

Deep Reading Tactics: A Walk Through Sketching to Transmediate Text

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“I have no idea what
the author is saying!”

I have uttered these words on more than one occasion, typically while reading texts that require familiarity with definitions, principles, formulas, rules, and other bits of prerequisite knowledge.

A while ago, I read an article about a quantum physics concept that appeared like an impenetrable wall rather than a written piece. My brain struggled to render the abstractions into useful images, and I walked away from it more confused than enlightened.



Works of philosophers are laden with abstractions as well; yet, I do not encounter them as walls. Reading philosophical texts reminds me of a working textile loom with an automated flying shuttle.

Bit by bit and row by row, I weave numerous threads that make up the authors' discourse with the weft of my experiences to transform written abstractions into new cognitive schemata for future scaffolding and recall. Back and forth, back and forth. I read an excerpt, then search my memory for a suitable illustration of what I just read. Sometimes these illustrations remind me of dreams--dynamic, faint or vivid, familiar, yet strange, often nonsensical--visual abstractions of text abstractions. Other times, images are still.

When my search successfully converges with an interesting or profound thought in the text, I accent it with a highlighter. I follow no color code but simply ensure each thought stands out from the others as much as possible.

...Back and forth, back and forth. I rarely perceive the fabric's pattern until I labor well into the text's interior. Intricate patterns take longer to reveal. Back and forth, back and forth; the shuttle has a rhythm.

To admit "I have no idea what the author is saying!" is to cut a thread in the warp and to cause my fabric of comprehension to unravel. I hate the thought of this happening, so when my thought shuttle struggles to come back to the other side, I slow down my reading. Sometimes, when I struggle to make sense of a passage or when I find an idea worth further exploration, I sketch to transmediate the written word.

CHOREOGRAPHING THE POLITICAL

Like many classical autistics, Ido Kedar came to language late. Coordinating his fingers to be able to type was a long process, and because his body often went against his wishes, moving in directions contrary to those he thought of as aligned to his conscious intentions, it was incredibly difficult for him to demonstrate to his aides that he was indeed capable of understanding their directives. This condition, which affects all classical autistics to differing degrees, is defined most aptly in the current literature as "autistic movement disturbance." Following older neuroscientific literature, Kedar calls it "motor apraxia."¹ Through his writing in *Ido in Autismland: Climbing Out of Autism's Silent Prison*, Kedar hopes to educate neurotypical readers and parents of autistics about movement disturbances in autism.² His outspoken desire is that parents and specialists no longer rely on the outward appearance of autistic movement to determine what autistics can do. Just because autistics have challenges with movement and communication, Kedar argues, does not mean that they cannot understand what is going on around them. Referring to the period before Kedar could express himself in writing, Kedar's mother explains: "Ido was bored out of his mind, trapped in a paralyzing silence and frustrated beyond belief. He tried hard to show that he was smart but his hands and his body did not cooperate with his mind, so everyone assumed that he just didn't understand the concepts. I cannot imagine a greater exercise in frustration." "The experts," Kedar says, "have no clue" (2012: 24).

Opening with Kedar's experience of his own type of neurodiversity, what I would like to do here is to take autistic motor disturbance as the starting point for a discussion of a body-world split I feel is endemic to the neurotypical account of experience. While it would be impossible to generalize across any group of people, and any autistic will reiterate that there are as many autistic experiences as there are autistics, I will take autistic

“Body-world split”
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(p. 111).

“Body-World Split” Study.

Erin Manning begins Chapter 5 in her book titled “The Minor Gesture” (2016) with “autistic movement disturbance,” a form of motor impairment experienced by people with autism.

I read the page carefully and pause several times to appraise my attitude toward the topic. I am wary of any discourse that reinforces boundaries between neurotypicality and neurodiversity.

A thought that my autistic daughter and I belong in two opposing camps—camp “neurotypical” and camp “neurodiverse”—brings me pain. Yet, the concept of a body-world split is intriguing. I consider it and conclude: my body and the world around it coexist and interact, but they are not the same. They are, in fact, separate. I cannot even imagine a different way to be. Or can I?

Later in the chapter, Manning explains that body-world split refers to “direct perception of experience” (p. 112) and illustrates her thought with the following example:

“The neurotypically oriented world we live in privileges consciousness as aligned to instrumentality over nonconscious, nonvolitional tendencies. It is this very neurotypical perspective that teaches us that a body begins and ends in a skin envelope we can readily perceive. Again and again in young childhood we are given instructions that assist us in differentiating our skin from that of the world. Think, for instance, of the young child’s difficulty in assigning hurt when they fall, and their tendency to point to the ground instead of their knee.” (p. 114)

I am excited to study perception of experience more—I sense a promise of a new way to connect with my daughter.



I reach into my memory for a suitable example of a body-world merge to conceptually contrast body-world split. A recent hike in the mountains of North Carolina... rays of the afternoon sun filtered through the thick branches of a fir-tree then split into thousands of sparkles. I captured the moment on my camera, and here it is, on my screen. Images help me recall the intensity of the moment.





The scent of firs and the fresh air fill my lungs with elation. I do not breathe it, I drink it. A faint wisp of smoke rising from a chimney morphs my childhood and my present together. When I was little, I lived in a house with a furnace; smoke always meant supper and warmth. The olfactory memory of burning wood is so powerful that it instantly takes me back forty years ago. The mountain, the trees, the air... we are one, I am dissolved. Then I shiver. The wind reminds me of the body-world split even as I fix my scarf to shield my neck and chest from being frisked by the chill. How funny. I do not mind the air on my inside... On the outside, my body and the world a clearly separate. I thought I had it.

I skim through photographs in my camera, looking for more experiences of a body-world merge. Obviously, skin is a powerful barrier between the two—it feels temperature, touch, pain... What if it is somehow arrested, made to feel less? I imagine floating on my back on a summer day in the pool. I need to conjure up sensory memories to help interrogate the body-world separation, so I reach for my tablet and search for a stock photo to help with recall. I find a match quickly.



The woman in the image looks serene. Only her head is above water, her hair, shoulders, and arms are immersed. Eyes closed.

I try to imagine what she feels, but I am aware the image documents another woman's experience, not mine. Visuals are an efficient way to access the brain of a seeing person, but the process is too quick for what I am trying to accomplish. A veteran graphic artist, I routinely evaluate scores of stock images for use in my designs. My eyes are trained to look for specifics and make selections as quickly as possible. If I am going to use images to help me with deep reading, I need to suspend this habit.

An idea comes to mind: re-sketch the photo by hand and transform the model's experience into my own.

I find a pencil and some poster board. I begin with an outline. My hand follows the curves of the face profile, and it puts me in the mood. Unlike straight lines, curves are liquid, and I think of the water, as intended. Next, I work on the shading: first nose, then chin. Hair is last because half of it is underwater, and it looks like a mistake with its clearly defined, but oddly shaped boundaries. It is unrecognizable.

I resist the urge to heed my brain's suggestion about what an eye or long hair should look like and I do my best to draw exactly what I see—shapes, lines, shadows, highlights, and their proximity to each other. The activity forces me to process each element separately, in isolation from the whole they are meant to represent. Drawing reminds me of a linguistic analysis. It also disrupts my perception of time and creates a niche in the inner universe where I can gather and interact with memories.

I recall the muffled sounds, ears underwater; skin is calm, lulled by the totality of water and the soothing warmth radiating through my face and chest. Eyes closed; they feel the assault of the Florida sun and dare not to unsheathe. Left with no visual information to process, they idle. With these three privileged—auditory, tactile, and visual—sensory channels subdued, other experiences come into the focus. The gentle rocking of the waves. Gravity is repurposed. My heartbeat is solemn, and I muse: the rhythm is so persistent! I make a note that someday it will stop, but the thought does not upset me, it simply punctuates my awareness of the now.

I pay attention to the air traveling through my lungs as I breathe—I adjust my body's depth and imagine myself as a submarine. Volition is loitering somewhere on the boundaries of my self-consciousness. Good. Is this how relaxation feels? A well-deserved break from my obsession with purpose? No needs, no wants, no thought chatter. Body-world split is irrelevant. In fact, I am so tuned into my body that the concept of the world disappears. I feel it physically, but there is no split.

I decide my drawing is complete.



I step back, examine my drawing, and cringe. I want to share it with Janet, Jenni, and others, but I do not want to be judged as an artist. I suspect I am a step up from a stick figure painter, but I am also a flight of stairs below the professional level.

The flaws in my sketch are obvious. A trained eye can tell I had no idea how to define the nose or how to make water look liquid. The fact that I wanted it to look liquid is a giveaway that I failed to think only in terms of shapes, shadows, and lines. I did not even attempt to draw the immersed arms because I kept wanting to somehow draw water over them. There was not supposed to be water. Nevertheless, I like this sketch because I did something authentic.

I did not set out to create art or to engage in the activity of art-making.

My skills are more obvious elsewhere; still, I managed to slow down time and to help my flying shuttle weave the next row in the fabric of text comprehension.

I still do not know exactly what the absence of body-world separation feels like for an autistic person. I am not sure it is possible for me to know. However, I am more tuned in to Manning's narrative, and eager to find new themes to explore.

In the beginning of Chapter 6 titled "Carrying the Feeling," (p. 131) Manning quotes Lucy Blackman who shared:

"Remember that my body and its "orbit" include my thoughts, my real emotions, and what I call my "feelings." These are not the same as what you people, i.e. neurotypicals, call "feelings" but are my carrying... vibrations, flashes, visual-blocks, touch-horrors, smell-tickles and the cross-over that comes from them."

Later in the chapter, Manning continues to explore the verb "carry." She writes on page 131, "Carrying moves the noun. With this motor attached to it, the noun becomes a field of sensation, making felt the ineffable more- than of perception, the welling nonconscious activity of experience in the making." On page 132, she continues, "carrying is always tied to movement."

I too wanted to explore the word carry, only through recall of experiences associated with carrying so I can make better sense of what Lucy Blackman said about carrying her thoughts, emotions, and feelings.



CARRYING A BABY.



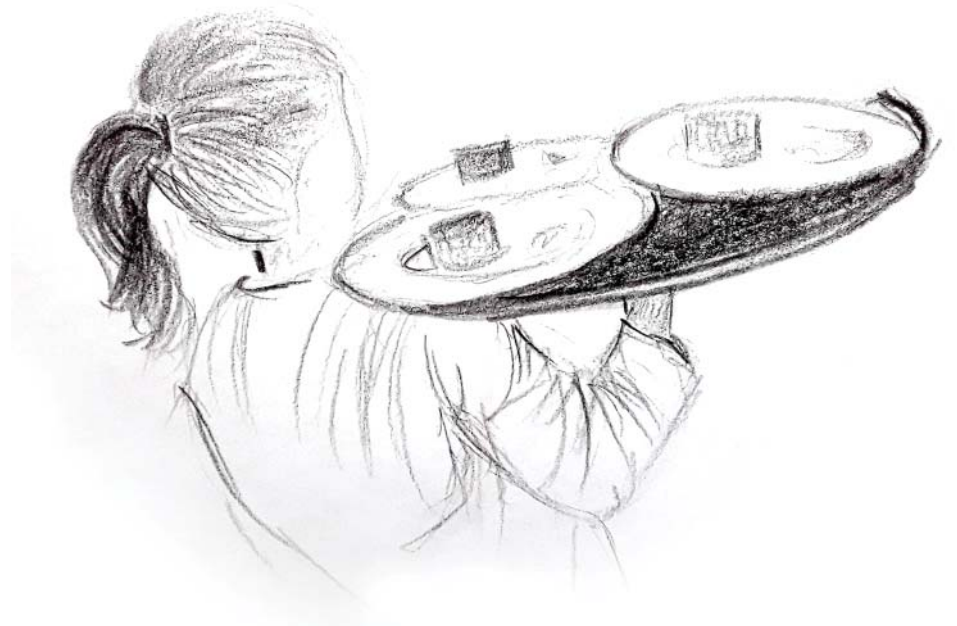
CARRYING BELONGINGS
IN A BACKPACK



CARRYING TO COMPLETE
CHORES



CARRYING A LOT OF
THINGS AT ONCE



CARRYING TO EARN
MONEY

These sketches are just examples of how transmediation can aid deep reading and generation of further thought.