

PERCEPTIVE PRESENTATION IN AUTISM: A STUDY BASED ON THE AUTOBIOGRAPHIES OF DONNA WILLIAMS¹

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ABSTRACT. This paper is based on the clinical material of the autistic Donna Williams in order to investigate the work of transformation of the sensorial-perceptual through perceptual presentation. We discuss the contributions of the psychoanalysts Cesar and Sara Botella and the contributions of the psychoanalyst Roussillon on the importance of reflexivity for perception and recognition as supports for the process of symbolization of the first perceptive traits that need to be invested and associated with each other. Throughout the text, we hypothesized that by inventing compensatory mirroring modalities, Donna was able to re-present perceptual features not yet represented, whose perceptual presentation is preliminary to their own ability to be represented. In this context we based ourselves in the studies of the psychoanalyst Laznik about the urgency of the elision in the clinic with the autists to think about the existence of mnemonic traits in autism that exist, but are not invested. Because they are completely without investment, they do not install paths and connections, blocking the appearance of representations and the complexification of the psyche based on the organization of representations. In contrast, we study a psychic work of symbolization of the sensorial through the projection of these traits and, in this line of argument, we will demonstrate how the transfer of these traits, by means of the figuration, favored a specularity through these mirrors that provided a compensatory function of mirroring.

Keywords: Autism; psychoanalysis; perception.

APRESENTAÇÃO PERCEPTIVA NO AUTISMO: ESTUDO DA AUTOBIOGRAFIA DE DONNA WILLIAMS

RESUMO. No presente artigo analisamos o material clínico da autista Donna Williams com objetivo de pesquisar o trabalho de transformação do sensorial-perceptual por intermédio da apresentação perceptiva. Dialogamos com as contribuições dos psicanalistas Cesar e Sara Botella e com as contribuições do psicanalista Roussillon, acerca da importância da flexibilidade para a percepção e para o reconhecimento enquanto apoio para o processo de simbolização dos primeiros traços perceptivos que precisam ser investidos e associados entre si. No decorrer do texto, tecemos a hipótese de que ao inventar modalidades de espelhamento compensatório, Donna pôde reapresentar traços perceptuais ainda não representados, cuja apresentação perceptiva é preliminar à própria capacidade destes serem representados. Nesse âmbito nos apoiamos nos estudos da psicanalista Laznik acerca da premência da elisão na clínica com os autistas para pensar a existência de traços mnêmicos no autismo que existem, mas não são investidos. Por ficarem completamente sem investimento, não se instalam trilhamentos e ligações, impedindo o surgimento de representações e a complexificação do psiquismo oriundo da organização de representações. Em contraponto, abarcamos um trabalho psíquico de simbolização do registro sensorial por meio da projeção destes traços e, nessa linha de argumentação, demonstraremos como a transferência desses traços, por meio da figuração, favoreceu uma especularidade através desses anteparos que propiciaram a função compensatória de espelhamento.

Palavras-chave: Autismo; psicanálise; percepção.

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PRESENTACIÓN PERCEPTIVA EN EL AUTISMO: ESTUDIO DE LA AUTOBIOGRAFIA DE DONNA WILLIAMS

RESUMEN. En el presente artículo se ha analizado el historial clínico de la autista Donna Williams con objeto de investigar el trabajo de transformación de lo sensorial-perceptual por intermedio de la presentación perceptiva. Dialogamos con los aportes de los psicoanalistas Cesar y Sara Botella, y del psicoanalista Roussillon acerca de la importancia de la reflexión para la percepción y el reconocimiento en tanto apoyos en el proceso de simbolización de los primeros rasgos perceptuales que precisan ser investidos y asociados entre sí. A lo largo del texto, presentamos la hipótesis de que, al inventarse modalidades de espejo como compensación, Donna Williams pudo volver a presentar rasgos perceptuales todavía no representados. Tal presentación perceptiva es, a su vez, preliminar a la propia capacidad de que dichos rasgos sean representados. En este sentido, nos basamos en los estudios de la psicoanalista Laznik sobre la urgencia de la elisión en la clínica con los autistas, a fin de pensar la existencia de rasgos mnémicos en el autismo, presentes, pero que no son investidos. Al estar totalmente ausente la investidura, dejan de instalarse aperturas de paso y ligazones, impidiéndose así el surgimiento de representaciones y la complejión del psiquismo oriundo de la organización de representaciones. En contraposición, abordamos un trabajo psíquico de simbolización del registro sensorial por medio de la proyección de estos rasgos y, siguiendo esa línea argumentativa, buscaremos demostrar cómo la transferencia de ellos, a través de la figuración, favoreció una especularidad mediante tales mecanismos que propiciaron la función compensatoria de espejo.

Palabras-clave: Autismo; psicoanálisis; percepción.

Introduction

In this paper, we will cover autobiographical writings of the autistic Donna Williams (1996, 1998, 2006) to analyze the transformation of sensorial-perceptual through the perceptive presentation. Throughout the text, we hypothesized that Donna was able to re-present perceptive traits not yet represented, which, as the psychoanalyst Anne Brun (2014) emphasizes, are not traits to be deciphered, with latent meanings but traits whose presentation is preliminary to their ability to be represented. In this line of argument, we will demonstrate how the transfer of these traits (not represented) allowed them to be reactivated perceptually, through a “figuration work” (p. 76). We dialogue with the contributions of the psychoanalyst Roussillon about the importance of “reflexibility” (Roussillon, 2012, p. 139) for perception and for recognition, as anchors for the process of symbolization of the first perceptive traits, which need to be invested and associated with each other.

Perceptive mnesic traits are the primordial material for building the foundations of the human psyche, and this “first psychic matter must be metabolized and transformed by a reflective process of symbolization to be integrated into subjectivity” (139). In this context, the clinical material deriving from Donna’s texts provided us with elements to articulate the construction of the psyche through the transformation of the sensorial-perceptual and the invention of compensations that propitiated this work of figuring, what we will develop later in the text supported in the psychoanalytic conception of *Darstellung* (figuration or configuration).

Through sensory regulation, incorporation of traits of others/otherness and inventions of screens with mirroring function, we hypothesized that Donna operationalized the emergence of *gestalts* and mirror screens that enabled an apprehension of the self and the others. Thus, we formulated that it was invented a way of creating a projection surface and a reflection screen of the self, through modalities of perceptive presentation that allowed the establishment of new psychic connections and new investments of these sensory/perceptual traits not yet represented.

The perception and investment of the other in autism

Anchored in the practice with autistic patients with classic symptomatology with autistic withdrawal, the psychoanalyst Laznik (2004) emphasizes the existence of mnemonic traits that are not invested by the autistic person, and cannot lead to an associative registration or representations, characterizing the urgency of the psychic mechanism of elision. If at first, the autobiographical accounts of Donna also corroborate with these formulations, portraying the failure to invest in mnemonic traits that could later

produce representations, the present article starts from the following problematic: Laznik in her practice with young autistic persons tries to establish investments that could not be established. It is possible, that in a similar way, the writer Donna Williams has been able to create compensatory ways of investing these traits not yet translated, not yet represented. In this way, we intend to investigate if, as Laznik in the clinic with the small autistic patients demonstrates a possible path from the elision mechanism towards the registration and representation of these unrecorded or untranslated traits, if it could be possible to detect in autobiographies of autistic persons the solidification of the inscription of the trait of the other through strategies of perceptive presentation that propitiate a transcription of the registration of these traits.

The elision defense mechanism, typical of autism, portrays the absence of the inscription of the presence of the other/Other, which would be for the psychoanalyst Laznik, “as if, precisely, the defense system consisted of eliding all psychic places where mnemonic traits of the representations of the Other could be recorded” (p. 30). In this sense, he states that in the *Project* he understood “that Freud thought that in the hallucinatory pole of satisfaction are inscribed the mnemonic traits and the attributes of this next guarantor” (p. 70) that can give an answer that appeases the baby in the face of tensions. In this context, by returning to the experience of satisfaction, both the pleasure obtained and the trait of that other would be retaken. From then on, at the base of the experience of primary hallucination, there would be self-erotism marked by the mnemonic traits of that other that really ensures, so that when she was sucking her little finger, the pleasure aroused that had already been recorded would bring the trait of the presence of the maternal Other, operating a “reinvestment of the mnemonic traits of this maternal Other” (p. 80).

The psychoanalyst emphasizes that here maternal pleasure is not “a *principle of no pleasure*” (p. 174), but an expression of the pleasure of the Other. In the mentioned example, it is an offering itself to be eaten that is an active movement of the baby and which implies the presence of the Other and its pleasure, which then “was inscribed as a mnemonic trait in the psychic apparatus” (p. 29).

However, Laznik herself emphasizes that there are cases of babies (not necessarily those who will become autistic) who “have great difficulty in managing their excitement other than by their radical avoidance” (p. 50). These are babies who do not smile, do not demand vocally, do not call despite a situation of pain and anguish, and can fall “into cataclysmic distress, as if they are broken into pieces” (p. 50). In this context, there would be a helplessness related to the elision of the possibility of inscribing the traits of the Other as a “suppression of the perceptive signs” (p. 53) that would allow to perceive in fact the presence of the Other, its/his/her libidinal investment and its/his/her inscription as the Other that ensures.

Because of its constitutional prematurity, the human baby “is incapable of carrying out the specific action necessary to cease the excitation of the interior of the psychic apparatus and, consequently, the displeasure that accompanies it” (p. 141). It is precisely the neighbor, the human at its side (*Nebenmensch*), guarantor, the one who “performs the action that causes the endogenous excitation to cease and consequently allows *the experience of satisfaction*” (p. 141), protecting the baby’s psychic apparatus against displeasure and against pain. In the face of intense constitutional helplessness, the help of this guarantor other is necessary, whose (effective) presence makes it possible to be inscribed in the satisfaction circuit, which, if sufficiently repeated, would enable the emergence of paths by which the human baby could then relive this experience as a hallucinatory satisfaction. In this perspective, the psychoanalyst emphasizes that the satisfaction circuit leaves memory traces in the “motor discharge produced by a certain number of movements, among which the reflexes that put an end to the experience of displeasure” (p. 141), “the investment of a number of mnemonic traits that correspond to the perception of the *guarantor neighbor*” (p. 141) and “the paths between these two types of images of memories” (p. 141). In this context, faced with a situation of tension and displeasure, these paths⁴ are already facilitated by the recording of the satisfaction experience.

⁴ The concept of paths (*Bahnungen*) was used by Freud in the *Project* to encompass the establishment of facilitations produced in certain permeable neurons. It deals with the enchainment between neurons, in a process of crossing contact barriers between neurons, which makes a passage of energy through paths that become facilitated, more easily traveled, from the established connections. In the

In family videos of babies who became autistic, the psychoanalyst Laznik (Burnod & Laznik, 2016) detected how much these babies appeared to be impervious to others, noting many cases of low responsiveness and permeability to the (phallicizing) look-voice of others. In another discipline in the same research field, psychiatrist Cohen and the doctor in neurosciences Saint-Georges (2016) analyzed family videos of babies who became autistic and pointed out the lack of reactivity and interest in the other by these babies, and how much that affected synchrony with the caregiver other. Such manifestations lead to statements such as that of the child psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Golse (2016) that “autism can now be defined as the greatest form of failure in the process of access to intersubjectivity” (p. 213). Similarly, we can use Donna’s description to emphasize the (lack of) response of the baby who will become autistic, or how its way of reacting to parental investments is aversive and hinder or prevent the construction of the inscription of the other in its/his or her pleasure circuit. In her autobiographical accounts, this is referred to the impact of sensory disturbances that generate excesses of hypersensitivity and that cause violent excitations, causing movements of disconnection, as opposed to the connection with others.

Similarly, in her vast clinical experience with autistic children, Laznik (Burnod & Laznik, 2016) points out the importance of organic issues that hinder the inscription of the pleasure circuit in relational bonding. In this context, it is worth highlighting how much these sensory disturbances can impact the viability of the other’s investment being marked and experienced as pleasurable, which can lead to the marked psychic effects in autobiographies and that can be well characterized as “an active refusal on the part of the baby” (Laznik, 2004, p. 39), in a “relational refusal” (Laznik, 2016, p. 48)⁵.

As we have described, the intensity of sensory-perceptual disturbances has blocking or hindering effects on the inscription of the pleasure principle in a libidinal economy, and we can then reiterate how much the inscription of the presence of the other implies a “good” functioning of perception, and the possibility of this is made possible by the development of a protective shield that enables “the reception of stimuli, reducing and modulating their energy intensity through the creation of resistances and facilitations” (Campos, 2009, p. 116). This “shield for excitations” (p. 116) can be referred to “the differentiation of the outer surface [which] will eventually be considered the prototype of all development of sensory organs” (p. 166), which highlights the problematic in autism of sensory-perceptual disturbances for the execution of the functions of perception, which we will consider next. It is worth mentioning that Donna’s reports show how, initially, even the record of pleasure-displeasure and the establishment of escape paths to displeasure could be inhibited as a result of sensory chaos, hindering the establishment of any action to obtain a satisfactory regulation in favor of a state of homeostasis.

As a result of these sensory disturbances, she describes that up to adulthood she “couldn’t see a face or body as a whole, often failed to recognize objects I hadn’t already got to know” (Williams, 2006, p. 127), remaining sensorially submerged by a “visual chaos” (p. 127). This also impacted her ability to listen, for although she could hear sounds, she lost the ability to process them on a significant, representational level, describing the effects of this perceptual change as follows:

Perceptually, other things were happening for me. The world was visually some how ‘in bits’: a fragmented reality in which it was hard to perceive the wholeness of anything and even harder to make any sense of something or someone in the context of its wide surroundings. There were losses of depth perception with the compulsive fascination and fear of watching things drop through space. (p. 121)

present text, we do not seek to examine the Freudian project, so in this footnote we stick to discuss the importance of this conceptualization to focus on how the drive energy is initially disconnected, needing to find ways to be discharged through these connections. The emergence of these psychic links builds the routes of facilitating discharge, the paths. In turn, these paths can be articulated to the issue of the importance of “associativity” (Roussillon, 2012, p. 56) for the psychic apparatus, specifically for the symbolization of the perceptive traits, that is, for “a polyformism of the psychic associativity” (p. 52), in addition to the verbal, which we will focus through perceptive presentation as a way for the symbolization and subjective appropriation of the first sensorial-perceptual records.

⁵ Contrary to this active refusal, in the typical development of the baby, it “has an extraordinary appetite for the enjoyment that its presence unleashes in the maternal Other” (Laznik, 2004, p. 174).

In her autobiographical accounts, the effects on the psychic apparatus of both internal and external excessive excitations, which overflow any treatment capacity, are striking. The impossibility of processing these excitations and of obtaining meaning/attribution of an interpretation to the experience prevented the feeling of continuity of her existence and the permanence of self. Before we proceed with our hypothesis that through perceptive presentation this process can be resumed, facilitating a dynamization and greater complexity of the psychic functioning, we will address the theorization of Donna herself about the existence of a whole part of herself not marked by the other, which we will try to articulate to the existence in the autism of the raw matter not invested, not linked psychically.

Automatisms and mnemonic traits not invested

In the third autobiography (Williams, 1996), Donna attends a research center and clinic with people with brain disorders, where professionals evaluate that her sensory disturbances result from the maintenance of infantile reflexes, which were not inhibited as in most other people, and were not replaced by new ones. Through the testing of the reflexes, they identify how the "different body parts speak or don't speak to one another" (p. 31). After this assessment, Donna stated that her body could be divided into four parts with distinct modes of operation. In the first part, her infantile reflexes had been inhibited, being replaced by others that last in the adult life. In the second and third part, there was a partial inhibition of the infantile reflexes. And in the fourth part, her infantile reflexes remained intensely active, among which there were some that should have disappeared at 10 months of age in the normal development, and others that should have disappeared after birth, such as a reflex movement of the hip that would aid the exit from the maternal body and that should be restricted to birth, but it still existed, so that in Donna's words "it was as though I was only half born" (p. 32).

The explanatory hypothesis put forward for her disturbances would be that she had found ways of compensating for the maintenance of the infantile reflexes that should have been replaced, but these compensations continued to operate in a desynchronized manner throughout her development. Also in this context, we can use the formulations of the psychoanalyst Vorcaro (2017) about the delimitation of the existence of instinctual reflexes different from those that would be taken in a drive circuit. She restores the value of an ancestral knowledge derived from the human condition and expressed in the libidinal economy that is referred to the circuit of the pleasure principle. In this context, she distinguishes the existence of reflexes before her subjective appropriation in the encounter with the Other, referring this reflex to an "active condition of the baby, as an organism susceptible to becoming Self" (p. 47). In this sense, she states that "in addition to manifesting a state of neurological disorganization of the neonate – still lacking a voluntary central coordination of a nervous system – the reflexes present at the beginning of the baby's life would have a function of promoting a communicative interaction necessary to the support of the bond with otherness" (p. 49). In addition to the response of the Other, which supposes a subject in these manifestations, the psychoanalyst points out that there would be in the reflex itself an ancestral knowledge that would "invite" communication, proposing to rescue their importance for psychic life and for interrelationship, emphasizing the availability to the other in the normal development.

In contrast, it is worth emphasizing Donna's argument about the existence of infantile reflexes and registers of *sensing*⁶ that would generally be inhibited in normal development, but which remain active in these "born unborn people" (Williams, 1998, p. 52). In this context, we may ask whether the existence of the infantile reflexes, not abandoned, would remain possessors of this knowledge, pointed out by Vorcaro, expressing an inviting manifestation to the other human, but which would require the interpretation of a human that she could recognize in these manifestations - so atypical in an adult - an invitation to the other.

In this context, she hypothesized that when the processing of *inputs* is deficient there would be an "inability or delay getting incarnated into mind" (Williams 1998, p. 51). Her argument is that, as a result

⁶ Donna designates by sensing the whole range of stimuli apprehended from the sensory-perceptual organs, emphasizing the sensoriality of this apprehension to the detriment of what would be an intellectual apprehension

of sensory-perceptual disturbances and their impacts on the processing of *inputs*, there are overloads that impact the possibility of being able to rely on a “consistent interpretation” (p. 51), in the absence of which she developed “an aversion to being affected” (p. 51) and “a rejection” (p. 51) as “anti-identification” (p. 51). Due to the presence of these psychic states, Donna could hear sounds, see things, but this “although perceived, remained unprocessed and uninterpreted” (p. 53), not giving rise to an answer.

In addition to formulating the permanence of these reflexes, Donna theorized the existence of *triggered*⁷ automatism and manifestations that she distinguished in two modalities: attempts to regulate the sensory disturbances and mimetizations without subjective appropriation. Based on the hypothesis that in autism there is a disturbance in the processing of *inputs*, she remitted several typical autistic behaviors to that explanation. For example, she suggested that some repetitive stereotyped behaviors – *stimming* – could be attempts to repeat an action until obtaining an increase in sensory or emotional effect, in an attempt to intellectually process what was experienced. Others could be attempts to calm down or *download* excess information or regulate states of mood and anxiety. Donna’s hypothesis was that, in this context, *stimming* would enable a compensatory self-therapeutic modality, since with brain access to such information/messages/feedbacks that could not be processed in the past, better regulation and integration would be possible, and there is no need for these repetitive behaviors. Other *stimmings* would be caused by boredom and would be attempts to entertain herself in activities that did not imply the need for social relationships.

Unlike voluntary self-stimulation behaviors, Donna describes an immense amount of involuntary tics (hair pulling, hitting her stomach, slapping her face, etc.) that she developed over the years, characterizing that they usually lasted a few weeks or months until they were replaced by others. However, some of these occupied a large part of her day, such as a few tics linked to breathing (holding her breath, wiping her nose, etc.) that occupied around half of her waking time, and could be around eighty percent of the time when she was ill.

Regarding triggered body expressions, Donna formulated a repertoire that could be triggered independently of her mind, which is why she devised monitoring strategies to observe and control how her body acted and whether or not she expressed what her mind had thought. Donna’s hypothesis about triggering was that it was both raw non-invested matter and non-appropriate mimetized matter. She reports that for most of her life she had experienced the world as a “zombie” (Williams, 1998, p. 53), who could record herself and record others without assigning an interpretation or accessing a representation of them, being that this raw matter or mimetized matter would manifest itself triggered.

The triggered manifestation in the third autobiography

The theme of self-analysis of triggered behaviors is predominant in the third autobiography (Williams, 1996) in which Donna devoted herself to the question of the difficulty of self-apprehension in the face of lack of meaning, noting that several of her experiences could not be elaborated, because her feelings were as the sounds to the deaf or as the colors to the blind. People generally interpreted her “triggered behavior” (p. 5) by “real responses” (p. 5), but since they were not subjectively appropriated, that would be, from Donna’s point of view, a functioning equivalent to that of a robot.

A mutating moment occurred in this autobiography when she began to use special glasses with filters – Irlen tints – that were dyed and they filtered the various colors of the environment, which enabled new modalities of “processing of visual information” (p. 189). Her explanatory hypothesis was that people with information-processing disorders are in part receiving more information than they can process, and else where they receive less information than they need to properly process the information they have registered. She underwent several tests with manipulations of the lights, light waves, until she found a combination of lenses that made it possible to “compensate for what was

⁷ Donna refers to trigger, triggered and triggering in autism as automated manifestations that emerge despite autistic volition. Triggered manifestation is that one which manifests itself through behaviors, facial expressions, etc., in spite of the autistic person. The Trigger is the stimulus or signal that triggers the manifestation and the triggering encompasses this modality of automatism.

missing or filter out what one was getting too much.” (p. 189). This allowed her to no longer be disturbed or distracted by brightness or shade, both when reading a text and when looking at the world, people, environments. In this context, she reported that when looking with her glasses out of the window, instead of seeing a lot of trees one by one, she saw a garden. While she always thought of herself as a non-participant of the scene, she could see herself in the middle of the garden, because she was able to visualize the image with the third dimension. With the lenses when she looked at her husband’s face and body, she could apprehend it as a global unit rather than as fragmented pieces loose and disconnected.

Donna stopped using traditional glasses, reporting that an ophthalmic correction had been prescribed as if there was a problem in her sensory organ of vision, when in fact her problem would be solely in the visual processing of the brain rather than in the eyes. In this way, looking through the combination of colored lenses, her vision was perfect and she was able to gain a global and deep visual apprehension. Worth mentioning her description:

In a perceptual world in which my body-sense, my auditory comprehension, my personality, and my sense of surroundings were fragmented, I finally could do more than struggle to imagine an unfragmented whole. If only on one channel – that of vision – I no longer had to imagine. I could experience (p. 190).

With the use of these lenses, she also partially normalizes her hearing, since when looking at an environment, for example, and not seeing it as being full of incoherent fragments that seemed to bombard her, the background noise stopped bothering her and she could more easily screen the sound of the noise, without suffering more overloads. This global apprehension enabled her to lose an infinite amount of detail that could be placed in the background in favor of global apprehension. Her sense of security in the relationship with people in the shared world increased significantly: because she no longer had the feeling that fragments were attacking her unexpectedly, her anxiety dwindled dramatically and her body relaxed. Her experience was that she was in a “new world, which was no longer felt like an enemy waiting to invade or bomb” (p. 212).

At that time, after gaining a more global apprehension of herself, of the other, of reality, one of Donna’s main focuses of observation and control became her own body, which repeatedly acted in autopilot mode. In this context, she emphasizes that she sought to control the “dissociation” (p. 95) that manifested in her body. She tried to detect actions and disconnected parts of her body, which acted in automatic functioning, having the experience of having “strangers in your body” (p. 95) whose traits could be referred to several people who were part of her life, including those hated and feared, as well as cartoon characters or people seen on television, who would be mimetized without a subjective appropriation.

By inventing screens to see these traits of others, which manifested themselves automatically, she was able to designate them, recognizing them as parts of the “straitjacket” (p. 95) that was expressed in her body, despite her consciousness. She explains that, previously, encountering these others would have involved getting lost “in a suffocating ocean of ‘other’” (p. 95), but in the third autobiography, she can analyze how these mimetic identifications have been constituted in the course of life, which were constituted as a *patchwork* of others that did not allow the feeling of an existential continuity. In this stage of fighting the recorded repertoires of others, Donna reports that she saw herself walking bizarrely as “two halves of two different people” (p. 97), disconnected from each other, each walking in a desynchronized rhythm. At that time, she pointed to the urgency of the confusion set “when you attempt an exorcism of the intruders within your own body” (p. 98), incurring “dysfunctional bodies” (p. 98), after the loss of automated or mimetized behaviors of others.

By avoiding to use an expression copied from the other, she did not find in the reservoir of behaviors another record that allowed her to manifest a personal expression, which made difficult the accomplishment of any basic activity. At that time, Donna claimed that every fragment of her body manifested someone from her past, her left leg could be expressing her father, her right leg expressing another person, each arm expressing a different person from her past, and her head could express a

character of a cartoon or movie. She could no longer perform movements such as walking, or she could start hitting her own face, weaving the hypothesis that she was trying to remember with her body, but her body did not have a personal record of how to walk or how gestures are performed. Donna exemplifies that “inside of me, I was thinking, Come on, leg, you know what to do. But it was like my body couldn’t hear me, like I had no body-memory” (p. 100), describing a split between her mind and a repertoire of motor actions recorded as if they did not belong to the body itself.

Donna encountered parts of her own body that were “alien” (p. 101), theorizing that it was necessary to make new “links between body and mind” (p. 101), because during that period, most of the time, when she wanted to do something, either her “idea didn’t connect with my body” (p. 102) or she performed an activity as if she was another person. The need to reinitialize the entire system of links between her mind and her body has encompassed the repertoire of body movements, facial expressions, ways of speaking, and all physiological movements of the organs and muscles of the mouth, tongue, phonatory apparatus, diaphragm, the lungs, the jaw and the lips. Her talk became a “verbal mosaic” (p.103) babbling and leaving gaps, because she was not sure how to pronounce some sounds or how to make the necessary connections to produce the spoken language. While the diaphragm could respond to her intention to speak, her jaw remained motionless, lacking synchrony and with an impossibility of obtaining adequate functionality.

It is worth mentioning the explanatory hypothesis that Donna elaborated on this body-mind dynamics:

It was not that my mind was breaking apart; instead, the connection between my mind and my body had gone into the workshop for minor repairs, but were now getting a total overhaul. I hadn't gone crazy but my body had. (p. 99).

Donna reports that, for three days, she could only communicate effectively by blinking, one for yes and two for no, until she could progressively achieve a connection between mind and body. She lived, then, the paradigmatic moment in which she could speak with her own voice. Until then she could only speak with the voice of her mimetized others, but after the link established between her mind and her body, the voice that emerged was not that of another person, but her own intimate voice.

To hear my own voice in my own ears, the foundations of a mental voice of my own that had been absent for twenty-eight years, was to give myself a key to escape(...) the sense of deafness-to-self (...) That night, for the first time in my life, I heard myself speak in my dreams with my very own voice. I had a body, I had emotions, I had a voice (p. 106).

After being able to appropriate her own voice, Donna could appropriate her look. When she started walking, she noticed that something had changed in her perception. Until then, her eyes worked as a scanner that was usually focused on seeing where parts of her body were going or were fixing something that was luring her in autopilot mode. But then, for the first time in her life, her eyes could be directed to where she was going and this allowed her to predict what she would find before reaching a place.

When she looked at Ian, she noticed something different. Until then, her eyes had scanned the facial features, but Ian realized that when she saw these fragments, she could only see with one eye at a time. Even when she directed both eyes, she could only record one eye at a time. It is only after realizing the new links between her mind and her body that there was a change in her relationship with her eyes, which allows her to realize which of her eyes is capturing and when one of her eyes stops capturing. Therefore, she was able to gain more control over which eye was capturing, trying to switch from one eye to the other when there was a sensory overload, noting that although she had two eyes, they worked separately, as two distinct organs.

The triggered expressions and the Perceptual Presentation

How to understand these triggered manifestations and behaviors in her body without having existed a prior conscious record and subjective appropriation? The theorization of Donna (Williams, 1998) is

that in autism, in a stage of non-existence of a mind, the others, the world and the body itself were experienced by a nonphysical body that intermediated these relationships as “a tool of resonance” (p. 26). Donna’s hypothesis is that most people lose much of that capacity for knowledge by resonance, which would be pressing in the first few months of the human baby’s life. Through resonance, when relating to an object given by someone, both the object and the trait of the person who had given that object resonated. In this context, she reports that her way of apprehending the world and building knowledge included a trait of the other, indiscriminately embedded from the object, in such a way that “an imprint” (p. 45) from the other was absorbed and she experienced a “fusion with their energy” (p. 45). As a result of this mode of relationship with others, Donna theorized that these triggered manifestations arose from a repertoire of “involuntary and indiscriminate accumulation” (p. 55) from which emerged a “meaningless mirrored replay of the sounds and actions of others, without consciousness, without choice, without intention, without mind” (p. 55). The preferred way in which Donna appropriates this raw matter is built up in the psychic work of mirroring and recognizing the traits of herself via the other/screen.

Through this work of metabolizing raw sensory matter, which can be progressively recognized, appropriated, invested, a psychic work of connection emerges through these modalities of perceptive presentation. It is worth mentioning that in this context we try to articulate the autobiographical accounts of Donna to the Laznikian formulations about the lack of marking of the Other in the libidinal circuit of the autistic person, correlated with the predominance of the elision of the perceptive signs of the presence of the Other. In this way, we seek to elucidate the existence of mnemonic traits that are not invested in autism, and because they are completely without investment, they make unfeasible paths and psychic connections, which prevents the emergence of representations. In this sense, we seek to investigate the hypothesis that new investments of these traits linked to sensoriality, and that compose the representations of thing in Freudian metapsychology, can build new paths that can be established from the perceptive presentation, as we address in the present text.

In the form of role-plays or using her partner Ian as a mirror so that she can observe, detect, analyze, and understand her own way of functioning psychically, the third autobiography (Williams, 1996) is devoted principally to the invention of screens that allow both to inscribe what had previously been apprehended under autopilot mode and which remained activated by means of automatic *triggers*, and to make psychic connections never before established, or not sufficiently invested. In Freudian psychoanalysis, the sensory-perceptual matrix is the substrate of the constitution of the psychic apparatus. We can then reiterate the importance of these screens/mirrors that enable a support for these traits of self to be manifested figuratively, whose recognition via the other makes possible a work of symbolization, of psychic connection.

This work of mirroring the raw matrix may be referred to the formulations of the psychoanalyst Moreno (2014) about gesture, postural and mimic communications between mother and baby related to a modality of communication through the “mirror before the stage” (p. 82). This mirroring would allow a first form of recognition by specularization, enabling the emergence of “a figuration of a perception” (p. 83). It would be the constitution of “a first psychic pathway (*Bahnungen*), a sensory-motor figure composed of perceptive mnemonic traits, which intends to psychically connect the excitations that arrive simultaneously from the interior and from the exterior, forming a surface” (p. 83).

Based on the distinction of the psychoanalytic conceptions of *Vorstellung* (representation) and *Darstellung* (figuration or configuration), considering that the second term is particularly useful to think the process of psychic representation in these cases of disturbance of the symbolization process, we are anchored in a formulation of *Darstellung* (figuration or configuration) defined as the Freudian term “related to the constitution of the unconscious, prior to repression” (p. 82), which can be referred to the existence in the unconscious of traits that may or may not become significant representations, predominating the representation of thing and a form of figurability, in the form of images.

In this way, we seek to explain the feasibility of a psychic presentation that enables the transformation of the mnemonic traits, encompassing an active way of transforming this raw matter through perception, emphasizing that there is an investment of this in the act of perception, whose invested

energy can enable the transfer and the transformation into representation of thing, into mnesic image, and can therefore open up to new psychic forms” (p. 85). It is, therefore, a psychic work of primary symbolization that reconnects this first inscription, in the form of a perceptive mnesic trait, to the representation of thing. In this same sense, the psychoanalyst Roussillon (2013) stresses that in situations of extreme difficulties of subjectivation “in which a part of the work of symbolization, particularly that of primary symbolization, and therefore of subjective appropriation, is inoperative or in failure” (Roussillon, 2013, p. 188), it is necessary to connect or reconnect this first inscription, in the form of a perceptive mnesic trait, to the representation of thing.

Primary symbolization has been formulated by the psychoanalyst Roussillon to encompass the psychic processes by which raw materials (a multiplicity of sensory impressions) are inscribed in the psychic as mnesic traits, and then are transformed into a representation of thing, or as Naffah Neto (2013) suggests, how the psychic thing is represented. Naffah stresses the importance of thinking this symbolization in two distinct times: as a representation of thing, whose symbolization we embrace through the importance of figuration, and as a word representation, effected by language. In this context, the secondary symbolization encompasses the psychic processes by which the thing representation is transformed into word representation. We focus, therefore, in the present article on the transformation of the first psychic inscription by the process of primary symbolization, through the perceptive presentation.

Final considerations

We try to describe and analyze Donna's evolution and the change in her psychic functioning, considering that the clinical material of her autobiographies provided us with interesting elements to articulate the construction of the psyche from the transformation of the sensory-perceptual through the perceptive presentation. Why is the presentation of these traits so important to Donna? Psychoanalysts Cesar Botella and Sara Botella (1995) emphasize that perception is an integral set of the psychic apparatus that forms an organized whole capable of transforming quantitative (sensorially captured) into qualitative. However, in order to have this qualitative change, they emphasize the need for perception to become “perceptible” (p. 352), bringing this psychic process closer to an endopsychic⁸ perception that allows the subject to think oneself when apprehending this perceptive that presents itself. It would thus be a psychic process similar to endoperception “capable of presenting to consciousness, in the form of a figurability, what cannot, in a first approach, be done through verbal representations” (C. Botella & S. Botella, 2002, p. 20). In this sense, the psychoanalysts point to the need for a “psychic figurability” (p. 20) through which a perception through the consciousness is made possible, providing for the emergence of new psychic connections and investments. We note how difficult it is for Donna to record the presence, the first perceptual inscription. In Donna's autobiographies, she operationalizes important screens that enable a work of mirroring and recognition of the raw sensory material, which can be progressively recognized, appropriated, invested, enabling a psychic work of connection through these modalities of perceptive presentation. Thus, through transformation by figurability, she was able to invest or (re)invest these traits, (re)updated by the field of sensoriality, via perceptive presentation. We focus, unlike a representational work anchored in the perceptive absence, on the importance of a first inscription of perceptive presence for building the foundations of the psychic apparatus, through the investments of this perception and the connection of these perceptive elements, which signals important guidelines for the theory and the clinic in the field of autism.

⁸Coelho Júnior (1999) explains that: “Endopsychic perception is a type of unconscious perception of what is in the psyche, they are representations that appear as a projection in the external world. The endopsychic perception is a type of projection of processes that occur internally. It is like an unconscious internal perception that is perceived as a conscious external perception” (p.38).

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