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1

Sowing the Seeds of Love

Time to eat all your words

Swallow your pride

Open your eyes

(TEARS FOR FEARS, 1989)

Introduction

Characterized by its use of synthesizers, electronic instruments, penetrative rhythms, and catchy melodies, synth-pop defined a generation of musicians and creatives in the 1980s. The architects of the genre were bands like Soft Cell, Kraftwerk and The Human League. It was propelled into the mainstream, however, by the bands that would come to depict the sound of the decade: Depeche Mode, New Order, and of course Smith and Orzabal, better known as Tears for Fears.

The Bath duo, whose original incarnation was the mod-inspired Graduate, orchestrated a sound that was synonymous with continuous evolution. Maturing from songs such as “Change,” which Orzabal famously describes as “not really being about much” to the politically conscious “Sowing the

Seeds of Love,” itself heralded by reviewers at the time as a pastiche of The Beatles, Orzabal’s fleeting interest in politics towards the end of the 1980s would become the Somerset pair’s most overtly political offering. Driven by the egalitarian vehicle of socialism, the message of this song—infused with incensed calls for the removal of the destructive British Conservative Government of the time—mirrors many of the global and domestic problems we are currently facing.

The many muses from whom we have drawn our inspiration are a particularly important aspect of this treatise, and just as in other areas of life imitation remains the sincerest form of flattery. In the same way, the christening of this track (“Sowing the Seeds of Love”) was inspired by Cecil Sharp and was ultimately a nod to his own melodic offering, “The Seeds of Love.” Reflecting this well-trodden path of imitation (flattery) encourages a thread of inspiration that pays homage to Smith and Orzabal’s ideal. We use their words as both a navigational and a moral compass in an attempt to signpost our societal siblings towards a collective sowing of loving seeds throughout this opening chapter. We do so in the hope that it becomes a conduit for conveying a broader message, which situates love as the catalyst for change whilst encouraging the continual watering of these seeds until they bloom. We also recognize the might of the nib in being able, like Tears for Fears, to form words (lyrics) that reject the constrictions of an unjust, neurotypical society and which also—perhaps equally importantly—constitute a call to arms, a call to make a stand while shaking up the views of ordinary people.

Now, let’s get into it. We have drawn on our lived experiences of neurodivergence, Blackness and class (see below), as well as our sociological training and imagination, to produce a contribution to activism, advocacy, and writing that aims to provide routes into exposing and dismantling neurotypical power and

domination. We home in on the way everyday life is so often structured around rigid ideas of what “normal” looks and sounds like and locate these cultures in historical and contemporary depictions of other social inequities (for example racism and classism). In an effort to show how the neurodiversity movement (see below) can offer solutions for some of society’s biggest injustices, we trust the reader to look at how theories of love and knowledge are vital ingredients for creating and imagining a truly inclusive society.

In this book you will find a critical yet hopeful and loving dialogue about how the neurodiversity movement is enhanced for everyone when we take notice of the way power becomes organized through race, class, and gender primarily. It is a call to action for the powers that be, as well as a book about understanding, acceptance, and humility. It is a book that has been put together in an effort to take stock of how history continues to inform the ways we understand each other and the reflexive strategies required to make space for different ways of being and understanding the world. The key issues we cover here relate to the locally and globally felt uneven distribution of resources, and the way power evolves to protect and maintain ideas around who should be considered the “normal” or “ideal” citizen. Our intention is to show how the politics of neurodiversity and the neurodiversity paradigm more broadly can help us understand global inequities in a way that can offer multiclassed and multiethnic solidarities across difference.

We have intentionally written this book in a way that uses theories that some people might not have come across before. We see it as an example of the sort of conversation that needs to extend beyond the university (and academia in general) and thus encourage a culture where processes like “methodology” (how we come to understand and research) are universal

concepts we can all learn and include in our dialogues about society. While we make a conscious effort, throughout the book, to both explain and explore the academic language that might put some readers off, we do need to make clear that one of the key uses of terminology we home in on was inspired by the work of autistic sociologist and neurodiversity advocate Elizabeth Radulski from La Trobe University, in a 2022 paper titled *Conceptualising Autistic Masking, Camouflaging, and Neurotypical Privilege: Towards a Minority Group Model of Neurodiversity*. Radulski's work was the first place we really started to see a discussion of some of our own personal reflections about race, ableism, and capitalism (spoiler alert!). In particular, Radulski's clear and concise conceptualization of "neurotypical hegemony" (see later in this chapter) as the social processes by which "*the neurological majority have the benefit of shaping cultural norms for society and communication that reflect their own traits and characteristics*" guided a lot of the themes we have used to piece together the arguments in this book.¹ We hope to pay homage to the many scholars and advocates who have paved the way for arguments that incorporate freedom for us all but—for us personally—Radulski's formative work certainly deserves an honorary mention here.

With voices and advocacy like that of Radulski's, our overarching ambition has been to show that existing sociological work and decades of advocacy intervention across a broad range of themes related to both disability and neurodiversity and their intersections, can be channelled to better imagine a more equitable future for all groups of people. In writing this book, we see how intentionally paying attention to the politics of neurodiversity and disability justice more broadly offers the chance to build a new culture with a collective spirit of love, hope, and solidarity. Written in language that shows sensitivity and strength, the

objective of this book is that all readers should come away with an analysis of society and its people that is grounded in a *critical yet loving framework of understanding*. We are guided by much of bell hooks' scholarship, which centers the inextricable link between love and liberation. All roads should lead us to a synchronization between the practice of love and the routes to freedom. We are moving towards ways of living and understanding each other which recognize that domination in all its forms should be understood through what hooks describes as "anti-love."² To resist the cultures of "anti-love" and to actualize and become *loving*, our contributions in this book provide us with the knowledge to garner a type of empathy that can be applied to all our relationships. Whether these relationships are with our families, communities, or colleagues, or with people we would consider strangers—this is about producing a relational politics attentive to the historical and contemporary structuring of society to generate equitable futures for everyone. This civic responsibility stems from our belief that to know where you are going, you need to know where you have come from. We adopt this philosophy as a navigational tool for the essential mapping of where we need to go as a society.

Our primary mechanism for engaging with such vast and expansive intentions is located in the emancipatory politics of neurodiversity, alongside a multifaceted engagement with the perils of neurotypical hegemony and domination (see later in this chapter). This book has been constructed with our lived experiences of being Black and neurodivergent people as a starting point. This means that the overlaps between ableism, racism, and capitalism in particular have been grounded in our subjectivities, as we move between different social worlds.

Thankfully, we stand on the shoulders of giants; collectives comprised of the writers, creatives, activists, parents, siblings, and

young people at the vanguard of the push to abandon reductive and deficit language and treatment of all people. Zooming in on lived experiences of the struggle to be valued in society, we are grateful for dialectics of hope and hopelessness (when things go wrong) to keep us grounded in this work. If we are to truly understand ableism, capitalism, and racism as some of the central aspects of domination, we have to find moments of solace, since the scale of the task at hand is vast, and the road to liberation can be rough as well as smooth. As Gabor Maté notes in *Scattered Minds: The Origins and Healing of Attention Deficit Disorder*, compassionate patience has to include a tolerance for failure.³ Such juxtapositions are integral to dialogues and practices for transformational disability justice. As scholars like Fiona A. Kumari Campbell suggest, “we are all, regardless of our subject positions, shaped and formed by the politics of ableism.”⁴ In a similar vein, she collectivizes this struggle by stating that,

The experience of disablement can, arguably, be spoken of not in terms of individualized personal tragedy but in terms of communal trauma, where the legacies of ableism pervade both the conscious and unconscious realms.⁵

While we see Campbell here as stressing a trauma felt collectively by the global disability community, we also believe this trauma can be located in cultures reproduced across the whole of society. In the way described above, communal trauma is of course more intensely felt by others, but its very existence, and the varying ways and guises in which it manifests—through illness, poverty, racism, and sexism for example—show that these are challenges which should be understood as societal, and therefore as matters for us all to contend with. No one is free until everyone is free.

In this book we show how ableism is embedded in how we think about education, health, employment, and family life.

Our route into this work is located in an engagement with neurodiversity in all its intersectional modalities, providing radical opportunities to create new cultures of understanding that are liberating for everyone. Race, class, ethnicity, gender, and nation are just some of the social structures for which the politics of neurodiversity can produce an emancipatory analysis. Social justice, for us, is the view that everyone deserves equitable economic, political, and societal rights and opportunities. In *Black, Brilliant and Dyslexic*, Marcia Brissett-Bailey notes that the role of neurodiversity advocates now is about *breaking down the silences* of difference through representation, support, and evidence.⁶ Brissett-Bailey argues that without a more thorough commitment to addressing the ethnicized, classed, and gendered dynamics of neurodiversity, we continue to create systemic barriers between families, in education, and in the workplace. With these types of wisdoms embedded in each page of this book for the twenty-first century, we and many others believe that the politics of neurodiversity is a matter for social justice in relation to the way we relate to, understand, and live with each other, that appreciates difference and humbly allows for the emergence of understanding and empathetic cultures.

In this introductory chapter we lay out the political motivations behind the book. We do this by emphasizing the importance of the collective when it comes to social and disability justice. We then talk about how we came to write this book by stretching the muscles of our existing professional relationship and friendship. Our discussions then lead us to contextualize social and material inequalities on a local and global scale. In the second half of the chapter we begin to introduce concepts such as neurotypical hegemony, Black subjectivities and Marxism. Woven throughout these introductory provocations are

the importance of love and political education, as well as of going beyond the politics of representation.

Neurodiversity, Neurotypical Society, and Disability

Before we get into exactly how we are all getting free, we are going to start as we mean to go on by doing our absolute best to explain how we are using the concepts and terminology found throughout this book. As “neurodiversity” has become a bit of a buzzword, we see it as our responsibility to be very clear about how we are using the term in this book. We want to caveat this introduction by disclosing that we ourselves can still do better when it comes to the language and terminology of neurodiversity, neurotypical society, and disability. With this, we remain profoundly grateful to individuals and collectives in the neurodiversity movement, as well as to critical friends and colleagues who continue to “check our workings out.” The politics of critical love and understanding embedded in the pages and production of this book are what motivates us to encourage people to step into unknowing, not knowing, or not quite being sure as means to lean into openness, humility, and learning. As long as we are willing to admit when we have missed the mark and have the appetite to do better, we are onto a winner!

Now, first and foremost—what exactly do we mean by neurodiversity? Our—understanding and use of the term neurodiversity has been inspired by the author, educator, queer futurist, and transpersonal somatic psychologist, Nicky Walker. In his book *Neuroqueer Heresies*, he carefully lays out three key areas of definition and terminology for those of us seeking to understand, contribute and advocate for both neurological inclusion and diversity.

Throughout the book, we invariably draw on Walker's definition of neurodiversity as:

- i. "the diversity of human minds, [and] the infinite variation in neurocognitive functioning within our species."

Secondly, when we refer to neurodiversity, we are describing:

- ii. a collective political and social project and movement which contains a variety of neurodivergent individuals and groups with different goals, viewpoints and affiliations (more on neurodivergence below).

Thirdly, the discussions found throughout the book are very much a contribution to the *neurodiversity paradigm*, which asserts that:

- iii. There is no normal, right or healthy type of brain.

Finally, we are guided by Walker's assertion that:

- iv. neurodiversity creates social dynamics (and inequalities) that are socially produced like other structures and identities of difference such as ethnicity, class, and gender.

Next, we note the indomitable contribution to terminology and language in the neurodiversity movement of radically neurodivergent activist, Kassiane Asasumasu. Asasumasu's coining of terminology came out of the autism rights movement of the 1990s, in which it was claimed that a wide range of people experienced the world in a way similar to autistic people yet were not actually autistic. In 2000, Asasumasu's blog, "Radical Neurodivergence Speaking," provided us with the terminology "neurodivergent" and "neurodivergence." In short, when a person or group diverges from what society has considered to be

“normal” or “neurotypical” cognitive functioning, this individual or group is neurodivergent. Neurodivergence on the other hand is a way for an individual or group to describe how their trait or traits show up. For example, neurodivergence ranges from Autism or Autism Spectrum Conditions to ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder), ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder), dyslexia, dyspraxia or Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD), dyscalculia, cognitive functioning difficulties or executive dysfunction, dysgraphia, misophonia, slow processing speed, global development delay, stammering, Tourette’s syndrome, traumatic brain injury, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). In line with Asasumasu’s assertion of a broader understanding of neurological difference, we also align ourselves with her inclusion of mental illness in neurodivergence (see chapter 3).

We are also in agreement with Robert Chapman that leaning into a categorization of neurodivergence (and neurodivergent traits) is part of reclaiming them from the oppressive and eugenicist practices of the discipline of psychiatry.⁷ The neurodiversity movement continues to provide us with the language to show how a “minority mode” of neurocognitive functioning *becomes* disabled by a dominating neurotypical (“normal”) society.⁸ In such a society, we are different simply because society has decided what is *normal* (don’t worry—more explanation of this to come). By contrast, neurotypical (or “normal”) society is a cultural and social reproduction that is not fixed by people’s individual profiles or characteristics. Neurotypical culture refers to sets of behavioral expectations socially developed in line with dominant ideas about neurological functioning that normalize certain organizational, social, and emotional practices as the correct and conventional way to be. Is neurodivergence a disability? For our presentation throughout this book, informed by our

sociological training and lived experience, the short answer is yes. While we demonstrate the disabling features of neurotypical society, we want to acknowledge those at some of the sharper ends of the spectrum of disability and neurodivergence; the physically impaired or compromised, those unable to properly communicate their needs without external support, and of course our non-verbal siblings. We have chosen to contribute to the connectedness, fluidity, and unification of social justice movements with an interchangeable reference to disability and neurodiversity throughout, aligned with the social model of disability. While we recognize some of the conceptual and practical (and perhaps ethical) flaws of presenting neurodiversity and disability in tandem, we are overwhelmingly inspired by the possibility of a solidarity that spans our differences. Working with and through that which sets us apart is a way of building love and understanding in the face of consistent and multiple sites of struggle. In this way, our contribution is built in resistance and opposition to the medical model of disability and neurodiversity by playing close attention to the possibilities of a social model which takes seriously the impact of physical, attitudinal, communication, and social barriers which are not “natural,” but are rather created and constructed around us.⁹ This contribution is built in alliance with the neurodiversity movement, which opposes the idea that certain neurological conditions are inherently “abnormal” or “disordered.” This is about building a framework that seeks to change society into something more inclusive and accommodating for all.

Many thanks for bearing with us through these the introductory notes on definitions, labels, and categories. We recognize their possibilities and limitations, yet we remain persuaded by the merits of working with terminologies that address difference, because whether they are used or not, they have the power to have lasting impacts on our life courses.

Visions for Social and Disability Justice

We are public sociologists, which means that our usual way of talking about social justice focuses on how *we can take people with us* to learn together about how to improve the lives of the majority.¹⁰ Taking people with us requires the long and challenging process of moving beyond feelings and building our understandings of life and society around facts, truths, and histories. This is not about denying people their individual experiences or the emotions attached to them, but more about emphasizing that in order to build collective strength and solidarity we need space to make mistakes, grow, and connect through our shared histories and identities. This work is life-long; it is difficult, overwhelming, beautiful, and all-consuming all at once. Grounding ourselves in openness, humility, and care in our efforts to find pockets of hope and solidarity fuels the politics of this book. We operate from the premise that “telling ain’t selling,” and that broadly speaking, people are doing their best with the information they have to hand. Returning again to bell hooks, we stress that arriving where we are, or recognizing a lack of loving and understanding of ourselves and others usually occurs because “[we] were socialized to see [ourselves] as unlovable by forces outside [our] control.”¹¹ We can always do better to understand how society is organized and our job, as public sociologists, is to point out knowledge and research to help people to have a better understanding of the society we find ourselves in. This is clearly not the only method of political education, but it is the role we have both chosen. We are grounded in the tradition of our fore parents, among whom bell hooks, Claudia Jones, Olive Morris, Robin D. G. Kelley, Audre Lorde, Maya Angelou, Paulo Freire, Angela Davis, Sylvia Wynter, Katherine McKitterick, Antonio

Gramsci, C. Wright Mills, Gabor Maté, Raymond Williams, Alana Lentin, Gail Lewis, Frantz Fanon, Patricia Hill Collins, Cedric Robinson, Walter Rodney, and of course, Stuart Hall, have always stood out for us in terms of their commitment to understanding and communicating the importance of everyday life in how we articulate anti-capitalist, anticolonial, feminist, and now neurodivergent futures. Though each of them has their own variation on “how we get there,” we have been inspired by their philosophies around the importance of educating the masses and really taking the time to help people imagine a better world. Of course, most of these theorists are marked by their Marxist, Black feminist, and mostly humanist endeavors, which we hope to have woven through our presentation of love, hope, neurodiversity, and the possibilities of knowledge production in this book.

The book is for anyone who wants to join us in creating a world where everyone is given the space to both understand and be themselves. The stories, research, and conversations on which we draw have been put together to show how creating a collective culture of love and hope can build a society truly inclusive of disability and neurodiversity. We aspire to a world that centers the needs of neurominorities as a way to make our ways of being and existing ordinary. We have constructed the book to show that when we make disability justice a priority, we make life and society better for everyone. In this way, we have been greatly influenced by the scholarship of people such as Robert Chapman, who in *Empire of Normality* states that liberation for all is located in the development of a politics of neurodiversity and neurodivergent consciousness-raising. This is about developing a fluid understanding of who we all are in relation to capitalist systems of domination that are shaped by our material conditions, relations, and social practices.¹²

We use this introduction to begin to paint a picture of how we came to write this book together and the key scholarship and writings that guide the analysis in each chapter. As both a personal and a political intervention into the politics of neurodiversity, our objective has been to create an accessible yet rigorous discussion focused on social justice for everyone.

Friendship and Scholarship

We learned about our shared philosophy and vision of social justice very early on in our friendship. We met in 2018, when we both began working for Leading Routes, a pioneering organization founded by our sister Paulette Williams, designed to strengthen the academic pipeline for Black African and Caribbean students and staff in UK Higher Education (UKHE).¹³ We instantly bonded over our shared experience of race and class and how difficult we had found education as neurodivergent children and adults. We also discovered that we had similar ways of coping; mitigating our own educational challenges through what can only be described as an obsession with helping others to reach their full potential in work and education. Part of this is about each of us having a spiritual pull towards the democratization of resources and redistribution of capital to people. But if we are honest and look a little more deeply, we can both see that it also comes from a position of wanting to determine our own places in a society in which our ways of being are so often deemed unworthy. How have we learnt to show we are of value? By being in service to others (see more in chapter 2 on the necessity of self-love).

As people from working class backgrounds, there was instant attunement and ease between us. We were early career academics when we met; our first conversation was mostly about

education, money, and struggle. Chantelle was a part time PhD student with three paid jobs and family and healthcare responsibilities. Jason was a lecturer with multiple side hustles and jobs to help support his family and friends, a full-time carer for his parents, and a parent to his two children. In 2018 we were both employed and studying in universities, but even as early career academics it was natural that—on meeting someone with similar experiences of limited resources and access to capital—we voiced some of the difficulties we were facing. The social and cultural capital we have acquired through our education and jobs means we no longer consider ourselves to be working class (despite the fact that we still have to sell our labor to live!)

Of course, through industry and endeavor we are no longer working class, but that sense of permanent precarity and the memory of material struggle stays with you. In this way, our scholarly bond was first and foremost located in our class consciousness. We would later discover that alongside class consciousness was a spiritual, metaphysical, and neurodivergent connection that became fundamental to our ability to discuss what freedom might look like for the many. It is this connection that infuses each page of this book; it is something we see as a gift and a privilege, not to be taken for granted. When you meet siblings who have come to understand society through multiple lenses of marginalization, the possibilities are endless, not just because of similar experiences, but because we have understood those experiences in multiple ways across different settings and alongside a variety of people. Simply put, material, racialized, and classed similarity provide the grounds of a respectful union in which our differing ideas became grounded in ways that allowed us to learn, disagree, and grow in our thinking together.

While this collaborative project is about the politics of neurodiversity and neurotypical hegemony (see later sections of this chapter), we also feel that our dialogical and dialectical union demonstrates how building together with like-minded individuals is enhanced by similar lived experiences. This is a methodological intervention as well as a theoretical one, and it is imperative that the reader knows that a respectful union contains disagreement, debate, and conflict. For us, this is what love is. To produce work through the praxis of love is about recognizing and naming that love is seldom—in the seeds that are sown—about agreement alone. Love is about challenging and struggling through ideas and perspectives to produce a politics of emancipation. As bell hooks poignantly says, *it is the practice of love which transforms*.¹⁴ Love transforms us and the world around us if engaged with in all of its beautiful, challenging, and painful dynamics.

Circling back, we know that we have been able to produce the book in this way because we have similar backgrounds. In times of angst, this has enabled us to locate familiarity as a tool to get back to each other. Human beings have a lot in common, and the only way to respect, collaborate, and learn together is through a loving framework of acceptance, discipline, and forgiveness. We do not claim to have all the answers, but we would like to think that our process of grappling with neurodiversity, disability, and society transcends a typical academic method of collaboration. We lean into our similarities through a loving praxis in order to learn, grow, and expand our ways of thinking and being.

At the same time, we are conscious that scholarly union, and even the political union of minds and experiences, have been used to uphold the inequitable social structures we seek to intellectually dismantle in this book. Though this is in no way a perfect science, we hope that readers will see how our ongoing

awareness of critical friendship can contribute to the kind of liberalism we intend to expose and critique. As Noor and Shafee note, “*Generally, the roles of critical friends are to ask provocative questions, provide data to be examined through another lens, and offer a critique of a person’s work as a friend.*”¹⁵ We have been guided by researchers who have worked in like-minded collectives or partnerships that have centered provocative questions and offered critique of a person’s work. It is with this in mind that the political grounding of our relationship is one of revolution and transformation rather than reform. This is where we find it particularly useful to center teachings from fore parents such as bell hooks, who was clear that revolutionary feminism is about holistic self-actualization, which is embedded in dismantling an inequitable system.¹⁶ Coming together through a shared belief system is not enough to make change. We need to challenge, disagree, and sit with our differences, too. As a Black mixed-race woman raised in the suburbs of the West Midlands, and a Black man from South London, it is natural that our distinctive experiences of early socialization (growing up) have in many instances produced perspectives on life and neurodiversity in each of us that differ from those held by the other.

As we delve more deeply into the political spirit of this book, it will become clear how our initial conversations about society back in 2018—alongside our love and respect for each other—foreground our arguments. While we weave sensitive, compassionate, and understanding threads of analysis throughout each chapter, the urgency of these times for social justice movements requires us to begin this book with a tone to match the political calamities we find ourselves in. Bear with us as—with some hard facts—in these introductory sections we set the scene for recognizing and taking seriously the politics of neurodiversity and disability for the twenty-first century.

Global Inequality

We write this book from the island of Britain and the United Kingdom. It is the summer of 2024, and this is currently one of the most inequitable countries in Europe and the World. According to the Equality Trust, the UK has a very high level of income inequality compared to other developed countries; crucially, wealth in Britain is even more unequally divided than income. In 2020, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) calculated that the richest ten percent of households owned forty-three percent of all wealth. The poorest fifty percent, by contrast, owned just nine percent.¹⁷ After more than a decade of politically imposed austerity, there had been an increase in child poverty, systemic homelessness, a housing crisis, a huge wealth divide, and in many parts of the country social and public services often appeared to be in a state of collapse. In 2018, Philip Alston's United Nations envoy's report on poverty stated that the British government has inflicted "great misery" on its people with "punitive, mean-spirited, and often callous" austerity policies driven by a political desire to undertake social re-engineering rather than economic necessity.¹⁸ In 2023, Olivier De Schutte, the UN's special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, argued that poverty levels in the UK are "simply not acceptable" and that the government was violating international law.¹⁹ In the USA, similar trends in economic and social inequality are being recorded, with Statista showing that in 2023, more than sixty-six percent of the total wealth was owned by the top ten percent of earners. In comparison, the bottom fifty percent of earners owned only a little over two and a half percent of the total wealth.²⁰ Moreover, according to the World Inequality Database, the richest ten percent in countries such as India, Maldives, and Thailand,

earn more than half of the national income. Similarly, in Bangladesh, Nepal, and Singapore the richest ten percent earn about thirty-five percent of the national income. In a 2019 *American Economic Review* paper, Thomas Piketty, Li Yang, and Gabriel Zucman revealed that the top ten percent of the population of China holds approximately sixty-seven percent of its wealth and earns forty-one percent of the income. Meanwhile, the World Inequality Database shows that the continent of Africa suffers extreme levels of wealth inequality with the highest gap between the average incomes of the top ten percent and the incomes of the bottom fifty percent. The average incomes of the top ten percent are about thirty times higher than those of the bottom fifty percent, significantly higher than in other regions with extreme inequality.

We do not want these statements of fact to be read as in any way presentist; we understand the current system as part of a *longue durée* of constructed inequality sponsored by the legacies of colonialism, empire, and the extractive and profit driven cultures of capitalism. The key difference now is that there has never been this much absolute wealth alongside so much poverty and inequality. Leading scholars of social inequality, like Danny Dorling, contend that the global concentration of wealth persists because of the ongoing consensus that poverty is “natural.”²¹ This moment marks an emergency for the disabled community as these urgent political and social issues routinely marginalize physical and neurological minorities. These issues are an emergency for people who do not identify as disabled, too. The current lack of access to material, psychological, and structural care, support, and assistance is a multiclassed and multiethnic crisis; disabled people are simply at its sharpest end. As will be explored throughout the book, disability rights are integral to how we imagine dignity for all. People who do not

identify as disabled are only ever one moment, one day or one year away from being at risk of marginalization via disability. This is about recognizing that our politics and how we understand humanity should always take into consideration our future selves and collectives, as well as our present-day disabled siblings. The social and political emergencies we find ourselves in have been informed by an ideological force focused on dehumanizing neurological and physical disabilities by way of ableism, racism, and capitalism. This is about recognizing that some lives have been deemed disposable. But in spite of this emphasis that “it could be you,” we write this book in the spirit that love and empathy can be produced without the need to focus on readers’ fears of becoming disabled themselves. What we hope is that the neurological and neurotypical majority will be able to see just how damaging this type of hegemony is for everyone, regardless of levels of individual risk.

We also write this book during a time of a widespread cultural complacency surrounding our thinking about the neurodiverse community. Committing to a revaluation of neurodiversity requires an unpacking of the way previous structures and institutions have contributed to some of the sustained misinterpretations of the disadvantage faced by neurodivergent people and families. Governments and stakeholders need to reflect on the practical consequences for the neurodivergent population, in particular the long-suffering parents and carers of neurodivergent people, who continue to be an afterthought. The structures put in place to ensure that resources are unattainable remain a stain on our society. The existing hierarchy situates disabled and neurodivergent people as disposable, with their contributions to civil society measured against the neurotypical hegemony that determines what and who is deemed to be of value.

Beyond Representation

While we pay close attention to how ableism is intrinsic to class inequality, we also look at what an increased representation of neurodiversity in the media means—tangibly—for the disability movement. In any given week, we find ourselves sending each other different media links detailing the variety of ways that neurodiversity is making the news. From celebrity diagnoses to women and ethnic minorities being given a platform to talk about their lived experience of race, gender, and disability—neurodiversity continues to present as a zeitgeist for these times. In Alice Wong’s edited collection, *Disability Visibility: First-Person Stories from the Twenty-first Century*, it is clear that the shift in visibility afforded to disability and neurodivergence has been essential in bringing it from the margins to the center. Our recognition of the material politics of neurodiversity in the current context is aligned with our commentary on the cultures and discourse that surround this moment. Material politics here refers to the extent to which social and economic capital affect quality of life. Further, neurodiversity is a hot topic for people who take an interest in self-help and self-improvement resources, as well as more general discussions about how we as individuals manage and negotiate modern society. Naturally, people want to understand themselves. They want to understand how their personal and professional lives have been influenced by their neurodivergence and perhaps learn more about how to grapple with the challenges of living. We are witnessing a growth in formal diagnoses among women and ethnic minorities due to the structural implications of race, class, and gender in childhood.²² These structures, which are fuelled by racism and sexism primarily, cause a delay in care that is only now being fully reconciled via adult diagnosis. And generally speaking, we

observe this moment as a renewal of the capitalist cultures in which people want to delve more deeply into their sense of themselves to find solace in the face of the many extant political and environmental emergencies. Crucially, however, people are often being pushed to understand themselves in order to be better workers. But regardless of these critical ponderings on the discourse that surrounds neurodiversity, we come to the premise of this book as optimists. In spite of the—clearly much more sinister and capitalistic—cultures that are becoming established around neurodiversity, cultures that are often devoid of the radical roots of social justice movements, we remain convinced that if people could be provided with alternative ways of both understanding and communicating neurodivergence, this topic would have the capacity to be emancipatory for everyone, rather than simply being a trend.

Stretching our Imaginations

In-between our intensive writing sessions in Chantelle's kitchen or in Jason's native home of South London, we spent hours discussing the different ways of writing this book that would stretch our imaginations of neurodiversity (we'll come onto Frantz Fanon and stretching Marxism later in this chapter). We wanted to produce a resource that would go beyond the functioning of a single individual's brain. We wanted to create something that went beyond simply describing how the marginalization of neurodiversity could be resolved through the acts of individuals. But to go beyond individuality when we are working through a subject as fluid and diverse as neurodiversity is no easy feat. For starters, we needed to address the intensity of our feelings about the more universal marginalization of disabled people. We channel what Brittany Cooper conceptualizes

as a Black women's feminist *eloquent rage* to guide us.²³ Being frustrated (and angry) about these cultures was a starting point; it gave us the passion and drive to articulate the problems. With this, when we first started to write this book, we often described feelings of isolation, ambivalence, and frustration when it came to thinking about which sorts of people are valued in society and the ways in which this is too-frequently mitigated by able-bodied-ness, neurotypical functioning, and mental health. What we have come to learn as we collaborate, research, and imagine together is that many of the scholars, activists, and freedom-fighters who have inspired us would perhaps today be understood as *disabled or neurodivergent*. Why is it that disability and neurodiversity are often understood in isolation or in terms of the experiences of specific individuals? Essentially, this is what frames the politics of this book; an emphasis on the movements and structures of society. By retrieving and centering the politics of neurodiversity as integral features of the formation of society, we are both resistant to and reliant on a politics that utilizes representation while recognizing that it can only ever be a starting point. The starting point for us in leaning on representative figures is very much about a sense of feeling, emotion, and connection. Put simply, seeing our experiences through the work of others makes us feel less alone. In later parts of the book—an essential feature of our critique of how neurodiversity is discussed—we highlight the toxic nature of neoliberalism. However, it would be disingenuous of us to state that the representation of neurodivergence by inspirational individuals did not move us. Although this book lays out a variety of critical interventions on neurodiversity, we are very clear that at the heart of our work is the human story. In this way, the voices and experiences of people who are like us inspire every page, and thus we explore what it means to be both critical and

appreciative of the representation of neurodiversity and disability at this current moment.

Crucially, we write this book in admiration of the people who are sharing their stories of struggle in both childhood and adulthood as they try to manage their disabilities and neurodivergence in an increasingly ableist world. Fundamentally, we are seeing more conversations and more organizations that emphasize the strategies used by neurodivergent individuals to cope, adapt, and mask in everyday life.²⁴ When we were growing up in eighties, nineties, and noughties Britain as neurodivergent people, we could never have imagined this kind of representation, which not only validates our lived experiences of ableism, but gives a voice to various instances in each of our lives that are and have been specific and particular, and indeed deemed rather peculiar. Simply in seeing this new-found representation of neurodiversity outside societal structures, we feel an overwhelming warmth in the knowledge that future generations of neurodivergent people might see themselves presented as “ordinary.” This ordinariness is the orthodoxy we want to promote, advance, and advocate for all, recognizing the importance attached to becoming a society that truly embraces intersectional differences in all their guises.

Introducing Neurotypical Hegemony

One of the most intriguing, yet possibly one of the more neurodivergent aspects of this book, is the fact that we rarely outline or discuss the specificity of living with neurodivergent traits in isolation. Our focus is mainly on the proliferation of neurotypical culture (domination and power), in a move to collectivize the politics of neurodiversity. This is of course inspired by the movement of critical disabilities scholars who have dedicated much of

their careers to recognizing the extent to which our points of entry into structural inequity can be enhanced by an intentional engagement with disability, affect, and society (see for example Theri A. Pickens, Dan Goodley, Kirsty Liddiard and Katherine Runswick-Cole, Rebecca Lawthom, Anna Hinton, Sami Schalk and Robert McRuer). This is about recognizing how our sense of self is constructed in relation to how we have been and continue to be affected both emotionally and structurally by the way society is organized. With this, we see that looking closely at how normative (or “normal”) ideas become so intensely valued provides a route into the ongoing, yet incredibly important, work of addressing the conflict, connection, and challenge of both structure and agency. Rather, scholars such as Goodley, Liddiard, and Runswick-Cole note that the intersection of disability shows that, for the disabled community, the interaction between the relational, the political, and the social cuts across a variety of issues at the forefront of matters that are both queer and feminist.²⁵ We take many of these guiding principles into our contribution to the field to show that *different ways of knowing and experiencing the world* are often thwarted by the constraints of neurotypical society. In this way, we bring the politics of neurodiversity into consistent conversation with the primary concept we use throughout this book—*neurotypical hegemony*.

Neurotypical hegemony gets its own section in our introduction because it forms the basis of our critical overview of the best ways to embrace neurodivergence and generate hopeful and inclusive futures for all. Firstly, we break down the term in two distinct ways. “Neurotypical” describes the neurological majority whose modes of thinking, being, and living have become embedded in society; neurotypical people are seen as the normal, most valuable, and valued citizens. Scholars of neurodiversity, such as Dieuwertje Dyi Huijg, note that the connection

between agency (or how the structured position of a person affects the way they interact with their environment) and “normality” is grounded in “neuronormativity.” This process systematically represents neurotypical minds as being the “normal state.”²⁶ The word neurotypical represents both people and culture and is used throughout our analysis as the central phenomenon we are trying to disrupt and dismantle. Neurotypical hegemony means cultural and social dominance. As sociologists, our overview of neurotypicality resists individualizing the harm it inflicts, avoiding a politics of “good” and “bad,” and instead situating it as both tied to and socially reproduced through a combination of structures. In this way, both the neuromajority and the neurominority support and protect neurotypical culture, which has been conveyed routinely as the only safe and viable way for society to be organized. Put simply, neurotypical culture has become so powerful because it is able to dominate even through the actions and ideas of the people and communities it consistently marginalizes.

To complete our account of the term neurotypical culture as something ideologically entrenched and powerful, we use the humanist Marxist term hegemony. Humanist Marxism is attentive to the ways that capitalism becomes socially reproduced through the power of ideas and values. We use the framework of civil society as responsive to the notion that society is intentionally curated through the guise of the “most tolerated citizen.” This is achieved through a combination of common sense (or how ideas and values become described and positioned as normal and normative), and consent (or how people and society give permission for certain cultures to dominate). We will now take a brief but crucial introductory historical detour to the concept of hegemony, to lay the foundations for the way we use the term throughout the book.

Gramsci, Hegemony, and Modern Society

The concept of hegemony was first developed by Antonio Gramsci, when he was General Secretary of the Italian Communist Party, during his years in prison (1926–1935). In *Quaderni del Carcere* (*The Prison Notebooks*), Gramsci established the basic premise of the theory of hegemony in a series of dispersed writings which, in the simplest terms, argued that power is concealed, consented to, and socially reproduced by a range of social agents (people!).²⁷ Thus, hegemony means both power and dominance. It is achieved through the combination of “civil society” and “common sense” and becomes a social contract. To deviate from its cultures is to become a challenging citizen or member of civil society. This contextualized focus on hegemony is a way of emphasizing how it becomes normalized, naturalized, and also struggled over, both intimately and socially. For Gramsci, the state is the base on which political power is woven, through the production of ideas and values. With this power, the terrain is set for how these cultures present in “civil society.” Civil society is maintained by the ways in which media, education, and religious institutions (primarily) become integral to the formation of people’s identities, which ultimately contribute to the conditioning of the ideological power that regulates ideas, values, and social norms. The sphere of civil society is where hegemony operates, negating the need for coercive control; it requires ongoing investment in the protection and reproduction of the ideologies that preserve power.

A closer look at what Gramsci calls *common sense* provides us with some key sites of everyday life which can help introduce just how integral hegemony is for the social reproduction of ideas and the values we all live by. For the purpose of laying the foundations of a world seen through the lens of neurotypical

hegemony we see how schools, politicians, the media, and pop culture become integral components in the creation of principles that are simultaneously both common sense and marginalizing, such as ableism, racism, and capitalism. In the context of the politics of neurodiversity, this means that neurodivergence becomes marginal simply because key social institutions have committed to cultures that understand disability as a phenomenon synonymous with inferiority. Each institution in civil society relies on the others to reproduce common sense in this way. An example of this in the context of neurodiversity and disability is the combined existence of austerity alongside pupil referral units (the removal of young people from mainstream school), and the repeated recommissioning of *The Undateables* on Channel Four (which has to date run for eleven series).²⁸ Each institution commits to a pathologization of neurodiversity and disability through common sense notions of the normality of social and economic marginalization. This becomes most dangerous in the social reproduction of consent, which is where hegemony creates its winning formula. For humanist Marxists and especially for Gramsci, hegemony is most dangerous where it is seen to be winning on multiple fronts. Consent across key social institutions enables the dehumanizing of populations that are rarely at the forefront of creating the power required for ideological control. Keeping in mind TV shows like *The Undateables* and *Love on the Spectrum*,²⁹ our concern is with the ways in which material and social marginalization can exist while also being presented as entertainment. In its most sinister form, the combination of consent and common sense produces a hegemonic condition where those who are most likely to be marginalized in civil society portray this ideological culture as reasonable. Simply put, hegemony's appeal for the most powerful is that it allows them to control ideas about populations they

see as disposable, and they can win even the minds of the people at the sharper end of this culture. As Marx said, the proletariat experiences the constant suppression of a sense of self alongside the structural insecurity that has been fed to them as integral to their survival. If societal cultures—and hegemony—work hard enough, they can convince those positioned by them as least valuable that their position is well-founded.

It is in these foundations of hegemony that we see the clear connection between the ways in which neurodiversity and disability become understood as marginal, and the way that neurodiverse and disabled people are positioned as the opposite of the most valuable, valued, and loveable citizens (see chapters 2 and 3).

Love and Political Education

We contend throughout this book that exploring the way neurotypical hegemony persists provides the information required to produce more loving ways to live with and relate to each other. We present this information to demonstrate the utopian possibilities of political education, in the understanding that *knowledge is power*. Throughout our themed discussions, from subjects like mental health to schooling and class, we stress that *we only know what we know*, and sometimes it is only by exploring these matters through anecdotes and by relating issues to each other that we can truly understand their interconnection. We are guided by many scholars, but in particular by Black feminist educators such as Patricia Hill Collins, who notes that political education and knowledge production more broadly are rooted in a consciousness-raising which fuels individual and collective empowerment to change and revolutionize how we live and relate to each other.³⁰ Learning about the histories of

how, as people and collectives, we have experienced life in relation to the structures of society forms the basis for the liberatory politics found in this book. On the essential *practice of knowing* how society is constructed through its ableist, racist, and capitalist tendencies, global commentaries from Black feminists over the past fifty years help to prompt some of our more poignant critiques throughout this book. An example of the importance of political education as we negotiate a society fixated on obscuring consciousness-raising can be found among our Black British feminist siblings, such as Lola Young, Beverley Bryan, Stella Dadzie and Suzanne Scafe, Gail Lewis, Elizabeth Obi, Olive Morris, Marsha Prescod, Laretta G. Ngcobo, Julia Chinyere Oparah (previously Sudbury) and many more.³¹ Among these writers and activists, many of those located on the island we currently find ourselves writing from have been committed to documenting the lived experiences of racialized and gendered struggle as a way of surviving a society fixated on making inequality invisible. Though there is no doubt that the digital and technological revolution has produced more fertile ground for political education, the activity of concealing the lives of those who find themselves in some of the darkest and most helpless places in contemporary society persists.³² As Tracey Reynolds has noted, the limited and limiting representations of how contemporary inequality is rooted in its historical constructions show just how radical the Black feminist tradition of telling stories from the standpoint of knowing has been for other movements for social justice.³³ In this way, political education rooted in existing resistance to the media, government, and civil society more broadly provides space for us to use the democratization of information as a vehicle for generating cultures of love and understanding. Knowing who we are and how society is co-produced is where Black feminists have

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