Where I Sit: An Autoethnography of Being/Becoming a Neurodiverse Student

MEd Portfolio

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Masters of Education for Change

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Dedication

I dedicate this portfolio to my mum, Lori, who has dedicated so much of her life to me: You are one of the strongest, smartest people I know and have always been my biggest supporter. You are always there for me when I need you, even if it's at three am. You make a point of telling me that you are proud of me and love me no matter what, and I hope to keep making you proud. I'm proud of you and everything you've accomplished and you should be proud of yourself, too. Love you, mum.

Acknowledgements

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To Claire: Thanks for being my partner in crime for the past two years. Without you, I would have been resigned to a rather lonely and isolated couple of years.

To all my professors, instructors and administrators of the Music Department: thank you for showing me that I am capable and deserving of success and belonging.

To Chris, Danae, Danielle, Hannah, Ivory, and Kirsten: I couldn't have picked a better crew of music majors to have by my side during our program. Thank you for the years of friendship, carpools, laughter, study sessions, rehearsals, consortium concerts, and memories.

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Chapter I: Introduction

"2. When Ms. Carriere is reading, she should always use her finger or a pencil [as] a pointer to assist her in tracking accurately through words and sentences" (Caelan Carriere Psychological Assessment, 2019, appendix). Of all the recommendations in my psychological assessment, this finding is the one I joke about the most. At this point in time, I was already 20 years old, had successfully completed two years of my university program with a GPA of 80.14, and here I was being told that I really ought to use my finger or a ruler to read more effectively.

I vividly remember the meeting where I received the results of the three-hour diagnostic assessment administered by the university's contracted psychometrician: Mild attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), generalized or social anxiety disorder (GAD)[1], and memory abilities that were "significantly below the bottom of the average range" (Caelan Carriere Psychological Assessment, 2019, appendix). I definitely cried but I was quite excited because I thoroughly enjoy learning new information about interesting topics and I certainly think of myself as very interesting! Nevertheless, I had not really considered how these diagnoses might change my life, beyond getting an academic accommodation to receive feedback in private, because nothing about me had essentially changed. Instead, I had gained this fascinating new framework for understanding my lived experiences and I read this document like an academic article on a revolutionary theoretical framework because that is what it was like for me.

Frankly, I would be well-pleased writing a paper focusing on just this diagnosis process and the assessment document I received because it is one of my favourite readings. At this meeting, the psychometrician and I also discussed the possibility of an autism spectrum disorder

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[1] In this paper, I will be referring to people diagnosed with GAD as either 'a person with anxiety' or 'an anxious person' and a person diagnosed with ADHD as 'a person with ADHD' because I have found no evidence that people with these labels have a preference for either identity-first or person-first language, hence, I will be reverting to the language with which I am the most familiar.

(ASD)[2] assessment but the levels of anxiety I was experiencing at the time made it very difficult to continue the assessment, though I received a formal autism diagnosis five and a half years later. I thought this whole process was excellent because I love labels and have always viewed them as ‘good’ for me, though I respect how there are people who justifiably dislike labels, particularly the imposition of these labels by institutions.

Before I had “attracted the label of autism” (Douglas & Rice, 2021, p. 24), I did not think it was possible for a university-educated person to believe that being autistic made someone lesser. However, while working with some peers in the university library, I casually mentioned that I have autism and a classmate actually stated, “but you seem so intelligent.” I wish I had responded, “Of course I am intelligent. I’m brilliant. But autism has nothing to do with how smart I am” instead of my more immediate thoughts such as, “And you seem very stupid because that was a stupid thing to say.” I recognized how this would be a rude thing to say –even though what my peer said *was* stupid. This was the first time I realized that even university-educated people could be profoundly ignorant about neurodiversity, prompting me to become more discerning. As I reflected further, I noticed that although I had neurodiverse[3] peers, I knew of no instructors or academics who openly identified as neurodiverse. This realization led me to question my own lived experiences and initiated extensive research to uncover narratives of neurodiverse identities within academia.

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[2] I will be referring to people diagnosed with ASD as ‘an autistic person’, as identity-first language is overwhelmingly preferred by those from the autism community (Douglas et al., 2021; Bury et al., 2023).

[3] Legault et al. (2021) explain that “Although the terms ‘neurodiversity’ and ‘neurodivergence’ are sometimes used interchangeably…‘neurodiversity’ is a term of inclusion whereas ‘neurodivergence’ is a term of exclusion.” (p. 12843). The authors argue that neurodiversity is innate and encompasses all people, while neurodivergence is a fact of society implying a cognitive standard from which these ‘others’ diverge (Legault et al., 2021). With this in mind, I am preferring the term(s) “neurodiversity/neurodiverse” except in contexts where I seek to emphasize the socio-political process of ‘othering’ experienced by those with cognitive disorders/disability/impairments.

Being/Becoming a neurodiverse student

As I have focused my graduate research on studying neurodiversity in higher education, I increasingly realize how my own narrative as neurodiverse has been both typical and atypical: I am typical as the number of diagnosed young adults with ADHD, autism, anxiety, and learning disability continues to increase, including for those entering or already studying at universities (*see* the Conference Board of Canada report, 2025). And my university career as a neurodiverse student is atypical due to the years I have spent unlabeled and undiagnosed in an accepting, inclusive music program that embraced me as a capable student with every opportunity to access and participate in the program's courses, collaborative performances, and departmental community. Moreover, I was again an atypical neurodiverse university student due to this music program's acceptance and how it first affirmed my academic strengths rather than doubt, scrutinize or exclude me for being 'unusual' or not in the norm. To illustrate this program's inclusivity of my differences, I was able to enroll in my preference of overloading 7.5 credits of courses in both my second and third years of university[4], rather than the normative limit of 5 credits. My department and faculty approved an overload of 12 courses in my second year and 14 courses in my third year precisely because (1) I *wanted* to learn the material, and (2) I *believed* I could handle it, on my promise that I would (a) attend all classes, complete all assignments, and ask the instructor for help if I required clarification, and (b) I would choose to drop a class if I found it too challenging or if it compromised my performance in other courses.

Typical of neurodiversity, the executive function skills with which I struggle most are time management and organization, but I thrived during those years of my music program (and later, in the BEd program) because having more courses created a clearly defined structure for my school week, which facilitated a routine. My professors did not view me as unreasonable,

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[4] The standard, yearly course load for full-time students is 5.0 (five) credits (FCE); this can consist of any combination of full (1 FCE) and half (0.5 FCE) credit courses. I took an excess of 2.5 FCE in each year.

incapable, or too fragile even when I cried in class and never took notes. On the contrary, they first considered my love for learning, looked at my academic record, and trusted my judgment regarding my capabilities.

Neurodiverse student experiences in higher education continue to be widely misunderstood, limited, or mis/represented in research as mostly struggles, challenges and exclusions, reproducing the ableist notion that neurodiverse students are *misfits* (*see* Rice et al., 2024) or inherently incompatible with the demands of a university education (Couzens et al., 2015; Kwon et al., 2018; Grant & Kara, 2021).

My portfolio research challenges this dominant, deficit narrative by countering with my own autoethnographic account of how certain spaces -pedagogical, environmental and social- enabled me to fit in as neurodiverse and feel belonging at university. I critically examine how ableism in academia, including ableist narratives in higher education, reinforces a pessimistic belief that neurodiverse students are too difficult, challenging, or frustrating to incite institutional efforts for greater equity and justice (Brown & Leigh, 2018; Grant & Kara, 2021; Saltes, 2022). My autoethnographic study examines questions regarding inclusion and navigating belongingness in the university, along with the contributing factors that evoke that affective state. I explore my own lived experiences to analyze how different pedagogical, socio-cultural and environmental or physical contexts enabled me to feel accepted, engage and thrive in university learning; and to provide a positive narrative of neurodiversity in higher education through an asset-based appreciative inquiry.

Background

Being/Becoming a neurodiverse student

The study of neurodiverse experiences in higher education remains dominated by neurotypical perspectives, often reinforcing ableist biases and deficit-oriented narratives (Brown & Leigh, 2018; Gant & Kara, 2021). Concurrently, there is a dearth of autoethnographic research at the intersection of neurodiverse perspectives in higher education, which maintains the dominant narrative that neurodiverse and "invisibly disabled" people always struggle and often fail in higher education (Brown & Leigh, 2018, p. 985). Despite the growing number of students self-identifying as neurodiverse or invisibly disabled in universities (*see* Conference Board of Canada, 2024, 2025; Couzens et al., 2015; Geyer, 2021), along with a legally mandated (Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act-AODA) increase of social and academic supports for inclusion (Titchkosky, 2023; Carriere, 2025), stereotypical misrepresentations of autistic people as rude and callous or people with ADHD as childish or careless, and a limited range of character archetypes such as the underdog, the tireless advocate or the charmingly quirky academic, still persist and remain embedded in the academy.

Neurodiverse and disabled students certainly face many institutional, physical and socio-cultural challenges in the neoliberal university (see Rice et al., 2023) including those that I faced during my own university years; however, neurotypical people should not default to the assumption that my university experience is primarily negative because I have been diagnosed with anxiety, ADHD, and autism. On the contrary, my autoethnography represents a narrative of positive reclamation, an assertion of self-determination, and a call to other invisibly disabled university students to rise up and tell their own stories to challenge and shift dominant ableist narratives. In this portfolio, I provide a more nuanced perspective where neurodiverse students are seen not as victims of their condition(s) but as active contributors to the academic community.

Positionality

Being/Becoming a neurodiverse student

I have always been neurodiverse and invisibly disabled, living with anxiety, ADHD, autism, and a learning disability. However, it was not until my third year of university that I received a formal diagnosis of general and/or social anxiety disorder and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. This occurred after a contract lecturer, noticing my classroom performance and anxious responses, encouraged me to consult a counsellor at Student Accessibility Services to explore potential accommodations. Tests administered as part of that assessment revealed the anticipated anxiety disorders, along with ADHD and significant memory impairment. For example, in subtests tapping my working memory and short-term auditory memory, my scores averaged around the 8th percentile (significantly below average), and my rapid-naming composite score was at the 5th percentile (significantly below average). With the psychometrician, we discussed exploring an autism diagnosis; however, I was not formally diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) until five years later.

Though I have always been different from my peers throughout my K-13 and university education, I somehow managed in classrooms or environments that did not contrast, conflict or overemphasize these differences to the point that I attracted labels or was made to feel like a misfit. In this regard, my story and autoethnography are atypical because I have loved my time at the university, feeling included and valued in the music department, thriving in my academic programs, and making strong relationships with the people (peers and instructors) who have shared this journey with me. Though I may be biased towards my university as it has served me well over the past eight years, my autoethnographic research aims to deliver a neurodiverse narrative that can open theoretical space for more inclusive higher education research. While my autoethnography does not focus on the experiences of other neurodiverse students/people in the university, it addresses both strengths and challenges that I faced during my 6+ years as an undergraduate student in two different programs (HBA in music and BEd in primary/junior teaching), examining how institutional structures, environmental spaces, and social contexts have all shaped my sense of belonging in the university. This autoethnographic project follows a retrospective appreciative inquiry methodology to emphasize how an institution of higher learning made me feel included, valued, and accepted as a neurodiverse student and to refute the negativism in much ableist discourse that values criticism over appreciation.

First and foremost, this autoethnographic research is necessary for the neurodiverse community. While I am atypical of many neurodiverse university students because I did not feel like an outsider pre- or post-diagnosis, nor was my acceptance by peers or professors conditional on my being able to mask idiosyncratic mannerisms, my narrative matters as it provides new insights into specific elements or conditions that have been effective in welcoming me as a neurodiverse/invisibly disabled person into higher education and academia. It is crucial that I provide a first-person account, with my insider perspective as a neurodiverse student-researcher, drawing from my lived experiences over a 6-year period (2017-2023).

As a graduate student who has the opportunity to conduct meaningful research for social justice, I recognize that I am privileged to be in this position based on merit and invisibility, as I am regularly mistaken for a member of the dominant normative group. Outwardly, I appear as an educated, middle-class, white, able-bodied, cis-gender Canadian woman, but in reality, I am Métis, disabled, and queer. My academic success has been earned, but I have also benefited from the presumption that I do not belong to marginalized groups, to which I am invisibly a member. As a person with autism, anxiety, ADHD and a learning disability, I recognize that I have been very fortunate in avoiding discrimination while privileged to be in a position of power to conduct justice-oriented research that can impact neurodiverse and invisibly disabled communities.

Purpose and Rationale

Being/Becoming a neurodiverse student

My primary objective in this research is a call to reframe the conversation of neurodiversity in higher education through the holistic lens of a 1st person perspective that can challenge the prevailing deficit-oriented discourse in higher education research by presenting an alternative, affirming narrative of my neurodiversity (Grant & Kara, 2012; Rice et al., 2023). While I am no idealist, I am an inherently optimistic person who tends to the positive with the aim of problem-solving in situations that are causing harm. Moreover, I find it exhausting to be surrounded by too much negativity, pessimism and complaining because those behaviours and discourses do not produce change. Many academics, however, tend to orient towards focusing on critiquing or primarily analyzing deficits, gaps and faults within their fields. Grant and Kara (2021) highlight an implicit negativity bias within autistic research: "The majority of research on autistic experiences is deficit-based– assuming there are only disadvantages to being neurodiverse. This view has been thoroughly debunked by Autistic people considering 'the Autistic Advantage' (Russell et al., 2019), within an asset-based approach" (p. 593).

While Grant and Kara (2021) identify that deficit-based approaches are pervasive in much research, they also recognize that marginalized groups are particularly vulnerable when the research is conducted by 'outsiders' from the autism community. As an insider to the autistic/neurodiverse community, my narrative examinines pedagogical, departmental and physical environments with curiosity and wonder[5] rather than focus on overcoming my own disability. It would be incorrect and exhausting to present my story as an underdog, manufactured from cherry-picked moments, to demonstrate how I fought to overcome my disability and rise to the status of a successful academic. More importantly, it would be

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[5] For an example of approaching disability in academia/higher education, see Titchkosky (2023).

untrustworthy research because it would misrepresent struggles in higher education as a central part of my narrative of disability, which was not the case.

Douglas et al. (2021) have identified the implicit harms in deficit-oriented discourses of neurodiversity and embrace narrative or story-making as the method to challenge ableist ways of thinking and "create something new about difference as …counter-stories that push back against dominant or negative conceptions of autism in education … identify[ing] the story most needed to tell at that time" (p. 607). I aim to follow this respectful approach as designed by Douglas et al. (2021) of first asking autistic/neurodiverse people, such as myself, if they were interested in contributing to research to correct misconceptions other people have about autism.

And it is unacceptable to continue a cycle of oppression by treating neurodiverse people as tragic figures and burdens, harassing them and their families with questions about how difficult or unfortunate their lives must be because of 'what they are' or 'what they have' (Douglas et al., 2021; Armstrong, 2015). Douglas (2016), who is a neurodiverse researcher with an autistic son, explains in their PhD research that "the dominant approaches to autism … readily accessible to me in mass media, schools and autism agencies… [were] grounded in Western science and understandings of autism as disorder and family tragedy, were individualizing, marginalizing and pathologizing" (p. 38).

Douglas also traces the historical meanings of autism that continue to impact ableist discourse around autism:

> … as a subtraction or lack rather than an attribute, a *withdrawal*, or *regression* "that incarcerated an otherwise 'normal' or non-autistic self" (McGuire, 2011b, p. 80) into a prison, state of aloneness or "empty fortress" (Bettleheim, 1967). Within such terms, it is impossible to imagine autism as anything beyond a tragedy, let alone a standpoint,

> different way of being-in-the-world, viable form of life, or even an identity to negotiate and manage (Butler, 2004). (p. 121-122)

The neurodiversity and critical autism studies movements are fighting against this pathologizing, dehumanizing history because neurodiverse peoples cannot deny or dissociate this part of themselves and deserve to live in a world that looks upon us as full human beings. Within the academy, it is well established that an overemphasis on negative narratives can lead to despair and hopelessness, especially amongst marginalized groups, which exacerbates demoralizing experiences in daily life and facilitates the development of internalized oppression (Beck et al., 2020). Combating this deficit-oriented and pessimistic discourse of neurodiversity requires justice-focused research that challenges those stigmatizing ableist misperceptions. By exploring how physical spaces, socio-cultural contexts, and institutional structures enabled me to feel accepted and at ease, my autoethnographic research highlights conditions that enable inclusion, belonging, and meaningful participation among neurodiverse and invisibly disabled students in the university. Ultimately, the purpose of this research is to contribute to the development of a more positive, inclusive and affirming academic landscape for neurodiverse and invisibly disabled people within academia.

My rationale for this study is rooted in the need to expand and diversify the scholarly discourse on neurodiversity in higher education. Existing research largely focuses on the challenges and systemic barriers that neurodiverse students face, often reinforcing ableist assumptions that position these students as inherently disadvantaged or struggling (Couzens et al., 2015; Grant & Kara, 2021; Saltes, 2022). By providing a first-person, insider perspective, my research contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of neurodiverse experiences in higher education. I hope that the findings from my autoethnography may lend support to those initiatives to inform institutional policies, teaching practices, and accessibility issues that move beyond compliance-based accommodations to actively create spaces where neurodiverse students feel valued and included (Titchkosky, 2023; Grant & Kara, 2021). I intend for this portfolio to serve a dual purpose, both personal and community-oriented. As a neurodiverse student who has experienced a significant sense of belonging at university, I recognize the importance of documenting and sharing narratives that actively counter prevailing deficit-oriented discourses surrounding neurodiversity and disability. Positive representations of neurodiverse experiences can illuminate effective strategies and institutional practices within higher education, providing valuable insights and potential roadmaps for creating affirming and inclusive academic environments (Grant & Kara, 2021; Saltes, 2022; Rice et al., 2023).

To understand and articulate the nuanced aspects of my experiences, I approach this study with the following research questions:

1. What physical-environmental, socio-cultural-pedagogical, and institutional factors have shaped my neurodiverse experiences in higher education?
2. How have my interactions with faculty, peers, and departmental staff influenced my evolving sense of identity, belonging, and inclusion as a neurodiverse university student?
3. How does my autoethnographic narrative challenge deficit-oriented discourses on invisible disability within the university context, while simultaneously expanding opportunities for self-determination and the recognition of diverse neurodiverse identities?

Description of Chapters

Chapter I: Introduction, Background, Research Questions

Being/Becoming a neurodiverse student

In this chapter, I introduce the personal and academic trajectory that led to my research, beginning with my diagnosis and place within the invisibly disabled and neurodiverse community. I outline my motivation for pursuing this autoethnographic study and frame my narrative within broader discourses of neurodiversity in higher education. I discuss my research questions, objective, and rational for pursuing this research: My intention is to interrogate dominant deficit-based frameworks and instead offer an insider perspective of navigating university as a neurodiverse student.

Chapter II: Literature Review

Here, I engage critically with the existing scholarly literature on neurodiversity, invisible disability, stigma, labeling, and ableism within higher education. I examine the ways in which current research often pathologizes neurodivergent students and fails to centre our voices. This chapter allowed me to situate my own narrative within these broader academic conversations, identifying key gaps and tensions. Through this review, I advocate for the inclusion of lived experience and first-person narratives as vital contributions to neurodiversity research.

Chapter III: Research Design

In this chapter, I outline the methodological choices that underpin my research: autoethnography, Interpretive Disability Studies (IDS), and story-making. I describe how I adapted the Re•Storying methodology—developed by Patty Douglas and Carla Rice—to create a research process that is accessible, reflective, and grounded in arts-based inquiry. My role as both participant and researcher is central to this work, and I detail how I navigated this dual position to craft a rigorous, authentic narrative that will add value to the current discourse.

Chapter IV: Data Showcase for Building Story-Making My Neurodiversity Narrative

This chapter presents the curated data that shaped the story-making, narrative element of my research. I share selections from my journal entries, photographs, and the emergent multimedia short film that captures meaningful sites and moments from my university experience. Through these artifacts, I illustrate the academic, pedagogical, and social dynamics that either enabled or inhibited my sense of belonging. This arts-informed chapter foregrounds the complexity and texture of neurodiverse student life in higher education.

Chapter V: Being and Becoming

In this final chapter, I return to my narrative to analyze the central themes that emerged, including being, becoming, ensemble, and (un)worthiness. I reflect on how my identity evolved across spaces of inclusion, tension, and transformation. I argue that belonging for neurodiverse students is constructed not through conformity to ableist standards, but through relational trust, pedagogical openness, and institutional flexibility. My interpretation resists deficit models and instead contributes an affirming, embodied account of what it means to thrive—authentically and unapologetically—in academic spaces.

Ethics Review

As my portfolio does not directly involve other human subjects than myself, I did not seek approval from the Research Ethics Board at Lakehead University.

Chapter II: Literature Review

Current discourse surrounding neurodiverse and invisibly disabled people in higher education is overwhelmingly negative, with neurotypical, “able” researchers often studying us through deficit-oriented lens and sharing biased interpretations of our lives. The purpose of this chapter is to provide an important context for my research by grounding my understanding in key concepts and current issues, including neurodiversity and invisible disability, labelling, socio-cultural stigma, deficit-oriented discourse, and ableism in academia, within the extant scholarly literature. I discuss significant gaps in the literature that contribute to the mischaracterization of neurodiverse and invisibly disabled students as ill-suited, burdensome, and/or struggling significantly in university, in comparison to their neurotypical peers. My goals are to expose the current body of literature regarding neurodiverse students in university as serving ableist interests and to describe how my autoethnographic research supports the creation of discursive space for neurodiverse/invisibly disabled academics to direct critical conversation and research within the field of neurodiversity/invisible disability in education.

Neurodiversity and Invisible Disability

Neurodiversity encompasses a broad range of cognitive differences, including autism, aphasia, attention deficit disorders, dyslexia, and anxiety disorders (Armstrong 2015; Geyer, 2021). Armstrong (2015) describes how the term allows individuals with multiple diagnoses, and those without a formal diagnosis, to express their differences without disclosing specific information. Douglas et al. (2021) emphasize that autistic self-advocates were early adopters of the neurodiversity framework, viewing “positive brain-based difference [as] part of the natural variance of life” (p. 610-611), rather than something to be pathologized. Neurodiversity is one of the few terms that beckons a strengths-based approach (Grant & Kara, 2021), affirming cognitive diversity (Armstrong, 2015) and fostering kinship within a historically marginalized community (Brown & Leigh, 2018). Neurodiverse people often embrace this identity as a means of resisting the dichotomy between the medical and the social models of disability because neurodiversity does not fit neatly within either (Grant & Kara, 2021). One participant in Saltes' (2022) study illustrates this by describing how she "placed a neurodiversity sticker on her laptop to communicate…that she [proudly] identifies as a neuro-divergent person." (p. 18). 'Neurodiverse' is the first label made by our community, for our community–it has neither been reluctantly accepted into the lexicon nor used to dehumanize us. Already, neurodiverse academics "are concerned that they are not taken seriously or seen as academics in their own right, and that their achievements and publications are considered through the lens of their disability status" (Brown & Leigh, 2018, p. 987). Geyer (2021) states that "in much of peer-reviewed literature, the concept of neurodiversity has seldom been used…[classifying] disorders as they are listed in the DSM [diagnostic criteria]" (p. 10), underscoring the slow integration of neurodiversity affirming language into academic discourse.

Another important concept in the literature is invisible disability, which refers to differences not visible to others. I find Brown & Leigh's (2018) approach to navigating 'disability' valuable, where "impairment or chronic illness focus on the biological and functional, whereas disability reflects the social and environmental response to the biological and functional" (p. 986), echoed by Saltes (2022), describing 'disability' as the "result of exclusionary and oppressive social arrangements and practices" (p. 676), referencing the social model of disability. Although there is significant overlap between the neurodiverse and invisibly disabled communities, not all invisible disabilities are neurological (e.g., hemophilia), and some neurodiverse individuals may not consider themselves disabled/impaired (Grant & Kara, 2021). Brown & Leigh (2018) explain the importance of understanding the overlap: "Whilst disabilities, illnesses and neurodiversity are treated differently, with regard to our concern in relation to where those academics are, they can and should be conflated. After all, they are all commonly considered as deviants and divergences from norms" (p. 986). Many neurodiverse individuals identify as invisibly disabled to acknowledge the real barriers they face in participating in daily life (Couzens et al., 2015), which may require accommodations and support. Disability legislation, such as the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (1982) and the *Accessible Canada Act* (2019), guarantees the right to equitable treatment and opportunities for people with disability. However, Brown & Leigh (2018) note that identifying as disabled still carries risks, as "academics with health conditions are concerned that they are not taken seriously or seen as academics in their own right, and that their achievements and publications are considered through the lens of their disability status" (p. 988), whether that perspective is positive or negative.

Labelling

Ability/diagnostic labels have long been applied as an act of "othering", undertaken by dominant social groups to maintain a favourable power differential through narrative control (Armstrong 2015). Historically, within the medical model of disability, neurodiverse individuals were diagnosed and labelled by so-called professionals as defective, disabled, delayed, and deficient (Douglas, 2010, 2016)--terms implying a future of limited social and career opportunities. While having a label can give some individuals peace of mind, for others it can be detrimental. Dan, a preservice teacher who has a learning disability and depression recalled being called a "special student" (Siuty & Beneke, 2020, p. 38) and how he came to associate that label as segregation, writing in his critical conversation journey map: "You're not a student. You're a SPECIAL student" (Siuty & Beneke, 2020, p. 38).

Self-identification gives members of marginalized groups the agency to (re)claim their identity and assert how they should be represented (Brown & Leigh, 2018; Bury et al., 2020). Brown & Leigh (2018) state that "whether or not academics choose to disclose their disability and illnesses is, in practice, a risk-benefit analysis of consequences associated with the specific concern or issue." (p. 987). Not all neurodiverse people with a formal diagnosis have the desire to publicize it. One autistic woman who had been recently diagnosed said that she did so for her own well-being: "I realized nothing was wrong [with me], things are just harder for me... It is nice to have a reason for things. Now I know it is not my fault" (Beck et al., 2020, p. 815). This experience captures seeking a diagnosis as a critical step toward self-acceptance and reclaiming identity rather than a move toward receiving external validation or social legitimacy.

In recent years, there has been an increase in debates over person-first versus identity-first language across various areas of social justice. While most communities have signaled they prefer person-first language, autistic people overwhelmingly prefer identity-first language (e.g., Autistic person) as supported by autism/autistic scholar, including Grant & Kara (2021), Douglas et al. (2021), and Bury et al. (2020). When non-autistic autism advocates advocate for person-first language, they telegraph that they view it as an unfortunate disease that affects an otherwise "normal" person (Douglas, 2010; 2016), which is a view rejected by autistic people, who view autism as a core part of their identity which cannot be excised (Douglas et al., 2021; Beck et al., 2020).

Socio-Cultural Stigma

While students have no choice in whether they comply with the socially imagined cognitive standard, they do have a decision of whether or not to disclose their status as neurodiverse, a decision frequently influenced by concerns of stigmatization or other repercussions for their personal life or professional aspirations (Brown & Leight, 2018; Saltes, 2022). Neurodiverse individuals continuously evaluate potential risks and benefits, often deciding not to disclose unless absolutely necessary or unless disclosure promises tangible support (Brown & Leigh, 2018). A real risk are microaggressions directed at the neurodiverse as a form of discrimination characterized by patterns of covert behaviours that belie the aggressor's sense of internalized dominance without being easily identified (*see* Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p. 94 for disability-specific examples). Microaggressions wear down their targets, such as the atypical or neurodiverse, and over time through ambiguous acts/words, they often leave an impression of an inherent power dynamic. When neurodivergent people normalize these experiences, microaggressions can lead to internalized oppression, meaning that the individual starts believing ableist rhetoric even when they know it is not justified.

Masking as concealing neurodiverse traits in an attempt to appear 'normal' and to protect themselves, is often discussed in neurodiversity contexts (Siuty & Beneke, 2020). Many current 'therapies' for neurodiverse people emphasize and reward their ability to camouflage any 'abnormalities,' even at the cost of their own well-being: this creates a vicious cycle where "the numerous… benefits of camouflaging efforts reinforce the behavior and make future efforts more likely" (Beck et al., 2020, p. 810). This approach concedes that disability is a result of social inequity but often still expects neurodiverse people to "endur[e] significant amounts of invisible labor, ma[ke] multiple sacrifices and pa[y] many personal costs in order to approximate dominant conceptions of normalcy" (Siuty & Beneke, 2020, p. 35). Geyer (2021) supports this statement by explaining that "the struggle to appear 'normal' can lead to increased anxiety and social isolation" (p. 19). The process is energy-intensive, requiring the individual to constantly monitor their social environment, adjust their mannerisms without losing focus, and ensure they appear ‘normal’.

Deficit-Oriented Discourse

One of the most challenging aspects of this research was coming to understand that the broader academic community is apparently so fixated on outdated ableist representations of (invisibly) disabled people in academia that I would struggle to find credible academic papers discussing anything other than the endless struggles of disabled students in post-secondary education. This frustration is epitomized by the following quote by Grant and Kara (2021), who say “The majority of research on autistic experiences is deficit-based– assuming there are only disadvantages to being neurodivergent” (p.593). Deficit-oriented perspectives continue to dominate the academic discourse addressing neurodiversity in university, emphasizing perceived limitations (Grant & Kara, 2020; Geyer, 2021; Douglas et al., 2021) and ignoring the growing number of students self-identifying as neurodiverse or invisibly disabled finding success in higher education (Couzens et al., 2015; Geyer, 2021; Fane, 2024; Conference Board of Canada, 2025). Saltes (2022) agrees with this statement, highlighting that “[t]he push for equality in education has featured prominently in disability studies literature” (p. 674). I agree that equality in education is important, but also believe that this issue has led to a conversation that leaves no space for other narratives of neurodiversity/disability in university, a sentiment echoed by Grant and Kara (2021), Douglas et al. (2021), and Titchkosky (2023).

Overall, the scholarly literature discussing neurodiversity in higher education is mostly pessimistic (Douglas et al., 2021; Geyer, 2021); hence, I want to draw attention to the possibility that ableism[6] and confirmation bias play a role in this deficit-laden, negative emphasis. Sensoy

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[6] Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017) define *ableism* as “The systematic oppression of people with (perceived) disability… based on the assumption that there is a physical, intellectual, and emotional standard for human beings and that this

and DiAngelo (2017) discuss how all researchers have implicit biases which unconsciously influence our thoughts and actions. Consider how Kwon et al. (2018) portray adults with ADHD:

> Adults with ADHD have a lower quality of life than those without ADHD [7]. Similarly, college students with ADHD have a lower quality of life than do students without ADHD [8]; they have been shown to be more depressed and anxious, to be more easily angered or to suppress emotion, to have achieved less academically, and to be poorly supported in their relationships with their friends [9, 10]. ADHD symptoms have a negative impact on many aspects of life, including self-esteem, academic functioning, social functioning, and parent–child relationships [8, 11, 12]. Adults with ADHD are vulnerable to addiction; ADHD is often accompanied by addictive disorders [13] that are closely associated with sleep problems, leading to impairment in daily life [14]. (p. 1)

This introduction very effectively lays the groundwork for a conversation that describes exactly how people with ADHD can be harmed, even tormented by the university. In their discussion, the authors also describe how individuals diagnosed with ADHD "tend not to pay enough attention to the feelings and desires of others, often interfering in a criticizing and controlling way, and causing conflict, disappointment, and distrust" (Kwon et al., 2018, p. 6). I contend that this finding is a gross overgeneralization, and is evidence of ableist biases held by Kwon et al. (2018), that colours their perception and description of their "patients".

By contrast, Couzens et al. (2015) at least attempt to balance their introduction of ADHD, stating that "mood and substance use issues [are] commonly comorbid and a major trigger for accessing medical support within this group" (p. 27) while also including information shared by

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standard is the only one accepted as normal. All other variations of the human body are considered abnormal, deviant, or inherently inferior… Some activists prefer the term disableism because it centers the reason for the oppression—one's disability status." (p. 221)

Sarah Rasher, an academic with ADHD, about how she uses movement and "over-exten[tion] to keep busy and avoid boredom" (p. 27). The paper by Couzens et al. (2015) is part of an international study assessing accessibility for those with invisible disability in the university setting and "comparing the establishment of universal design for students in higher education" (Couzens et al., 2015, p. 39), which aligns with the presentation of disability in this paper. While the research does still focus on challenges experienced by students, the authors leave some flexibility for individuals' lived experiences, suggesting that the researchers are truly interested in gaining a clearer picture of what supports ADHD students find effective and which they do not.

Ableism in Academia

Some people have the false impression that academia somehow sacrifices rigour, quality or integrity through the inclusion of neurodiverse individuals or that neurodiverse people must sacrifice parts of their identity in order to belong in academia–but they are wrong. Dolmage (2017) describes how and why those in positions of power perpetuate this stance:

> Making disability seem inimical to or out of place at the university has been a strategy used to shore up the identity of those invested in higher education: if those who do not "qualify" can be vilified, marked out, and kept away, then those who make it up the stairs must deserve to. In this way, the university disavows disability—the steep steps create an environment in which disability cannot be validated or recognized. (p. 62)

Traditional academic expectations—such as high productivity, competitiveness, and conformity to standardized methods—often intersect problematically with neurodiverse identities (Brown & Leigh, 2018; Saltes, 2022; Titchkosky 2023). These expectations marginalize neurodiverse academics who may approach scholarly work differently: prioritizing minutia, proposing creative, novel methodologies or research, deep and intense focus, or different research models (Brown & Leigh, 2018; Saltes, 2022). Neurodiverse academics bring substantial value to academia through unique perspectives, innovation, critical thinking, and problem-solving in research and teaching (Siuty & Beneke, 2020; Grant & Kara, 2021; Saltes, 2022;).

Saltes (2022) describes how neurodiverse people in the university are often subject to a destructive manifestation of low self-esteem, characterized by persistent self-doubt, (misplaced) fear of being exposed as fraudulent, and undervaluing their accomplishments, which contribute to an overall feeling that they are undeserving of their position. This phenomenon grows out of internalized oppression when a neurodiverse individual unconsciously begins to believe negative ableist stereotypes about their achievement and worth, even when they know the truth (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017; Saltes, 2022; Titchkosky, 2023). They may even dismiss external validation, believing that others are mistaken (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017; Douglas et al., 2021; Saltes, 2022). Brown and Leigh (2018) state that sometimes the academics themselves "are the physical manifestation of internalized ableism within academia" (p. 988). Disabled academics are particularly vulnerable to this phenomenon due to misconceptions that accommodations are a form of special treatment (Couzens et al., 2015; Jackson et al., 2018), compounded by the difficulty neurodiverse individuals face in proving their disability status (Saltes, 2022).

Institutional Barriers

The literature demonstrates that nearly all neurodivergent students face systemic barriers during their time in higher education, negatively impacting their autonomy, success, and/or social life (Couzens et al., 2015; Jackson et al., 2018; Kwon et al.,2018). Individuals can be disabled by formal, systemic structures, which include inaccessible policies and architecture (physical settings), but can also be disabled by informal social structures through stigma, social norms and practices that may be explicit or implicit (Titchkosky, 2008; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017; Saltes, 2022).

The university can disable students through policies and practices that inadvertently limit neurodiverse individuals' participation. One graduate student with a teaching assistantship shared that they were not even sure who to approach about accommodations during their teaching:

> I don’t know like should I go to the Disability Resource Centre, which is for students or should I go to HR which is for employees when I have issues? You know, it’s like I don’t really have a place to go that … the DRC doesn’t care about my teaching, you know, but HR doesn’t care about like myself as a student so it’s like really kind of tough to figure out who I can go to for help. (*Anna* in Saltes, 2022, p. 693)

Many undergraduate students give up on requesting formal accommodations once they find out how involved the process is. This bureaucratic structure that inhibits the acquiring of support is an excellent example of how ableism prevents neurodiverse students from acquiring support even when there are excellent options available.

Titchkosky (2023) highlights the challenge of acquiring accommodations in an Ontario university context, describing how “‘[R]egistration’ is, of course, a process of demonstrating worthiness; that, through medical documentation, the student is not only ‘legitimately’ disabled but also worthy of university accommodation” (p. 116). Regardless of prior school-based support in K-12, students at university must prove that they ‘qualify’ as disabled to register with the institution’s accessibility services. One frequent requirement is medical documentation, which can be difficult for some students to acquire if they only begin to experience—or recognize—the challenges they face upon entering higher education due to changes in the environment, reduced oversight and support, and the higher level of self-regulation expected (Saltes, 2022; Siuty &

Beneke, 2020). Federal legislation mandates publicly funded schools to provide accommodations and accessibility services for neurodiverse students, but formal policies alone do not eradicate ableism (Saltes, 2022; Titchkosky, 2023). Equity is achieved through social justice education, radical inclusion, and transformative research conducted by community members for the community (Douglas et al., 2021).

Conclusion

This review identifies the need for first-person narratives within any research concerning neurodiversity to provide a more balanced representation of neurodivergent peoples' experiences in higher education. My autoethnographic research contributes to closing this gap by providing my own narrative as a neurodivergent student at university. By positioning neurodivergence as a natural human variation and examining my experiences through a positive and appreciative lens, I present an alternative narrative where neurodiversity is an integral part of identity, not a burden to carry or endure.

Chapter III: Research Design

Autoethnography

My primary methodological framework in this study will be *autoethnography*, following the definition by Adams et al. (2017):

> Understanding autoethnography requires working at the intersection of *auto*biography and *ethnography*. When we do autobiography—or write about the self—we often call on memory and hindsight to reflect on past experiences…Then we write these experiences to assemble a text that uses tenets of storytelling devices, such as narrative voice, character development, and dramatic tension, to create evocative and specific representations of the culture/cultural experience and to give audiences a sense of how being there in the experience feels…When we do ethnography, we observe, participate in, and write about a culture and/or a cultural experience…We enter the cultural "field" for an extended amount of time, take "field notes" about our participation, and interview cultural members ("insiders") about their experiences, thoughts, and feelings. Typically, ethnographers approach cultural communities inductively, allowing observations to guide what they write, that is, their "findings." Then, they consult with and often connect their findings to more formal research about their experiences. One aim of ethnography is to create a representation of cultural practices that makes these practices familiar to cultural "outsiders."...Taken together, the process, principles, and practices of autobiography and ethnography contribute to the way we write and practice autoethnography, as well as the goals and purposes we have for autoethnographic work. (p. 2-3)

My 'field notes' took the form of hand-written journal entries based on my memories of pivotal experiences, and then revisiting the places of these experiences to re-immerse myself in these physical spaces serving as a type of elicitation strategy. My goal as an ethnographer was to document parts of the neurodiverse/invisibly disabled academic community as someone with insider access and deep insider understanding. My research account is designed to share this knowledge with outsiders who would not otherwise have meaningful entrance or experience of this specific community's culture, while my autoethnographic goal is to craft my narrative in a way that engages people into the secret world I lived whilst walking among them. Overall, my autoethnographic aim is to invite 'outsiders' into this neurodiverse-academic community through my personal narrative.

Interpretive Disability Studies (IDS) Framework

My theoretical framework for this study is grounded in *interpretive disability studies* (IDS), which aligns itself with the neurodiversity movement, borrowing from critical disability studies, interpretive sociology and phenomenology (Titchkosky 2008, 2023; Douglas, 2010; 2016). I am using this IDS framework to focus the interpretation of my autoethnographic data through discussions of neurodiversity, impairment, and disability. Douglas (2010) coined the term "interpretive disability studies to refer to an interdisciplinary approach influenced by hermeneutics and phenomenology, as taken up within various fields: feminist post-structuralism, disability studies and interpretive sociology" (p. 4), citing works by Titchkosky (2003, 2007) and Michalko (2002) for applying an interpretive sociological approach to disability studies. In turn, Douglas' (2010) theory of interpretive disability studies was applied by Titchkosky (2023) to explore their own experiences as a dyslexic professor at the University of Toronto.

While I first considered critical disability theory (CDT) for my research, I thought that its greater emphasis on socio-political and power dynamics would distract from the personal emphasis of my narrative. While interpretive disability studies (IDS) and critical disability theory differ in many ways, they are similar in their framing of disability through impacts and relations of the environment, social-interactional norms, and knowledge regimes in order to decenter deficit-based medical and scientific narratives (Douglas, 2010). IDS also works to shift the focus from the institutional and/or community level back to the individual's experience. Titchkosky (2023) has paired this interpretive approach with politics of wonder as they describe what disability means in their internal world. The frameworks I have selected for this portfolio emphasize the individuality of exploring my personal neurodiversity narrative within higher education. The intent of this study is not to convey a message that my experience is representative of many or the majority of neurodiverse students, nor can my narrative be used to discount other neurodiverse/invisibly disabled people's stories of strife and struggle. With these goals in mind, I have designed the following research questions for my own autoethnographic inquiry and self-determined narrative.

Re-Visioning, Re-Storying, and Story-Making

I follow the methodology and methods of re-visioning and re-storying my neurodiverse education experiences, as theorized by Dr. Patty Douglas and her project of *Re•Storying Autism* at Queen's University (2016-2023), which extends her previous SSHRC research projects of *Enacting Critical Disability Communities in Education* (2016-2019) and *Re•Storying Autism in Education* (2019-2023). For the *Re•Storying Autism* project, Dr. Douglas extended the approach of *Re•Vision(ing)* as established *by* Dr. Carla Rice (2012), director of The Centre for Art and Social Justice at the University of Guelph. Rice describes the centre as an arts methodology research hub that "investigates the power of the arts, and especially story, to open up conversations about systemic injustices in health care, education, and the arts sectors. Our driving purpose is to support and equip academics, artists, activists and storytellers from justice-seeking communities seeking to shift misrepresentations with cutting edge technological tools and methodologies" (n.d., *Who we are*).

The primary methodology used by the Re•Vision Centre is *multimedia story-making,* which is an approach rooted in arts-based research that includes the voices of participants from marginalized communities in transformative social justice research (Rice & Mündel, 2018). These projects engage autistic people and those closest to them through the process of story-making, beginning with preliminary interviews to learn what the participant wants to share, then providing access to materials and workshops where participants are coached and supported through the process of creating their multimedia pieces (Rice & Mündel, 2018; Douglas et al., 2021).

Rice and Mündel (2019) describe this research as "the act of making space for people to tell their own stories coupled with the translation of these stories into a widely shareable multimedia format has allowed renewed and varied engagements with systemic issues of racism, sexism, ableism, classism, and colonialism" (p. 123), with Douglas et al. (2021) providing that these multimedia stories are "short first-person films that combine visuals, audio, movement, ambient sound, spoken narrative and more to push back against exclusionary systems" (p. 606). The flexibility and inherent accessibility of multimedia provide opportunities for those who may have difficulties communicating verbally, such as autistic people whose use of language is limited, directly challenging a historical medical narrative that if someone is 'dumb'[7] they have no thoughts to express.

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[7] I use the word 'dumb' in the historical sense, referring to someone as unable to speak. It is telling that it later became commonly used to indicate someone of low intelligence, as it exposes the misconception that one's use of language is directly correlated to their intelligence and ability to perceive/think.

The academic value of these multimedia-enhanced stories is that they are envisioned, created, and performed by real people from the neurodiverse community and reflect their thoughts, feelings and experiences. The intention is not to create what society might call a 'good' film, a deliverable that presents a polished and sanitized version of autistic life to avoid making neurotypical people uncomfortable. The films are intentional and immerse the audience in their experiences, but they are not of professional quality or polished because that is not the goal. Expecting participants with limited exposure to filmmaking and/or editing to create a polished piece would be counter-productive to the stated objectives of the re-vision lab, as stated by Rice & Mündel (2018, 2019) and Douglas et al. (2021): It would create greater barriers and further marginalizing those who experience other facets of discrimination and educational inequity, including autistic people of colour, newcomers, and people with less access to technology[8]. This methodology is very well aligned with my study's purpose, goals and research questions, which are to craft a new narrative of neurodiversity/invisible disability in the university that may contribute to a paradigm shift in discussing differences in higher education.

Notes Around Method

I describe my particular method in this portfolio research as an autoethnographic adaptation of *Re•Storying,* as described by Douglas et al. (2021). Their re•storying methodology served as my primary model because it very clearly communicates the steps to create IDS multimedia pieces. I anticipated having difficulty organizing a framework and accurately estimating the time it would take to accomplish phases of my research because I have

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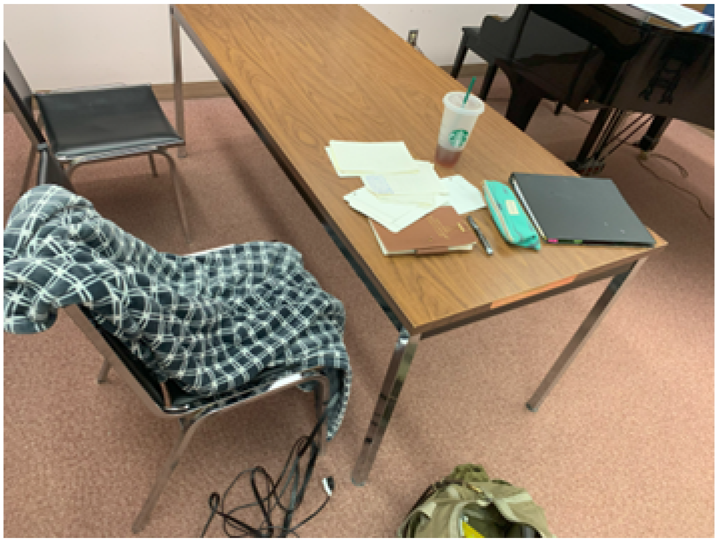
[8] 'First-generation student' is a term used to refer to a student entering/in higher education who does not have any immediate family that has finished a degree. The term recognizes that those who come from families with at least one university education parent are more successful at university–not due to genetics but because those parents often create more academic-oriented households and are better able to provide information and support to their children/dependents in an educational context.

experienced marked challenges in many domains of executive functioning (e.g., time management, sense of urgency, linear thought), due to my ADHD and memory impairments. Douglas et al. (2021) describe three distinct phases; 1) pre-workshop preparation, 2) story-making workshops, and 3) screening/analysis, which supported my understanding of how to approach this research in my dual role of participant and researcher. The following is a description of my method and timeline.

Pre-Workshop Preparation

In my aim of following the method employed by Douglas et al. (2021), I looked at how participants were invited to the project to gain insight on how I ought to approach it myself: The *Autism and Inclusion* workshop series invited “persons who identified as a family member, educator and/or autistic person” to share personal stories that “push back against dominant or negative conceptions of autism in education” (p. 607). In the workshop series, researchers conducted interviews to help participants identify meaningful personal stories they most wanted to tell; however, in my case, the big question was “How does my narrative [of neurodiversity in higher education] challenge deficit-oriented discourses of invisible disability in the university?” (an adaptation of my *Research Question 3.*, see p. 13).

First, in fulfillment of my role as the participant/autobiographer, I allocated myself two weeks to prepare for my “interview.” During that time, I identified and visited select sites I felt to be of significance during my time as a university student. I visited each site at least twice and wrote at least one journal entry for each site *in situ* or in re-immersing myself in the physical experience. I allowed myself one journal-sized piece of paper, front and back, per entry, as a way of limiting the length of my responses and I took photographs of each location, as shown in the photo below and to the right which is a photo of "the classroom" as it appeared when I was writing in that space.



I replaced the interview step as it occurs in Douglas et al. (2021) with the process of revisiting my previously gathered "participant" data and annotating the vignettes, as the researcher/ethnographer, through the lens of my research questions 1[9] and 2[10]. It is at this point that I was able to coalesce my analysis back into my role as autoethnographer and begin to sift through my original data set. I added new annotations and my *ad hoc* coding in order to begin mapping a narrative which would be reflective of my personal experiences while serving to disrupt prevailing deficit-oriented views of invisible disability in higher education.

Multimedia Story-Making Workshop

I began this second methodological phase by revisiting the participant-created multimedia short films discussed in Douglas et al. (2021), as a way of creating general success criteria for myself and limiting the scope of what I would try to create. Based on what I observed, I judged that my own re-storied narrative would be a 3–4 minutes digital video comprised of images (photographs, video clips, or artwork) and sound (voiceover, music, sound effects) that tell and enhance my personal narrative as a neurodiverse university student. The key features of my

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[9] "What environmental, socio-cultural, and institutional factors have impacted my experiences in university [as a neurodiverse person]?"

[10] "How have interactions with faculty and peers influenced my sense of identity and belonging [as a neurodiverse student]?"

digital re-storying would include the following, often overlapping, methods: (1) re-visiting to re-vision specific campus places, where I will sit and record memories of my lived experiences or pivotal incidents as stories in a journal; (2) poetic writing in these spots; (3) image collection with photography for development of the visual narrative; (4) voiceover or musical elements for recording; and, (5) video editing for the final digital story (Douglas et al., 2021; Rice and Mündel, 2018; Burgess, 2006). I used sticky notes as a fluid means of physically organizing and planning my narrative, including tracking visuals, sounds, and specific dialogue I wanted to incorporate. Once I had created a cohesive narrative, representative of my original data set, I rechecked to determine that the narrative accurately reflected the themes emergent from my analysis.

Technical notes

I recorded and edited the narration using the audio software *Audacity* (Muse Group), to ensure the words were well-articulated, improve flow for comprehension purposes, and reduce ambient noise. I am also using digital mockups of my own original music composed during my time as a music student, using the composition software *MuseScore* (Muse Group), including their basic library of synthetic instruments. For images, I am using a combination of personal photos/videos, public domain photos/video clips available for free through the *ClipChamp* (Microsoft) library. And I imported all these raw digital elements into *ClipChamp,* to assemble and edit the final multimedia piece. I also want to acknowledge that I only used publicly available, free software[11], to take advantage of the abundance of tutorials available online and limit the complexity of the process while reducing financial barriers to myself and anyone else looking to use this method.

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[11] While some of these software apps do have expansions and extra features available to purchase, I elected to use the free version.

Reflections of method

I created my final narrative using only five of my original ten hand-written journals (see *Appendix A* for transcriptions) that I believed would provide the richest qualitative data, as I had overestimated the amount of data I would be able to analyze and incorporate into my multimedia short film. I then supplemented this data sub-set with two shorter, type-written journals (p. 35-36) to further explore key themes: 1) *Where I sat alone* explores the feelings of (un)worthiness that predate the beginning of my official program; and, 2) *Where we sat together* addresses the theme of my cohort as an ensemble. Finally, I transcribed my written journal data using voice-to-text software available through Google Docs.

Ultimately, the length of my full written narrative of neurodiversity in higher education (p. 36-41) is 14,000 words and the duration of my multimedia story is approximately 6 minutes, using a reduced script (see *Appendix B)*. While my original intent was to create a 3-4 minutes multimedia piece as a digital story based on the methods by Douglas et al. (2021), I found that due to the breadth of my research, I required extra space to create a piece that was representative of my research. I have made many attempts to further reduce the length of my script, but I could find no way to accomplish that reduction without sacrificing narrative elements, the tone of the piece, or fidelity to my research.

Chapter IV: Data Showcase for Building Story-Making My Neurodiversity Narrative

In this research, I felt it was essential to adopt an arts-based method to communicate my findings (Douglas et al., 2021), as this approach is more accessible to both academic and lay audiences. My goal was to enhance the impact of my research within the neurodiverse community and to meaningfully contribute my voice to the ongoing work of the Re-Vision Lab (Douglas & Rice, 2020). However, despite my strong intentions, I underestimated the complexity of this undertaking, as I had no prior experience producing a video of this nature. My supervisor, Dr. Lisa Korteweg, shared research by another student who effectively presented their findings through a narrated slideshow. Reflecting on this, I believe a simplified multimedia presentation such as a narrated slideshow, would sufficiently meet my research goals.

In Appendix A, I have included a transcription of five journal entries I created as part of my original data set. I have chosen pseudonyms for all individuals named in my original text to respect the privacy of those who were bystanders but included in my writing. I have also included a photo of the locations, taken in such a way that it does not include any people, names, or landmarks that would disclose information about the venue or other people present at the time. I have provided two short entries that were originally typed up instead of handwritten, for the purpose of using them in this chapter: I was able to edit them as I went for clarity, fluidity, and proper grammar, and they are therefore much easier to read from a legibility perspective.

Typed Entries

I. Where I sat alone

> *I sat in the music library. I was alone. Everything was so quiet. I looked down at my theory entrance exam. I could answer these questions, take some educated guesses. Then, I couldn't answer the questions. I couldn't even take guesses. The paper sat on the table*

taunting me: "Write in the following intervals above the given note." I sat in front of the paper: "I don't even know what an interval is, let alone M2 or m2." I didn't know what to do, except hand in my paper. I explained that I had tried my best. Then, I sat down in the hallway and cried. I should've tried harder. I was so alone. Then I wasn't. Jan came across me and asked what was the matter. "I don't know what to do now. I've ruined everything before even getting started. I know I've failed the entrance exam." But it was just a diagnostic test. I would just have to enroll in the rudiments course to catch up. She told me it'd all be alright and that I don't need to handle stuff like this alone. I sit here now and know she was right. I still felt alone sometimes but I never had to be afraid to talk to someone if my worries got too big.

II. Where we sat together

There were seven of us in my year: two flautists, a clarinetist, three vocalists, and a pianist. We had nearly every course together, just us, and always sat together in class, by default. They weren't scared off when I cried in every class. We always sat together when we attended concerts. It wasn't like that, not right away, because I often left during intermission. I suffered from exhaustion in those early days and struggled to stay out past 7 pm. We sat together in Ellie's apartment before our first listening test in music history. We sat at her table, passing around the laptop and taking turns quizzing each other. By the time we were done, we could all identify the name of the piece, the year, and the composer for all twenty pieces on the list within a few seconds of the recording being played. We sat crammed together in one tiny practice room before Musicianship[12]*, to*

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[12] Musicianship, as a university course, is one where students gain technical knowledge and practical skills important to the performance of music. At my university, the course includes learning to identify melodic intervals, chords and chord progressions by ear, transcription of aural melodic and rhythmic excerpts using standard music

> *warm up and practice before class, because it's a little bit less daunting to sing in front of your other classmates for evaluation when you were doing it for fun right before. We sat together in the music library, between concerts and classes and exams, we sat and we talked and talked about everything and anything and we laughed about Tchaikovsky's cannons and learning Miniwanka. Sitting here now, I'm so grateful for them. There have been other years that weren't nearly so close. They were the best group of people I could've had sitting with me through all of this, they're the best friends I could have had in this program.*

Where I sit: A Narrative of Being and Becoming[13]

The concept of belonging, particularly within academic settings, is often abstractly theorized but rarely mapped through the intimate, sensory, and social textures of lived experience. As a neurodiverse student, my experience of belonging has not been a binary condition—being either in or out—but rather a fluid, relational process tied to space, people, pedagogical style, and social contracts rather than norms that shape classroom culture. Through revisiting physical and emotional landscapes of my time in university—from classrooms to recital halls—I have come to understand belonging not as a static state, but as something constructed through relationships, routines, and recognition. This narrative is grounded in physical and emotional spaces: classrooms, practice rooms, libraries, and recital halls. In each of these spaces, I experienced belonging as an embodied, relational, and sometimes contested process. Through these experiences, I began to understand my own becoming—not as a

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notation, singing of scale degree (numerical), melodic, and rhythmic exercises using *Movable Do* solfege and sight singing.

[13] This section is the full narrative, but the scripted version can be found in *Appendix B*. My multimedia video can be found at the following link: Where I Sit: A Narrative of Being and Becoming

transformation from deficient to whole—but as the unfolding of self-awareness, confidence, and voice in a world that often demands silence, perfection, or invisibility.

For neurodiverse students, higher education is rarely experienced as a linear progression from enrolment to graduation. Instead, it is often lived as an ongoing process of *being and becoming*—a continuous navigation between states of visibility and invisibility, connection and isolation, capability and overwhelm. My story is one not of "overcoming" but of gradually building the internal and external conditions necessary to exist, participate, and grow within an academic space that was not designed with neurodivergence in mind. This multimedia short film can be accessed here: Where I Sit: A Narrative of Being and Becoming.

This is where I sat alone

My earliest days in the program were marked by isolation and overwhelming self-doubt. I sat in the music library alone, staring at my theory entrance exam until the questions became incomprehensible. Terms like "M2" and "m2" might as well have been written in code. I handed in the blank spaces with an apology, then found myself crying in the hallway, certain I had ruined everything before it even began.

But then I wasn't alone. Jan found me and gently explained that it was only a diagnostic—nothing was ruined. I would simply take a rudiments course to catch up. That moment stayed with me. It was the first time I realized that failure, perceived or real, did not preclude belonging, and that asking for help—or being found—was part of what it meant to be part of a community.

This is where we sat together

Over time, belonging became something I could see, hear, and feel. It was in the way our small cohort of seven sat together in every class, by default. It was in the nights spent at Ellie's apartment, quizzing each other for listening exams, and in the cramped practice rooms where we warmed up together, turning anxiety into laughter. We studied in the library, between concerts and exams, talking about everything from Tchaikovsky's cannons to obscure vocal pieces. They didn't flinch when I cried in class. They stayed. This silent social contract—that I could be myself, entirely—transformed my experience. In them, I didn't have to earn belonging through performance; I belonged because I showed up, because we showed up for each other.

This is where I sat with ghosts

My relationship to classrooms changed over time. When I first arrived, I claimed a seat at the front of "the classroom" out of necessity. I wanted to arrive early to avoid being watched. I didn't want to seem late or lost. I sat alone near the professor, where I could whisper or mouth my answers. At first, I only spoke when I knew I was right. But over time, gentle affirmation from professors—responding with interest, not correction—gave me the courage to try even when I was uncertain. I learned that participation did not require perfection.

Years later, returning to that same classroom as an observer, I saw how much had changed—and how much had not. The silence of the room, now filled with typing and disengagement, felt hollow. I was physically present, but emotionally unmoored. I missed the lively interaction that once defined our cohort. I felt like a ghost in the room—watching students who did not know I was there, or perhaps did not even know *they* were there. The shift reminded me how fragile the conditions for belonging can be, and how easily a room can transform from community to isolation.

Then there was the Theory II class. The professor did not stand behind the piano or hide behind slides. He moved around, asked real questions, and wanted to hear our ideas. He dressed in flannel and jeans, joked with students, and encouraged us to question the textbook. That classroom felt familiar, alive, human. It was a place where being—with all its messiness and multiplicity—was welcomed.

This is where I sat in turmoil

The Recital Hall, a space of performance and vulnerability, encapsulated the contradictions of being a neurodiverse music student. It was where I auditioned, shaking with fear, and where I later returned again and again for juries and choir. In those early moments, my flute teacher became a source of safety. She welcomed my tears without shame, played beside me when I struggled, and offered kindness over correction. Through her, I learned that struggle did not imply failure and did not demand guilt and that emotional expression did not invalidate my artistry. Choir, too, became a central space of belonging—despite its challenges. As the only nighttime course, it pushed my limits; I often came home in tears, overtired and frustrated. But it was also communal, creative, and profoundly meaningful. I learned languages, interpretation, and communication. And I stayed for seven years.

Still, not all moments felt safe. Watching classmates disengage—texting during rehearsal, arriving unprepared—was deeply upsetting for me. Choir was a class with an explicit social contract. In ensemble work, we are each other's successes and failures–a bad performance affects us all. Disrespect felt personal. I managed my frustration as best I could—breaking pencils, stepping out to cry in the hall. I knew not to take it out on others, but the emotional impact remained. This too is part of being for me: I take everything so seriously and the faith I have in others to do the same can lead to crippling disappointment when I find myself in a space where others are not.

This is where I sit today

To be neurodiverse in higher education is to constantly toggle between self-protection and self-expression. My becoming was not about shedding anxiety or learning to perform like my peers—it was about recognizing that I never needed to. Even on the stage, I did not have to be a polished version of myself that conformed to neurotypical standards of behaviour to appease some ableist expectations. I needed safety, recognition, affirmation, and time. I needed rooms where my way of being in education was respected. I needed peers and professors who did not treat emotion as excess. I needed to know that belonging was not conditional on masking or exceptionalism. Being a neurodiverse person in academia has meant navigating a body and mind that do not conform to institutional expectations, and learning how to find—and sometimes create accepting space.

Over time, I came to understand that *becoming* is an evolving process of building new ways of being in community with others—ways that affirm and embrace difference, rather than erase it. Through the rooms I inhabited and the people who shared them with me, I found not only a place in academia but a sense of self that no longer required justification. Belonging has not always been easy, but I have belonged here. My academic journey has been irrevocably shaped by professors who saw me, peers who stayed beside me, and brave spaces that held both my vulnerability and my voice. While music has been integral to my life through my time at the university and will forever be woven into every fiber of my being, my narrative here has also been one of simply learning how to exist, to connect, and to be in community.

This is where I sit, now, as I prepare to leave everything I have known for the past eight years, my whole world, and take all those memories and lessons forward into my next phase of being and becoming.

Chapter V: Being and Becoming

The process of becoming, especially for neurodiverse people in higher education, is neither linear nor easily defined. For me, it has involved a continuous negotiation between how I *am*—my "being"—and how I am perceived or expected to *become*. This tension between *being* and *becoming* is shaped by institutional expectations, normative academic culture, and personal narrative. While these two concepts are often intertwined, I see *being* as the state of existing authentically within one's neurodiversity identity and *becoming* as the complex process of self-recognition, diagnosis, adaptation, and identity development in the context of academic life (*see* Douglas et al., 2021 and Douglas & Rice, 2021).

Being

Part of the reason of how I made it until my third year of university before talking to student accessibility services (SAS) was due to the fact that my behaviour had become normalized within our program's educational context. It took an outsider to suggest speaking with SAS staff because my crying (i.e., not loudly or disruptively) in nearly every course and lesson came to be accepted by others as my way of being in education (Douglas et al., 2021), and was *not* a harbinger of some impending breakdown. While crying did indicate I was feeling anxious, distressed, frustrated, or upset in the moment, faculty and peers trusted my explanation that I was alright and that I would tell them if there was any change in my needs. Though professors extended offers to talk, take breaks, or let them know if there was a way they could better support me, none of them ever suggested that I talk to student accessibility services. This point deserves emphasizing as it conveys the fact that they did not view me as disabled or a misfit (Rice et al., 2024) within that space. These professors perceived each of us as unique individuals who have different strengths and different needs for support. Saltes (2022) explains that in ableist spaces, those who “do not meet normative standards encounter barriers and ableist practices that are not universally experienced by everyone” (p. 677). People who seek to frame my behaviours in relation to normative standards are alarmed by my crying because they assume it is an indicator that something is seriously wrong because they believe all adults would avoid crying in public at all costs and that if they succumb, the emotion they are experiencing is so intense that this is not possible.

(Un)Worthiness

Worthiness is defined by the Oxford English dictionary[14] as an individual’s “worth, merit, excellence.” (1.a.), “The quality of deserving to be treated in a specified manner; the quality of being worthy to do something.” (3.a.) and “The quality of deserving to have or receive something” (3.b.). The innate desire to prove one’s suitability or worthiness is important as demonstrating skill or preparedness is a reasonable part of education. For example, I requested to take a second-year French course without taking the pre-requisite, and I had to prove to the head of the department that I was worthy of an exemption by demonstrating proficiency in the language. However, this definition also raises the question of who is the arbiter of worthiness and requires us to reflexively consider how that influences our worldview and self-perception.

The obvious answer would be that I view my professors as the arbiters of my worthiness, as they have a role that explicitly requires them to assess and judge students’ skills and worthiness. To say I seek validation and approval from authority figures is accurate, but that rationale is weakened by the knowledge that I would have their acceptance as long as I interacted respectfully with others, actively participated in class, and demonstrated improvement. My

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[14] These definitions were accessed through the online version of the Oxford English dictionary, which is a living dictionary and thus has no official publication date. However, the digital lading page for *worthiness* does identify 2017 as the most recent revision for these definition(s). With this caveat, I am still following the citation information provided by the dictionary, itself, which is aligned with the official APA 7 citation conventions for dictionaries.

professors, especially those who have known me since my first year of university, are some of my biggest supporters, and they have always been there for me and my peers, regardless standards of academic excellence. While I absolutely believed that my professors thought of me as worthy, I also thought that this confidence was misplaced, that they did not hold me to a high enough standard, and that their judgment must be based on some fundamental misconception of me.

The realization that I believed they were absolutely sure of their own assessment of my worthiness revealed that my sense of unworthiness came from my own belief that their assessment was flawed. Through my research, I was able to recognize this as a manifestation of internalized ableism (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017; Brown & Leigh, 2018). Despite being in a nurturing, differentiated learning environment, surrounded by people who accepted me as I was, I still questioned my own value. Despite being a fast learner, an active member of the department, a committed student, a reliable peer, and academically successful, I still felt that I was never good enough –that I ought to *be* better.

In reflecting on my own experience, I recognize that my feelings of unworthiness are not rooted in objective measures of performance but in a pervasive internal narrative shaped by these systemic dynamics of which I was not consciously aware. This is the crux of internalized ableism: even when we are seen, valued, and supported by others, we may still struggle to see ourselves as fully deserving of that recognition. Recognizing this has been a crucial step in re-visioning my academic journey and re-storying my narrative as a neurodiverse, invisibly disabled scholar. It is not enough to exist in inclusive environments; structural ableism must be actively named and challenged to give students the tools to recognize it in their lives. I believe that we, as educators and academics, are responsible for moving educational culture beyond what

Dolmage (2017) calls ‘retrofitting’ ableist systems to include neurodiverse people, and toward an educational model in which neurodivergent students are welcomed as full participants in knowledge creation.

Ensemble

Conceptually, this theme emerged early in my analysis as I noticed most of my writing was about events told through my interactions and communication with people. This theme makes a lot of sense when considering that music is inherently social, communicative and collaborative. It is similar to the idea of composition in that composers do not *write* music; they *create, compose,* and *make* it, and then attempt to *transcribe* or *notate* it in a way that others will be able to *interpret* it. Everything in music is inherently about the human experience.

I came up with the specific theme of *ensemble* as I reflected on the differences between social norms and social contracts. Unlike norms, social contracts are explicit, communicable agreements of social expectations that are able to be discussed and are, to some degree, open to negotiation. In music, we understand that so much requires tasteful and contextual interpretation, but we also feel free to discuss these things explicitly. Each performer has a unique part, and we expect there to be discussion in order to make sense and communicate how all of these parts make sense together. The *ensemble* is a powerful metaphor for my experiences as a neurodivergent university student because it has been about forming meaningful, reciprocal relationships of trust and respect, interpreting and constructing meaning through interactions with others, and using explicit communication as a crucial tool for managing expectations and ensuring that everyone is able to participate. This framing foregrounds a level of interdependence that goes beyond that usually established among university peers and underscores a relational ethic of care that neurodiverse students often find lacking in conventional academic settings

(Siuty & Beneke, 2020; Brown & Leigh, 2018; Couzens et al., 2015).

Unlike many competitive university environments, our music department intentionally fosters a culture of collaboration over competition. Faculty-student relationships are characterized by mutual respect and understanding, with students and professors preferring to be addressed by their first name and listening to what each other has to say vis-à-vis their engagement and performance. This more holistic view approach to the student-teacher dynamic is also supported by engaging with each other socially at concerts and after-parties, which often include an invitation to include family, friends, and partners. The department's pedagogy emphasized engagement*,* growth*,* and embodiment, rather than rigid standardization—it is an excellent example of a change made to benefit one group, but ends up benefiting wider groups—this structure is well-suited to neurodivergent learners for whom traditional educational models may be limiting or alienating, but it also benefits young students who are away from home for the first time and mature students who may require more flexibility due to having children.

Neurodiversity-Affirming Practices

The idea of ensemble aligns with neurodiversity-affirming practices, which emphasize valuing *how* people think, not just *what* they think (Morrison et al., 2024). Fine arts fields (e.g., classical music, portraiture, theatre) can often be perceived as elitist and traditional, since we are usually seen at performances in formal wear or "concert blacks"[15] but the truth is that, as a culture, it aligns with the broader culture of creative arts (e.g., musical theatre, pop music, crafters) which is generally inclusive of different ways of being (Douglas et al., 2021). Carla

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[15] "Concert blacks" are a pseudo uniform for ensemble performances. For large ensembles (e.g., choir or orchestra), this often includes sleeves that extend past the elbow, full-length black bottoms (i.e., a knee-length black skirt is acceptable with black hoisery), black shoes (i.e., no other colors, no sandles or boots) and minimal jewelry. While for less-casual concerts and small group ensembles, the expectations are less rigid and may be as simple as the expectation that your apparel is completely black or

Rice (2021), in a joint interview with Patricia Douglas for the *Re-storying Autism Project*, describes that within their creative, arts-based framework: “People tend not to get mired in identity politics, or get fixed into certain positions, but open up to curiosity, imagination and generativity as they move from the critical to creative mode” (p. 27). Rather than expecting neurodiverse individuals to suppress visible or expressive traits in order to appeal to normative society, neurodiversity affirming practices call for the full celebration of autistic traits and ways of being (Douglas, 2016; Grant & Kara, 2021). Professors play a pivotal role in cultivating a classroom atmosphere, and it is often their grassroots efforts that are the most impactful when implementing neurodiversity-affirming practices. Their empathetic engagement, rather than strict adherence to policy alone, aligns with Couzens et al.’s (2015) finding that “caring and clear lecturers and/or tutors” (p. 32) are more impactful for invisibly disabled students than formal accommodations alone. As Douglas et al. (2021) argue, true inclusion depends on faculty recognizing when a student inhabits “a body that is not always met with welcome in educational spaces” (p. 613) and responding accordingly with compassion and flexibility.

Becoming

My becoming as a neurodivergent scholar did not begin with crisis, but with conversation. It was a music instructor—someone from outside my immediate department—who, after noting something different about my participation, suggested I connect with student accessibility services. I had not sought this evaluation with the goal of naming a disability. I simply wanted to communicate that I was doing my best and hoped to be understood. Yet this conversation led to a three-hour psychiatric assessment and, shortly after, multiple diagnoses that contextualized my experiences in ways I had never anticipated. The results were initially shocking but undeniably clarifying. I had been formally diagnosed with ADHD, met the criteria for general and social anxiety disorders, had significant impairments in rapid-naming, short-term, and working memory, and could benefit from pursuing an autism diagnosis. I accepted these diagnoses with surprising ease—not out of denial, but because they made intuitive sense. For a time, though, I treated the information more like trivia than transformation. The diagnoses became anecdotes—facts to mention at parties or jokes to share with friends—rather than something I integrated into my personal or academic identity. This early detachment or dissociation underscores how disorienting the process of becoming can be.

I am reminded again of a quote from a study of autistic traits and masking tendencies with one participant who said: "I realized nothing was wrong [with me], things are just harder for me... It is nice to have a reason for things. Now I know it is not my fault" (Beck et al., 2020, p. 815). I like labels because I find them very useful for making sense of the world around me. As I discussed in *(Un)Worthiness*, I was very hard on myself because I could not find a reason that school was more challenging for me; my perspective was that it was equally difficult for everyone else, and I was just weak for not being able to handle it as well.

Challenging Internalized Ableism

Saltes (2022) emphasizes that in some cases, "[university students] who self-disclosed were at times still expected to perform according to ableist teaching standards" (p. 695). This statement reflects the way in which I held myself to the same ableist performance standards that I had previously treated as a means of demonstrating worthiness, despite never having been held to them by others in the first place. Pre-diagnosis, I held myself to those standards because I had no reason to believe they were unjust, but I now clung to them to demonstrate that I was not going to use my disability as an excuse to take an easy [sic] path. The perspective that accommodations are shortcuts to academic success and allow students to cheat the system is a literal textbook example of ableism in academia (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017; Dolmage, 2017; Couzens et al., 2015). Unfortunately, I see myself in this quote from Dolmage (2017): “If you can laugh at higher education as a college graduate, it may allow you to reinforce the sense that the hoops you had to jump through were more difficult, and the merit you’ve received and privilege you have access to are thus more deserved” (p. 175). In my case, I may have sought to prove my worthiness by appealing to ableist rhetoric that everyone experiences challenges, but if you really want something, you might have to work hard.

This position, however, fundamentally overlooks the question of why that should be the case and why neurotypical people get to take it easy. By freely disclosing my diagnoses but still holding myself to neurotypical standards, I would be viewed as worthy by everyone: My success would be earned from an ableist academic perspective, I had done the same as or better than many neurotypical people in spite of facing these challenges, while they (the neurotypical) had had it easier. I included another quote from Dolmage (2017) in *Chapter II*, which concisely illustrates the problematic nature of this toxic approach: “if those who do not ‘qualify’ can be vilified, marked out, and kept away, then those who make it up the stairs must deserve to. In this way, the university disavows disability—the steep steps create an environment in which disability cannot be validated or recognized.” (p. 62). I did not realize that my actions at the time were signaling to others my unconscious support for ableist systems, but what makes internalized ableism is so insidious is that it causes people to support views or act against their own best interests due to dominant social ideas. Only through reflective engagement with my own narrative did I begin to see how my neurodiversity had always been present in my academic identity—both before and after diagnosis.

Being/Becoming a neurodiverse student

My becoming has not negated my being—it has allowed me to name it, claim it, and offer it back to the academy with integrity.

The Power of Narrative

Clinical diagnoses, while informative, do not arrive with emotional clarity or cultural context. As Grant and Kara (2021) argue, neurodivergent individuals must have the autonomy to define the meaning of diagnosis within their own narratives. However, too often, institutions—and even well-intentioned communities—offer archetypes instead of agency. Douglas (2016) critiques this tendency in her work on autism mother narratives, identifying how archetypes like the "warrior" or "therapist" mothers impose predetermined story arcs and character traits that individuals are expected to inhabit. These patterns also emerge in how neurodiverse students are framed: either as inspirational exceptions or tragic figures who succeed "in spite of" who they are (Brown & Leigh, 2021; Grant & Kara, 2018; Dolmage, 2017). Arbitrarily casting neurodiverse and invisibly disabled people in these roles is confining and reductive, ultimately leading to further oppression, even when well-intentioned. I reject these narratives: *I am not an underdog. I am not a warrior. I am a scholar. Simple as that.*

While my becoming began with receiving my formal diagnosis, it took shape through the process of re-storying and story-making. As Rice and Mündel (2018) and Douglas et al. (2021) suggest, narrative and story hold immense power to either constrain or enable identity. Examining how the participants chose to share their narratives and what they chose to highlight about their experiences has allowed me to consider new ideas of what is important and worth sharing, because *everything* those participants shared offered value and insight to me (Douglas et al., 2021; Douglas et al., 2020). The ability to claim and craft one's own story is crucial for resisting deficit-based models of disability. For me, this meant moving from pathologizing labels to internal understanding and considering *how* I want to be known.

Final Thoughts and Future Research

Importantly, this work is not just personal—it is political. It is about reframing not only my own personal narrative but also the structures in which all invisibly disabled and neurodiverse people operate as academics. As Dolmage (2017) argues, inclusion in higher education cannot be achieved through retrofitting; it requires reimagining. Educators must move beyond models that offer conditional access—entry based on performance or palatability—and toward a model in which neurodivergent students are recognized as full and equal participants in the creation of academic culture, knowledge, and norms. As a researcher, I have a firm grasp of how systemic ableism operates in higher education. I could name its mechanisms, critique its assumptions, and identify its effects. But I struggled to recognize those same structures in my own academic experience. I justified this disconnect by attributing it to benign circumstances: a small, supportive department, a strong memory, a familiarity with academic culture. In truth, these were rationalizations—coping mechanisms that enabled me to avoid confronting how deeply I had internalized ableist norms.

This duality—possessing intellectual knowledge of ableism while narrating myself as somehow exempt from its effects—speaks to the insidious nature of internalized ableism. It shapes how we interpret our experiences, often convincing us that our struggles are personal failings rather than structural outcomes. To be and become a neurodivergent academic is to live in tension with the ableist expectations of the university and to transform those tensions into valuable, transformative research for the benefit of the whole community. This portfolio, then, is not simply a record of experience, but a critical site of becoming: a space where I resist external archetypes and assert my identity on my own terms.

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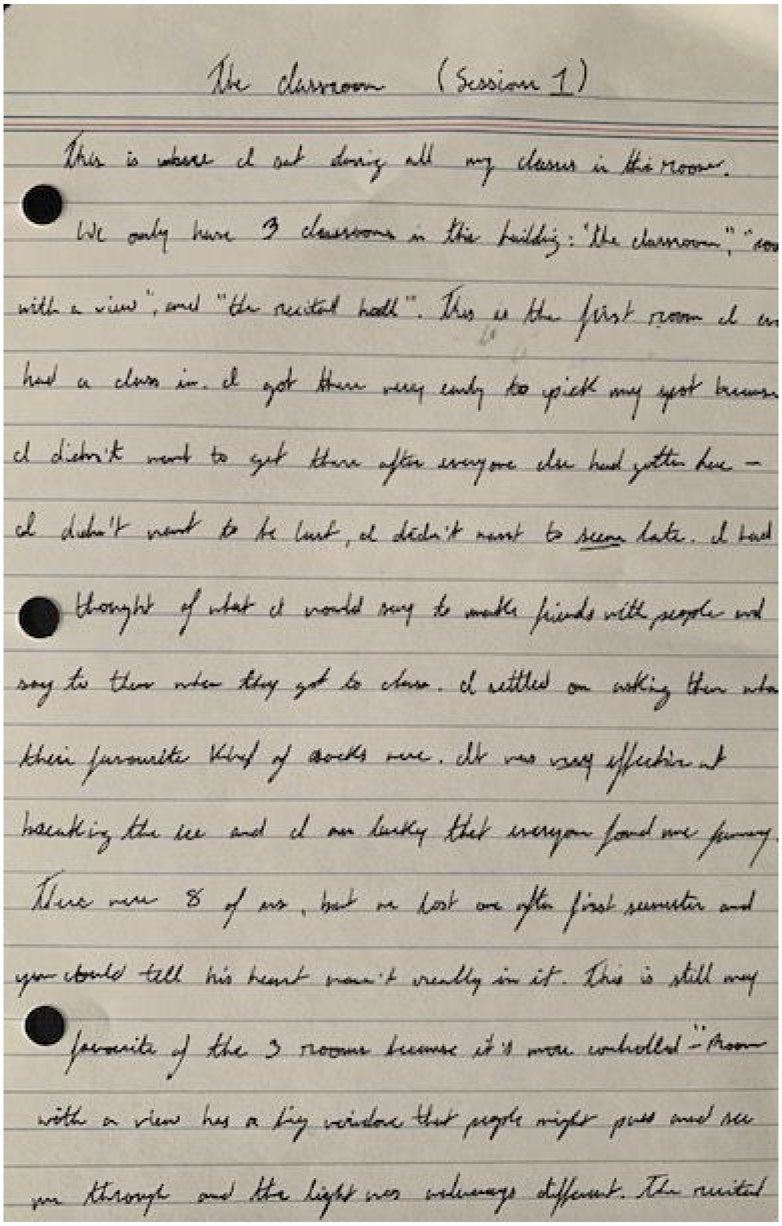
Appendix A: Select Journal Transcripts



The classroom (Session 1)

This is where I sat during all my classes in this room.
We only have 3 classrooms in this building: "the classroom", "roo
with a view", and "the recital hall". This is the first room I ev
had a class in. I got there very early to pick my spot becaus
I didn't want to get there after everyone else had gotten here –
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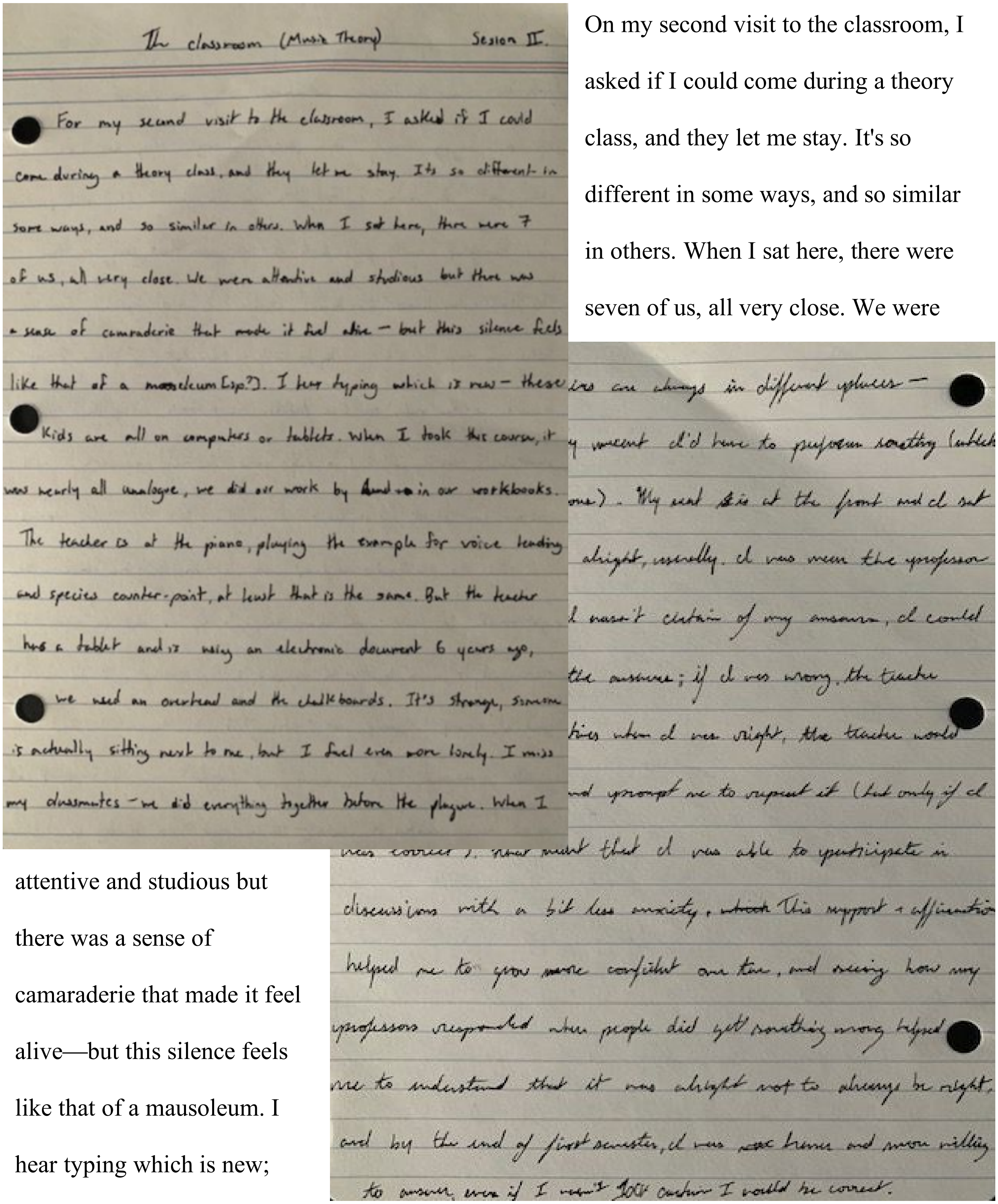
me through and the light was always different. The recital

The Classroom (Session 1)

This is where I sat during all my classes in this room. We only have 3 in this building: “the classroom”, “the room with a view”, and “the recital hall”. This is the first room I ever had a class in. I got there very early to pick my spot because I didn't want to get there after everyone else had gotten here [sic.] –I didn't want to be the last, I didn't want to <u>seem</u> late. I had thought of what I would say to make friends with people and say to them when they got to class. I settled on asking them what their favourite kind of socks were. It was very effective at breaking the ice and I was lucky that everyone found me funny. There were 8 of us but we lost one after first semester and you could tell his heart wasn't really in it. This is still my favourite of the 3 rooms because it's more controlled– “Room with a view” has a big window that people might pass and see me through and the light is always different. The recital hall is too big, the chairs are always in different places—and being there usually meant I’d have to perform something (which I hated. I was very nervous). My seat is at the front and I sat on my own, which was all right, usually. I was near the professor, which meant that when I wasn't certain of my answer, I could either whisper or mouth the answers; if I was wrong, the teacher wouldn't care, but sometimes when I was right, the teacher would acknowledge my answer and prompt me to repeat it (but only if I was correct). That meant that I was able to participate in discussions with a bit less anxiety, this rapport and affirmation helped me to grow more confident over time and seeing how my professors responded when other people got something wrong helped me to understand that it was all right not to always be right, and by the end of first semester I was an intelligible and more willing to answer, even if I wasn't certain I would be correct.

The Classroom (Session 2)

On my second visit to the classroom, I asked if I could come during a theory class, and they let me stay. It's so different in some ways, and so similar in others. When I sat here, there were seven of us, all very close. We were attentive and studious but there was a sense of camaraderie that made it feel alive—but this silence feels like that of a mausoleum. I hear typing which is new; these kids are all on



The classroom (Music Theory) Session II.

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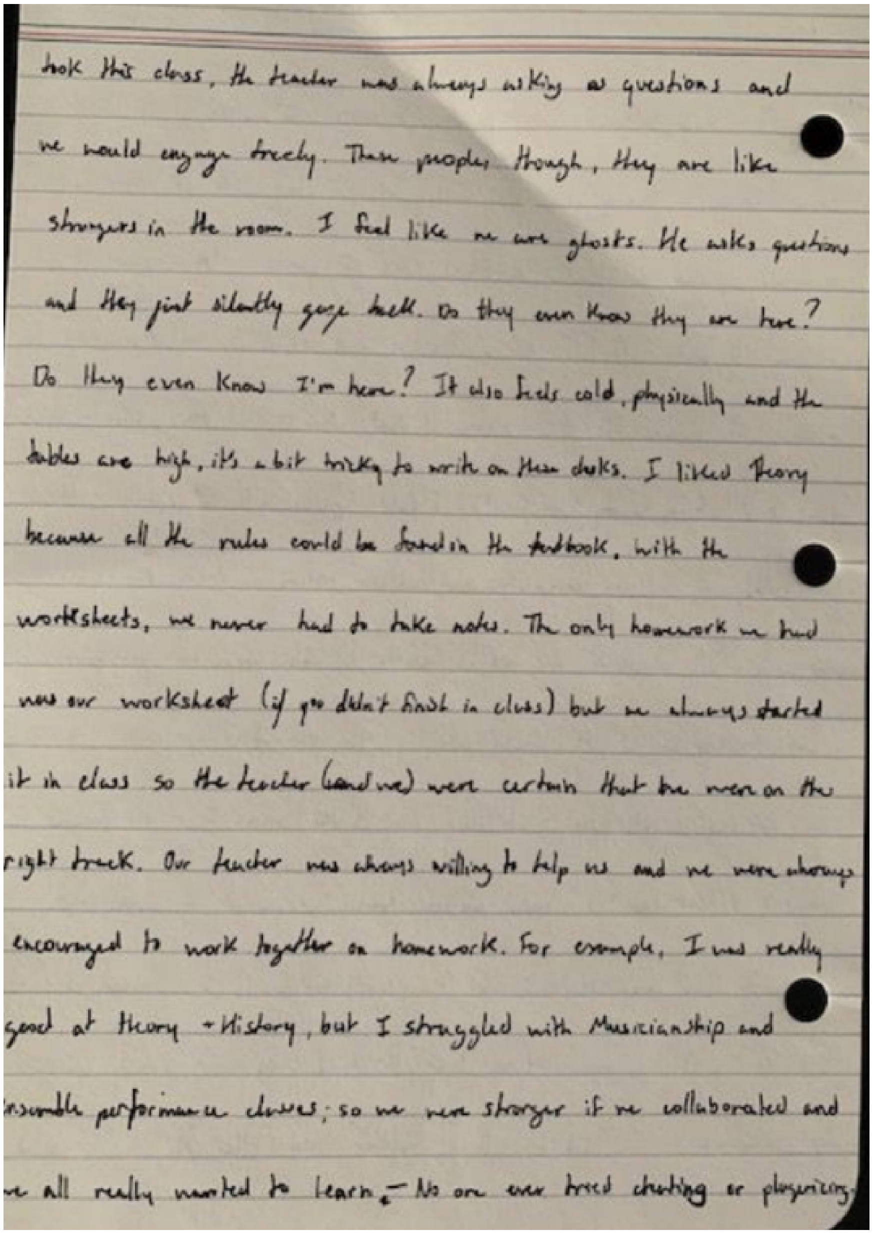
The Classroom (Session 3)

On a whim, I joined the Theory II class in the classroom because I believed it would [be] more evocative of my own experiences. I was right. Our professor is Llew, who took over Theory II the year after I took it. Llew has been the chair of the department since before I started; he was there during my audition and he taught me Composition I.5 and II. He also invited me to help out during grade 11 day and first-year orientation. There are [the] same number of people as in the first-year course, but it's almost like back to normal, these people are friends and they banter with Llew. They're all answering questions and people are contributing to the conversation and asking questions. They know I'm a person and they can see me–the professor can see me. He jokingly asks me questions, and I try my best to answer. It's just like when I took the course with Di, well, a bit, it is. [Llew's] drawing pictures and structure



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Recital hall (I)

The first time I was here was my audition; it was on a Friday afternoon (or Saturday) with Llew, Anton, Julie, & Della. I was so nervous my hands were numb and I was shaking like a leaf. Everyone told me that I had passed and done well, and that I could relax a bit. I was told I really ought to take lessons over the summer in preparation for the upcoming school year. Ari gave me both Della and Julie’s numbers and said I could choose whoever (that no one would be hurt by my choice). Della looked gentle and reminded me of my mum, a bit, even though she's not really. I went over to her house for summer lessons, and I met her husband, George (and later, their grandson Harry, who was in Grade 9 at the time and played/plays the flute much better than me, which is only fair, since he's much better at practising). [Della] is so kind and patient. She dealt with me crying in almost every lesson for about 2 years and on and off for the next 4 years. She never lost her patience with me and always offered to play for me, then with me, to help me understand the music better when I was frustrated and couldn't get it. She helped me buy my “good” flute, a proper one of silver, in the French style. I house-sit for her twice a year, and I pick food from her garden and stay there for a couple of weeks during that time. The Recital Hall is where we have “jury”, it never stopped being unnerving. I'm not sure if I found them worse or better than master classes. It was only Della, Etienne/Julie, and Llew+/Anton, but they're the ones whose opinions I care about most. After you play, you leave the room and they talk about your performance, your notes from lessons throughout the year, then all three/four of them negotiate for your final mark. Your teacher emails you back a week later with your mark & specific notes, and you decide what to work on as summer assignments, since there are no summer lessons, but you have to keep your skills up.

Recital Hall (II)

I am mostly in the Recital Hall for choir. When I started, it was mandatory for all music students in all years (4331-4334). It was/is the only course I had at night (7-9 pm); it was so hard at first, to stay up that late. I came home crying a lot because it was too hard for me, I was overtired, and I got frustrated. It's one of my favourite classes, though, no matter the distress or frustration. We were all together and learning so much about singing in other languages, and how to communicate, and so much interesting repertoire. I really think it's one of the most important classes on musicianship we can take. I've been in the choir for 7 years (it didn't run during COVID). I think our choral director is very fair in her expectations of us, but that other people don't respect the course enough, and that's very frustrating for me. I can't stand when people don't take something seriously enough. Especially in an ensemble. because we reflect on each other and a choir is only as strong as its weakest/least prepared member. ALSO, some people go on their phones during choir. They hide them behind their folders, not only is it disrespectful, it prevents me from focusing because it's so distracting for me when others break the rules. but maybe there's something, like an addiction instead of just disrespect. People don't realize that I have a nasty temper, but I do. Only I know better than to take it out on others. I hit things and break pencils…but I mostly cry. I sometimes have to leave the room. Why do they think it's okay? What are they thinking? I hate them when they do that.

Appendix B: Script

This is where I sit, looking back

The concept of belonging, particularly within academic settings, is often abstractly theorized but rarely mapped through the intimate, sensory, and social textures of lived experience. As a neurodiverse student, my experience of belonging has been a fluid, relational process constructed through my interactions with others. My narrative is grounded in physical and emotional spaces: classrooms, practice rooms, libraries, and performance halls. In each of these spaces, I experienced belonging as an embodied and relational process.

My journey has been one of becoming, characterized by the development of self-awareness, confidence, and voice in a world that often demands silence, perfection, and invisibility. My story is one not of “overcoming” but of gradually building the internal and external conditions necessary to exist, participate, and grow within an academic space that was not designed for neurodiverse students.

This is where I sat alone

My first memory within the music department was marked by overwhelming self-doubt. I sat in the music library alone, staring at my theory entrance exam– I didn’t even know what the questions were asking. I handed in my paper with its blank spaces and an apology, then found myself crying in the hallway, certain I had ruined everything before I’d even gotten started.

But then I wasn’t alone. Jan found me and gently explained that it was only a diagnostic—nothing was ruined. I would simply have to take a rudiments course to catch up. That moment stayed with me as the first time I realized that failure, real or perceived, did not preclude belonging, and that asking for help—or being found—was part of what it meant to be part of a community.

This is where we sat together

Over time, belonging became something tangible. It was in the way our small cohort of seven sat together in every class and every concert. It was in the nights spent quizzing each other for listening exams, and in the cramped practice rooms where we warmed up for Musicianship. We spent free time in the library, talking about theory assignments, joking about learning Schaffer's *Miniwanka* in choir, and singing *Circa Mea* because we could. They didn't shun me for crying in class; I could be myself, entirely, knowing they would stay by my side. In them, I didn't have to earn belonging through performative behaviours because we understood the meaning of ensemble as mutual support, respect, and camaraderie.

This is where I sat as a ghost

When I first arrived in “the classroom”, I was very early and I claimed a seat at the front out of anxiety. I sat near the professor, where I could whisper my answers to their questions. At first, I only spoke up when I was *sure* I had it right. But in the company of professors who responded to students without judgment, I gained the courage to respond even when I *wasn't* certain. Over time, I learned that participation did not require perfection.

Years later, I saw how much had changed. The Theory I class, now filled with typing and disengaged students, felt hollow. I missed the lively interaction that had defined my cohort. I felt like a ghost in the room. Then I attended the Theory II class. The professor moved about, asked real questions, and wanted to hear our ideas. He dressed in flannel and jeans, joked with students, and encouraged us to question everything. The classroom felt familiar, alive, human again. These shifts reminded me how fragile the conditions for belonging can be.

This is where I sat in turmoil

The Recital Hall, a space of performance and vulnerability, for me, encapsulates the contradictions of being a neurodiverse music student. It was where I auditioned, shaking with fear. In those early days, my flute teacher became a source of safety and comfort. She accepted my tears, played beside me when I struggled, and offered me empathy. Through her, I learned that struggle was expected, but did not imply failure and neither demanded my guilt.

My membership in the Choir, held in the recital hall, has been a profoundly meaningful experience, though it pushed my limits; I often went home in tears, overtired and frustrated. I had to tolerate peers texting during rehearsal, which was distressing. Choir, being an ensemble, has an explicit social contract: We are interdependent; we are each other's successes and failures. Despite the heartache, it has been a highlight of my academic journey.

I managed my frustration as best I could, stepping out to cry in the hall. I knew not to take it out on others, but the emotional impact remained. This, too, is part of being for me: I take everything so seriously, which can lead to frustrated outbursts when others are too lax.

This is where I sit today

To be neurodiverse in higher education is to learn to balance self-protection and self-expression. My *becoming* was not about shedding my neurodiverse ways of *being*, it was about recognizing that I shouldn't have to. Even on stage, I do not need to perform as a less authentic version of myself that conforms to ableist expectations.

I needed safety, recognition, affirmation, and time. I needed spaces where my ways of being in education were respected. I needed peers and professors who did not treat my emotions as an excess. I needed to know that belonging was not conditional on masking or exceptionalism.

Being/Becoming a neurodiverse student

Between moments of learning the explicit curriculum, I also learned about a sense of self that does not require justification.

Where I will sit

Belonging has not always been easy, but I have belonged here. My academic journey has been irrevocably shaped by professors who saw me, peers who stood by me, and brave spaces that held both my vulnerability and my voice. While music has been integral to this journey and will forever be woven into every fibre of my being, my narrative as a neurodiverse university student has also been one of learning how to exist as myself and within a community.

This is where I sit, now, as I prepare to leave everything I have known for the past eight years. I sit at the precipice of an amazing journey, where I will continue being and becoming. I am so grateful for all the memories and lessons that will accompany me into the next phase of my academic career.

Thank you to everyone and everything. I haven’t got enough words or time to even come close to expressing my gratitude and the enormity of everything I am experiencing at this moment of closing this chapter of my life, so I will leave off with this: Thank you to everyone for everything. Thank you for showing me what it means to belong.