

Aby Kaupang and Matthew Cooperman, both accomplished poets in their own right, have joined their talents to create a remarkable book that gives the lie to the notion that non-conventional writing is devoid of affect. Indeed, it's a punch to the gut – multiple punches – not least because of the way it tells its story. At the same time, these are extremely *inventive* writers, who understand the syntactical unit as a unit of sound and of thought, and the page as a field of action.

NOS is a difficult book to characterize. In part, this is because of its mixed-genre nature: it includes prose, verse, dialogue, pictures, facsimiles. But it is also because it is a book that raises so many interlocking issues so deftly in such a short space. On one level, *NOS* is about Kaupang's and Cooperman's daughter Maya and their struggles to find help for her and better understand her. We find out that she is, depending on which specialist you talk to, profoundly autistic, developmentally delayed, dysphasic, or a slew of other diagnoses that are "not otherwise specified" – that is, of little or no descriptive or prognostic value. The authors do not spare both the grueling physical and emotional details of caring for Maya at home. And the family's journey through the medical institution charts a maze of different physicians and health care professionals, referrals, medications, trips, and filling out forms, forms, forms. The structure of the book reflects this journey, designating the various sections as "floors" of a hospital (e.g., "Floor One: Critical Care" and "Floor Two: Diagnostics").

Upon a first flip-through of *NOS*, one is struck by the extent of blank/white space. This feature well expresses a central theme of the book: lack of information, gaps in knowledge, expertise withheld, no's – all that is not specified, revealed, or permitted. Blank space highlights the unsaid, pauses and gaps in thought, speech, knowledge, narrative.

Indeed, to my mind, *NOS* is a book about agnosis. "You want to know more about her," Kaupang and Cooperman write; "So do we" (4). There is no definitive diagnosis. Rather, for the authors, "[t]here is a lost gnosis in our little girl . . . Language unkempt, everywhere pages are kept" (27). The epigraph, from *Far from the Tree* (2012), by Andrew Solomon, references "parents of children with horizontal identities" – that is, those that are not replicated (genetically or culturally) from family, but rather are defined by others with similar identities. Being gay from a straight family or deaf from a hearing family, an understanding of one's identity as gay or deaf won't come from that family; being neurodivergent might qualify as a horizontal identity as well. *NOS* is an attempt at understanding, and even "[u]nderstanding is ultimately a horizontal identity," the authors write (144n). Nothing prepares you for this particular experience, or this particular life. Your family can't help you understand another person, let alone prepare you for a child with special needs.

One can never ignore positionality and perception in *NOS*: "See the patient over there | the patient is seen from over here," we are reminded. There is no clarity. The FOC (Father of Child, in medical-chart lingo) speculates that there is a "wide array of sunbeams / blossoming inside her head / without a window" (91). The book raises the questions of how autistic and non-autistic people communicate, and what "autistic" means in the first place. How far on the Spectrum is the "disabled" person from the "abled"? How do the interiors and exteriors of people interface, and how can one person (neuronormative or -divergent, parent or child, spouse or other spouse) "understand" another? There is "an outside then that's always masking that's all I am" (65).

This fact doesn't neutralize other people's demand for knowing, cataloging, probing, prodding, diagnosing. At one point, the MOC (Mother of Child) loses patience with the initial readers of the manuscript:

they "wanted to know more" about her. As if we didn't. As if our attempts at bringing her to the hospital were not an enormous effort at knowing her. As if we knew the problems, we might provide the solutions. As if the repeated diagnosis, "Not Otherwise Specified," wasn't such a blow because no one could specify, could lead us to the *her* that was more than ill body, body ineffective. . . . (144)

The difficulty in understanding others is magnified to the extent that the other is not like oneself – if their body seems non-normative, if they are someone else's child. *NOS* turns the mirror on the reader, on our demand to know the subject and on how that demand might be politically problematic. The parents/authors also see the book as a mirror: they are well aware of the fraught politics and ethics of representation, but also of the necessity of writing for grieving, for thinking-through:

We try not to speak for Maya. We try not to write a book. [. . .]

MOC: Matthew feels that to use one's daughter as a "poetic" subject is taboo. Forgive me then for publicly processing. I embarrass.

Speaking from experience, barely & newly, I pen out my exhaustions, my endless angers.

FOC: I forgive you nothing for there's nothing to forgive.
You are writing a boat to float upon, a car with enormous wings
to give us horizon. Maya is real and worth writing for. (57)

The FOC and MOC each have a "floor" to themselves, and the styles are notably different. The former is a long lyric poem, "A Violet Man" – violet being the end of "the Spectrum" and just one letter off from "violent":

Each speech made
a violence

Each seed of syllable
not spoken

What salts the mouth
with birdly sorrow

What
does not fly (93)

The MOC's section conveys a profound sense of loneliness while confronting the Institution of the hospital (not to mention patriarchy and ableism):

this morning having slept alone | the hospital | then still being
mine alone the light which died on the other side of the blinds
was not mine not *for* me I being grown and up a woman
construe-ably playing into the present history
of baptism

(125)

She is interpellated into the cohort of MOCs around her, where she also finds resilience, empathy, and tragedy:

[. . .] some MOCs
were honored the loss some MOCs denied there were those that
ate the loss those that planted it as cardiums there were those
that saw life was love and lossy there were those that were
eaten by loss [. . .] (133).

Indeed, in the case of both the MOC and FOC, horizontal identity comes partially as a result of other parent-caregivers. Many sentences in the book begin with the quasi-biblical construction “they that” – an abstraction that both acknowledges and participates in the similarities of experience they share:

they that tense in well-lit halls where other other people talk of other
things and others realize or not that they could hear no other than
they themselves seizure-singing in difference and rage and jealousy
and and and (55)

They are all together and yet profoundly isolated; they collectively constitute “a we everywhere // MOCs and FOCs as assemblies / of pills” (49). It isn't just the patients who are prescriptively medicated (isn't everyone, in our medicalized society?).

More pointedly, the authors also *critique* horizontal identities:

Disability is a social performance, and the sociality of disability is a group we are reluctant to join. Because you have a disabled child you must represent, you must attend, you must be like these others. There is so much weeping and we want to escape this group. (75n)

Like any collective identity, whether horizontal or vertical, there is a price to be paid in individuation – even in self-fashioning or self-knowledge. One can begin to regard oneself not as a self, but as “selfchildselfchildspouseself selves” (116), a fusion of identity induced by situation and institution: or, “to slowly fade from the world *myself* / a delational story (131). Ultimately, everyone here is the subject of the institution. Or, as Guy Dubord says (in a footnote): “The agent of the spectacle placed on stage is the opposite of the individual” (14n).

Yet the institution exists for a reason, it evokes a desire: “One wants facts in the god-doctor / world” (70). One at least wants a clear diagnosis, an effective treatment, and a prognosis. But “our -ISTS have never begun to provide solutions” (81). The specialists, the archons, have feet of clay. “Kafkaesque” is an overused term, but . . . the endless rounds of “visits” (or “outings”) – which, we find out in a footnote, mean a 184-mile round-trip for the POCs – seem only to result in forms begetting more forms, pills multiplying, and diagnoses piling on top of one another. One begins to suspect that healing is “a normative sabbath” (139) – a compulsion to put them that come within the institution (patients or no) as aberrant, even sinful, machines. “[A]nd yet the children are unknown” (35) still. The institution can transform its subjects, but cannot answer the question “what do atypicals dream?” (114). The clinic cannot get at the self, for all that; it creates its own margins.

NOS turns from the intensely lyrical to the xeroxically bureaucratic. Kaupang and Cooperman see the page as adept visual as well as verbal artists, making deft use of images, texts, and layout, as in this spread:

Charts, forms, letters are reproduced, and in some cases detoured. They do some of the work of narration, as well as conveying the constrictive force of their accumulation. The desire for definite answers, for nouns, for complete sentences, becomes a kind of violence, which the disjunctions and hybridities of the text thwarts – just as real life does, in real life,



not least of all in Maya.

At the end, “NOS. No one knew” (148). The book ends with the poem “A Good Day,” which is perhaps the most directly representational and hypotactic part of the book. A good day is recognizable, clear and explicable, free of hurt, at home not hospital. But the next day is always near, and that is all one knows or needs to know: “days keep coming / Most days are unspecified” (148).

Aby Kaupang and Matthew Cooperman have created a work that is at once intensely moving, intellectually engaged, and formally adventurous. It is starting to show up on syllabi and on lists of important documentary poetry. I recommend putting it on your reading list, too.