoids calling herself disabled politically, noting: “as somebody who appears as like an able-bodied person, [labelling ‘disability’] feels like I’m leaving myself open for criticism from the wider public. There’s a part of me that really wants to protect myself from that. We don’t live in a society that caters towards disabled people.”

Participants with additional disabilities, who experience their neurodivergence as debilitating, and who are more visibly disabled or cannot mask all more easily adopted the label. The liminal experience of ND workers with disability thus follows Malhotra & Russell (2002, 232), who assert that “‘disability’ is a social creation which defines who is offered a job and who is not, and what it means varies with the level

of economic activity.” ND workers within the liminal lumpenproletariat feel “Not Quite Abled and Not Quite Disabled” within their bodyminds (Moss 2000, 214), a similar nonbinary position to the one they occupy across the labour market. Wholly, participants’ experiences with diagnosis and disability demonstrate the continued power of the pathology paradigm at work upon their bodyminds.

6.2.2 Politicizing the Bodymind

ND workers resisted pathologization and isolation at the bodymind scale through the neurodiversity paradigm – which “centres disabled people as primary experts in their own experience” (Chapman 2023, 140). This countervailing force is the first example of a collective teetering strategy adopted by ND workers – as such, it connects with the social body of ND community and supports an understanding of bodymind as “meeting place.”

In 2011, Nick Walker argued in favour of “a shift from the pathology paradigm to the neurodiversity paradigm [in order] to create [...] improvement in the realm of autism-related praxis.” Participant responses evidence such a shift. In the last five years, more than three quarters of participants received a medical diagnosis, reconceptualized their previous diagnosis, or self-diagnosed. Many of those recently diagnosed described it as a positive process – Stephanie’s ADHD diagnosis a year prior to our interview led to “a lot of therapy and a lot of learning.” Maud, diagnosed in her early 20s, felt “relief to be able to start using that label,” describing herself as “very accepting of [her ADHD]” especially since “it was my decision to seek it out.”

With “professional diagnoses highly inaccessible,” the neurodiversity paradigm affirms self-diagnosis as an entry point to community due to its assertion of the ND bodymind as its own authority (Sarrett 2016, 31).⁸ Participants often self-diagnosed after receiving additional (mis)diagnoses, conducting personal research, and/or personally witnessing neurodivergence in others close (often related) to them. Self-diagnosis offered several participants access to identity, self-knowledge, and community. Orla observed that “there’s so much more information [...] acceptance [and] language” which has enabled her to “understand myself more and understand why things have been so challenging for me and also understand that what I thought was always a lack was actually a success tool.”

⁸ Self-diagnosis is countered by ‘biocertification,’ a process that defines community “through medical, governmental, or psychiatric practices and documentation” (Sarrett, 2016, 24) and reifies the pathology paradigm. Despite uneven opinions on self-diagnosis, the process remains a radical challenge to the pathology paradigm and epistemic injustice.

However, while the neurodiversity paradigm aims to reveal connections between the bodymind and structural oppression, with the goal of “de-pathologizing, and instead politicizing Autistic disablement, and distress” Chapman & Carel (2022, 615), the findings reveal otherwise. Rather, many participants remained focussed on adapting their bodymind to capitalist spaces of work through the individualized responsibility of “neoliberal entrepreneurialism” (Mirchandani 2019, 549).

In contrast, the participants who adopted a political disability claim urgently linked their bodyminds to a systemic critique. For example, Dylan articulated the social model of disability by pointing out that “Autism has disability because of ableism.” Orla first “became public” about her mental health and dyslexia as “a political move [...] to destigmatize” these disabilities. As Wilson (2021, 5) asserts, “analyzing the world through the powerful prism of disability creates a revolutionary and irreversibly transformative understanding of the human experience, one that magnifies our appreciation for human differences, deepens our commitment to social justice, and leads us to embrace our need for one another.”

Therefore, though the neurodiversity paradigm connects ND workers to a social body, it fails to broaden towards a material critique of capitalism or elicit collective action at other geographies, such as the workplace and labour market. Additionally, though ‘disability’ offers strong political potentials, the continued power of the PP expressed through lateral and internalized ableism undermines solidarity and collaboration between neurodivergent workers and more marginalized disabled people.

6.3 The Sensing Bodymind

This technicolour, blurry view out of the only bodymind we’ve ever known?⁹

Like palpitations, we’ve been buzzing since we left the womb.¹⁰

Moving feet, moving fingers, eyes. Making food, art, metal.¹¹ Settling racing minds.

Everything takes a lot of energy. Everything takes a lot of time and everything feels very painful.¹²

The fan. The ugly fake plant. The coworker’s loud phone call. An overseeing eye, hands and words watched close.¹³

Losing track of time, tasks, attention, authority.

Clenched fingers, making dents in neatly stapled papers. Trapped in tension, neck so stiff, arms rushing.¹⁴

⁹ Dylan, Hannah

¹⁰ Susan, Orla

¹¹ Orla, Pen, Stephanie, Josh.

¹² Irina

¹³ Coco, Mae, Pen, Hiba

¹⁴ Irina, Susan, Pen, Niels

Being incredibly stressed and presenting as calm as possible.¹⁵ Today, we smiled wide.
 The next, our faces immobile in a dark quiet room.¹⁶
 Feeling like I'm behind or feeling like I don't have my life sorted out¹⁷
 The mask of machismo fell right off when we were too tired to do anything but survive.¹⁸
 We went into a cozy room in our head, safe.¹⁹
 A complex equation onscreen illuminating our face in the dark bathroom.²⁰
 Then, a soaring feeling. The joy of a knot undone.²¹
 A single, heavy sigh. The roaring in our ears subsided; it would be back soon.²²
 A bit of a messier body, a bit of a, a more confused experience.²³
 A spring under pressure; a sore thumb.²⁴
 Bees in our head, bees in our head.²⁵

The poem above (composed from participant remarks) reveals the mark of the empire of normality upon the flesh, sensations, feelings, and neurons of neurodivergent workers. Many participants viewed their bodyminds as a source of joy and strength, yet within capitalist workspaces, they felt discomfort – missing social cues, weathering inaccessible environments, and falling short on productivity expectations. As discussed in previous chapters, the persistent precarity and the extensive teetering of the liminal lumpenproletariat presents high costs; the empire of normality thus writes pain, tension, and stress onto the ND bodymind scale. Yet, ND workers adopt teetering techniques to resist these effects.

6.3.1 Stress, Mental Illness

Figure 7:

Comorbid Disabilities and Disorders among 22 Neurodivergent Participants

Type of Comorbidity	<i>Quantity of Participants</i>
Depression	4
Anxiety	5
OCD	5
Unspecified Mental Illness/Mad	3

¹⁵ Mae

¹⁶ Hiba, Maria

¹⁷ Dolly

¹⁸ Josh

¹⁹ Josh, Maria

²⁰ Nathan

²¹ Nathan

²² Dolly

²³ Hannah

²⁴ Pen, Josh

²⁵ Hazel

CPTSD	4
Bipolar	1
Misophonia	1
Chronic Pain/ Illness / Cancer	5
Insomnia	2

Many participants described “ambient anxiety” (Fern) and its “constant weight” (Nathan) or tension on their body. Dolly (24) stated that she has a fast heart rate, feels constant “mental exhaustion,” and sometimes forgets to breathe properly. Susan experienced intense neck pain in her 20’s due to stress, which she now sees as “the body [...] trying to tell me to slow down.” Stress was also a barrier to sleep, leading to insomnia for some. There were also intense spikes in stress as Henry (25) described needing to “hide in my room and breakdown, crying, screaming like oh I’m so stressed.”

Anxiety was also a form of hypervigilance, where ND workers tried to control possible memory or social lapses. Nathan is “permanently stressed. Stressed I’m offending people, stressed about having to remember things, and if I don’t remember this then people will think I’m stupid.” As Randle et al. (2025, 16) note, “youth with GAD are often characterized as “worriers”, which may lead them, despite their ADHD, to attend to their world at higher rates.” Stress therefore represents significant mental labour for ND workers in their attempt to manage their bodyminds.

Stress is also the product of being unable to match productivity expectations. Dolly, for instance, thought her stress “boils down a lot to feeling like I’m behind or feeling like I don’t have my life sorted out.” In workplaces, she is told to speed up and “always feels like there is one more thing that I need to get done.” From the outside, it appears as though her body is moving at a slower pace; yet she embodies the fact that “‘slow’ is relative and what is perceived as slow to others can feel/be exceedingly fast-paced” (Kaufman et al. 2024, 390). To maintain a teetering LL position by keeping up a slow/fast pace is an extremely fraught bodymind undertaking, which marks itself through pain and tension.

A total of 63% of participants reported a mental health disability. Randle et al. (2025, 16) note that “youth with ADHD experience punishment for merely existing with ADHD, leading to high rates of depression and anxiety.” Many participants also reported OCD or OCD symptoms, which follows the findings that “25% of youth with OCD also have a diagnosis of ADHD and 11% of youth with ADHD have OCD” (Randle et al. 2025, 1).

6.3.2 Grief & Trauma

Older ND workers described a “grieving process” (Susan) after gaining the newfound knowledge that their bodyminds were disabled their whole lives. “What a waste of a life,” Susan said, “not knowing [...]

how to deal with it and how to live with it in a world that is now more accepting of it.” Orla is “so angry and sad too, because I've worked so much harder.” Participants of all ages described the trauma of being neurodivergent in an ableist society – of “being told that like I'm doing it wrong” and of “social shit and over stimulation” (Dylan).

Trauma also informs neurodivergence in the inverse, with many participants describing histories of childhood and/or relational trauma, neglect, and abuse. Indeed, Randle et al. (2025) discuss how “ADHD, characterized by inattention, impulsivity, and hyperactivity, may be further intensified in a child who has experienced traumatic events [since] trauma can disrupt emotion regulation and increase the severity of symptoms in children with ADHD and OCD, often leading to a cycle of maladaptive coping strategies.” (Randle, et al. 2025, 3).

6.3.4 Burnout

Several of the participants described burnout as the climactic point of masking and suffering under capitalist work regimes. Burnout at its worst can lead to “negative impacts on [Autistic people’s] health, capacity for independent living, and quality of life, including suicidal behavior” (Raymaker et al. 2020, 132). Ultimately, the violence of ableist capitalist work regimes can lead to an ultimate form of violence – death.

Thus, the materiality of the ND bodymind keeps score of the many geographies it must face. As capitalist standards of productivity and affective labour mount, ND workers attempt to keep pace with able bodied workers. The anxiety, pain, and trauma described in this section are some of the dire consequences of this. In the next section, I look more closely at these strategies and how ND workers seek to regiment the bodymind to ill affect.

6.4 Techniques of the Bodymind

ND workers bodyminds feel like “a sore thumb” in spaces of advanced capitalism – as troublesome and disobedient bodies, out of place. They discipline our bodyminds to ‘fit,’ and numb the pain of doing so, at great cost.

6.4.1 Masking

Masking involves the strict regimentation of the bodymind’s behaviours and appearance, allowing ND workers to agentively hide ‘undesirable’ traits from an ableist labour regime. According to Price (2022, 79), Autistic masking falls into two categories: “Camouflaging: attempting to hide or obscure Autistic traits in order to ‘blend in’ with neurotypicals. The main goal of camouflage is to avoid detection as disabled [and] Compensation: using specific strategies to “overcome” challenges and impairments related

to disability. The main goal of compensation is to maintain the appearance of high, independent functioning.”

The findings of this research reveal the embodied strain of masking. Irina, for instance, describes expending “a lot of energy every single day” on camouflaging. She is “always having to think about my body language and facial expressions” because “eye contact is really, really, really hard for me” and she feels “just constantly out of the position that I feel like I'm supposed to be in.” Ultimately, the camouflaging process is “super painful [and] exhausting.” Short term pain eventually leads to chronic pain and fatigue, as was shown with additionally disabled participants Dylan and Mae in chapter 4.

Geographies of work also enforce masking to the point that it becomes impossible to avoid doing. Irina, for instance, “lost track of [...] who I was or what my PhD dissertation was even about” during a period of intense grant writing. Hiba’s mask is an “very innate thing” which was the result of “socialization from a young age. [...] those of us who are, like, racialized and gendered, we're taught like not to inconvenience the people we're around.” Though Hiba did not notice herself masking as a purposeful technique, she described its heavy toll on her bodymind. Masking thus constitutes a site of liminality, as the masked neurodivergent worker performs acts unsuited for their bodymind.

6.4.2 Medication

Many of the ADHD participants took stimulant medications to regiment their bodyminds with a range of implications – reflecting how these pharmaceuticals are “part of first line treatment for ADHD” (Randle et al. 2025, 16).

Some workers experienced a positive relationship with medication. Though Merna was initially cautious towards medical treatments for ADHD she found using them transformative. “All of a sudden. It was quiet in my brain and I felt calm. [...] this is how people live?” However, Merna would still opt off medication during her retirement as previously described. She saw its purpose – in ‘fixing’ her ADHD – but only necessary under capitalist work regimes.

Other ND workers found medication a more complicated experience. Though Hannah has been on and off ADHD medication since they were six years old, they “don't really come off it anymore because I feel like I lose a lot of time when I do.” Their vision gets blurry, and they are unable to function day-to-day. Medications also obscure their bodymind’s signals for hunger and thirst. This was common – Maud (24) for instance found medication “beneficial to help me focus and like, sit still at work when I have to.” But she also found medication makes it difficult to “focus on taking care of myself, so it's hard to like, remember to eat enough snacks throughout the day and drink enough water.” Once the medication wears off, she is left in a depleted bodymind.

Other workers disliked the rigidity pharmaceuticals provoked in their bodyminds. Randle et al. reported that “stimulant medication [...] may exacerbate OCD symptoms as well as comorbid trauma reactions and anxiety” (Randle et al. 2025, 16). This is concerning given the high comorbidity of these disorders. Despite the negative impact, several participants felt they could not opt out due to productivity expectations. For instance, Irina has “taken breaks from Vyvanse recently” and was disappointed to realize “I need it to do my work. [...] I don't love it. And there's side effects that aren't great for me, but I feel like I otherwise can't do everything.” Despite the daily embodied costs which take an ‘increasing toll on [one’s] physical and mental health,’ ND workers continue to use stimulant medication to maintain an efficient and productive bodymind (Hanan 2019, 112).

6.4.3 Addiction

Most workers described overstimulation and exhaustion at the end of their days, an indelible mark of capitalist work regimes upon their bodyminds. In this section, I look at participants’ embodied & deleterious attempts to cope with these costs.

Studies (Lyver et al. 2024; Kronenberg et al. 2015) correlate ASD and ADHD with internet addiction and high rates of substance abuse disorder. Many participants described consuming media to cope with embodied strain, yet several found it was a source of isolation and unfulfillment. Over the course “six hours [after work] just fully dissociated ***** scrolling or YouTube or video games.” In this way, Mae’s bodymind moves from numbness into “anxiety” then into a deep sense of “dread for the next day,” which causes insomnia.

When Merna gets home from work, she “just want[s] to be numb;” “the second I can get to a joint is my fastest and happiest thing.” Though she acknowledged that her dependence on marijuana “isn't taking me closer to who I am, it's putting a blanket on it,” Merna was “OK with that for now.” Fern similarly does not condemn her daily marijuana use, saying “it helps a lot [...] with sensory stuff [...] It just makes things go easier.” Most workers, however, viewed their reliance on substances negatively. Josh, for instance, recalls drinking “to try to unwind” after work as “times in my life where [regulation] has turned ugly.” Nathan was proudly sober.

6.4.4 Soothing & Slowing

Participants also described less harmful methods of self-soothing, which slowed the flow of sensory input without creating dependencies and risk. Meditation, proximity to pets/animals, cocooning in blankets, reading about special interests, etc. were all mentioned. Other participants resisted productivity. After years of cycling through overwork and months-long burnout just to keep up, Orla (59) slowed down. Now, she was “stopping before I'm tired” and working until 5pm, instead of her previous 10 or 11 pm.

Despite “old voices in my head telling me I’m lazy,” Orla now “find[s] rest delicious.” She learned to attune to her bodymind, which “feels so much more cared for in allowing myself to stop and lie down. To pause.” While most teetering techniques adopted by ND workers present individual fixes for pain and disablement, Orla’s connects with true alterity and healing. “Rest is radical,” she told me.

6.5 Alienation

Neurodivergent traits mean that ND workers feel the pain of capitalism (which all workers face) in “technicolour” (Dylan). Even if their self-conceptions do not account for material injustice, their bodyminds feel alienation viscerally. As Marx (1844) writes, the worker alienated from their labour “does not affirm but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind” (p. 69). Congruently, Chapman’s (2023, 14) argues that post-Fordism has been a “disabling event” that magnified alienation, as “cognitive, attentive, and emotional labour” demands have led to “tightening neuronormativity, [...] increased disablement, [...] and] widespread mental health problems.” As communist participant Pen argued: since being neurodivergent is “environmentally based” and the numbers of diagnoses are growing, “if everybody at some point has symptoms of ADHD, then it’s no longer a divergent experience.” The norm becomes disablement under advanced capitalism.

6.5.1 Unmasking

While conceptualizing the bodymind as “meeting place” reveals pain and alienation, Goeman & Barker (2020, 111) argue it can also teach us how to “reclaim the body” despite continued oppression. The unmasked bodymind is one such site of “slippage & possibility” (111).

Neurodivergent activism pushes for ‘unmasking’ as a politically transformative practice (Price 2022). Though many participants had difficulty imagining their unmasked bodyminds, they experienced it during moments of unselfconsciousness: in the freedom of childhood (Irina’s bodymind as a “really nice thing” as child, since she “was in spaces that allowed me to be myself”) and of deprivation (during cancer treatment, Josh’s “mask kinda fell off for a while ‘cause I was just like, so inundated by catastrophe in my life. And then I never really quite figured out how to put it back on”).

Additionally, participant answers to my final question about “liberatory access” also revealed the unmasked bodymind. Merna discussed the “physicality” of work. During her twenties, she had spent a summer tree planting. Although “riddled with insecurity initially” tree planting was “the first time in my life, I was liberated from that.” A lifetime of “mood issues” lessened as Merna became intimately grounded in her bodymind. When “you work physically till you’re exhausted every day, food tastes better, sex is better, sleep is deeper. Your mind isn’t cluttered.” She hoped for a similar grounded

experience in retirement, where she planned to stop taking ADHD medication. Instead, she would just “wake up and decide what my day is going to be like on any given day” and follow her bodyminds’ intuitive interests and sense of time: “Today I’m a knitter and tomorrow I’m a painter and the next day I’m a gardener.”

Indeed, most participant answers described a bodymind following joyful, intuitive, and interest-motivated behaviours; operating within its own sense of time; solving problems and making change; connecting at individual, communal, and social levels; exerting mental & creative energy; refining patterns; thinking systemically and efficiently; and existing in proximity to the non-human world. Ultimately, many of these unmasked neurodivergent desires are the desires of the human condition. They represent a longing for unalienated labour.

Merna once again connected her embodied experience to the mode of economic production, telling me “I would be shocked if people in agrarian societies had ADHD. I don’t think there’d be any need to identify it.” After she discussed her dream of retirement, she concluded: “When you talk about imagining like the perfect world, I guess in a way kind of capitalism doesn't really help neurodivergent people [...] Because work is money and we have to make something and there has to be profit. And so, like, really, [liberatory access is] the undoing of society and redoing of it.”

Merna demonstrates the underlying hope of unmasking; if we follow our bodymind, they lead us into a new regime of work. Indeed: disability justice argues, “our embodied experiences guide us toward ongoing justice and liberation” (Sins Invalid 2018). Adopting a “meeting place” view of the ND bodymind thus allows us to understand neurodivergence as “fundamentally linked to the needs of capital accumulation;” such an understanding can transform the bodymind into a site of collective power (Malhotra & Russell 2002, 216).

6.6 Conclusion

This chapter has mapped forces of capitalism on the ND bodymind through an embodiment geography of the “meeting place” (Goeman and Barker 2020). I argued that teetering, done by ND workers to remain in the liminal lumpenproletariat, writes pain, stress, and addiction on the bodymind. As capitalism disables and alienates greater numbers of people, moving beyond a contained view of the bodymind will help politicize our experiences, link them to material relations of capitalism, and build a collective struggle for neurodivergent liberation.

Nick Walker (2011) argues that the pathology paradigm “means that Autism-related professional and institutional praxis is overwhelmingly dominated by a focus on “fixing” Autistic persons.” Generatively, Goeman & Barker (2020, 121) counter ideas of “healing of the individual self” with healing through

“becoming a part of creation.” The bodymind as “meeting place” thus offers a path toward alterity. In next chapter, I take up embodied insights of ND workers to co-create visions of alternatives neurodivergent politics of work.

CHAPTER 7: Conclusion

7.1 Summary of the Argument

This spring, I ran into one of the participants. Josh and I did not know each other, except for the two hours we had spent talking – “no one asks me, a construction guy, questions like that.” Yet he surprised me with a hug, then thanked me, deep eye contact, intention, and the echo of practice in his words. “What you’re doing – it’s praxis. You left me with so many thoughts, reflections. I knew I’d struggled – I’d never seen it the way you framed it. A struggle we have collectively. A structural condition.”

As I walked away, my eyes misted. I had gotten lost in the writing; stumbled away from the community this thesis was meant to be accountable to. Talking to Josh reminded me of the goal – to co-create neurodivergent theory and respond to the crisis we were all facing in our working lives.

In this conclusion, I bring together the insights of neurodivergent workers in an array of transformative policy, advocacy, and theoretical suggestions. These suggestions are the result of neurodivergent imaginations let loose to build alterity; they reflect an array of political stances and demands, ranging from the micro to the macro, and offering a view from within the unmasked neurodivergent bodymind. My aim is not to create a list of specific actionable policy briefs, but to follow the work of scholars before me in co-imagining a material reality otherwise. In effect, I take up Chapman’s (2023, 159) demand that “the first thing we must do to combat the Empire of Normality is to further develop an analysis of its nature and workings, and to build a critique of these into our imagining of what a postcapitalist society might look like.”

This MA thesis has used a labour geography approach that takes neurodivergence as a location of epistemic authority – a perspective from which intimate knowledge of the capitalist system emerges. Today, ‘neurodivergence’ has been adopted by increasing numbers of people, especially given changes in how neurodiversity is understood to show up in adults, gender marginalized, & racialized people through concepts like ‘high masking’ Autism (Price 2022; Conrad & Potter 2000; Hinshaw et al. 2022; Pellicano et al. 2020). ND people today therefore *consciously* take up a much larger percentage of the labour market than they did historically.

I contextualized my study within the post-Fordist Canadian economy, which has moved towards lean production, precarious work, and knowledge and service sectors (Leslie 2023a; Kalleberg & Valles 2018; Boyle & de Keere 2019; Coffey et al. 2018). Labour geography literature, which focuses on the agency of the worker and site of labour, provides a helpful framework in investigating this rising segment of the labour market. However, I argued that due to a sizeable productivist tendency, the labouring lives of those who work less or work differently have been neglected. ND workers’ participation in the workforce is

complicated by the ableist violence of neoliberal policies, including the rise of ‘workfare’ which pushed many disabled people below the poverty line (Chouinard 2001, 177).

This master’s thesis also followed critical neurodiversity studies (CNS), and its forebear, critical disability studies (CDS), in interrupting pathologized & medicalized views of the neurodivergent bodymind. The rich thinking of Disability Justice (DJ) organizers and CDS scholars on interdependence, access, and care also informed much of my analyses of the intimate lives of neurodivergent workers. However, rather than interrogating ableism & normativity, this thesis analyzed neurodivergent workers through a Marxist Feminist critique of capitalism and ableism. Following Russell (2001) and Chapman (2023), I asserted that neurological difference, like other disabilities, is socially and materially created and disabled by the exploitative conditions of capitalist wealth accumulation. Therefore, this project contributed to recent efforts to move CNS away from liberal rights frameworks and towards a critical praxis against the material conditions of the capitalist economy.

This study’s methodology was built with an access-centred framework. I interviewed 22 participants from a range of ND types, genders, and ages, many of whom received late in life diagnoses. Qualitative interview data was supplemented with an analysis of Ontario labour and human rights law. Interview and legal data were separated into a multi-scalar analysis of the labour market, the work-home environment, and the bodymind.

Chapter 2 of the thesis detailed literature on post-Fordist Canadian labour markets, contested theoretical and political frameworks of CNS and CDS, geographic work on feminist embodiment and worker agency, and the productivism of labour geography. Chapter 3 clarified my research design as a work of Feminist Geography methodology and Cripistemological co-creation between ND researcher and ND participant. In chapter 4, I mapped the embodied experiences of ND workers at the provincial scale through concepts of the liminal lumpenproletariat (LL) and teetering, involving sectoral preference, mobility, & accommodation. In chapter 5, I argued that ND workers adopt a variety of emotional and physical geographic strategies to navigate being LL at the scale of the work-home environment, including 1) formal accommodation, 2) informal accommodation and 3) relational care. I argued that these strategies enabled workers to manage their disability but also heightened Autistic burnout. Finally, in chapter 6, I took on the bodymind as material and “meeting place,” mapping the intimacies of teetering and LL through Chapman’s (2023) update on Marx’s (1844) theory of alienation to show how the neurodivergent bodymind is indelibly marked by capitalism. Altogether, this thesis has shown how the costs of managing disablement under capitalism offer novel insights into labour geography scholarship, (dis)abling its current narrative of precarious work.

7.2 Theoretical Contributions

In this thesis, I developed two concepts from co-created ND knowledge to organize my findings. Specifically, I critiqued the traditional Marxist binary conceptions of the reserve army of labour (RAL) and forwarded the liminal lumpenproletariat (LL) & teetering to understand the experience of Ontarian ND workers at multiple geographic scales.

First, the liminal lumpenproletariat is a description of neurodivergent workers' strained, agentic, & fluid position in the labour market. Typically, Marxist scholars understand disabled workers as depressed into the underclass and out of the labour market – as the lumpenproletariat (Marx & Engels 1848, 20). Yet, Marxist scholars also describe disabled workers as facing a capitalist contradiction – both pushed out of the labour market by a capitalist calculus of profit and pulled in by capitalists' efforts expand the reserve army to maintain low wages (Malhotra & Russell 2002, 89, 91). This study's findings reveal neurodivergent workers, situated within this contradiction, occupy a threshold teetering space in the labour market. I call these workers the liminal lumpenproletariat (LL). The LL thus consciously occupy positions of persistent precarity and agentively manage their disability to avoid falling into the underclass. The spectrum of neurodiversity and additional precarities are duly reflected as a spectrum of labour market position, with a few select outliers occupying stable employment on one end and the lumpenproletariat on the other end, and most remaining in the middle, liminal position.

Next, I developed 'teetering' in conversation with participant Irina as a description of the liminal behaviours ND workers undertake as the LL. The liminality of these behaviours is the result of ND workers being forced to act differently from their intuitive neurodivergent bodyminds in capitalist labour geographies. I argued that teetering is how the LL agentively adapt to the advanced capitalist labour market of Ontario; yet these behaviours resulted in significant costs and the normalization of precarity for ND workers.

7.3 Implications:

“It would be post-capitalist, like it would be after the revolution.” – Hiba

Embodiment geographies show that harm and repair are interwoven at multiple geographic scales and in social & nonhuman relationships. In the last interview question, I invited workers to connect the scales of their bodyminds, workplaces, and the world to think critically about the forces that shape their embodied labour and to present steps towards reclaiming the ND bodymind. Specifically, I prompted participants to consider liberatory access (LA) through a work arrangement that might “get us closer to the world we want and ache for, rather than simply reinforcing the status quo” (Mingus 2017). The following section

draws from their answers to co-create a self-conscious ND worker politic, from which advocacy and policy steps must emerge.

7.3.1 Societal Reorganizations

Pace Orla sees “rest as radical.” She wanted pace to not be punished and, in her final answer, argued for a world where no matter how many days a week you work, “you get paid for full.” Reflecting on LA in education, Hannah called for a standard of lifelong learning which would refuse to hierarchize pace or fetishize destination: “we would never be like, really judging ourselves against that like a signpost [...there would be] space to get there as I get there.” Moreover, Dylan connected these arguments surrounding pace to a political push for Universal Basic Income (UBI), imagining a world where people have “the ability to say yes or no to work and knowing that you'll still have your basic shit.” Therefore, ND workers’ emphasis on pace and Crip time reveals a liberatory ND politic where capitalist systems of value, productivity, and profit extraction must be reordered.

Collaborative Work Many participants imagined work as more integrated with community. For instance, Hazel critiqued the “isolating” and “competitive” neoliberal university, arguing for research to instead involve “a wider network of collaboration [...] where everyone has ideas [...] And we're not afraid to share it.” Irina agreed, saying if we “remove competition out of this world [...] we would be doing the intellectual work that we actually want to do [instead of the] admin stuff.” Hannah hoped “education and teaching would be things that like people took up in community [...] as both like a student and as a learner or like as a learner and as a teacher.” Therefore, an ND politic involves questioning individualism, which is a barrier to focused, efficient, and integrated learning, and prioritizing interest and interdependence. Furthermore, as Niels offers: “the problem is capitalism, of course. And I think the solution is fundamentally community, but both social and in terms of space.” Thus, shared labour is a key component of ND liberation – to recognize and work towards our uneven abilities, not leave each other behind, or be forced to adopt behaviours that do not suit their bodyminds.

Epistemic/Value Justice Dolly saw creativity – “when there's no right answer and kids are allowed to express themselves differently or [how is] most comfortable to them” – as inspiration for finding LA in “work too [because] it's a lot more liberating from mindsets that make you critical of yourself, critical of others. And sucked into the mentality of being a perfect worker, person, student.” ND workers wanted to be “valued for definitely more than just like output” (Mae) and argued in favour of building “spaces that make it easy for everyone to shine” which would mean “the society blooms” (Orla). The heart of an ND politic thus remains connected to a fight against normalcy and advances diverse forms of value.

Security/Stability Hiba listed material gains that would improve the world for “neurodivergent people or marginalized people in general” including “a fair wage,” “housing security,” and “food security.” Josh agreed, arguing that affordable housing would mean “we wouldn’t need to work as much because we could afford to live somewhere.” Fern argued for an end to precarity and return to policy from “30-40 years ago [when] you got money from the government”; she argued in favour of redistributing wealth from “bankers.” Altogether, this reveals that a radical ND politic is opposed to neoliberal capitalism and aligned with the fight for a good life and the aims of the working class and labour movement in general.

Worker Power/Democracy Participants emphasized the need for autonomy. Josh has “a hard time imagining anything like accessible work so long as work is so excessively exploited” and said that the cumbersome demand to mask would remain “until [...] we have more control over what it is we’re doing.” Pen talked about “how little it takes to change a person’s life forever,” and therefore argued for a world “where any person who is disenfranchised can go and change things.” Orla, additionally, proposed more direct democracy, where “maybe 1/3 of the community is part of the decision makers” to become more “tuned in to people who you’re creating [...] places, spaces, structures for.” ND liberatory politics are thus connected to radical social movements, including communism and anarchism.

Collective Care/Social Reproductive Labour Josh wished for a world where social reproductive labour was seen as a “unified thing” with “the labor that we get paid for” and as “part of the same project [...] of just taking care of ourselves and each other.” He pointed out our “wildly inefficient” system of laundry and transportation, for instance, and stated that “collectivizing it [would mean] freeing people up to do so much more than this” and require far fewer “machines.” Many participants desired such a reorganization. Fern “envisio[n]ed a world where there are, like public canteens and restaurants available that [...] efficiently produce food at scale for a low cost.” Dylan believed that “if we didn’t have to spend so many spoons on work and, like, survival,” we could have “community structures to support people with kids, people who are caring for other folks, disabled folks.” They wondered how much care work “we would just naturally do” if we were freer to. Given the extensive disablement within social reproduction, ND liberation is thus intertwined with feminist and family abolitionist movements.

Automated Labour Nathan desired “more and more sophisticated devices to automate a lot of things,” especially social reproductive tasks like “mak[ing] my breakfast [...] wash[ing] the dishes and do[ing] laundry.” He wanted a world where meeting these needs was not connected to wage labour and instead “handed out for free.” Furthermore, Henry envisioned a “post scarcity, AI social democracy [...] AI socialism” where labour regimes would be transformed and “people just work a little bit.” Orla, who voiced criticism about the broken promises of tech capitalism, where “automation and technology was supposed to make our lives easier but now we have more work to do,” added to this politic a demand for

accountability and move away from increasing work demands. Therefore, the fight to reclaim technology for the good of people rather than the good of capitalist accumulation is part of an ND liberatory politic.

7.3.2 Geographic Reorganizations

Anti-Carceral/Abolitionist Space Hiba reflected on the police violence faced by Autistic people. While today neurodivergence “gets acknowledged,” she pointed out “the moment that people actually demonstrate like symptoms then they get punished.” Hiba argued that a LA workplace “would have to be a space that is like inherently anti carceral. There would be no room for police and military infrastructure [...so that] a lot of the punishment of people for being different naturally goes away.” Therefore, ND liberation must also be a politics intertwined with prison and police abolitionism.

Land/Non-Human Relationships Hannah discussed how there needed to be “different understandings of land ownership.” Orla wanted workspaces to “have lots of trees and flowers [...] and] community gardens [...] everywhere on rooftops.” Susan, who wanted to live “nomadic [...] following the weather,” brought up environmentalist concerns: “we are so far away from connection to the land. It's not very promising from the standpoint of what I think we need for the future.” ND liberation thus aligns with environmentalist and decolonial demands to resuscitate our relationship with the non-human world and the fight against extractive capitalism.

Sensory Friendly Spaces Nathan described a LA workplace as a space of low sensory input and minimal social interaction – “everything's dark. [...] I have a candlelight, and I have this massive, massive wall of books and infinite coffee, infinite fried chicken, and I can just study.” Stephanie also emphasized the sensory, saying her “perfect work environment” would have “soft stuff so that the acoustics are muted,” no TVs, lighting “reduce[d] by 30%,” and an improved layout for task switching and visual order. ND liberation evidently requires reclaiming the physical geographies of work from the bottom-up to build spaces that match our diverse sensory needs. Given “the invasive sensory and information environments of the modern world, where economic relations require a constant bombardment of lights, advertising, screens, and so forth” (Chapman 2023, 115), such autonomy requires our ND politic to demand radical economic and political reorganization.

ND worker interviews thus reiterate Neurodivergent Marxism as championed by Chapman (2023): that ND people will not achieve our liberation alone. Rather, our liberation is fundamentally intertwined with anti-colonial, abolitionist, labour, feminist, and environmentalist movements. Therefore, ND people must move beyond the current emphasis on individual rights and accommodations and instead join a mass movement towards material change and liberation for all. As Orla argued, making it so “the society blooms” means “dismantling these systems we have presently are not working for so many people.”

7.4 Future Research

Building such systems is not just possible in the imagined future. Dylan described such a realized “realm of disabled mutual aid and education” within their current workplace, a disability justice online movement building school. While Dylan works a variable number of hours week-to-week and month-to-month, their workplace “pay[s] out us the same amount every month” and is “beyond flexible in a way that I’ve never experienced.” In the organization, workers are invited to show up as they are, so Dylan “lay[s] down at work on camera, people lay down all the time, people stim.” Furthermore, Dylan expressed “there’s room to say no, I can’t do a thing. But there’s also this space to say, like, ‘I want to do this thing, and I don’t know how or I don’t know what would make this possible [... and] have people be like [...] ‘how can we support you to do this?’” This real-life example offers an instructive map to building similar spaces of radical disability access throughout our society.

Islands of disabled worker cooperatives are limited, however, if unable to proliferate and unify toward liberatory aims. Currently, these spaces are focused on disabled workers who are largely lumpenproletarianized, like Dylan, especially given the low disability consciousness of liminally lumpenproletarianized ND workers, as documented in chapter 6. To expand these spaces, our ND movements must connect the struggle of workers to the surplus. As shown, the popularization of the label ‘neurodivergent’ conveys rising disablement under capitalism. This thesis has shown that lifelong teetering to manage disablement is incredibly disabling itself. ND workers with additional precarities faced the highest risk of entering the lumpenproletariat – yet all struggled under the capitalist labour demands of high productivity, focus, and affective labour. Furthermore, all will eventually age and become additionally disabled, leading to heightened precarity and mortality.

When asked about her vision of work, Susan was stymied due to the question of “old age and dying. I mean, until we get that straightened out...” she trailed off, looking perturbed. “Being in a long-term care home by yourself sharing a room with eight other people with curtains between you,” is many people’s fates after a lifetime of precarity, she stated, if they do not “have family” or “intentional community.” In fact, Susan describes the experience of two aunts “in this situation right now” who are “alone” and therefore likely “to do MAID before the end of next year.”

Susan’s fears were legitimate, especially amidst the neoliberal abandonment and neglect of those deemed unworthy of care – the sick, single, elderly, poor, racialized, gender marginalized and disabled. This is particularly relevant given how ascendant fascist movements in North America have pushed the needle towards the normalization of eugenics. Anti-vaxxer rhetoric and rhetorical fearmongering surrounding Autism have intensified, evident in the appointment of Robert F. Kennedy Jr. as United States Secretary

of Health and Human Services under the second Trump Administration. Indeed, Russell and Malhotra (2002, 223) remind us that “eugenics, sterilization, euthanasia and the institutionalization of the impaired and others have all been productivist societies' answers to what to do with the 'unproductive.’” If, therefore, neoliberalism “begins with starving ‘you of the funding you need to live a dignified life’ and then posits the decision to then die as a matter of freedom rather than coercion” can “the choice for assisted suicide” be truly an exercise of “autonomy in practice” (Chapman 2023, 124)?

In such an uncaring society, how do we weather being neurodivergent? How many ND workers become surplus along the way? Whether we successfully teeter through liminal lumpenproletarianization into a good life is contingent on having the scale stacked in our favour. Yet even the most privileged ND worker still sacrifices and masks to prosper. With the high genetic prevalence of neurodivergence, these workers likely have family members more precariously positioned than them. In response to the increasing readiness to discard disabled people, it is critical for liminal lumpenproletariat ND workers to recognize their shared struggle with the lumpenproletariat and organize together. We must implement our dreams of alterity in work and life to honour our bodyminds and champion unmasking for all.

Currently, the ND community is still nascent and largely wrapped up in the potentials for individualized ‘fixes’ for their bodyminds. Such views of the bodymind are a relic of the pathology paradigm and must be countered with the bodymind as a “meeting place” of structural oppression. Rather than solely heal the individual self, we must aim to heal the social world. The labour geography perspective offered today, which integrates embodied worker knowledges with critical theory, thus offers a more viable route for collective organizing and worker resistance.

In future work, connecting this struggle with the grassroots organizing of disability justice is necessary. Mapping kinship networks, disability organizations, mutual aid, and the geographies of social reproduction would aid in building alterity. Additionally, scholarship on neurodivergence under different modes of production across the global south and 20th century are necessary. This involves archival and oral histories on the experience of ND workers under Soviet communism and the highly regimented factory work of Fordism. Indeed, Just in Time and lean production must also be examined to understand how neoliberal reforms in manufacturing impact ND workers. Moreover, given the rise of Fascist eugenics, it is necessary to examine how the line around liminal lumpenproletariat as ‘productive citizenry’ is drawn and redrawn depending on labour shortages, capitalist crisis, and productivity demand. The work of imagination is essential to any movement for liberation. Future work should therefore also include creative fiction and artistic engagements to develop a neurodivergent futurism.

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